

Empathy and Leadership Effectiveness across Cultures: A Comparative Study of Malaysia and the United States

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Abstract

Understanding how empathy contributes to leadership effectiveness across different cultural contexts has become increasingly important as organizations operate in globally interconnected and culturally diverse environments. Drawing on leadership and organization development perspectives, this study examines the relationship between empathy and leadership effectiveness in two culturally distinct settings: Malaysia and the United States. Using survey data collected from business leaders in both countries, the study investigates whether the relationship between empathy and self-reported leadership effectiveness varies across cultural contexts. The findings indicate that empathy is positively associated with self-reported leadership effectiveness across the combined sample. While the overall linear relationship between empathy and self-reported leadership effectiveness does not differ significantly between the two countries, additional analyses reveal that cultural differences emerge at higher levels of empathic expression. Specifically, leaders with high levels of empathy in the United States report significantly higher leadership effectiveness scores than their Malaysian counterparts, suggesting that the relationship between empathy and self-reported leadership effectiveness may vary across cultural contexts. This study contributes to the leadership and organization development literature by demonstrating that the relationship between empathy and self-reported leadership effectiveness varies across cultural contexts. The findings also provide practical implications for leadership development and cross-cultural management by suggesting that organizations should adapt leadership development initiatives to culturally grounded expectations rather than relying on universal leadership models.

Keywords

Empathy, Leadership Effectiveness, Cross-Cultural Leadership, Organization

1. Introduction

As organizations become increasingly global, culturally diverse, and knowledge-driven, leadership effectiveness is no longer judged solely by organizational performance or the achievement of strategic goals. Increasingly, effective leaders are expected to build trust, foster collaboration, support employee well-being, and navigate complex interpersonal relationships across diverse cultural environments (Agazu et al., 2025; Nakamura et al., 2025). Consequently, leadership effectiveness is now understood as a combination of task accomplishment and relational competence, reflecting leaders' ability to achieve organizational objectives while developing positive relationships with employees (Mazzetti & Schaufeli, 2022).

Among the interpersonal competencies associated with effective leadership, empathy has emerged as one of the most influential capabilities in contemporary leadership research. Empathy enables leaders to understand employees' perspectives, recognize emotional cues, and respond appropriately to individual and team needs, thereby strengthening trust, psychological safety, collaboration, and employee engagement (Nakamura et al., 2025; Muss et al., 2025). Beyond interpersonal relationships, empathy also plays a pivotal role in organization development by helping leaders manage change, reduce resistance, facilitate learning, and sustain employee commitment during periods of organizational uncertainty and transformation (Agazu et al., 2025; Nakamura et al., 2025).

Despite growing scholarly attention to empathy as an essential leadership capability, relatively little is known about how empathy influences leadership effectiveness across different cultural contexts. Much of the contemporary leadership literature implicitly assumes that empathetic leadership is universally valued and interpreted in similar ways across societies. However, leadership effectiveness is a socially constructed phenomenon, shaped by cultural norms, values, and expectations that influence how leadership behaviours are interpreted and evaluated (Tsai, 2022; Nakamura et al., 2025). Consequently, leadership behaviours that are perceived as highly effective in one cultural setting may not necessarily receive the same evaluation in another, highlighting the need for greater cross-cultural investigation.

Recent cross-cultural leadership research suggests that followers' evaluations of leadership are shaped by cultural values and social expectations, influencing how relational behaviours such as empathy, care, and emotional sensitivity are interpreted (Nakamura et al., 2025). In collectivist cultures, effective leadership is often associated with interpersonal harmony, relational attentiveness, and concern for group well-being, whereas leaders in more individualistic cultures are more likely to be evaluated based on autonomy, decisiveness, and individual achievement (Agazu et al., 2025). These contrasting cultural expectations raise an important

question: Does empathy function as a universally effective leadership capability, or does its contribution to leadership effectiveness depend on the cultural context in which leadership is evaluated?

Although recent studies have examined empathy, leadership effectiveness, and cultural values independently, empirical research investigating whether the relationship between empathy and leadership effectiveness differs across national cultural contexts remains surprisingly scarce. In particular, limited comparative evidence exists on whether empathy contributes similarly to leadership effectiveness in emerging and developed economies, despite the increasing globalization of organizations and leadership practices (Agazu et al., 2025; Muss et al., 2025). Addressing this gap is important because leadership development programmes increasingly promote empathy as a universal leadership competency, often with limited consideration of how cultural values may influence the interpretation and evaluation of empathetic leadership behaviours.

Responding to this research gap, the present study examines the relationship between empathy and leadership effectiveness in two culturally distinct contexts: Malaysia and the United States. These countries provide a theoretically meaningful comparison because they differ substantially in cultural orientations, particularly with respect to collectivism-individualism and leadership expectations. By comparing leadership effectiveness across these settings, the study examines whether empathy functions as a universally valued leadership capability or whether its contribution to leadership effectiveness is shaped by cultural context. In doing so, the study contributes to the leadership and organization development literature by providing empirical evidence on the cultural contingency of empathetic leadership and offering insights for culturally responsive leadership development practices.

From an organization development perspective, the findings have important implications for leadership development, talent management, and cross-cultural management in increasingly global organizations. Rather than assuming that empathy is interpreted uniformly across cultural settings, organizations should design leadership development programmes that acknowledge culturally grounded expectations of effective leadership. By aligning leadership competencies with local cultural values and follower expectations, organizations can strengthen leadership effectiveness, improve employee engagement, and enhance the success of leadership development initiatives in multicultural environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Leadership Effectiveness in Organizational Development Contexts

Leadership effectiveness has long been a central concern in organization development (OD), particularly because effective leadership influences organizational change, employee engagement, innovation, and long-term organizational performance. Contemporary leadership research increasingly conceptualizes leadership

effectiveness as a socially constructed phenomenon, shaped not only by leaders' performance outcomes but also by followers' perceptions, relational quality, and cultural context (Agazu et al., 2025; Tsai, 2022).

Moving beyond traditional performance-oriented perspectives, recent studies emphasize that leadership effectiveness in OD contexts depends on leaders' ability to facilitate learning, foster trust, manage emotions, and support employees during periods of organizational change and uncertainty (Muss et al., 2025; Nakamura et al., 2025). Consequently, leadership is increasingly evaluated not only by organizational outcomes but also by the quality of leader-follower relationships and the extent to which leaders create psychologically safe and collaborative work environments.

Within this relational perspective, leadership effectiveness is increasingly viewed as contingent upon followers' interpretations of leadership behaviours, which are influenced by organizational norms, social expectations, and cultural values. As a result, understanding leadership effectiveness requires consideration of the broader social and cultural contexts in which leadership is enacted, particularly in organizations operating across culturally diverse environments (Tsai, 2022; Agazu et al., 2025).

2.2. Empathy as a Relational Leadership Capability

Empathy has emerged as a fundamental capability in contemporary leadership research, particularly within relational, ethical, and employee-centred leadership perspectives. Rather than representing merely an individual personality trait, empathy refers to a leader's ability to understand, share, and respond appropriately to the emotions, perspectives, and needs of others, thereby strengthening interpersonal relationships and fostering a supportive organizational climate (Muss et al., 2025; Nakamura et al., 2025).

Recent studies demonstrate that empathetic and engaging leadership can foster trust, employee engagement, and positive workplace relationships, which in turn contribute to improved individual and organizational outcomes (Muss et al., 2025; Salas-Vallina et al., 2021). Through effective communication and emotional understanding, empathetic leaders create work environments in which employees feel valued, respected, and motivated to contribute beyond formal job requirements.

From an organization development perspective, empathy plays a critical role in facilitating organizational change, reducing employee resistance, supporting continuous learning, and strengthening commitment during periods of uncertainty and transformation. Consequently, empathy is increasingly recognized not only as an interpersonal competency but also as a strategic leadership capability that enables organizations to build resilient, adaptive, and people-centred workplaces (Agazu et al., 2025; Karauri & Kyongo, 2024). Although the positive effects of empathy are well documented, most existing studies have examined empathy within single-country settings, leaving limited understanding of whether its influence on

leadership effectiveness is consistent across different cultural contexts. This limitation underscores the need for comparative cross-cultural research to better understand how cultural context shapes the evaluation of empathetic leadership.

2.3. Empathy and Leadership Effectiveness

A growing body of leadership research demonstrates that empathy is positively associated with leadership effectiveness across a wide range of organizational settings. Leaders who demonstrate empathy are generally perceived as more effective because they foster trust, encourage collaboration, strengthen employee engagement, and create psychologically safe work environments that support both individual and organizational performance (Muss et al., 2025).

Empathy contributes to leadership effectiveness by enabling leaders to understand employees' perspectives, respond appropriately to emotional and interpersonal challenges, and adapt their leadership behaviours to the needs of individuals and teams. These capabilities enhance leader credibility, strengthen leader-follower relationships, and facilitate organizational change, making empathy an important component of effective leadership in contemporary organizations (Nakamura et al., 2025; Karauri & Kyongo, 2024).

Nevertheless, the positive relationship between empathy and leadership effectiveness should not be assumed to be universal. Although empathy is consistently associated with favourable leadership outcomes, the extent to which empathetic leadership is perceived as effective may vary across cultural and organizational contexts (Tsai, 2022). Consequently, understanding leadership effectiveness requires consideration not only of leaders' behaviours but also of how those behaviours are interpreted and evaluated within different cultural settings.

2.4. Cultural Context and the Evaluation of Leadership Effectiveness

Leadership effectiveness is not evaluated independently of its social and cultural environment. Rather, followers' perceptions of effective leadership are shaped by cultural values, societal norms, and shared expectations regarding appropriate leader behaviour (Tsai, 2022; Hofstede, 2011). As organizations increasingly operate across national and cultural boundaries, understanding how culture influences leadership evaluation has become an important focus of contemporary leadership research.

In collectivist cultures, effective leadership is often associated with interpersonal harmony, relational attentiveness, and concern for group well-being. In contrast, leaders in more individualistic cultures are more likely to be evaluated according to autonomy, decisiveness, personal initiative, and individual achievement (Den Hartog & De Hoogh, 2024; Tsai, 2022). These cultural differences suggest that identical leadership behaviours may be interpreted differently depending on the cultural context in which they occur.

Consequently, empathy may not be equally valued across all cultural settings.

Leadership behaviours that strengthen perceptions of effectiveness in one cultural context may receive different evaluations in another because followers apply culturally grounded expectations when interpreting leaders' actions. This perspective suggests that culture functions not merely as a contextual characteristic but as an important mechanism shaping the relationship between empathy and leadership effectiveness, thereby providing a strong theoretical basis for cross-cultural comparative research.

2.5. Empathy, Culture, and Organization Development

From an organization development (OD) perspective, leadership effectiveness depends not only on leaders' competencies but also on the extent to which those competencies align with the cultural expectations of employees and organizations. As organizations become increasingly multicultural, leadership development initiatives must recognize that leadership behaviours, including empathy, may be interpreted differently across cultural settings (Den Hartog & De Hoogh, 2024; Tsai, 2022).

Recent leadership research suggests that empathy contributes to organizational development by strengthening trust, facilitating collaboration, supporting organizational change, and promoting employee engagement. However, the effectiveness of empathetic leadership is likely to depend on whether such behaviours are viewed as appropriate and desirable within the prevailing cultural context (Muss et al., 2025; Nakamura et al., 2025).

Although empathy is widely promoted as a core leadership competency, relatively few studies have examined whether its contribution to leadership effectiveness remains consistent across different national cultures. Most empirical research has been conducted within single-country settings, limiting understanding of how cultural context influences the evaluation of empathetic leadership. Addressing this gap is important for developing culturally responsive leadership development practices and advancing organization development theory in increasingly global work environments (Den Hartog & De Hoogh, 2024; Agazu et al., 2025).

2.6. Research Gap and Hypotheses Development

Existing research consistently demonstrates that empathy is an important leadership capability associated with trust, collaboration, employee engagement, and leadership effectiveness. Previous studies also recognize that leadership effectiveness is shaped by cultural values and followers' expectations regarding appropriate leader behaviour. However, these two streams of research have largely developed independently, with relatively limited empirical attention given to how cultural context influences the relationship between empathy and leadership effectiveness.

Although cross-cultural leadership research acknowledges that leadership effectiveness is culturally embedded, empirical evidence directly comparing the role

of empathy across different national contexts remains limited. Most studies have been conducted within single-country settings, making it difficult to determine whether empathy functions as a universally effective leadership capability or whether its contribution depends on culturally grounded leadership expectations (Den Hartog & De Hoogh, 2024; Tsai, 2022).

Addressing this gap is particularly important as organizations increasingly operate across culturally diverse environments and leadership development programmes continue to promote empathy as a universal leadership competency. Without a clearer understanding of how empathy is interpreted across cultures, organizations may overlook important contextual differences when developing and evaluating leadership capabilities.

Accordingly, this study examines the relationship between empathy and leadership effectiveness in Malaysia and the United States, two culturally distinct contexts that provide an appropriate basis for cross-cultural comparison. By investigating whether cultural context influences the relationship between empathy and leadership effectiveness, this study seeks to contribute to leadership theory, organization development, and cross-cultural management by providing empirical evidence on the cultural contingency of empathetic leadership.

Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Empathy is positively related to leadership effectiveness.

H2: Cultural context moderates the relationship between empathy and leadership effectiveness.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional comparative research design to examine the relationship between empathy and leadership effectiveness across two national cultural contexts. The study was theory-driven and designed to investigate whether the relationship between empathy and leadership effectiveness is consistent across cultures or varies according to culturally grounded leadership expectations. A cross-cultural comparative design is appropriate because it enables the examination of how cultural context influences the evaluation of leadership behaviours and their perceived effectiveness (Den Hartog & De Hoogh, 2024; Tsai, 2022).

Malaysia and the United States were selected because they represent culturally distinct contexts with well-established differences in cultural values, particularly individualism-collectivism and power distance (Hofstede, 2011). These differences provide a theoretically meaningful basis for examining whether empathy is interpreted and evaluated differently as a leadership capability across cultural settings.

3.2. Sample and Data Collection

The study targeted business leaders holding supervisory, managerial, and senior

leadership positions across multiple organizational sectors in Malaysia and the United States. These participants were selected because they were directly involved in leadership, decision-making, and managing organizational relationships, making them appropriate respondents for examining empathy and leadership effectiveness. To be eligible for participation, respondents were required to hold supervisory or managerial responsibilities with direct oversight of teams or organizational units.

A purposive sampling approach was employed. Potential participants were identified through organizational directories, company listings, and professional contacts, and were invited via email to participate in the study. Data were collected using a structured online questionnaire administered through Google Forms. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential, and advised that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

A total of 267 business leaders responded to the online survey. During data screening, 51 responses were excluded because the respondents did not complete the survey. Only completed questionnaires were retained for the primary analyses, resulting in a final analytic sample of 216 respondents, comprising 112 business leaders from the United States and 104 from Malaysia. No additional responses were excluded from the completed-response sample, providing a relatively balanced distribution for cross-cultural comparison. The final sample size was considered adequate for the statistical analyses performed in this study, including comparative analyses and hierarchical regression (Hair et al., 2022).

3.3. Measures

3.3.1. Empathy

Empathy was measured using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), a widely validated multidimensional instrument that captures both affective (empathic concern) and cognitive (perspective-taking) dimensions of empathy (Davis, 1983). These dimensions are particularly relevant to leadership contexts that require interpersonal understanding, effective communication, and relationship management. The use of a multidimensional measure is consistent with the study's conceptualization of empathy as a relational leadership capability rather than a unidimensional personality trait. Reliability analysis demonstrated acceptable internal consistency for both the overall scale and its subscales. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess the construct validity of the empathy measure across the combined sample.

3.3.2. Leadership Effectiveness

Leadership effectiveness was assessed using an original self-report leadership questionnaire developed by the researcher. The measure conceptualized leadership effectiveness in terms of five behavioral characteristics: motivation, openness, communication, trust, and adaptability. The behavioral component consisted of 15 items, with three items measuring each dimension. The items were rated on a

five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Describes me poorly*) to 5 (*Describes me excellent*). Sample items included “Take risks and make good decisions,” “Help others to reach their success,” “Easily establish relationships with others,” and “I adapt easily with my surrounding.” Composite scores were calculated by summing the ratings across the 15 behavioral items, with higher scores indicating greater self-reported leadership effectiveness. The behavioral characteristics scale demonstrated strong internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.945$). The CFA results for the leadership effectiveness measurement model indicated acceptable model fit, $\chi^2 (172) = 328.714$, $p < 0.001$, RMSEA = 0.069, 90% CI [0.058, 0.080], and CFI = 0.938. Accordingly, leadership effectiveness represents the participating leaders’ self-assessments rather than evaluations provided by followers or subordinates.

3.3.3. Cultural Context

Cultural context was operationalized at the national level, distinguishing between Malaysian and U.S. respondents. Rather than measuring culture as an individual-level psychological variable, national context was treated as a theoretically grounded proxy reflecting shared cultural norms and expectations regarding leadership behaviour (Hofstede, 2011). This approach aligns with the study’s focus on cultural logics as socially embedded systems shaping leadership evaluation.

3.4. Data Analysis Strategy

Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics and MATLAB in several stages. Descriptive statistics were first examined to assess data quality, identify missing values and outliers, and evaluate the distributional properties of the study variables. Reliability analyses were conducted using SPSS, while confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed using MATLAB to assess the psychometric adequacy and construct validity of the empathy and leadership effectiveness measures.

Hierarchical regression analyses were then performed to examine the relationship between empathy and leadership effectiveness and to test the moderating effect of cultural context. Empathy was first entered as a continuous predictor to examine its direct association with leadership effectiveness. Country was subsequently entered as the moderator, followed by the interaction term between empathy and country to assess whether cultural context moderated the relationship.

To examine potential non-linear or threshold effects, empathy was additionally operationalized as a categorical variable (low, medium, and high) using tertile-based composite scores. Categorizing empathy into three groups enabled further examination of whether cultural differences in leadership effectiveness became more pronounced at different levels of empathic expression. This complementary analysis provided additional insight into the interaction between empathy and cultural context beyond the linear moderation model (Salas-Vallina et al., 2021).

Finally, independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare self-reported leadership effectiveness between Malaysian and U.S. leaders within each empathy category, providing further insight into cross-cultural differences across varying

levels of empathy.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles for research involving human participants. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to data collection. Participants were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential, and no personally identifiable information was collected. All data were used exclusively for academic research purposes and were reported only in aggregate form to protect participants' privacy.

4. Results

The hypotheses were tested using hierarchical regression analysis to examine the relationship between empathy and leadership effectiveness and to determine whether cultural context moderated this relationship. Prior to hypothesis testing, the psychometric properties of the measurement scales were evaluated using reliability analysis and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Descriptive statistics were subsequently examined before conducting the regression analyses. Empathy was first entered as a continuous predictor. To further explore potential non-linear or threshold effects, empathy was subsequently operationalized as a categorical variable (low, medium, and high) to facilitate interpretation of the moderating role of cultural context.

4.1. Main Effects of Empathy on Leadership Effectiveness

The results of the hierarchical regression analysis are presented in **Table 1**. Consistent with H1, empathy, when entered as a continuous predictor, was positively and significantly associated with leadership effectiveness ($B = 0.342$, $SE = 0.030$, $p < 0.001$), explaining a substantial proportion of the variance in leadership effectiveness ($R^2 = 0.451$). This finding indicates that higher levels of empathy are associated with higher self-reported leadership effectiveness across the combined sample. Therefore, H1 was supported.

Table 1. Hierarchical regression results predicting leadership effectiveness.

Predictors	Leadership Effectiveness				R^2
	B	SE	Z	p	
Model 1: Continuous Empathy					0.451
Empathy (continuous)	0.342	0.030	11.24**	0.001	
Country	0.040	0.031	1.28	0.201	
Model 2: Continuous Empathy $\times$ Country					0.452
Empathy (continuous)	0.335	0.033	10.10**	0.001	
Country	0.037	0.032	1.16	0.248	
Empathy $\times$ Country	-0.019	0.034	-0.55	0.581	

Continued

Model 3: Categorical Empathy					0.305
Empathy (categorical)	0.268	0.034	7.94**	0.001	
Country	-0.022	0.054	-0.65	0.515	
Model 4: Categorical Empathy × Country					0.323
Empathy (categorical)	0.268	0.034	8.02**	0.001	
Country	-0.023	0.033	-0.68	0.500	
Empathy × Country	-0.070	0.033	-2.10*	0.038	

Note. Empathy was entered into the regression analyses first as a continuous predictor and subsequently as a categorical predictor (low, medium, and high), with categories defined using tertile cut-off points based on the composite empathy score. Predictor variables were standardized prior to analysis and entered simultaneously within each regression model. B = regression coefficient; SE = standard error; R^2 = coefficient of determination. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$.

To examine whether this relationship differed across cultural contexts, country and the interaction term between empathy and country were subsequently entered into the regression model. Country did not independently predict leadership effectiveness ($B = 0.040$, $p = 0.201$). Furthermore, the interaction between continuous empathy and country was not statistically significant ($B = -0.019$, $p = 0.581$), indicating that cultural context did not significantly moderate the linear relationship between empathy and leadership effectiveness. Therefore, H2 was not supported in the primary regression analysis using empathy as a continuous predictor.

4.2. Follow-Up Analysis of the Moderating Effect of Cultural Context

Although the interaction between continuous empathy and cultural context was not statistically significant, a follow-up analysis was conducted to examine whether cultural differences became more evident at different levels of empathic expression. Empathy was therefore categorized into low, medium, and high groups using tertile-based composite scores.

Under this categorical operationalization, a statistically significant interaction between empathy level and country was observed ($\beta = -0.070$, $SE = 0.033$, $p = 0.038$). This finding suggests that the relationship between empathy and leadership effectiveness differs across cultural contexts when empathy is examined at distinct levels of empathic expression rather than as a strictly continuous predictor. These findings provide additional insight into the moderating role of cultural context. However, because this interaction emerged only after empathy was categorized into tertiles, the findings should be interpreted as complementary to the primary regression analysis rather than as definitive evidence of moderation.

4.3. Cross-Cultural Comparisons at across Empathy Levels

To further examine the nature of the interaction observed in the follow-up analy-

sis, independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare leadership effectiveness between Malaysian and U.S. leaders within each empathy category. The results of these comparisons are presented in **Table 2**. The purpose of these analyses was to identify the levels of empathy at which cross-cultural differences in leadership effectiveness became evident.

Table 2. Independent samples *t*-tests comparing leadership effectiveness between U.S. and Malaysian business leaders across empathy levels.

	U.S. (LE)		Malaysia (LE)		<i>t</i> -Stat	df	<i>p</i>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Low Empathy	2.66	0.32	2.70	0.47	0.39	46	0.697
Medium Empathy	2.92	0.49	3.02	0.32	1.00	42	0.321
High Empathy	3.42	0.44	3.14	0.28	3.09**	48	0.003

Note. Values represent means (*M*) and standard deviations (*SD*). ** $p < 0.01$ indicates a statistically significant difference between U.S. and Malaysian business leaders on leadership effectiveness (LE) based on independent-samples *t*-tests.

The results indicated that there were no statistically significant differences in leadership effectiveness between Malaysian and U.S. leaders at either low empathy ($p = 0.697$) or medium empathy ($p = 0.321$). These findings suggest that self-reported leadership effectiveness was similar across the two cultural contexts when leaders demonstrated low or moderate levels of empathy.

In contrast, at high levels of empathy, U.S. leaders demonstrated significantly higher leadership effectiveness ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.44$) than Malaysian leaders with similarly high empathy scores ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 0.28$), $t(48) = 3.09$, $p = 0.003$. This finding indicates that cross-cultural differences in leadership effectiveness became more evident when leaders exhibited high levels of empathy.

Taken together, these findings suggest that although empathy was positively associated with leadership effectiveness in both countries, cultural differences became apparent only at higher levels of empathic expression. These follow-up analyses provide additional insight into the relationship between empathy and leadership effectiveness and should be interpreted as complementary to the primary regression analysis.

4.4. Exploratory Analysis of Empathy Dimensions across Cultural Contexts

To provide additional insight into the cross-cultural findings, independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare overall empathy and its two dimensions empathic concern and perspective-taking between business leaders in Malaysia and the United States. The descriptive statistics for overall empathy and its dimensions across Malaysia and the United States, together with demographic characteristics, are presented in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of empathy dimensions by country and demographic characteristics.

Demographic Characteristic	Empathy M (SD)		Empathic Concern M (SD)		Perspective- Taking M (SD)	
Total sample	3.14	0.66	2.94	0.74	3.33	0.67
Country						
U.S.	3.38	0.72	3.18	0.80	3.57	0.72
Malaysia	2.88	0.47	2.67	0.57	3.08	0.50
Gender						
Male	3.15	0.66	2.92	0.74	3.37	0.66
Female	3.11	0.67	2.96	0.74	3.24	0.68
Age						
18 - 29	2.88	0.51	2.69	0.64	3.06	0.51
30 - 39	2.96	0.52	2.75	0.58	3.14	0.58
40 - 49	3.07	0.56	2.84	0.62	3.28	0.60
50 - 59	3.26	0.77	3.09	0.85	3.42	0.76
60 - 69	3.51	0.82	3.28	0.97	3.70	0.71
Position						
Other	3.00	0.81	2.64	0.91	3.36	0.71
Assistant Head	2.73	0.44	2.58	0.45	2.89	0.49
Head	2.99	0.54	2.79	0.61	3.17	0.60
Treasurer	4.14	0.68	3.97	0.84	3.91	0.71
Vice President	3.10	0.68	2.80	0.76	3.44	0.67
COO	3.45	0.67	3.33	0.81	3.58	0.66
CFO	3.71	0.75	3.59	0.86	3.82	0.69
Director	3.34	0.69	3.13	0.75	3.51	0.70
CEO	2.99	0.56	2.64	0.66	3.27	0.59
President	3.40	0.66	3.16	0.75	3.65	0.66

Note. Data are presented as means (M) and standard deviations (SD). N = 216.

The results indicate that U.S. business leaders reported significantly higher levels of overall empathy ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 0.72$) than Malaysian business leaders ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 0.47$), $t(191) = 5.87$, $p < 0.001$. Similarly, U.S. leaders reported significantly higher levels of empathic concern ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 0.80$) than Malaysian leaders ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 0.57$), $t(191) = 5.38$, $p < 0.001$. Perspective-taking also differed significantly between the two groups, with U.S. leaders reporting higher scores ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 0.72$) than Malaysian leaders ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 0.50$), $t(191) = 5.81$, $p < 0.001$.

These findings indicate that business leaders in the United States reported higher levels of both affective and cognitive empathy than their Malaysian counterparts. Although these analyses were not part of the primary hypothesis testing, they provide additional context for interpreting the cross-cultural differences ob-

served in leadership effectiveness. The findings suggest that differences in empathy may contribute to variations in how leadership effectiveness is evaluated across the two cultural settings.

The psychometric properties of the overall empathy scale and its dimensions, including reliability coefficients and standardized factor loadings, are presented in **Table 4**.

Table 4. Psychometric properties of empathy measures.

Measure	Mean (M)	SD	Comp. Mean	SD	Cronbach's α	Standardized Factor Loading
Empathy Full Scale (14 items)	3.14	0.66	43.98	9.23	0.852	
Empathic Concern (7 items)	2.94	0.74	20.53	5.18	0.760	0.972
Have tender, concerned feelings			3.60	1.06		0.706
Does not feel sorry for others			2.07	1.18		0.111
Feel protective of victims			3.53	1.07		0.705
Other's misfortunes are not disturbing			2.20	1.25		0.133
Feel no pity for those treated unfairly			2.09	1.37		0.220
Touched by what I see happen			3.64	1.05		0.814
Describe myself as a soft-hearted person			3.45	1.09		0.739
Perspective Taking (7 items)	3.33	0.67	23.34	4.67	0.725	0.889
Difficult to see another's perspective			2.30	1.17		0.043
See both sides of argument before decide			3.70	0.93		0.697
Seeing the world through another's eyes			3.69	0.92		0.786
Doesn't listen to arguments of others			2.89	1.37		0.137
I believe there are two sides of situations			3.85	0.90		0.778
Always try to put myself in their shoes			3.38	1.14		0.669
Before criticize I try to feel their feelings			3.42	1.13		0.750

Note. N = 216. Cronbach's alpha (α) coefficients are reported for the overall empathy scale and each subscale. Standardized factor loadings were obtained from confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) conducted using MATLAB. Higher factor loadings indicate stronger relationships between individual items and their respective latent constructs.

Several negatively worded IRI items exhibited low factor loadings in the original measurement model. As these items were not reverse scored prior to calculating the empathy composite, the psychometric results for the empathy measure and subsequent analyses based on the composite empathy score should be interpreted with caution.

5. Findings

5.1. Empathy and the Cultural Evaluation of Leadership Effectiveness

The present study demonstrates that empathy is a significant predictor of leader-

ship effectiveness across both Malaysia and the United States, supporting the growing view that effective leadership extends beyond task accomplishment to include interpersonal understanding and relationship building (Simon et al., 2022). Consistent with H1, leaders who exhibited higher levels of empathy were perceived as more effective, highlighting the importance of empathy as a core leadership capability in culturally diverse organizational settings.

However, the findings also suggest that the relationship between empathy and leadership effectiveness is more nuanced than previously assumed (Muss et al., 2025). Although the primary moderation analysis did not indicate that cultural context significantly moderated the linear relationship between empathy and leadership effectiveness, the follow-up analyses revealed that cross-cultural differences became evident when empathy was examined at different levels of expression. Specifically, differences between Malaysian and U.S. leaders emerged only among leaders with high levels of empathy, suggesting that cultural context influences how highly empathic leadership behaviours are interpreted and evaluated.

These findings support the view that leadership effectiveness is not determined solely by leaders' behaviours but is also shaped by culturally embedded expectations regarding appropriate leadership and emotional expression (Tsai, 2022). Rather than functioning as a universally interpreted leadership attribute, empathy appears to operate as a context-dependent capability whose effectiveness depends on how it aligns with cultural norms and followers' expectations. This finding extends the cross-cultural leadership literature by demonstrating that cultural differences may become more apparent only when leaders exhibit high levels of empathic behaviour.

5.2. Cultural Variation in the Evaluation of Empathetic Leadership

The findings suggest that cultural context influences how empathetic leadership is evaluated. Although empathy was positively associated with leadership effectiveness in both Malaysia and the United States, the follow-up analyses revealed that cross-cultural differences became evident only at higher levels of empathy. Specifically, U.S. leaders with high empathy scores were evaluated as significantly more effective than Malaysian leaders with similarly high levels of empathy, whereas no significant differences were observed at low or medium levels of empathy.

These findings indicate that empathy is not interpreted uniformly across cultural contexts. Rather, the evaluation of empathetic leadership appears to depend on culturally embedded expectations regarding appropriate leadership behaviour and emotional expression. Within the U.S. sample, higher levels of empathy were associated with stronger evaluations of leadership effectiveness. In contrast, the Malaysian sample exhibited a more moderate pattern, suggesting that while empathy is valued, increasing levels of empathic expression may not necessarily result in proportionally higher evaluations of leadership effectiveness.

These findings are consistent with cross-cultural leadership research, which

suggests that leadership behaviours are interpreted through cultural values and follower expectations rather than according to universal standards. Consequently, empathy should be viewed as a context-dependent leadership capability whose effectiveness depends on how it aligns with culturally grounded perceptions of appropriate leadership behaviour.

5.3. Empathy Intensity and Leadership Legitimacy

The findings further suggest that the relationship between empathy and leadership effectiveness varies according to the level of empathic expression. Although empathy was positively associated with leadership effectiveness across both cultural contexts, the relationship was not strictly linear. The primary moderation analysis using empathy as a continuous variable was not statistically significant. However, when empathy was categorized into low, medium, and high levels, significant cross-cultural differences emerged among leaders with high levels of empathy.

This pattern suggests that leadership effectiveness does not necessarily increase proportionally with greater empathy. Instead, the influence of empathy appears to depend on how empathic behaviours are interpreted within different cultural contexts. Among the U.S. respondents, higher levels of empathy were associated with higher self-reported leadership effectiveness. In contrast, among the Malaysian respondents, leadership effectiveness appeared to plateau at higher levels of empathy, indicating that additional empathic expression was not associated with correspondingly higher self-reported leadership effectiveness.

Taken together, these findings suggest that empathy should not be regarded as a universally interpreted leadership attribute. Rather, the effectiveness of empathic leadership appears to depend on the interaction between leaders' empathic behaviours and the cultural expectations of those evaluating their leadership. This finding contributes to the cross-cultural leadership literature by demonstrating that cultural differences may become more apparent when leaders exhibit high levels of empathic behaviour rather than moderate or low levels.

5.4. Implications for Organizational Success across Contexts

The findings have important implications for leadership development and cross-cultural management. First, the positive relationship between empathy and leadership effectiveness across both cultural contexts reinforces the importance of incorporating empathy into leadership development programmes. Organizations should recognize that empathy is not merely an interpersonal skill but a strategic leadership capability that contributes to stronger leader-employee relationships and more effective leadership.

Second, the findings suggest that organizations should avoid adopting a one-size-fits-all approach to leadership development. Although empathy was positively associated with leadership effectiveness in both Malaysia and the United States, the evaluation of highly empathic leadership differed across the two cul-

tural contexts. This indicates that leadership development initiatives should be adapted to reflect the cultural expectations and social norms of the workforce in which leaders operate.

For multinational organizations, these findings highlight the importance of cultural intelligence in leadership development. Leaders working across national boundaries should understand that leadership behaviours that are perceived as highly effective in one cultural context may not necessarily be interpreted in the same way elsewhere. Consequently, leadership training should integrate both empathy and cross-cultural competence to enable leaders to respond effectively to culturally diverse employees and organizational environments.

Overall, this study suggests that effective leadership requires not only empathy but also an understanding of the cultural context in which empathy is expressed and evaluated. Organizations that develop leaders capable of balancing empathic leadership with cultural sensitivity are likely to be better positioned to foster employee engagement, collaboration, and long-term organizational effectiveness.

6. Discussion

6.1. Reframing Empathy in Leadership Theory

The present study contributes to leadership theory by demonstrating that the relationship between empathy and leadership effectiveness is shaped by cultural context. Although empathy was positively associated with leadership effectiveness in both Malaysia and the United States, the findings indicate that the relationship between empathy and self-reported leadership effectiveness is not entirely uniform across cultural contexts. Specifically, cross-cultural differences emerged only when empathy was examined at high levels of expression, suggesting that the relationship between empathy and self-reported leadership effectiveness may vary across cultural contexts.

Consistent with previous leadership research, empathy emerged as an important interpersonal capability associated with more effective leadership. However, the present findings extend existing knowledge by demonstrating that the relationship is more nuanced than a simple linear association. While higher empathy was associated with higher self-reported leadership effectiveness in both countries, significant differences between the U.S. and Malaysian samples became evident only among leaders with high empathy scores. This finding suggests that the relationship between empathy and self-reported leadership effectiveness may vary across cultural contexts.

Rather than suggesting that empathy is universally interpreted in the same way, the findings indicate that empathy operates as a context-dependent leadership capability. Leaders may therefore benefit not only from developing empathy but also from understanding how empathic behaviours are perceived within different cultural environments. This perspective contributes to cross-cultural leadership research by highlighting that cultural differences may become most apparent when leaders display high levels of empathic behaviour.

6.2. Challenging Universalistic Assumptions in Leadership Theory

The present study contributes to leadership theory by questioning the assumption that empathy functions as a universally effective leadership capability across cultural contexts. Although transformational leadership and emotional intelligence perspectives consistently identify empathy as an important characteristic of effective leaders, the present findings suggest that its relationship with leadership effectiveness is influenced by cultural context. Specifically, while empathy was positively associated with leadership effectiveness in both Malaysia and the United States, significant cross-cultural differences emerged only among leaders exhibiting high levels of empathy.

Rather than suggesting that empathy is less important in one cultural context than another, the findings indicate that empathy is evaluated through culturally embedded expectations regarding appropriate leadership behaviour. These results extend existing leadership research by demonstrating that the effectiveness of empathic leadership depends not only on the presence of empathy but also on how empathic behaviours are interpreted within different cultural settings. Consequently, the findings suggest that leadership theories may benefit from giving greater attention to the role of cultural context in shaping the evaluation of leadership behaviours.

6.3. Reconceptualizing Empathy as a Culturally Embedded Leadership Capability

The present study provides further evidence that empathy should be understood not only as an individual leadership characteristic but also as a capability whose effectiveness is shaped by cultural context. While existing leadership theories generally portray empathy as a positive attribute that contributes to effective leadership across situations, the present findings suggest that its influence on leadership effectiveness depends on how empathic behaviours are interpreted within different cultural environments.

Rather than viewing empathy solely as a stable personal characteristic, the findings indicate that its effectiveness is influenced by culturally embedded expectations regarding appropriate leadership behaviour. Although empathy was positively associated with leadership effectiveness in both countries, significant cross-cultural differences emerged only among leaders exhibiting high levels of empathy. This suggests that the value of empathic leadership lies not only in leaders' ability to understand others but also in how empathic behaviours align with the expectations and norms of those evaluating leadership.

Accordingly, the findings encourage a broader perspective on empathy in leadership by highlighting the interaction between individual capabilities and cultural context. This perspective complements existing leadership theories by emphasizing that empathy is not interpreted identically across cultural settings and that its contribution to leadership effectiveness depends, at least in part, on the social and cultural environment in which leadership is exercised.

6.4. Advancing Cross-Cultural Leadership Research

The present study contributes to cross-cultural leadership research by demonstrating that cultural context influences not only leadership behaviours but also how those behaviours are evaluated. While previous studies have documented cross-cultural differences in leadership styles and leader effectiveness, the present findings suggest that cultural differences may become more evident when leaders exhibit high levels of empathy rather than moderate or low levels. This provides a more nuanced understanding of how cultural context shapes leadership evaluation.

An important contribution of this study is the distinction between the continuous and categorical operationalization of empathy. When empathy was examined as a continuous variable, cultural context did not significantly moderate its relationship with leadership effectiveness. However, when empathy was categorized into low, medium, and high levels, significant cross-cultural differences emerged among leaders exhibiting high levels of empathy. These findings suggest that conventional linear analyses may overlook meaningful cultural variation that becomes apparent only at higher levels of empathic expression.

The findings also highlight the importance of considering cultural context in future leadership research. Rather than assuming that leadership characteristics operate similarly across cultural settings, researchers should consider how cultural values and follower expectations influence the interpretation and evaluation of leadership behaviours. Examining both continuous and categorical representations of leadership attributes may therefore provide a more comprehensive understanding of cross-cultural leadership processes.

Overall, this study extends the cross-cultural leadership literature by demonstrating that empathy is positively associated with leadership effectiveness across cultures while also showing that its evaluation is shaped by cultural context. These findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how leadership effectiveness is interpreted across different cultural environments.

6.5. Implications for Organizational Success and Leadership Development

The findings of this study have important implications for leadership development and cross-cultural management. The positive association between empathy and leadership effectiveness across both Malaysia and the United States suggests that empathy should remain an important component of leadership development programmes. However, the findings also indicate that empathy should not be viewed as a universally interpreted leadership capability. Rather, its effectiveness depends on how empathic behaviours are perceived and evaluated within different cultural contexts.

For organizations operating across national and cultural boundaries, these findings highlight the importance of integrating cultural awareness into leadership development initiatives. Although empathy was positively associated with leader-

ship effectiveness in both countries, significant differences emerged among leaders exhibiting high levels of empathy. This suggests that leadership development programmes should prepare leaders not only to develop empathic skills but also to understand how those behaviours may be interpreted differently across cultural settings.

The findings also have implications for multinational organizations responsible for developing leaders across culturally diverse workforces. Rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach to leadership development, organizations should recognize that effective leadership requires balancing interpersonal competence with cultural sensitivity. Leadership training that combines empathy with cross-cultural competence may better prepare leaders to build effective relationships while responding appropriately to the expectations of employees from different cultural backgrounds.

Overall, this study suggests that empathy remains an important leadership capability, but its effectiveness is enhanced when leaders are able to adapt their interpersonal behaviours to the cultural context in which they lead. Developing leaders who combine empathy with cultural understanding may therefore contribute to more effective leadership across diverse organizational environments.

7. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations warrant consideration. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference regarding the relationship between empathy and leadership effectiveness. Second, culture was operationalized at the national level, which may not fully capture variation within countries or organizations. Future research could employ longitudinal and multilevel designs to examine how empathy and leadership effectiveness evolve over time and across different organizational contexts.

Future studies should also examine how empathy interacts with other leadership characteristics, organizational environments, and contextual factors to influence leadership effectiveness across cultures. Given that the present study identified cross-cultural differences only at higher levels of empathy, future research could investigate whether similar threshold effects exist for other leadership capabilities. In addition, qualitative studies could provide deeper insight into how leaders and followers interpret empathic behaviours within different cultural settings, thereby enriching our understanding of the processes underlying cross-cultural leadership evaluation.

An additional limitation concerns cross-cultural measurement equivalence. Although confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to assess the construct validity of the empathy and leadership effectiveness measures, configural, metric, and scalar measurement invariance across the U.S. and Malaysian samples were not tested. Consequently, cross-country differences observed in this study should be interpreted cautiously, as some observed differences may reflect variation in how the constructs or scale items function across cultural contexts rather than

substantive differences alone. Future cross-cultural research should establish measurement invariance before making direct comparisons of latent means or structural relationships across countries.

A further limitation concerns the scoring and measurement of empathy. The original study used the Empathic Concern and Perspective Taking subscales of Davis's Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI); however, the negatively worded items were not reverse scored before the empathy composite was calculated. This scoring issue may have affected the validity of the composite empathy measure and may also account, in part, for the low factor loadings observed for several items. Because the original respondent-level data are no longer available, the empathy scores could not be recalculated, and the measurement model could not be re-estimated. Accordingly, findings involving the empathy composite should be interpreted with caution. Future research should apply the prescribed scoring procedures for the IRI and reassess the reliability and factor structure of the measure before hypothesis testing.

8. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between empathy and leadership effectiveness across two cultural contexts, addressing the assumption that empathy functions as a universally effective leadership capability. Using comparative data from Malaysia and the United States, the findings demonstrate that empathy is positively associated with leadership effectiveness in both countries. However, the relationship is more nuanced than a simple linear association. Although cultural context did not significantly moderate the relationship when empathy was examined as a continuous variable, significant cross-cultural differences emerged when empathy was examined at different levels of expression.

These findings contribute to leadership research by demonstrating that the effectiveness of empathic leadership depends not only on leaders' empathic capabilities but also on how those behaviours are interpreted within different cultural contexts. Rather than supporting a universal interpretation of empathy, the findings suggest that cultural expectations influence the evaluation of highly empathic leadership behaviours.

From a practical perspective, the study highlights the importance of integrating empathy with cultural awareness in leadership development. Organizations operating across diverse cultural environments should recognize that effective leadership involves not only developing interpersonal competencies but also understanding how leadership behaviours are perceived within different cultural settings.

Overall, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of empathy in leadership by demonstrating that empathy is a valuable leadership capability whose effectiveness is shaped, at least in part, by cultural context. These findings provide a foundation for future research examining how empathy and other leadership capabilities are evaluated across increasingly diverse organizational environments.

Conflicts of Interest

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

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