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Cultural Determinism, Leadership Identity, and Psychological Outcomes Among Emirati Women School Principals: A Convergent Mixed Methods Study

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Abstract

Background/ problem: Despite state-led empowerment reforms in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Emirati women school principals experience tension between leadership roles and entrenched cultural expectations. Norms related to family honor, modesty, male guardianship, and relational harmony, continue to shape leadership identity formation, agency, and psychological outcomes, influencing leadership legitimacy and professional identity.

Objective/ purpose: This study examines how cultural determinism influences leadership identity, agency, and psychological well-being among Emirati women school leaders on the East Coast of the UAE.

Design and Methodology: A convergent parallel mixed methods design was implemented. Correlation and regression analysis were used to test the influence of cultural determinism on psychological outcomes from the data gathered through survey of 253 principal and vice-principals. At the stage of interpretation, the results were integrated with phenomenological thematic analysis of 30 semi-structured interviews.

Results: The quantitative results indicated a strong and significant association between cultural determinism and psychological outcomes, $F(1, 251) = 496.35, p < .001$, explaining 66% of the variance ($R^2 = .66$). Cultural influence was a significant predictor for affective strain, emotional regulation demands, and internalized expectations of leadership presence, although not significantly associated with any structural variables. The qualitative results revealed six interconnected themes describing how leaders negotiate cultural norms through moral legitimacy, relational leadership, and strategic restraint.

Conclusion and Implications: Findings show a significant relationship between cultural determinism and psychological outcomes, which occur via emotional regulation, relational legitimacy, and negotiated agency. The study implies that developing leaders in a collectivist society requires culturally-informed methods that incorporate psychological aspects of leadership.

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While there are many areas where the Emirate's national reform efforts emphasize gender equality as it relates to women being educated and employed, there remains an underlying societal attitude toward what careers women can pursue that limits their career advancement opportunities in a male dominated field (Gallant & Pounder, 2008). These attitudes persist despite constitutional protections and government-run empowerment initiatives designed to assist women and provide them with equal access to all fields of employment. These tensions derive from two conflicting logics of gender-inclusive institutions clashing with an ongoing process of reproducing a gender hierarchy along the lines of cultural determinism (Metcalf, 2008; Mostafa, 2005).

This concept of cultural determinant, the knowledge and understanding that a person's behavior, role, and goals are affected by collective norms and beliefs (Ge, 2026), continues to be a significant theoretical construct to apply to the study of female leadership in the Arab world. Hijab (1988) argues that women's participation in the workforce is often evaluated in terms of competence, while remaining constrained by broader social expectations related to family roles and moral norms. Women's leadership identities in the UAE are imbued with religious values, family life, and tribal customs that promote social cohesion and male guardianship (Koburtay et al., 2023; Wong & Wang, 2022). Education has been a pathway into public life with Emirati women dominating the field of education and assuming increasingly senior leadership roles (Alhammedi, 2019; Al-Naqbi & Aderibigbe, 2024). However, leadership is gender-segregated with men occupying the most senior positions and women occupying the administration or elementary education sectors (Hashem et al., 2025). Such exemplars further show how culture norms and values continue to shape the legitimacy of one's leadership, aspirations to lead, and psychological adjustments to self-regulate such ambitions (Gallant & Pounder, 2008; Metcalfe, 2008).

Although most of the work on structural and organizational barriers to women's leadership in the Gulf has been focused on structural and organizational barriers, little attention has been paid to the internalization and negotiation of cultural determinism at the psychological and identity level, particularly in education, where women are numerically dominant but symbolically restricted (Hilal et al., 2024; Koburtay et al., 2023; Metcalfe, 2008). This gap reflects particularly sub-regional dynamics, particularly the East Coast of the UAE, where family and tribal relationships are more important. This research will fill an apparent gap in behavioral sciences by investigating the concept of cultural determinism from both a structural perspective and an identity-oriented one for influencing leaders' experiences.

Accordingly, two research objectives motivate this study through a mixed-method research design. The first is to determine the correlation between cultural determinism and the psychological and emotional outcomes that result from cultural determinism in Emirati women school leaders. The second is to explore how the participants in this study internalize, negotiate, and reinterpret cultural norms to shape their leadership identity and agency. To address this gap, the present study examines the negotiation process of cultural and career dynamics by Emirati women school principals through the ethical, emotional, and psychological dimensions of leadership agency. It is an empirical presentation on the mechanisms of conditional, negotiated agency in culture that has been grounded in the theory of cultural determinism to further behavioral science.

This study contributes to behavioral science by modeling cultural determinism not only as a structural or policy-level determinant but also as a multi-level psychological process influencing affective regulation, identity construction, and the vision of leaders. It contributes to leadership development, gender equity policy, and culturally responsive educational practice in collectivist societies by combining hypothesis testing and phenomenological inquiry modeling negotiated determinism as a culturally located form of agency, a contribution to behavioral science theory.

Literature Review

This section reviews the key literature on cultural determinism as the primary theoretical framework, followed by its application across core variables, including gendered leadership structures, psychological internalization, and negotiated agency, to establish the study's conceptual foundation and justify its hypothesis.

Cultural Determinism as Theoretical Framework and Gendered Leadership Structures

The concept of cultural determinism has been chosen as the dominant theory for this study. It refers to the impact of collectively held cultural beliefs, values, and norms on cognitive processes and behavior of the individual (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Ge, 2026). In contrast to similar concepts, including cultural norms, collectivism, and patriarchy, cultural determinism can be considered a macro theory because it involves the organization of the mentioned concepts into a system that influences social roles, behavior, and expectations (Metcalfe, 2008; Tlaiss, 2011). Therefore, gendered leadership structures constitute an important contextual

variable within this theoretical paradigm that affects the construction of leadership legitimacy, authority, and behaviors.

Cultural determinism theory has had a predominant influence on the study of gender roles in leadership in the Arab world. In such societies, culture is deeply rooted in complex social systems, and gender roles are formed within the context of prevailing social institutions and traditions, which affect the power of women as leaders in society (Hijab, 1988; Metcalfe, 2008). Gender roles in Arab societies are still highly prevalent, and women's involvement in leadership roles is affected by expectations of domesticity, morality, and family prestige (Tlaiss, 2011). While modernization and policies promoting educational and professional growth have increased opportunities for women in leadership positions, patriarchal social institutions still play a mediating role (Hilal et al., 2024; Koburtay et al., 2023).

Existing literature may be grouped into two dominant strands: structural explanations of women's limited advancement, and normative cultural explanations that emphasize moral regulation and legitimacy. However, these strands are rarely integrated to explain how cultural expectations are internalized at the psychological and identity level (Albornoz & Sebastián, 2022). Cultural expectations such as these have a direct impact on the legitimacy of the leader and the style of leadership. Gallant and Pounder (2008) mention that culturally gendered norms were used in the regulation of women's participation in public discourse and leadership, and Mostafa (2005) writes that patriarchal values and age relative barriers still hold women back from managerial positions. Cumulatively, this points to the cultural roles not only as an institutional barrier but as an informal system of regulation of ambition, authority and emotional expression.

Though gendered policy has enabled a stronger presence of women within the education system and administration system in order to participate in the education system, hierarchy of leadership remains an umbrella social order. A growing body of evidence suggests education reforms provided new employment opportunities for women (Al-Oraimi, 2004). More recently, studies indicate that cultural expectations shape women's access to power (Massouti et al., 2024). Emirati female principals are often associated with collaborative and transformational leadership, which allows them to meet administrative requirements while in harmony and respect within boundaries of authority (Al Khatib, 2024; Alhammadi, 2019). These same trends are also found in regional research on how cultural barriers persist, lacking mentoring and gendered hierarchies of education and school leaders in Arab countries (Hilal et al., 2024). Furthermore, there is evidence of gender segregation within UAE schools; males run schools at the top of the control hierarchy while females run schools at the bottom or middle positions (Rai et al., 2023; Hashem et al., 2025).

When synthesized, these studies suggest that although there has been movement toward women gaining access to leadership in the organizational context, there remains symbolic and hierarchical inequality, with culture continuing to play a role in mediating legitimacy even after formal reforms in policy.

Psychological Internalization and Negotiated Agency

In this research, psychological internalization is defined as the mechanism that facilitates the cognitive and emotional absorption of culturally grounded expectations that influence one's sense of self, identity, and behavior (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Eagly & Wood, 2012). Negotiated agency is used to describe the capability of people to make sense of, adjust to, and react to these expectations in socially appropriate ways (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Koburtay et al., 2023). While both concepts are analytically different, they are related in that internalization lays the psychological groundwork for agency.

In response to cultural factors, Emirati women also select jobs and leadership targets. Additionally, cultural expectations like high power-distance attitudes decrease comfort with assertive leadership styles and lower job aspirations (Gewinner et al., 2024; Kemp & Zhao, 2016). The younger generation of Emirati females finds themselves bound between the vexations of bitterness and the obligations of familial fidelity, locked in a struggle to balance the dichotomies of modernity and tradition (Begum et al., 2024; Kemp & McLoughlin, 2022). Interestingly, cross-national comparisons indicate that Arab women who ascend to

leadership positions understand and actively oppose the established patriarchal systems through the employment of organizational values and leadership strategies specifically tailored for females (Koburtay et al., 2023; Tlaiss, 2011).

In context of the United Arab Emirates, internalized cultural expectations regarding modesty, loyalty, and community identity persist as important aspects affecting the perception and enactment of leadership legitimacy by women (Gallant & Pounder, 2008; Mostafa, 2005; Vishkin et al., 2023). Although empowerment programs and reforms in education have provided increased access to leadership opportunities for women, these internalized cultural expectations continue to exert symbolic restrictions in terms of emotional control, self-presentation, and leadership actions. Although much research has examined the ways in which women have been denied access to leadership roles in organizations, the process through which cultural expectations become internalized and psychologically manifest has received less consideration, especially within education where women predominate numerically but are still subject to symbolic restrictions. In this regard, there is an even greater gap in relation to sub-regional cultures such as that of the East Coast of the United Arab Emirates.

Negotiated agency is thus developed within the context of a culturally located practice through which women leaders transform restrictions into legitimate influence. By using adaptive techniques in line with cultural standards rather than challenging the prevailing practices directly, the leader can effectively develop her position while remaining responsive to the cultural setting. This is due to a relational concept of leadership, according to which the leader derives influence not only from power but also from social embeddedness.

Research Objectives

Following a convergent parallel mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Fetters et al., 2013), mixed-methods research (MMR) was used in this research to analyze the influence of cultural determinism on the leadership experience of Emirati women leaders in school settings. Specifically, the quantitative phase used a deductive approach in examining the relationship between cultural determinism and psychological outcomes, while the qualitative phase used an interpretive approach in analyzing participants' subjective meanings and experiences of cultural determinism. The two approaches ran concurrently but analyzed separately before synthesizing during the interpretation stage of the research process.

During the quantitative phase, the study focused on research objective 1 (RO1), which states that the research aims at examining the correlation between cultural determinism and psychological outcomes amongst Emirati women school leaders. The quantitative approach was used as a way of analyzing correlations and associations between different variables and how strongly cultural determinism influences psychological outcomes (Field, 2024). Thus, following hypothesis was proposed:

H1: Cultural determinism is significantly associated with psychological outcomes among Emirati women school leaders.

The qualitative phase of the study involved the investigation of research objective 2 (RO2), which was to understand the process by which Emirati women school leaders negotiate, interpret, and internalize cultural determinism in the formation of their identities as leaders and negotiators of their agency. In this qualitative phase, the interpretive perspective was used to investigate how the participants understood cultural and leadership dynamics within their sociocultural context (Moustakas, 1994; Sandelowski, 2000). As such, the research question that guided this part of the study was:

RQ1: How do Emirati women school leaders interpret, internalize, and negotiate cultural determinism in shaping their leadership identity and negotiated agency?

With respect to the theory of cultural determinism being used as the fundamental paradigm, the construct of cultural determinism is explained as an independent variable within the suggested research model that affects the behaviors of leaders based on the collectively held norms, beliefs, and values. As such, leadership identity, psychological outcomes, and negotiated leadership agency are some of the significant dependent and mediating variables included within the proposed research model to show how the cultural effect influences leadership experiences.

Primarily, the four variables that are to be examined in the current research include cultural determinism, leadership identity, psychological outcomes, and leadership agency in regard to the professional experiences of Emirati women school leaders. Cultural determinism is understood as the effect of shared beliefs, values, and attitudes on behavior, decision-making, and the way leaders see themselves. Leadership agency in the context of the present study is regarded as an aspect of leadership activity that is contingent and negotiated rather than entirely autonomous. Psychological outcomes considered here encompass emotional stress and pressure, emotional regulation, and internalized leadership role expectations.

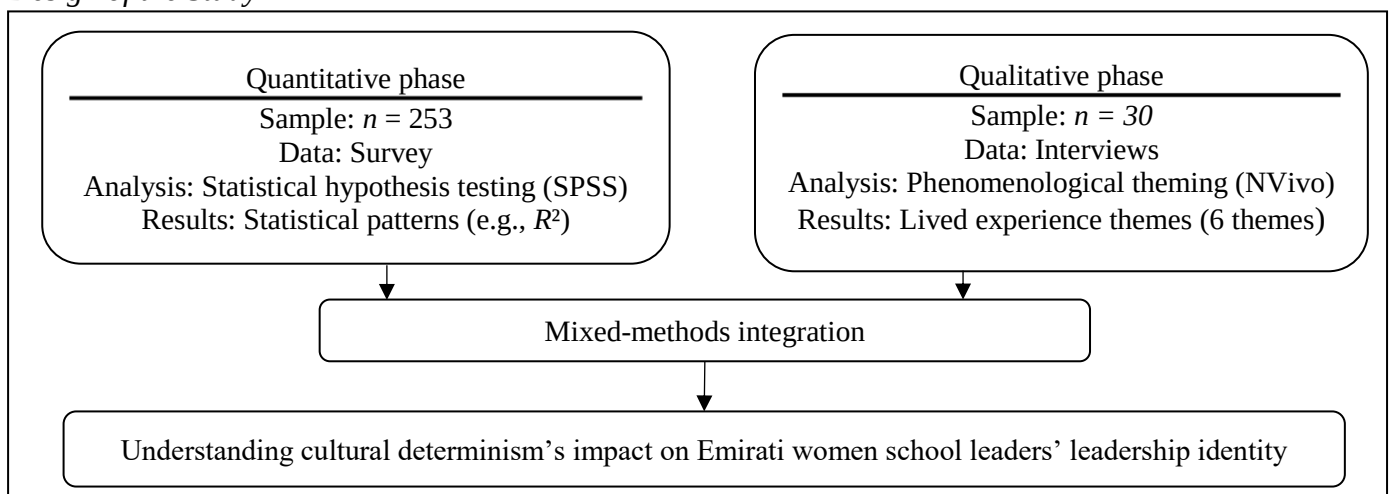
Methods

Design

The methodology used in the research was based on the convergent parallel model whereby the qualitative and quantitative research components were carried out concurrently in the general data collection period ranging from September 2023 to February 2024. The results of each component were analyzed separately before synthesis during the analysis phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Morse, 2003). In terms of quantitative part of the research, the relationship between cultural determinism and psychological outcomes such as stress and regulation and internalization of leadership was investigated using the deductive research approach. Meanwhile, the qualitative component of the research used interpretivist approach to analyze psychological outcomes in leadership settings.

The quantitative phase focused on the relationship between cultural determinism and psychological outcomes through the use of deductive research methodology. Meanwhile, interpretivist research methodology was used for the qualitative phase with regard to leadership. The simultaneous analysis of both approaches provides a means of comparing numerical patterns and real-life experience in the same society and era. The inclusion of both approaches in the analysis phase enables the research to move beyond identifying correlations to revealing how cultural determinism influences leadership in collectivist societies such as the UAE. The design of the research is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Design of the Study



Phase 1: Quantitative Phase

Population and Sample

The target population for this research comprised female Emirati school leaders, such as school principals and vice-principals, who work in public schools operated by the Ministry of Education on the East Coast of the United Arab Emirates. The total size of the accessible population was estimated at 260 potential respondents. For this particular research study, it was decided to use a census approach. In all, 256 responses were obtained, three of which had to be disregarded due to missing data, and thus, 253 responses were analyzed.

Instruments

Data were gathered utilizing a survey that had been developed to measure the various independent and dependent variables for the study. The instrument was made up of 42 questions, where the measure of cultural determinism was through 20 questions (example: “My leadership decision is based on family and cultural expectation”), and the psychological outcomes were determined through 22 questions on emotional strain, emotional regulation, and internalized leadership expectations (example: “There is pressure on me to regulate my emotions according to cultural expectations of a leader”).

The variable of cultural determinism was operationalized by having respondents answer questions regarding their perceptions on how factors like family expectations, social norms, and culture affected their leadership behavior. Psychological outcomes were measured in terms of three variables: emotional strain, emotional regulation demands, and leadership expectations. Emotional strain is defined as the mental stress resulting from the conflicting expectations about leadership roles. Emotional regulation demands relate to the need to control emotional expressions as per cultural requirements for leaders. Internalized leadership expectations involve the degree to which the respondents internally process their cultural expectations about leadership roles and behaviour. These measures were obtained through items in a modified version of the Likert scale taken from previous works concerning leadership, organizational psychology, and culture (see Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Eagly & Wood, 2012; Nazari et al., 2023), and they were fine-tuned according to the sociocultural reality of Emirati female school leaders. Data was gathered utilizing the Likert scale of measurement, whereby participants were expected to respond to items from one to five (strongly agree to strongly disagree). The survey items were based on existing scales validated in previous research on leadership and culture (e.g., Eagly & Wood, 2012; Kemp & Zhao, 2016; Metcalfe, 2008), and their content validity was assessed by three educational leadership experts and organizational psychologists. The original questionnaire was created in English language and then translated to Arabic through forward and backward translation technique proposed by Brislin (1970).

The internal consistency analysis showed that the reliability values for all constructs were above .70, surpassing the criterion of acceptable internal consistency reliability in the social sciences as proposed by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). In particular, Cronbach's alphas for cultural determinism and psychological outcomes were .88 and .91, respectively, which is considered a high level of reliability. The construct validity of the measurement model was confirmed by subject matter experts and factor consistency.

Data Collection

The quantitative data was collected through an electronic questionnaire which was sent to participants during the period between September 2023 to February 2024. The participants had a choice of whether to participate in this research, and their informed consent was sought prior to collecting data from them.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis was carried out using IBM SPSS Statistics, Version 26. The descriptive statistics were performed to describe participants' demographics and the distribution of variables.

Inferential analysis entailed correlational analysis and linear regression to investigate the association between cultural determinism and psychological variables. Normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity assumptions were tested and met before performing the analyses. Statistical significance at $p < .05$ was used throughout the analyses.

Phase 2: Qualitative Phase

Participants

A sub-sample of 30 participants was selected to take part in the qualitative stage from the quantitative stage. Sample selection was done through purposive sampling, guided by well-defined criteria: (1) UAE women who occupy the positions of school principal or vice-principal, (2) who work in public schools located along the East coast of the UAE, (3) having at least five years of leadership experience, and (4) willing to be interviewed in a semi-structured interview. Sample members were disqualified if they failed to meet these criteria, especially those who refused to give consent. The purposeful sampling technique was used to identify participants in order to achieve variability in demographic and occupational backgrounds, as well as to make sure that the participants could be reached and would participate willingly. The sample size fits within phenomenological study requirements.

Instrument

The data collection process involved the use of semi-structured interviews whose purpose was to examine the respondents' experience with cultural expectations, identity creation as leaders, and negotiating their agency in a cultural setting. Interview procedure involved the use of 8 open-ended guide questions generated from the theoretical framework of the study (Cultural Determinism, Leadership Identity, and Negotiated Agency), examples of which include: "In what ways does the culture impact your leadership decision-making?" and "In what ways do you reconcile the family and professional demands of your leadership position?" The formulation of the interview guide questions was done using an iterative approach anchored on leadership and cultural literature. This type of interview followed from the theoretical basis of the study and leadership literature. Each respondent chose whether he/she would like to conduct an interview in Arabic or English.

In order to establish the content validity of the interview questions, three experts in the field of education and qualitative methodology were asked to comment on their relevancy and appropriateness to achieve the purpose of this study. This helped in enhancing the cultural sensitivity of the interview questions.

Data Collection Procedures

Qualitative data gathering took place after the survey phase was completed. Despite the fact that the qualitative phase came after the quantitative phase chronologically, the study is still considered a convergent parallel mixed method design since both data sets were gathered concurrently, analyzed separately, and then integrated during the interpretation process (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Fetters et al., 2013; Morse, 2003). The reason behind this sequence is simply logistic and does not reflect an explanatory sequence design approach. All interviews were recorded with consent from the participants, then transcribed verbatim and anonymized in order to maintain confidentiality. The identification codes were used by the participants for their privacy. Identification codes were used for all interviewees, using the pattern P1-P30. The use of "P" is an abbreviation for "participant," while the numbers indicate the sequence in which interview transcripts have been prepared.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis was done using phenomenology thematic analysis based on the works by Moustakas (1994). The analysis process entailed repetitive reading of the transcript, selection of meaningful

statements, and construction of themes that would represent the core of the participants' experiences. The NVivo computer software was utilized during the process of organizing and coding data. The objective of this stage was not to confirm any hypothesis; rather, it was to give an interpretation of how cultural determinism was internalized and negotiated by leaders (Sandelowski, 2000).

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Phases

For the maintenance of validity and credibility in using convergent mixed-methods research design, integration involved the process of systematic comparison and convergence of quantitative and qualitative findings (Denzin, 2017; Fetters et al., 2013). In particular, comparisons were made between quantitative findings, including correlation and regression findings, and qualitative themes developed from phenomenology analysis.

The use of joint displays made possible the comparison of statistical findings against qualitative themes. A notable correlation between cultural determinism and psychological outcomes was examined in light of emotions and relational legitimacy. Integration involved merging of both datasets into understanding the phenomenon through cultural determinism that exists both on a structural and experienced level (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Fetters et al., 2013).

Ethical Considerations

Approval for the research was sought and granted by the ethical committee. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and consent was obtained before conducting the interviews. For the quantitative stage, written consent was acquired online before filling out the survey, while participation was voluntary and participants could withdraw at any point without any repercussions. For the qualitative stage, further verbal consent was acquired before audio-recording the interview process. They were also assured that participation was voluntary, and that they had the right to terminate the process anytime or skip answering certain questions (Ahmad et al., 2017).

The reliability of the qualitative phase was guaranteed by ensuring consistency in the interview process, conducting peer debriefing sessions, and documenting all steps taken in the analysis process, such as coding and reflective memos (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). For transferability, context was provided, and the findings were compared with other educational institutions in the Gulf region (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017).

Results

This section presents empirical results of the parallel convergent design research using mixed-methods. While the research adopted the convergent parallel design research approach that involves concurrent collection of data, this section provides the results in a sequential manner, starting from the findings obtained from the quantitative phase followed by those from the qualitative phase.

Quantitative Results

The first research objective was to determine whether cultural determinism significantly predicts psychological and emotional outcomes among Emirati women school leaders. Descriptive statistics indicated that the key study variables were normally distributed, as verified by skewness and kurtosis scores which fall within the acceptable range of ± 1.96 (Field, 2024), based on normality testing performed before conducting parametric tests, with acceptable means and standard deviations across all items, supporting the suitability of parametric analysis. Interpretation of the mean scores was based on a five-point Likert scale in which high mean values represent a high degree of agreement with the constructs. The classification of mean values for interpretative purposes was High (3.67 to 5.00) and Moderate (2.34 to 3.66).

Descriptive statistics of all constructs under investigation, including cultural determinism scales and other psychological factors, contextual, and organizational factors are presented in Table 1.

Table 1*Descriptive Statistics of Study Constructs (n = 253)*

Construct Group	Construct	M	SD	Interpretation
Cultural determinism	Communication	3.69	0.53	High
	Beliefs and moral values	3.70	0.53	High
	Norms and traditions	3.70	0.63	High
	Family status	3.77	0.49	High
Cultural determinism	Cultural determinism	3.66	0.47	High
Psychological outcomes	Psychological outcomes (emotional strain, emotional regulation, internalized leadership expectations)	3.58	0.51	Moderate
Contextual organizational variables	Career sustainability	3.72	0.49	High
	Training and development	3.69	0.46	High
	Opportunity	3.64	0.46	High
	Women school leaders' career	3.68	0.43	High

Note: Interpretation of means is based on a five-point Likert scale, where high is 3.67 to 5.00, and moderate is 2.34 to 3.66.

Table 2*Demographic Profile of Participants (n = 253)*

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	< 35	23	9.0
	35–45	152	60.1
	45–55	78	30.9
Experience	< 5 years	23	9.1
	5–10 years	103	40.7
	11–15 years	117	46.2
	> 15 years	10	3.9
Education	Bachelor	207	81.8
	Master	24	9.5
	Doctorate	22	8.7
Position	Principal	146	57.7
	Vice-Principal	107	42.3
Marital Status	Married	123	48.6
	Single	83	32.8
	Divorced	25	9.9
	Widow	22	8.7

Table 2 shows the demographic data. Most of this sample were primarily age 35 – 45 years (60%); had 11-15 years of work experience (46.2%); and held a bachelor's degree (81.8%). Collectively, these demographics suggest that the majority of those responding to this survey are likely experienced professional leaders who occupy leadership positions within relatively stable social systems.

Results from descriptive statistics indicated that leadership and culture related items were rated at high levels for each of these items; specifically, family status (Mean = 3.77, Standard Deviation = .49) and beliefs and moral values (Mean = 3.70, Standard Deviation = .53). These findings indicate a relatively high perceived presence of cultural determinants rather than confirming causal or explanatory significance. Furthermore, when rating cultural determinism as an overall construct, participants provided ratings at

similar to moderately high levels (Mean = 3.66, Standard Deviation = .47), suggesting a generally strong but not maximal endorsement of cultural influences among respondents. On the other hand, ratings associated with psychological measures were at the moderate levels (Mean = 3.58, Standard Deviation = .51), which indicates that participants reported a moderate level of psychological outcomes (e.g., emotional strain and emotional regulation demands), rather than implying weak internal influence or causal reduction.

A Pearson correlation analysis indicated a strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship between cultural determinism and psychological outcomes ($r = .82$, $p < .001$). The aforementioned correlation is the key relationship in the research hypothesis while other relationships were considered in the entire correlation analysis process involving all variables in the research.

Linear regression analysis was conducted using SPSS based on the 253 observed cases ($n = 253$). The cultural determinism variable was found to be a statistically significant predictor of psychological outcome, $F(1, 251) = 496.35$, $p < .001$. The predictive value of the model accounted for 66.40% of variance in psychological outcome ($R^2 = .664$, Adjusted $R^2 = .663$), suggesting that there is a large effect size. Cultural determinism was found to be a statistically significant predictor of psychological outcome ($\beta = .82$, $SE = .04$, $t = 22.28$, $p < .001$) with 95% confidence interval [.74, .89]. Other regressions were performed using several independent variables; yet, due to the strong correlations between the independent variables, the concept of cultural determinism remained to maintain model simplicity and avoid multicollinearity issues. Further regression analyses were conducted to examine whether cultural determinism predicted any structural variables, using cultural determinism as the independent variable predicting access to training, communication, professional development, age, number of years of education, and number of years of experience. These regression analyses were all not significant ($p > .05$). The results of the regression analysis are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Regression Results for Main Model

Predictor	Outcome	β	SE	95% CI	R^2	Adjusted R^2	$F(1, 251)$	p
Cultural determinism	Psychological outcomes	.82	.04	[.74, .89]	.664	.663	496.35	< .001

Note. $n = 253$. β = standardized regression coefficient. ns = not significant. Statistical significance evaluated at $\alpha = .05$.

Qualitative Research Results

The qualitative results focus on the perceptions of Emirati women educational leaders on cultural determinism and its role in their identity and agency in leading. This was guided by the following interview questions: (1) How do cultural expectations influence your leadership role?; (2) How do you construct your leadership identity within cultural norms?; and (3) How do you negotiate agency between professional responsibilities and family/social expectations?

Thirty semi-structured interviews were analyzed using transcendental phenomenology. Thematic analysis yielded six main themes and corresponding sub-themes, that described the lived experiences of the participants' leadership under the weight of cultural determinism.

Moral Economy of Leadership

Participants suggested that leadership was associated with qualities of modesty, dignity, and respectability within a family, rather than visibility or forcefulness. As one participant put it, "Leadership here is about dignity, not visibility" (P12).

Familial Legitimacy

Legitimacy for professional authority was often traced through the legitimacy of male family members (Guan et al., 2025). One leader stated, "Prior to assuming the position, I consulted my father, it pertained to family harmony, not seeking permission."

Education as Moral Ambition

Education was seen as an ambition sanctioned by society, not as an act of rebellion. As one vice-principal put it, “My PhD is not rebellion, it’s my contribution to the development of the nation.”

Emotional Labor

Participants discussed the emotional labor of navigating leadership alongside expectations from culture and family. One leader shared, “If my husband and family do not help me, leadership feels impossible” (P16).

Cultural Ambivalence

There was also an ambivalence articulated on a wider scale in which policy changes push forward the acceptance of women leaders while society lags. In the words of one participant, “They accept us by law, but not yet by heart.”

Transformational Agency

In that context, leaders took their culturally socialized caution and sensitivity to relationships as their strengths as a leader. As one leader summed up, “our caution became our strength, it makes us more thoughtful leaders.”

The qualitative themes generated from the analysis are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4
Summary of Qualitative Themes

Theme	Core Concept	Interpretive Description	Illustrative Quote
Moral economy of leadership	Privacy as moral capital	Leadership is constructed through culturally valued traits such as modesty, dignity, and relational respect, which shape acceptable expressions of authority. This interpretation is derived from participants’ repeated emphasis on dignity and modesty as prerequisites for leadership legitimacy (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Metcalfe, 2008).	“Leadership here is about dignity, not visibility” (P12).
Familial legitimacy	Social license via family consent	Professional legitimacy is negotiated through family approval, reflecting the centrality of relational endorsement in leadership acceptance. This theme is directly grounded in participants’ accounts of seeking parental or spousal approval before assuming leadership roles (Hijab, 1988; Gallant & Pounder, 2008).	“I asked my father, it’s about family harmony” (P7).
Education as moral ambition	Socially sanctioned advancement	Educational attainment is framed as a culturally legitimate pathway for advancement, aligning personal ambition with collective values. This concept is derived from participants framing higher education as contribution rather than individual ambition or resistance (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Kemp & Zhao, 2016).	“My PhD is not rebellion, it’s contribution” (P15).

Table 4 (Continued)

Theme	Core Concept	Interpretive Description	Illustrative Quote
Emotional labor	Psychological cost of negotiation	Leaders engage in continuous emotional regulation to balance professional responsibilities with cultural and familial expectations. This theme emerged from consistent descriptions of emotional strain, responsibility, and dependence on family support (Aldrup et al., 2024; Nazari et al., 2023).	“Leadership feels impossible without family support” (P21).
Cultural ambivalence	Policy vs. attitudinal change	A tension exists between formal institutional support for women’s leadership and persistent societal attitudes that limit full acceptance. This interpretation is derived from contrasting narratives of legal empowerment versus social resistance (Metcalf, 2008; Koburtay et al., 2023).	“They accept us by law, but not yet by heart” (P9).
Transformational agency	Reframing constraint as strength	Participants reinterpret culturally shaped constraints as leadership strengths, enabling context-sensitive forms of agency. This theme is grounded in narratives showing how caution, restraint, and relational sensitivity are actively reframed as leadership assets (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Rai & Beresford-Dey, 2023).	“Our caution became our strength” (P18).

Table 5
Joint Display of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Quantitative finding	Qualitative theme	Integrated interpretation
Strong effect of cultural determinism on psychological outcomes ($R^2 = .66$)	Emotional labor	Qualitative findings further support this result and extend it in demonstrating that culture’s effect on psychology is experienced not only statistically but also through consistent emotional management, family duty, and identity stress. In this way, then, the quantitative connection can be understood from the level of experience, wherein emotional labor is the mediating process.
Non-significant relationships with structural variables (e.g., training, opportunity, development)	Familial legitimacy	This finding is further complexified by qualitative evidence. Although there is no statistical basis for a structural prediction, interviews demonstrate that influence occurs via familial endorsement and not through institutions, suggesting that cultural determinism is a relational phenomenon.
Strong positive correlation between cultural determinism and psychological outcomes ($r = .82$)	Transformational agency	This finding is validated and reconceptualized in the process. Not only are there strong statistical correlations, but there are also stories that demonstrate how women do not merely accept the limitations imposed by culture, but transform them into positive leadership qualities. Culture, therefore, appears to have a twofold effect on leadership.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Qualitative findings from RQ2 were utilized to provide contextual insight into the statistically significant correlation identified within the quantitative portion of the study. The findings were compared/contrasted to illustrate how both sets of findings, when interpreted together, demonstrated how emotional labor (as an example), moral justification, and negotiated agency are all explanatory mechanisms that contribute to the experience and enactment of cultural determinism. While the quantitative portion of the data suggested that cultural determinism had a substantial impact upon psychological outcomes, the qualitative narratives suggest that these impacts occur through frames of morality, regulation of emotions, and negotiations of agency rather than through structural barriers. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings is presented in Table 5.

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion of Main Results

Results are discussed in a sequential manner starting with Phase 1 (results from the quantitative study), then Phase 2 (results from the qualitative study), and finally, the integrated analysis of findings.

Phase 1 (Quantitative Findings)

The results of the first phase suggest that cultural determinism plays an important role in predicting the psychological outcomes of Emirati women school leaders, $R^2 = .66$, $F(1, 251) = 496.35$, $p < .001$. Whereas those of Phase 2 show how this phenomenon manifests itself and is negotiated in terms of moral legitimacy, emotional regulation, and relational leadership. These findings contribute to the understanding of cultural determinism by suggesting its role as a significant factor influencing leadership experiences (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Metcalfe, 2008; Koburtay et al., 2023). The relationship between culture and psychology is meaningful. This statistical relationship between culture and psychological outcomes suggests that culture is a significant predictor of emotional and psychological well-being in relation to leadership (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

Phase 2 (Qualitative Findings)

The qualitative data shows that cultural determinism does not operate as passive determinism. Instead, Emirati women leaders create cultural boundaries through understanding, control of emotions, and responsive leadership in accordance with social context.

Evidence suggests that culture is a powerful predictor of emotional and psychological wellbeing in relation to leadership (Eagly & Wood, 2012). The results from the qualitative analysis support this finding, as they provide an explanation for how the statistical correlation between cultural determinism and psychological outcomes ($r = .82$) works, especially through the continuous regulation of emotions, family expectations, and identity negotiation. Emirati women leaders instead negotiate cultural boundaries through awareness, regulated emotions (Aldrup et al., 2024), and socially responsive leadership (Koburtay et al., 2023; Metcalfe, 2008; Rai & Beresford-Dey, 2023). Collectively, these six qualitative themes in qualitative research serve to extend the quantitative findings in the sense that there are several layers of process through which the effect operates, including moral legitimacy, relational leadership, and adaptive agency. This is consistent with Metcalfe's (2008) argument that gender and management in the Middle East need to be viewed as local processes and Koburtay et al.'s (2023) argument that gender and management in the Middle East need to be understood as local processes. Koburtay et al.'s (2023) assertion that Egyptian women leaders take on and challenge patriarchal structures simultaneously navigate, reproduce, and challenge patriarchal structures through culturally embedded leadership practices. Leadership agency in this context is conditional rather than entangled (Emirbayer, 2024), driven by moral expectations, family legitimacy, and not authority alone.

Although no statistically significant findings on structural variables such as access to training or professional opportunities, these results were confirmed through the regression analysis reported in the quantitative phase, which showed non-significant effects for these predictors ($p > .05$). However, the qualitative data challenges this quantified conclusion in the sense that the influence, instead of being more structural in nature, is more relational and psychological, using what could be described as a form of a glass ceiling. According to Gallant and Pounder (2008), such barriers are often created through psychological and moral means. Leadership legitimacy is negotiated around values such as modesty, patience, empathy, and harmonious relations, not through assertive or visible models of leadership (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). These internalized norms affect the way women influence ambition, power and emotional work (Nazari et al., 2023), and leadership is infused with moral and relational values rather than in a managerial role.

Qualitative narratives also provide a way to see Emirati women school leaders as cultural writers, redefining power, responsibility, and authority in the moral framework of their society (Rai & Beresford-Dey, 2023). In reinterpreting culturally-administered caution, emotional restraint, and interpersonal sensitiveness as strengths in leadership, participants shift constraint into legitimacy. The potential to transform is however limited, as desires are socially and culturally restricted through family bonds and the need for social approval. This duality reflects the two-sidedness of cultural determinism as enabling and limiting. As well as highlighting *how* cultural determinism acted as an obstacle it demonstrated how cultural determinism acts as a psychosocial regulation mechanism in regards to the participant's emotional/affective states, their identity and their behaviours related to leadership.

Implications for Behavioral Science

In this study, contribution is made to the body of literature in behavioral sciences since the relationship between cultural variables and their impact on behavioral outcomes is empirically supported. Previous studies have indicated a similar finding where cultural determinism influences behavioral outcomes and experiences as observed in the work of Eagly and Wood (2012) and Kemp and Zhao (2016). In this study, the same result has been observed and supported by the significant role that cultural determinism plays in determining psychological outcomes for women leaders.

The findings also contribute to the understanding of agency by providing support for the theory of negotiated agency in culturally bound settings. While researchers Emirbayer and Mische (1998) view agency as temporally situated and relational, Koburtay et al. (2023) empirically illustrate the effects of cultural and religious factors on women's approaches to leadership in the Arab world. Building on these theoretical positions, the present study demonstrates that agency manifest through emotional labor, family legitimacy, and relational leadership, which is represented by themes such as moral economy of leadership, family legitimacy, and transformational agency.

Moreover, the results make contributions to the development of the negotiated determinism approach. This theoretical framework regards culture not just as a structural constraint but as a system that constructs meanings, identities, and legitimacy of leaders (Metcalf, 2008). It is different from reductionist interpretations of cultural determinism as it recognizes a dual enabling/constraining character of cultural determinism, especially in collectivist societies where relationship-based expectations play an important role in assessing leadership.

Besides, the results indicate that leadership agency in a collective setting is mediated through morally and relationally justified behavior rather than through limiting individual freedom. The research contributes to prior literature on identity regulation and organizational control (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Tlaiss, 2011) by emphasizing the socially constructed nature of leadership, thus shifting the focus from the leader-as-an-individual approach.

Finally, it is possible to consider significant practical implications concerning leadership development and promotion of gender equality in collectivist societies. Firstly, leadership training and preparation programs in such societies need to include components of cultural sensitivity, emotional regulation, and relational legitimacy. In addition, there is no doubt about the importance of taking into account such aspects in collectivist societies like UAE where leaders' legitimacy is determined by family, social norms, and morality (Aldrup et al., 2024; Kemp & McLoughlin, 2022; Rai & Beresford-Dey, 2023).

Limitations

Some limitations must be noted. Firstly, the research was geographically limited to the East Coast region of the United Arab Emirates, which might affect the external validity of the results, considering the different socio-cultural dynamics in other emirates or Gulf countries (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017; Metcalfe, 2008). Secondly, despite the deep insights obtained via the convergent mixed-methods approach, the qualitative part had its focus on contextual information rather than sample representativeness (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Thirdly, the cross-sectional nature of the quantitative data collection limits the possibility of making any causal inferences since it only reflects existing associations, but not causes (Field, 2024). Lastly, despite triangulation used for the integration process, conducting separate analyses of the qualitative and quantitative data might create epistemological issues characteristic of mixed methods (Fetters et al., 2013).

Conclusion

In summary, as opposed to resisting tradition, Emirati women who are school principals adapt their practice in such a way that allows them to be within the boundaries of tradition, through a combination of adapting to tradition, regulating themselves, and reinterpreting what tradition has to offer. Therefore, the leadership that these women provide within their home culture creates a hybrid identity for them. The hybrid nature of this identity incorporates all aspects of their professional responsibilities with all aspects of their moral codes of behavior (Zahavi, 2022). Because cultural determinism does not either hinder or assist women's leadership development through some form of unilaterally determining factor, cultural determinism represents a contextual dimension for how conditional agency is exercised. In addition, practical recommendations include the development of culturally responsive leadership training programs, the provision of emotional regulation and well-being support mechanisms, and the strengthening of gender-sensitive leadership policies within collectivist educational environments.

Declarations

Funding: The author declares that no external funding was received for this research.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee at Zayed University, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (Approval No. ZU-EDU/2023/021; date of approval: 15 May 2023). All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, and no personally identifiable information was collected or reported.

Declaration of Generative AI: The author declares that no generative artificial intelligence tools were used in the design of the study, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of results, or writing of this manuscript.

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