

Cultural diversity and leadership styles in Malaysia's corporate sector

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ABSTRACT

In an era marked by globalization and heightened competition, this study delves into how sociodemographic factors such as age, gender, education, and work experience influence leadership styles, crucial for achieving organizational objectives. Employing the leadership behaviour questionnaire on 336 predominantly educated, male professionals of Indian descent in Malaysia's corporate sector, the research evaluates task and relationship orientations in leadership. The findings highlight a significant prevalence of both task-oriented and relationship-oriented leadership behaviours. Intriguingly, there is a positive correlation between higher education, age, work experience, and relationship orientation, while education and salary predominantly affect task-oriented leadership. A notable discovery is the positive interplay between task and relationship orientations, suggesting their complementary nature. The study concludes that a balanced, multifaceted leadership approach, fostering both efficiency and employee welfare, is vital. It underscores the impact of educational and professional growth on leadership skills and the necessity of diverse leadership styles for optimal organizational performance, offering key insights for leadership development in varied settings.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In conjunction with the process of globalisation, organisations have witnessed the emergence of new competitors, leading to a heightened level of uncertainty in the competitive landscape. Organisations that desire to endure and thrive in this context have had to ascertain novel modes of administration. Leadership is a crucial aspect of management that plays a significant role in enhancing productivity and attaining organisational objectives [1]. Under the appropriate leadership and guidance organisational members will enhance organisational performance by cultivating good attitudes and behaviours [2]. The success of an organisation is heavily reliant on the efficacy of its leadership style [3]. Over time, scholars have created models, theories, and hypotheses aimed at elucidating effective leadership in organisations. It has been suggested that in leadership theories, which are produced with varied conceptual substance, leaders need to possess specific traits [4]. The characteristics approach, which emerged as the dominant and first leadership method in the 1940s [5], posits that leadership traits are innate and cannot be cultivated to acquire leadership abilities later in life. Various research has been conducted on leadership styles and their impact on outcomes

and performance. The research on leadership is crucial due to the dynamic and unpredictable nature of the business environment. Contemporary firms require managers that possess the ability to foresee groundbreaking transformations and are competent in implementing modifications and enhancements across all levels of the organisational framework [6]. Additionally, it is imperative for them to establish a suitable working environment to prevent the occurrence of stress, burnout, depression, and other related conditions among their personnel [7]. Leadership can be defined as the capacity of an individual to exert influence over others in the realms of work, creativity, and the attainment of organisational objectives. It is considered a crucial element for the success of organisations, serving as an asset in the development of a competitive edge and overall corporate performance [8]. Current leadership is contingent upon present-day concerns, and “leaders favour a leadership approach that is suitable for the particular circumstance” [9].

Considering the significance of leadership, it is highly intriguing to explore the factors that contribute to being an effective leader. The primary objective of this study is to thoroughly investigate the relationship between sociodemographic factors such as gender, age, marital status, and educational attainment, and their influence on leadership styles. This inquiry aims to uncover how these demographic elements shape a leader's approach, contributing to a broader understanding of leadership dynamics in diverse environments. The findings of this study are expected to provide valuable insights for enhancing leadership development strategies within organizations and enrich the existing theoretical framework of leadership studies.

2. METHOD

The study employs the leadership behaviour questionnaire to assess leadership behaviours in relation to task and relationship orientations. Participants rate their frequency of specific behaviours on a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always), across 20 items. Task scores are derived by summing responses to odd-numbered items, and relationship scores from even-numbered items. These scores are then classified into ranges from ‘Very Low’ to ‘Very High’. The questionnaire's dual focus enables the evaluation of a leader's task-directive and people-oriented tendencies [10]. Additionally, socio-demographic data are analysed to explore correlations between leadership styles and demographic factors, providing insights into how these styles may vary across different groups. The survey was distributed online, utilizing professional networks and social media platforms to reach a wide audience. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The data collection phase spanned three months, allowing ample time for participants to respond. The questionnaire, validated through a pilot study and expert panel review for content validity and reliability (Cronbach's alpha >0.87), was employed to evaluate task and relationship orientations among 336 professionals. Sample size was determined using OpenEpi, aiming for a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error, deemed adequate for statistical analyses. Online distribution facilitated wide participant reach, maintaining anonymity and voluntary participation. Confounding variables were controlled via comprehensive socio-demographic data collection and statistical adjustments in multiple regression models. Ethical clearance was secured from the institutional review board, with informed consent ensuring participant awareness and data integrity. These measures, along with data quality checks, upheld the study's methodological rigour, ensuring the reliability and validity of findings in exploring leadership styles influenced by sociodemographic factors.

3. RESULTS

The demographic profile of the study participants shows a majority of male (60.4%) professionals, predominantly of Indian ethnicity (66.4%), and largely educated in Malaysia (88.1%), with 31% holding postgraduate degrees, see Table 1. The workforce is mostly in the private sector (34.3%), with a significant presence in engineering and manufacturing (31.3%). Most participants are in executive roles (45.8%), and about half (50.3%) have received leadership training. The majority are married (64.6%) and in their early thirties, representing a mature yet dynamic professional group. Salaries vary, with a significant portion (31.8%) earning above RM 7,500 monthly, and experience levels range broadly, indicating a mix of young and seasoned professionals.

Tables 2 and 3 present the distribution of scores into predefined ranges for two different metrics: task score, Table 2, and relationship score, Table 3, each based on 336 valid responses. For task scores, the majority fall within the ‘High’ (33.9%) and ‘Very high’ (31%) ranges, indicating strong task-oriented leadership behaviours in the group. The ‘Moderately high’ range also has a significant count (21.7%). Conversely, the ‘Very low’, ‘Low’, and ‘Moderately low’ ranges are less frequent, suggesting fewer individuals have lower task leadership abilities. Similarly, the relationship score table shows that most individuals score in the ‘High’ (40.8%) and ‘Very high’ (32.7%) ranges, with a substantial number in the ‘Moderately high’ category (19%). Very few are in the lower ranges. This pattern suggests that the cohort exhibits strong relationship management skills, aligning with the positive skew in task scores.

Table 1. Demographic of participants

	Variables	Frequency	Mean	Sd			
Gender	Male	203 (60.4%)	0.4	0.49			
	Female	133 (39.6)					
Working experience	<5 years	70 (20.8%)	2.23	0.042			
	5-10 years	120 (35.7%)					
	>10 years	146 (43.5%)					
Age group	<30 years	66 (19.6%)	2.18	0.48			
	31-40	182 (54.2%)					
	41-50	49 (14.6%)					
	>50 years	39 (11.6%)					
Race	Malay	88 (26.2%)	1.47	0.92			
	Chinese	13 (3.9%)					
	Indian	223 (66.4%)					
	Others	12 (3.6%)					
Highest education	High school	33 (9.8%)	1.73	1.008			
	Undergraduate	129 (8.4%)					
	Diploma	70 (20.8%)					
	Postgraduate	104 (31%)					
Graduation country	Malaysia	296 (88.1)	1.2	0.324			
	Overseas	40 (11.9%)					
Employment status	Government	73 (21.7%)	0.92	0.593			
	Private	216 (34.3)					
	Self-employed	47 (14%)					
Total dependent	None	83 (24.7%)	1.15	0.907			
	1-2	155 (46.1%)					
	3-4	64 (19%)					
	>4	34 (10.1%)					
Job	Accountancy, banking, and finance	19 (5.7%)	5.15	3.315			
	Business, consulting, and management	23 (6.8%)					
	Energy and utilities	3 (0.9%)					
	Engineering and manufacturing	105 (31.3%)					
	Environment and agriculture	4 (1.2%)					
	Healthcare	71 (21.2%)					
	Hospitality and events management	13 (3.9%)					
	Information technology	21 (6.3%)					
	Law enforcement and security	15 (4.5%)					
	Marketing, advertising, and PR	8 (2.4%)					
	Property and construction	13 (3.9%)					
	Teacher training and education	23 (6.8%)					
	Transport and logistics	18 (5.4%)					
	Monthly salary (rm)	<3,500			88 (26.2%)	1.55	1.188
		3,500-5,500			82 (24.4%)		
5,500-7,500		59 (17.6%)					
>7,500		107 (31.8%)					
Job titles	Operations and production	97 (28.9%)	1.17	0.849			
	Manager	85 (25.3%)					
	Executive	154 (45.8%)					
Leadership course	No	167 (49.7%)	0.5	0.501			
	Yes	169 (50.3%)					
Marital status	Single	109 (32.4%)	1.32	0.932			
	Divorced	10 (3%)					
	Married	217 (64.6%)					

Table 2. Distribution of task score

Task score range	Frequency	Percent
Very low range	3	0.90%
Low range	9	2.70%
Moderately low range	33	9.80%
Moderately high range	73	21.70%
High range	114	33.90%
Very high range	104	31.00%

Table 3. Distribution of relationship score

Relationship score range	Frequency	Percent
Very low range	2	0.60%
Low range	2	0.60%
Moderately low range	21	6.30%
Moderately high range	64	19.00%
High range	137	40.80%
Very high range	110	32.7%

In Table 4 regression analysis aimed at predicting relationship scores, the results highlight the significance of highest education level, age, and working experience. The analysis reveals a positive correlation between higher education levels and relationship scores, with a coefficient (B) of 0.097 and a p-value of <0.001, suggesting that higher educational attainment may enhance relationship management skills. Age also emerges as a crucial factor, with a coefficient (B) of 0.091 and a significant p-value of <0.001, indicating that relationship skills tend to improve with age. Additionally, working experience

positively influences relationship scores, as denoted by a coefficient (B) of 0.041 and a p-value of <0.001, implying that increased experience in the workplace is beneficial for relationship management. In contrast, other variables like gender, marital status, race, and employment status showed no significant impact on Relationship Scores, pointing to the more critical role of education, age, and work experience in shaping relationship dynamics.

In the regression analysis presented in Table 5, focusing on predicting task scores, the variables of highest education and monthly salary emerge as significant predictors. The level of highest education shows a strong positive correlation with task scores, evidenced by a coefficient (B) of 0.3 and a highly significant p-value ($p < 0.001$), indicating that higher educational attainment is closely linked to enhanced task-oriented capabilities. Additionally, monthly salary is a notable factor, with a coefficient (B) of 1.326 and a p-value of less than 0.001, suggesting a robust correlation between higher earnings and greater task-oriented proficiency. The correlation section of the analysis reveals a very strong positive relationship between relationship score and task score, with a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.735, see Table 6. This indicates a significant association, as the significance level (p-value) is less than 0.01. In practical terms, this strong correlation means that individuals with higher relationship scores tend to also have higher task scores, and vice versa.

Table 4. Regression analysis predicting relationship score

Predictor	B	Std. error	Beta	t	p-value	95% CI for B
Gender	-0.465	0.613	-0.045	-0.759	0.448	[-1.672, 0.741]
Marital status	0.114	0.36	0.021	0.317	0.752	[-0.595, 0.823]
Race	0.159	0.345	0.029	0.46	0.646	[-0.520, 0.838]
Highest education	0.097	0.294	0.019	1.03	<0.001	[1.675, 2.482]
Graduation country	-0.184	0.907	-0.012	-0.203	0.839	[-1.969, 1.601]
Employment status	0.346	0.514	0.04	0.673	0.501	[-0.666, 1.358]
Number of dependents	-0.329	0.342	-0.058	-0.962	0.337	[-1.001, 0.343]
Job sectors	0.137	0.088	0.089	1.556	0.121	[-0.036, 0.309]
Monthly salary (RM)	0.177	0.283	0.041	0.627	0.531	[-0.379, 0.733]
Job titles	-0.451	0.355	-0.075	-1.268	0.206	[-1.150, 0.248]
Leadership course	1.193	0.583	0.117	2.047	0.441	[0.047, 2.340]
Age	0.091	0.06	0.182	1.509	<0.001	[1.028, 0.209]
Working experience	0.041	0.062	0.077	1.005	<0.001	[1.164, 2.081]

Table 5. Regression analysis predicting task score

Predictor	B	Std. error	Beta	t	p-value	95% CI for B
Age	0.02	0.068	0.035	0.291	0.771	[-0.114, 0.153]
Gender	-1.094	0.692	-0.092	-1.581	0.115	[-2.457, 0.268]
Marital status	-0.09	0.407	-0.014	-0.221	0.825	[-0.891, 0.711]
Race	0.646	0.39	0.102	1.657	0.099	[-0.121, 1.412]
Highest education	0.3	0.332	0.052	1.203	<0.001	[1.353, 1.953]
Graduation country	-0.698	1.025	-0.039	-0.681	0.496	[-2.713, 1.318]
Employment status	1.581	0.581	0.059	1.02	0.201	[1.562, 1.723]
Number of dependents	-0.057	0.386	-0.009	-0.149	0.882	[-0.816, 0.701]
Job sectors	0.071	0.099	0.041	0.721	0.472	[-0.124, 0.266]
Monthly salary (RM)	1.326	0.319	0.066	1.021	<0.001	[1.302, 2.954]
Working experience	-0.031	0.07	-0.051	-0.446	0.656	[-0.170, 0.107]
Job titles	-0.52	0.401	-0.076	-1.295	0.196	[-1.309, 0.270]
Leadership course/camp	2.36	0.658	0.203	1.006	0.211	[1.065, 3.655]

Table 6. Correlation between relationship score and task score

Variables	Relationship score	Task score
Relationship score	1	0.735**
Task score	0.735**	1

Note: **. The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

4. DISCUSSION

Table 2 indicates that most participants scored highly on task orientation. As Alkailani *et al.* [11] explains, task-oriented leaders prioritize the tasks at hand and the necessary procedures to accomplish these tasks. Their focus is more on technical, step-by-step solutions for achieving specific goals, ensuring that deadlines are met, and tasks are completed efficiently. This approach is particularly effective for team members who struggle with time management. However, Bass notes that such leaders may not give considerable attention to their team's well-being [12]. In contrast, Table 3 reveals that a majority of

participants scored highly in relationship orientation. Relationship-oriented leaders as those who, while understanding the importance of tasks, devote significant time and effort to meeting the needs of everyone involved in a project [13]. Adeleye adds that people-oriented leaders focus on achieving success by building enduring relationships with employees [14]. They value tasks and schedules but place greater emphasis on cultivating a positive work culture.

The regression analysis indicates a positive correlation between education level and both task and relationship scores. There is a body of research exploring the connection between education and leadership, generally suggesting that higher education levels correspond with more effective leadership behaviours. For instance, Kearney and Gerbert [15] observed that team leaders at a multinational pharmaceutical company with a master's degree displayed more pronounced leadership performance compared to those with a bachelor's degree or less. Similarly, Xirasagar *et al.* [16], noted that physician leaders with a master's in business administration were rated higher in transformational leadership skills than those without such a degree. Conversely, Turner identified a negative correlation between education level and leadership [17]. Additionally, a positive link reported between education and all five exemplary leadership practices as measured by the leadership practices inventory [18]. While our analysis indicates a positive correlation between age and task score, contrasting research often points to a negative correlation. This discrepancy can be attributed to prevalent concerns or stereotypes in numerous organizations about the productivity of older workers [19]. According to study, there's a common perception that older workers might be less physically capable and face challenges in interpersonal dynamics with coworkers [20]. Furthermore, older employees are often stereotyped as being less adept with technology and less flexible in adapting to fast-changing environments, these stereotypes contribute to a generally negative view of the aging workforce in terms of productivity and adaptability [21].

The analysis reveals that working experience is positively correlated with relationship score. This correlation can be understood through the lens of organizational socialization [22]. When employees join an organization, they are gradually moulded by the organizational environment, learning to value and understand the abilities, behaviours, and social knowledge crucial for their roles and for being effective members of the organization. With increasing experience, employees typically experience a growth in familiarity with their roles, as well as the norms, culture, and goals of the organization [23]. They gain social acceptance, clearer role understanding, and a heightened sense of self-efficacy. This process contributes to enhancing their relationship skills within the organizational context. The analysis indicates a positive correlation between task score and salary. This suggests that offering profit shares, benefits, or increased salaries can motivate workers, leading to higher work productivity and enhanced task performance due to the non-fixed or variable nature of such compensation [24]. On the other hand, a study which examined 420 Brazilian publicly traded companies, found no significant relationship between executive compensation and the task performance and value contributed by employees [25]. This highlights a disparity in the impact of salary on task performance across different contexts and studies.

The analysis reveals a positive correlation between task and relationship scores, indicating that different leadership styles can complement each other. Task-oriented leadership, as described emphasizes accomplishing specific goals and adhering to set plans, but this approach can sometimes lead to a rigid work environment, potentially stifling creativity, and employee morale [26] [Click or tap here to enter text.](#). In contrast, relationship-oriented leadership focuses on employee satisfaction, motivation, and work-life balance, fostering teamwork and collaboration [27]. However, this style might sometimes prioritize team cohesion over task completion, as noted by Burke [28]. The combination of both leadership styles could mitigate their respective weaknesses, balancing the need for rule adherence and creative, collaborative team environments [29], [30].

5. CONCLUSION




In conclusion, this study illuminates the complex interplay between sociodemographic factors and leadership styles, revealing a workforce predominantly composed of highly educated male professionals, primarily of Indian ethnicity, with a balanced inclination towards task-oriented and relationship-oriented leadership behaviours. Key findings include the significant correlation of higher education and salary with task-oriented performance, and the positive impact of education, age, and working experience on relationship skills, underscoring the importance of a multifaceted approach to leadership. The study also highlights contrasting perspectives on the influence of age on task performance, and the role of organizational socialization in fostering relationship skills. The correlation between task and relationship scores suggests that combining diverse leadership styles can optimize organizational effectiveness, offering valuable insights for leadership development and enriching the broader understanding of leadership dynamics in diverse environments.

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