



WHY STANDARDISED LEADERSHIP APPROACHES FAIL: THE ROLE OF ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT IN LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS

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Abstract

Contemporary organisations operate in complex and diverse environments, yet many continue to rely on standardised leadership approaches that assume uniform effectiveness across organisational settings. The study examines employee perceptions of one-size-fits-all leadership practices, analyses the influence of organisational context on leadership effectiveness, and assesses the relationship between leadership standardisation and organisational outcomes. A quantitative cross-sectional research design was adopted. Data were collected from 120 employees and mid-level managers across diverse organisational settings using purposive sampling. A structured questionnaire measured leadership standardisation, organisational context, leadership effectiveness, organisational outcomes, and overall perceptions through a five-point Likert scale. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, multiple regression analysis, and an independent samples t-test. Organisational context showed a positive association with organisational outcomes and appeared to be a stronger positive predictor of organisational outcomes than leadership standardisation. Descriptive results indicated moderately positive perceptions of leadership effectiveness and organisational outcomes, while overall perceptions of uniform leadership remained neutral. The independent samples t-test revealed no significant difference in perceived leadership effectiveness between employees and mid-level managers. The study concludes that standardised leadership approaches offer limited value in diverse organisational environments and that leadership effectiveness depends more on contextual sensitivity, flexibility, and alignment with organisational conditions.

Keywords: Standardised leadership; Organisational context; Leadership effectiveness; Organisational behaviour; Human resource management; Organisational outcomes

1. Introduction

Modern companies are facing an environment that has grown complex, heterogeneous, digitalised, globalised, multi-ethnic, and increased uncertainty. These changes have raised expectations of leadership and questioned the usefulness of standardised frameworks that are applicable across all situations. Leadership in business and management practice is not only an interpersonal process but also a strategic organisational process which affects the motivation of employees, quality of decision making, organisational adaptability, productivity, and organisational performance. Standardized leadership practices may facilitate managerial control and policy consistency and administrative efficiency, but they are not effective when consistently implemented across variations in organizational size, sector, organizational culture, employee groups, and task environments. Thus, it becomes significant for human resource management, organisational behaviour, and evidence-based managerial decision-making to examine one-size-fits-all leadership. There are still a lot of organisations that persist in the leadership models that assume uniformity of results. Organisational interventions tend to have differentiated outcomes; however, due to differences in context, it is difficult to maintain universal assumptions (Abildgaard et al., 2020). However, the reactions of employees to organisational decisions vary in times of disruption, as evidenced by behavioral research on COVID-19, which found that employees reacted to the disruption based on their perceptions of organisational responsibility and sensitivity to the context (Aguinis et al., 2020). Beyond conventional management research, there are similar objections to the use of standardisation. Differentiated approaches are more appropriate than homogeneous approaches to addressing individual and situational needs in education (Bondie et al., 2019). Organisational culture and situational contexts are also important as determinants of leadership effectiveness. The studies of crisis management reveal that the leadership styles that are not aligned with the organization's culture can slow down the decision-making processes, and that situational leadership models are not to be imitated (Bowers et al., 2017). Leadership research also suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work, as the contexts in which leadership is effective influence its effectiveness (Bush, 2018). In governance, quality assurance, employee support, health and medical care, organisational commitment, technology, and legal scholarship, the shortcomings of standardisation are also noticeable.

The quality assurance systems that are often used to grade a uniform are not adequate in the case of institutional diversity (Cardoso et al., 2017). Organisations may have similar practices, but the perceptions of this practice by the employees may vary, such that consistent leadership practices do not necessarily lead to consistent perceptions (Daniels et al., 2022). Healthcare research also indicates that tailored strategies may have greater effects on behaviour than generic medication adherence intervention strategies (Easthall & Barnett, 2017). Research on organisational commitment further shows that employee-related outcomes do not react consistently to organisational practices, which adds to the limits of one-size-fits-all explanations of employee behaviour in the workplace (Lee & Lee, 2022). However, technology-based organisational systems need to be adapted to their context; more specifically, in agile contexts where the application of a fixed prescription is not enough (George et al., 2018). Legal scholarship also cautions against a single definition and a single model that fails to account for the nuances in the context (Greene, 2017). Taken together, the studies offer a general empirical and conceptual foundation for the proposition that it is not easy to apply standardised leadership strategies to organisational diversity.

Although there is increasing criticism of one-size-fits-all approaches, the topic of leadership has not been consistently explored in terms of an integrated empirical analysis. The compatibility of the practices and services' characteristics in an organisation is crucial in service development research, rather than the existence of a one-size-fits-all approach (Jaakkola et al., 2017). Contextual moderation, particularly in uncertain contexts, is being increasingly understood in the context of leadership scholarship. For instance, charismatic leadership does not always lead to the same results since the acceptance of employees and organizational circumstances influence the impact (Klein and Delegach, 2023). Additionally, recent management scholarship suggests the shift from universalistic assumptions to contingent, multilevel, and context-sensitive perspectives, reinforcing the idea that context plays a key role in the effectiveness of management and leadership (Stahl et al., 2023). Structural diversity also implies a different kind of leadership structure for each organisational form as opposed to a homogeneous one (Mintzberg, 2024). But, empirical knowledge about employee and mid-level manager perception of the standardised leadership in business organizations is still limited.

The ongoing use of standardised leadership practices also raises ethical and management issues on inclusion, equity, and organisational responsiveness. It is found that universal frameworks can fail if they are not contextualised, and may have unintended consequences (Msoroka & Amundsen, 2018). The same issues are found with generic diversity interventions in organisations, which might not be addressing structural and contextual inequities (Onyeador et al., 2021). In addition, policy research highlights that organizational and economic policies need to be tailored to the context and not standardized (Ortega-Argiles, 2022). The need is further illustrated in the context of leadership in small and medium-sized enterprises where the nature of leadership roles and expectations vary with the size of the organisation, resources available, and environmental uncertainty (Pillai, 2022). In this backdrop, the current study takes an empirical research design using the questionnaire approach, which aims to explore the perceptions of employees and mid-level managers about one-size-fits-all leadership practices. While some studies have questioned standardisation in different organizational and social settings, very few empirical studies have examined the interplay between the constructs of leadership standardisation, the organizational context, leadership effectiveness, and organizational outcomes. There is still much that is theoretical in the discussion, which is still sectoral or scattered across various fields. This research aims to fill that gap by investigating the question of whether there is a leadership practice that is standardised and which leads to organisational performance, or whether there is a context-specific leadership practice that is more suitable for business and management in the current context.

Research Objectives

The objectives of the study are:

1. To examine employee perceptions of one-size-fits-all leadership practices in organisations
2. To analyse the influence of organisational context on leadership effectiveness
3. To assess the relationship between leadership standardisation and organisational outcomes

2. Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development

Leadership is a type of organisational process, not a managerial practice that can be applied universally. Contingency theory suggests that leadership outcomes depend on the fit between leadership behaviour and situational conditions such as organisational structure, task requirements, employee expectations, and environmental uncertainty (Fiedler, 1964). Likewise, situational leadership theory suggests that leaders need to adapt their leadership to fit the context of the situation for which they are called. To acknowledge organisational reality and follower readiness rather than based on a codified set of behaviours, templates (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969). These theoretical concepts give a good basis Analysing the potential difficulties with the target objectives through the use of a Leadership style. different organizational settings. Standardisation of leadership in the Business Field management can contribute to uniformity of the regulations, message and business oversight. But a uniform approach to leadership can minimize flexibility and the capacity for managers to accommodate variations in organizational culture, staff composition, task difficulty, and circumstances. Thus, a high level of effectiveness of leadership is anticipated when leadership practices are implemented in a way that is consistent with the organisational context and not the same in every context. The following hypotheses are proposed based on this theoretical understanding:

H1: Leadership standardisation has a negative relationship with leadership effectiveness.

H2: Leadership standardisation has a negative relationship with organisational outcomes.

H3: Organisational context has a positive relationship with leadership effectiveness.

H4: Organisational context has a positive relationship with organisational outcomes.

H5: Organisational context is a stronger predictor of organisational outcomes than leadership standardisation.

H6: There is a significant difference in perceived leadership effectiveness between employees and mid-level managers.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study used a quantitative cross-sectional research design to explore perceptions of one-size-fits-all leadership practices and how this is related to organisational context, leadership effectiveness, and organisational outcomes. A cross-sectional design was used as the data were gathered from the respondents

at one time and analysed to examine the existing perceptions and relationships of the study variables. The quantitative approach allowed for the use of statistical analysis, such as descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, regression analysis, and independent samples t-test to answer the aims of the study.

3.2 Population and Sample

The sample population surveyed was employees and mid-level managers in various organisational environments. These respondents were deemed appropriate as they are most likely to have first-hand experience in leadership practices and thus are able to offer relevant perspectives on leadership standardisation, organizational context, leadership effectiveness, and organizational outcomes. The respondents were selected by a purposive sampling technique from different organisational roles, types of organisations, and sizes of organisations.

A total of 120 respondents from small, medium and large private, public and non-profit organisations, including employees and mid-level managers, made up the final sample. The goal of this study was to explore perceptions of leadership in various work settings, and this was achieved through this sample composition.

3.3 Instrument

A structured questionnaire format was developed based on the literature on leadership and organisational behaviour to gather data. The questionnaire was designed to assess the respondents' attitude towards the standardisation of leadership, organisational context, leadership effectiveness, organisational outcomes and their attitude towards the leadership approaches in general. There was also Demographic questions regarding gender, age group, education qualification, organizational role, work experience, size of organization and type of organization. The questions pertaining to the main study variables were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). The Likert scale format was determined to be appropriate as this study measured perceptions of employee and managerial perceptions of practice of leadership and perceptions of organizational outcomes. To facilitate the systematic comparison of perceptions between respondents, the questionnaire was designed systematically, and descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, regression analysis and an independent sample t-test were used.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The employees and mid-level managers in different organizational settings were given structured questionnaires to gather the data. The respondents were asked and fully informed about the study, and consent was obtained. The questionnaire included the following areas: perceptions of leadership standardisation, leadership's context within the organisation, leadership effectiveness, organisation outcomes, and overall leadership approaches. Questionnaires completed were checked for completeness and then analysed. The data set was composed of answers to the primary questions only. This procedure enabled the uniformity in data collection process and appropriateness of responses for descriptive, correlation, regression and comparative analysis conducted in this study.

3.5 Data Analysis Techniques

Descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were used to analyse the data in line with the objectives of the study. The respondents were presented in terms of frequencies and percentages in relation to their gender, age group, educational qualification, organisational role, work experience, organisational type and size. The main constructs studied in this main study were: leadership standardisation, organisational context, leadership effectiveness, organisational outcomes, and overall perception. In this main study, data for the following constructs are presented in terms of means and standard deviations: leadership standardisation, organisational context, leadership effectiveness, organisational outcomes, and overall perception. A Pearson correlation analysis was used to test the relationships between leadership standardisation, organisational context, leadership effectiveness and organisational outcomes. Multiple regression analysis was performed to check the predictive effect of the standardisation of leadership and organizational context on leadership effectiveness and organizational outcomes. An independent samples t-test was then used to check whether any difference was found between the perceived leadership effectiveness of the employees and the middle managers. The techniques selected were those that most closely corresponded to the purpose of the study, and which would allow perceptions, relationships, predictive effects, and group differences to be investigated.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

All ethical standards were observed. The respondents consented to this participation, the nature of this participation was explained, and the anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents was guaranteed throughout the study. Data were used only for academic research purposes.

4. Results

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

A total of 120 participants with a variety of organisational contexts answered the study. Table 1 shows that 50.0 percent of survey respondents identified as male, 45.8 percent female and 4.2 percent did not provide their gender. There was a wide range of age distribution with 30.8% under 25 years old and an even split between other age groups. Most (75.0%) consisted of employees and the rest (25.0%) were mid-level managers. The sample was divided into small (31.7%), medium (38.3%) and large (30.0%) organisations, which were deemed to be a heterogeneous group appropriate for analysis of the leadership. The demographic profile of the respondents is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 120)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	60	50.0
	Female	55	45.8
	Prefer not to say	5	4.2
Age Group	Below 25	37	30.8
	25–34	18	15.0
	35–44	27	22.5
	45–54	27	22.5
	55 and above	11	9.2
Educational Qualification	Undergraduate	30	25.0
	Postgraduate	30	25.0
	Doctoral	28	23.3
	Other	32	26.7
Role in Organisation	Employee	90	75.0
	Mid-level Manager	30	25.0
Work Experience (Years)	Less than 2	37	30.8
	2–5	25	20.8
	6–10	33	27.5
	Above 10	25	20.8
Organisation Type	Private	55	45.8
	Public	33	27.5
	Non-profit	32	26.7
Organisation Size	Small	38	31.7
	Medium	46	38.3
	Large	36	30.0

To present a visual picture of the respondents, a graphical representation of key characteristics of the respondents is provided. Gender, organisational role, organisational type and organisational size distribution of the participants are shown in Figure 1.

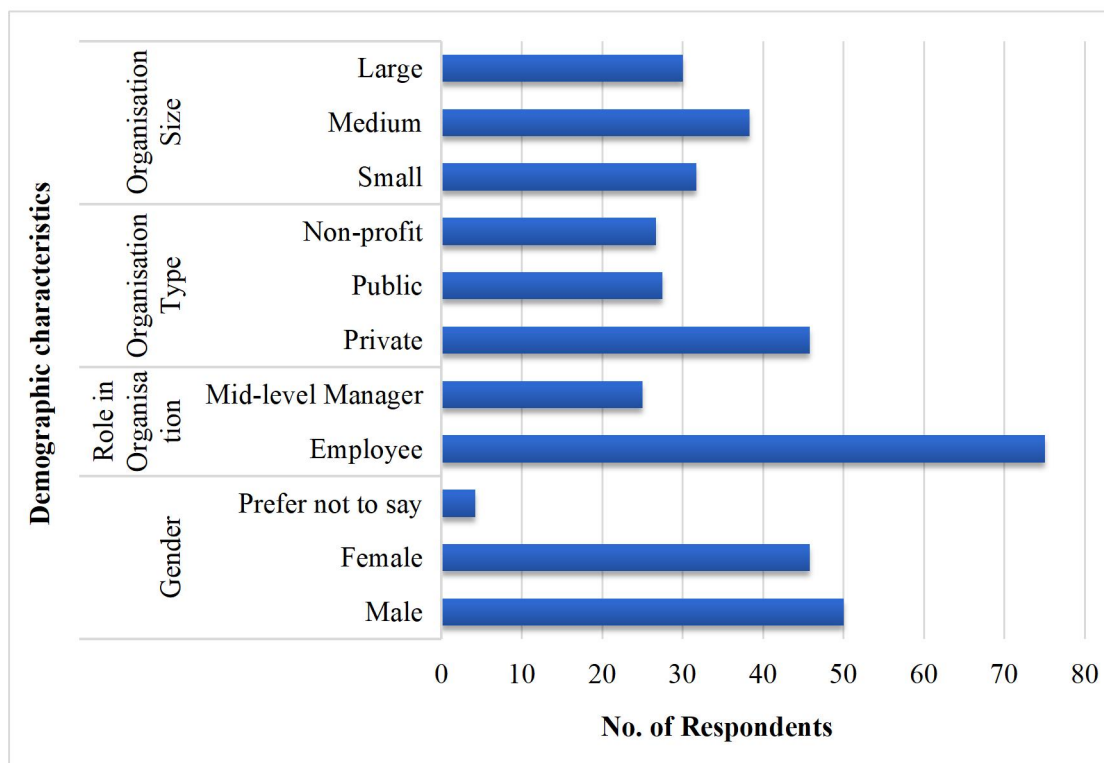


Figure 1. Demographic Distribution of Respondents

Distribution of the sample according to gender and occupation shows a fairly equal distribution of male and female and highest number of those that are employees, as illustrated in Figure 1. There is involvement from small, medium and large organisations, there is representation from private, public and non-profit organisations. This distribution tends to be a good indicator of a level of diversity within the sample which makes the comparison of perceptions of leadership across organisational contexts meaningful.

4.2 Distribution of Leadership and Organisational Measures

The descriptive statistics of the major study variables are shown in Table 2. The mean score for the leadership standardisation was 2.95 (SD=0.62), and was classified as moderate level of uniform leadership practice. Organisational context = 3.02 (SD = 0.62) – differences in working conditions and culture in the organisation. The mean values of the leadership effectiveness and organisational outcomes were 3.07 (SD = 0.58) and 3.06 (SD = 0.62), respectively. Overall, the attitudes towards the leadership were neutral (M = 2.97, SD = 0.82).

Table 2. Distribution of Leadership and Organisational Measures

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Leadership Standardisation	2.95	0.62
Organisational Context	3.02	0.62
Leadership Effectiveness	3.07	0.58
Organisational Outcomes	3.06	0.62
Overall Perception	2.97	0.82

A graphical representation of the mean scores of the key leadership and organisational variables is provided to show the central tendency. A visual comparison of the leadership standardisation, organisational context, leadership effectiveness, organisational outcomes, and overall perception is shown in Figure 2.

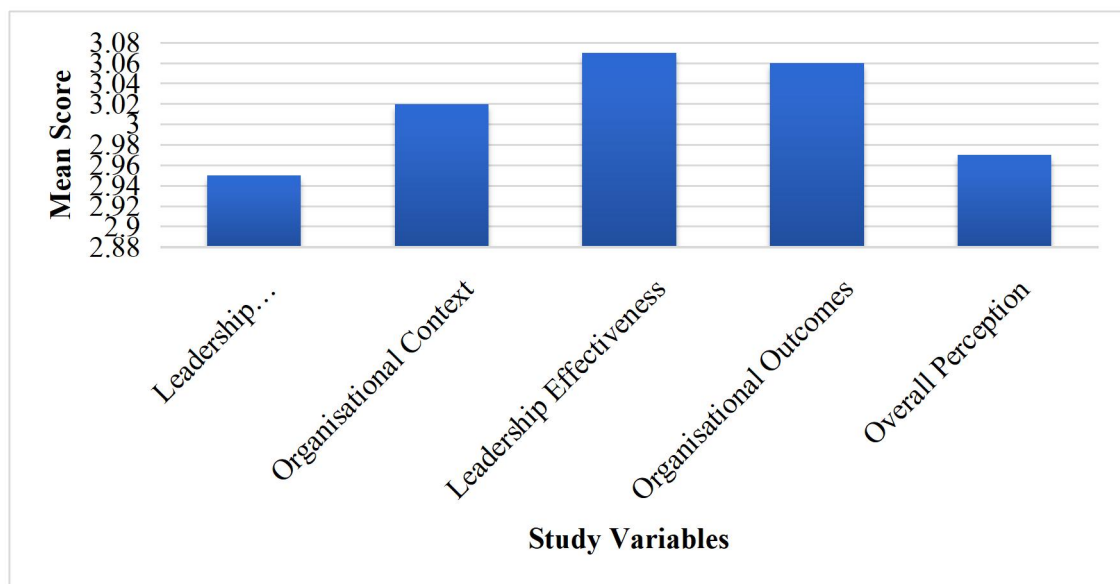


Figure 2. Mean Scores of Leadership and Organisational Variables

The highest mean scores were recorded with regard to leadership effectiveness and organisational outcome, as shown in Figure 2, reflecting relatively positive perceptions by the respondents. The mean values were also moderately high for organisational context and neutral for leadership standardisation and overall perception. This indicates that leadership effectiveness and outcomes are given more credit than uniform leadership practices.

4.3 Associations Between Leadership Practices and Organisational Outcomes

Pearson correlation analysis was used to investigate relationships between the key variables. Leadership standardisation showed weak and negative correlation with leadership effectiveness ($r = -0.04$) and organisational outcomes ($r = -0.04$); this implies that standardised leadership practices are not positively related to leadership effectiveness or organisational outcomes. Organisational context showed a positive relationship with outcomes of the organisation ($r = 0.19$), and therefore, it can be inferred that there is a positive effect of contextual alignment on the outcomes of the organisation. There was a weak positive correlation between leadership effectiveness and organisational outcomes ($r = 0.06$) as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Interrelationships Among Leadership and Organisational Variables

Variable	LS	OC	LE	OO
Leadership Standardisation (LS)	1.00	-	-	-
Organisational Context (OC)	-0.05	1.00	-	-
Leadership Effectiveness (LE)	-0.04	0.09	1.00	-
Organisational Outcomes (OO)	-0.04	0.19	0.06	1.00

4.4 Predictive Effects of Leadership Practices and Organisational Context

Multiple regression analysis was run to determine the effect of leadership standardisation and organisational context on leadership effectiveness and organisational outcomes. The findings, which are presented in Table 4, show a weak negative effect on leadership effectiveness for leadership standardisation. Organisational context, on the other hand, was a positive predictor of organisational outcomes. These results indicated that contextual factors have a stronger effect on leadership outcomes than conventional leadership strategies.

Table 4. Predictive Effects of Leadership Standardisation and Organisational Context

Predictor	Dependent Variable	β	Direction
Leadership Standardisation	Leadership Effectiveness	-0.04	Negative
Organisational Context	Organisational Outcomes	0.19	Positive

4.5 Comparative Analysis of Leadership Effectiveness Across Organisational Roles

The data were analyzed using an independent samples t-test to determine differences between the employees' perceptions of the effectiveness of their leaders and the mid-level managers' perceptions of their leaders. The mean score for leadership effectiveness as reported by employees was 3.06, and by mid-level managers, it was slightly higher, at 3.10, as reported in Table 5. The difference between the two groups didn't reach a level of statistical significance ($t = -0.31$, $p = 0.76$), suggesting that there was no meaningful difference between the perceptions of leadership effectiveness across organisational roles.

Table 5. Comparison of Leadership Effectiveness Across Organisational Roles

Group	N	Mean	t value	p value
Employees	90	3.06	-0.31	0.76
Mid-level Managers	30	3.10		

4. Discussion

The study findings support the proposition that a general solution of one-size-fits-all to leadership in diverse organizational settings is not effective. The descriptive results revealed moderate positive perceptions of leadership effectiveness and organisational outcomes, with leadership standardisation closer to neutral. This suggests that practices of leadership were considered reasonably positively in total, but that there was no strong link between uniform practices of leadership and effectiveness and organisational outcomes. The low negative relationships between leadership standardisation and leadership effectiveness and organisational outcomes also indicate that the implementation of a rigid set of leadership models may not be appropriate for organisations that exist in different contexts. Among the results, it was found that there was a positive correlation between organisational context and organisational results, which is in line with the importance of contextual alignment in the practice of leadership. Organisational culture, complexity of tasks, expectations of employees, and uncertainty from the environment could affect the relationship between leadership practices and outcomes. The results of the regression further suggested that organisational context played a more positive role in predicting organisational outcome than leadership standardisation. But the results must be viewed with caution, as the relationships found were quite weak. Leadership practices were experienced in a similar way between employees and mid-level managers, as there was very little difference in the perceptions of leadership effectiveness between both groups. This means that organizational factors can influence leadership more than a person's title.

The findings have implications for practice by managers, human resources professionals, and organisational decision makers. However, the standardisation of leadership was weakly related to leadership effectiveness and organisational outcomes, so organisations should not use only a one-size-fits-all leadership template in every department, leadership role, or organisational context. On the contrary, leadership development programmes should facilitate the manager's ability to evaluate the situation before using leadership practices. HR departments can also create flexible leadership policies to enable managers to tailor their communication, motivation, supervisory, and decision-making processes to meet contextual needs. Adaptive leadership principles are useful in facilitating leadership behaviour to better match the reality of the organisation. The findings are in line with previous research that challenges the success of standardised approaches in complex systems. Evaluation practices that rely on traditional models have been studied and have shown that they may not capture the individuality and situational variation of children, and this can affect the effectiveness of the practice (Rear, 2019). Also, organisational turnaround research shows that universal solutions might not be effective in dynamic organisational contexts, and that context-based ones are better suited (Rutherford and Favero, 2020). This is also supported by the findings from the technology and systems research, which found that as complexity and scale grow, one-size-fits-all approaches lose effectiveness (Stonebraker and Cetintemel, 2018).

The results are also validated by leadership and organisational studies related to it. Prior educational management research indicates that the impact of distributed leadership can vary across institutional contexts, further substantiating the view that there is no one universal model of leadership that works in all contexts (Thien and Chan, 2022). Conceptual considerations about leadership asymmetries also imply that the effectiveness of leadership is linked to a relational process, a relational responsiveness, and an interaction with the context (Tomkins et al., 2020). Likewise, studies conducted in the field of place branding indicate

that strategies based on a similar approach can overlook situational identity and be less effective (Zenker and Braun, 2017). The overall picture of these studies and the present findings challenges the norms of standardisation in various organisational and management settings. Findings corroborated the contingency and adaptive leadership approaches, which are built on the idea that leadership is not standardisable and that it is context-specific, as not much explanation occurred in relation to leadership effectiveness and organisational outcomes. The study enhances the body of knowledge in leadership studies, both in terms of perceptual evidence and contextual analysis, and in terms of leadership frameworks that are flexible. The findings indicate that there is a need to not rely on rigid leadership templates from a managerial point of view. Rather, they need to pay attention to leadership development initiatives that improve diagnostic skills, situational awareness, and adaptability. The lack of significant differences between employees and mid-level managers further indicates that leadership policies need to be general, rather than targeting specific roles, and to impact the organisation as a whole. However, the study has some limitations. First, the cross-sectional study design limits the ability to make causal inferences regarding the link between leadership standardisation, organisational setting, leadership effectiveness, and organisational outcomes. Secondly, the questionnaire responses reported by the respondents can have respondent bias, as the perceived leadership practices may be different from person to person and organisation to organisation. Third, respondents were drawn from various organisational types and sizes, but no detailed sector-wise and culture-wise comparisons were made. Future research can explore these limitations by employing a longitudinal design to investigate the change in leadership effectiveness across the different situations in an organisation. Mixed-method studies could also afford greater depth of understanding through survey results, as well as interviews or case-based evidence. Specific parts of the workforce, organisational cultures, or new issues such as digital leadership, remote working, and artificial intelligence-based management systems could be analysed more in-depth to gain deeper insights into the nature of context-sensitive leadership in modern organisations.

5. Conclusion

The current study used employee and middle managers' perceptions to investigate the reasons for the lack of uniformity in the effectiveness of one-size-fits-all leadership practices and styles in organizational contexts. The results indicate that the leadership standardisation was moderate, but it was not a significant contributor to leadership effectiveness or organisational results. The low negative correlations between leadership standardisation and leadership effectiveness and organisational outcomes suggest that standardised leadership in different organisational contexts is less effective. Organisational context, on the other hand, was found to be more relevant in the context of organisational outcomes. It is found that there is a positive relationship between organisational context and organisational outcomes, implying that organisational outcomes are better when leadership practices are consistent with the organisation's culture, task context, workforce expectations, and environmental context. This confirms that leadership effectiveness is not about the application of the one-size-fits-all approach but is more about sensitivity to context. Additionally, it was revealed that the perceived effectiveness of leadership by employees and mid-level managerial roles was not significantly different, suggesting that the experience of leadership practices is similar across organisational roles. The study concludes that adaptive and context-sensitive leadership strategies are more suitable than a one-size-fits-all approach in leadership. The results have significant implications for managers and HR practitioners aiming to boost leadership effectiveness and organizational performance.

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