

## ***“Connectivist Leadership”: Emerging Leadership Orientations in a Changing World***

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents findings from a quantitative research study conducted among the adult population of the United States and Asia-Pacific. The study quantifies how leadership is transforming so that theoretical and empirical contributions can be made towards a new genre of leadership to support organizations in their search for greater leadership efficacy. The main results of this study demonstrate that leadership orientations are evolving from the traditional views of power, authority, control, and hierarchy to a system of shared relationships grounded in connecting people and information sources to create collective influence. Based on the data set presented in this research, it is possible to classify leadership orientations into three groups: (1) traditional, (2) status-quo, and (3) emerging. Answering the IAFOR 2020 Special Theme of “Embracing Difference,” the manuscript proposes a conceptual reflection on alternative forms of leadership emerging in the United States and Asia. The data underscores the widespread evolution of leadership perceptions toward more collective and connected forms, while at the same time, provides evidence of how Asia is leading this evolution. The paper challenges the perennial perceptions of leadership, presenting emerging forms of leadership for future research and scholarly exploration. As such, the study aims to advance the field of leadership studies by showing how “difference” in conceptualizing leadership can provide new opportunities for researchers and business practitioners. It affords leaders around the world new avenues to navigate collectively, better understand difference, embrace, and work together for better global coexistence.

Keywords: Leadership, Connectivist, Asia

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## **Introduction**

This research paper is part of a more extensive research study conducted in the Summer of 2019 that investigated whether, and to what extent, there is evidence of the emergence of a new kind of leadership phenomenon, which is more collective and connected. The purpose of the full quantitative correlational research was to re-conceptualize leadership by advancing the understanding of leadership from an individual influence on others to a more connected shared process. The research study was based on a 26-question survey comprised of demographic characteristics and an exploration of personal values (Q23), emotional intelligence (Q24), work behaviors (Q25, 26), technology orientations (Q27), and leadership orientations consisting of leadership views (Q28), leadership principles (Q29), and opinions on the future of leadership (Q30).

In the context of this paper, the researchers focused on analyzing just one independent variable - geographic location - and one dependent variable - leadership views (Q28) - to isolate the areas of significance related to a new collective and connected leadership paradigm. Hence, this specific manuscript explores one component of the full research, investigating the leadership views of respondents based on different models of leadership theory (trait theory, behavioral theory, relational leadership theory, and collective leadership). The variable used a Likert 5-point scale with a combination of 10 items based on question 28, where respondents were asked about their leadership views. The main research question driving this paper was: what are respondents' views toward different forms of leadership? The specific research question includes: is there a difference between respondents' geographic characteristics (between those based in the United States versus those in the Asia-Pacific region) and respondents' leadership views?

The study sample included a total of 317 individuals, 159 men, and 157 women, of which 259 were employed full time, and 58 were either unemployed, students, or retired. The study called for the gathering of information on one key demographic, the geographic region where respondents are currently residing. There was no manipulation of the variables by the researchers. Should there be any determined differences, they were ex post facto in nature and resulted from differences in the measurement efforts. This research study sampled from the adult population of the United States and Asia Pacific. Respondents recruited from the United States totaled 198, while those from Asia were 119. The Asia-Pacific respondents were randomly selected from a cross-section of countries, including India (92), Malaysia (2), Singapore (23), and Australia (2). The sample collected cross-sectional data of the identified population through indirect measurement and ascertaining people's leadership views. The population of interest for this study was adults aged 18 to 72. The administration was conducted through non-probability sampling (a survey of convenience) and probability sampling using MTurk. The research was conducted using an online self-administered survey tool supported by Qualtrics, a subscription software for collecting and analyzing data for various research needs. Through this internet-based software, research participants were able to view and participate in the survey, including the screening questions and acceptance of IRB notification. Data analysis was conducted at Pepperdine University.

This study considers one independent variable, which is the respondents' country of residency. The results were obtained through self-reporting by respondents and then categorized by the researchers. Only data from respondents residing in the United States and Asia-Pacific were analyzed. The dependent variable consisted of leadership views, which were measured with question 28 (see below). Questions captured respondents' leadership views on a battery of 10 items, and answers were sorted based on the frequency of responses on a 5-point Likert scale.

1. When I think of leadership, I think of authority, power, control, and hierarchy
2. Leadership is about the common purposes of leaders and followers
3. Leadership is a process of connecting people and information sources to create collective influence
4. Followers can influence the leadership process as much as leaders
5. Leaders need to empower multiple groups, not just individuals, to allow for an inclusive diversity of voices
6. Leaders and followers share in the leadership process
7. The key to successful leadership is a person with special personality traits
8. The key to successful leadership is having the right skills
9. The key to successful leadership is the relationship between the leader-follower
10. The key to successful leadership is the quality of the networking relationships of all those involved

Utilizing the free source statistical calculator G\*Power 3.1.9.2, the F tests and ANOVA: Special effects and interactions test were selected. The following input parameters were used:

1. Effect Size: 0.25
2. Alpha: 0.05
3. Power: 0.95
4. Number of Groups: 4

A total of 317 responses were obtained for the final survey, which was above the G\*Power required of 210 completes with a minimum of 53 per group. Twenty-two individuals were filtered out due to the study not being completed, or their answers did not get recorded within Qualtrics properly.

A variable-reduction technique that shares many similarities to exploratory factor analysis is the Principal Components Analysis (PCA). The primary purpose is to reduce the more extensive set of variables (the 10-question leadership views questions) into a smaller set of principal components that account for most of the variance. Four assumptions were met to complete the PCA correctly. This included ensuring the data is continuous, linear, with no outliers, and sufficient data size (a minimum of 150 cases or 5 to 10 cases per variable). This research collected a total of 317 respondents, with a minimum of 105 respondents from each global region. Utilizing all data received, the PCA was conducted using factor analysis with Quartimax rotation and Kaiser normalization. The rotation converged in three iterations resulting in two primary components. A 0.7 correlation variance was established as a minimum level for grouping questions into primary components. Upon review of the principal components, the researchers evaluated responses to those characteristics associated with an emerging leadership phenomenon. As a result,

series 3, 4, 5, and 6 contained in question 28 represent an aggregate measure of views towards emerging leadership views.

A determination of internal consistency, the leadership view questions were group evaluated as a set of questions. Cronbach Alpha measures scale reliability through inter-item correlation. The evaluation was performed two ways, by measuring all ten items regardless of primary components and then as the two data group components of Asia Pacific and the United States. Cronbach Alpha measured 0.761 with all ten questions. When data was split between the Asia-Pacific and the United States, Cronbach Alpha measured 0.737 and 0.757, respectively. Measures above 0.70 are considered acceptable for social science determinations.

A between-subjects Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was selected to determine the significance of the study. The assumptions to conduct ANOVA were confirmed regarding the level of measurement, random sampling, independence of observations, and normal distributions. Homogeneity tests were confirmed by performing Levene's technique. With only two geographic and gender datasets being analyzed, ANOVA is capable of identifying which groups were significant by contrasting to group means. As a result, post hoc tests were not necessary.

## **Conclusions**

The main findings of this study underscore the importance of geographic location, and local culture, as critical determinants of leadership views. A substantial body of research (Dorfman et al., 2012; Hofstede et al., 2010; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997) has demonstrated that leadership does not exist in absolute terms; it is shaped by the values of local culture, which set expectations for leadership beliefs and behaviors. At the same time, the study raises the issue of how leadership orientations are evolving from the traditional views of leadership based on power, authority, control, and hierarchy to a system of shared relationships grounded in connecting people and information sources to create collective influence. Based on the limited data set presented in this research, it is possible to classify the leadership views expressed by respondents into three groups: (1) Traditional, (2) Status Quo, and (3) Emerging.

The PCA grouped within two main components. Traditional Leaderships was a separate component, while Emerging and Status Quo, although grouped within a single component, showed a subcomponent breakout, clearly delineating similar, but differing, leadership genres:

- Traditional Leadership: is characterized by views of leadership based on individual attributes and behavior. Data showed that correlations grouped with a high correlation of  $>0.7$ . These views consist of three components: domination, traits, and skills (see Table 1).
- Status Quo Leadership: is characterized by views of leadership based on what is shared by leaders and followers. Data showed that correlations grouped between 0.5 to 0.6. These views consist of two components: common goals and the quality of the leader-follower relationship (see Table 1).

- Emerging Leadership: is characterized by views of leadership based on connectivity and equality among leaders and followers. Data showed that correlations grouped with a high correlation of >0.7. These views consist of three components: the distribution, connectivity, and inclusivity of leadership (see Table 1).

Data validated that the traditional approaches to leadership received a limited appeal from respondents and lower agreement than other more progressive approaches tested in the research. Correlations between Status Quo and Emerging groupings were more closely correlated than with Traditional leadership, supporting a continuing transition from Traditional leadership approach to Emerging leadership.

In addition, the between-subjects Analysis of variance (ANOVA) between the United States and Asia-Pacific were assessed as it relates to the Emerging Leadership. Specifically, is there a difference, if at all, between respondents from the United States and Asia-Pacific with respect to views of Emerging Leadership? The results indicate that significance ( $\alpha < 0.5$ ) exists between Q3, Q4 and Q6. where Asia-Pacific means were higher than the United States, further supporting the propensity of Connectivist Leadership more in existence in Asia-Pacific or that a lower threshold of establishing this emerging leadership exists versus the United States.

<b>Traditional</b>	<b>Status Quo</b>	<b>Emerging</b>
<u>Domination</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● When I think of leadership, I think of authority, power, control, and hierarchy (Q1)</li> </ul> <u>Traits</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The key to successful leadership is a person with special personality traits (Q7)</li> </ul> <u>Skills</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The key to successful leadership is having the right skills (Q8)</li> </ul>	<u>Common Goals</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Leadership is about the common purposes of leaders and followers (Q2)</li> </ul> <u>Quality of the Relationship</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The key to successful leadership is the relationship between the leader-follower (Q9)</li> <li>● The key to successful leadership is the quality of the networking relationships of all those involved (Q10)</li> </ul>	<u>Distribution</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Followers can influence the leadership process as much as leaders (Q4)</li> <li>● Leaders and followers share in the leadership process (Q6)</li> </ul> <u>Connectivity</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Leadership is a process of connecting people and information sources to create collective influence (Q3)</li> </ul> <u>Inclusivity</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Leaders need to empower multiple groups, not just individuals, to allow for an inclusive diversity of voices (Q5)</li> </ul>

Table 1: Summary of Leadership Views

## **Traditional Leadership**

Among all the leadership orientations tested in the study, leadership expressed as a form of authority, power, control, and hierarchy scored the lowest. Only slightly more than half (57.8%) of the total respondents agreed that “leadership is a form of authority, power control, and hierarchy” (top two-boxes). In comparison, a quarter of all respondents (26.5%) had a marked disagreement (strongly disagree and somewhat disagree) with this way of conceptualizing leadership. The relationship between power, status, and leadership has been well established and remains a leading theory in the leadership literature and the foundation of much leadership training and competency development. Carlyle (1841) theorized on the “Great Man” theory, describing how leaders were born, not made (Bernard, 1926; Kohs & Irle, 1920; Zeidner et al., 2004) with an ability to exert power on their followers.

Respondents from the Asia-Pacific region (63.8%) were more likely to agree with leadership expressed as a form of authority, power, control, and hierarchy than those from the United States (54.1%).

## **Status Quo Leadership**

The study results prove that there is substantial agreement from respondents on leadership defined through the relationship between leaders and followers. Data indicates that respondents validate the relational aspect of leadership as a core process and its primary purpose. These beliefs are in line with the Leader-Member exchange leadership theory (LMX), which “conceptualizes leadership as a process that is centered on the interactions between leaders and followers” (Northouse, 2013, p. 161). Early studies of the LMX theory from Dansereau et al. (1975) explored the nature of linkages across leaders and followers based on their dyadic relationship, vertical dyads with subordinates, and in-group and out-group relationships. LMX theory directs attention to the relational aspect of leadership and the quality of the leader and follower exchange (Anand et al., 2011), indicating its predictive outcomes at the individual, group, and organizational level of analysis.

A large number of respondents (76.7%) agreed that “leadership is about the common purposes of leaders and followers” (top two-boxes), with more Asian respondents (83.2%) agreeing with this statement than those from the United States (72.7%). Additionally, respondents recognized the importance of the quality of the relationship between leaders and followers. A vast majority of respondents (83.6%) agreed that “the key to successful leadership is the relationship between the leader-follower” (top two-boxes), and this leadership view was equally strong with Asian respondents (84.6%) as American respondents (83.3%). Similarly, almost one in ten (78.9%) agreed that “the key to successful leadership is the quality of the networking relationships of all those involved” (top two-boxes), with particularly strong results in the Asia-Pacific region (86.5%) compared to the United States (74.2%).

The literature has established that Asian cultures value group harmony with a strong dependence on the relationship between bosses and subordinates (Chen & Kao, 2009; Fu et al., 2008; Ling et al., 1987). Employees are members of in-groups who act in the interest of their teams versus individual needs. According to Hofstede et al. (2010), countries in the Asia region tend to have a low Individualism Index (IDV), which

shows they are collectivist and very focused on the relationship aspect of leadership. Conversely, the United States has the highest IDV score of the Hofstede study, placing it at the top of the survey as the most individualistic culture globally (Hofstede et al., 2010, pp. 95–97).

### **Emerging Leadership**

Beyond the expected aspects of leadership, such as sharing common goals across leaders and followers and getting along, respondents recognize more emergent dimensions. Progressive views of leadership stress that leadership should be fully distributed with equal power among leaders and followers. The majority of respondents (84.5%) agreed that “followers can influence the leadership process as much as leaders” (top two-boxes), with robust agreement from Asian respondents (91.6%) compared to those from the United States (80.3%). Similarly, a majority of respondents (80.7%) agreed that “leaders and followers share in the leadership process” (top two-boxes), with more Asian respondents (88.2%) agreeing with this statement than those from the United States (76.2%). In the past, followers were defined as “subordinates who have less power, authority, and influence than do their superiors and who therefore usually, but not invariably, fall into line” (Kellerman, 2008, p. xix). However, in recent years, the meaning of the word follower has changed. Followers have come to be gradually recognized as a force to be reckoned with (Kelley, 1992). The data in this study corroborates the evolving role of followers and the dependency that leaders place upon them for success.

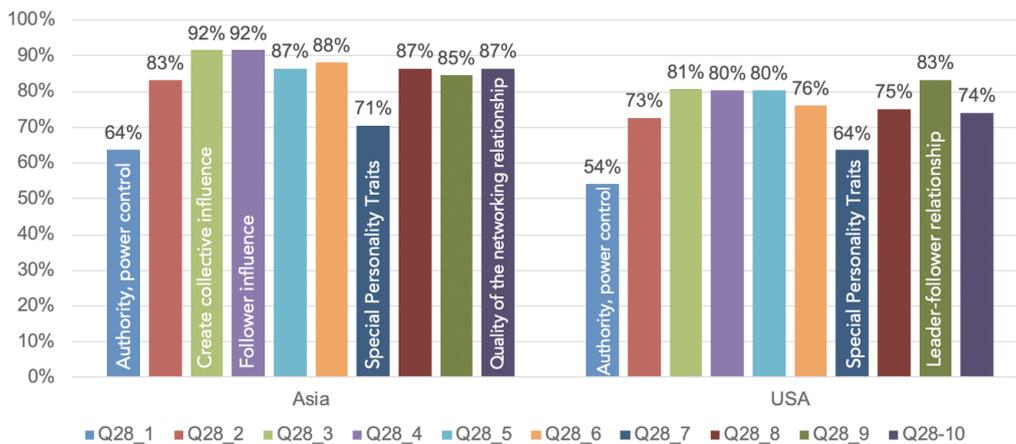
Recently, scholars have highlighted that shared leadership and teamwork have enabled companies to respond faster to today’s complex business challenges. According to Kogler Hill (2013, p. 287), “leadership in organizational work teams has become one of the most popular and rapidly growing areas of leadership theory and research.” Sharing leadership is the recognition that “leadership is more than just a role; it is a social process” (Pearce et al., 2009, p. 234) that requires a reappraisal of the role of followers and leaders, who become more commonly thought of, and leveraged, as peers.

Aside from distributing leadership more equally, respondents also stress the importance of increasing the connectivity and inclusivity of leadership. The majority of respondents (84.8%) agreed that “leadership is a process of connecting people and information sources to create collective influence” (top two-boxes) with the vast majority (91.6%) of Asian and American respondents (80.8%) agreeing. The majority of respondents (82.6%) agreed that “leaders need to empower multiple groups, not just individuals to allow for an inclusive diversity of voices” (top two-boxes). This belief was held equally among Asian respondents (86.5%) and those from the United States (80.3%).

The nascent literature on collective leadership provides new perspectives for understanding emergent collective behaviors that transcend the age-old power and status dynamics. Hagberg (2003) called for a more sophisticated view of power and action to create productive leadership. Will (2016, p. 263) argued that “if effective leadership entails creating conditions conducive to the balance of diversity - and consensus-generating interactive dynamics that in turn yield emergent collective behaviors,” it is central to discover which interactive dynamics should be promoted.

## Implications

The implications of this study are significant. The findings challenge assumptions that leadership remains anchored on legacy leader-centric approaches promoting leadership as a function of individual traits, style, or behavior. Across all respondents, regardless of their place of residence, leadership based on authority, power, control, and hierarchy, received the lowest agreement scores (see Figure 1). The data provides supporting evidence for shifting the practice of leadership in organizations and training approaches. Hollenbeck and McCall (2003) emphasize that global executive development has not been working due to outdated strategies too heavily focused on the leader versus the development of relational competencies across teams.



Results based on top 2 boxes "strongly agree/agree"

Figure 1: Summary of Leadership Views Asia vs. the USA

Conversely, leadership that transcends the heroic leadership paradigm resonates strongly. In the United States, respondents are more concerned with the leader-follower relationship, while in Asia, collective influence is paramount (see Figure 1). Sharing leadership and empowering others to create mutual influence becomes the key to leading. Power is achieved through diversity and inclusion rather than individual force. As a result, it is possible to shift the leadership genre from Traditional (leadership is as a person) to Status Quo (leadership as a relationship) and Emerging (leadership as a connective state). Instead of positional power, leadership becomes a process of connecting people and information sources to create collective influence. In content analysis, Corbett et al. (2018) demonstrated that the leadership literature experienced a significant change in 2015, with a marked decline from its steady increase since the start of the century. Search terms for "collective leadership" grew with network theory characteristics, including transparency, collaboration, teamwork, and distributed decision-making (Corbett et al., 2018). These theories advance more complex views of leadership, challenging the underlying assumptions of the previously reviewed literature. In these newer leadership paradigms, leadership is no longer defined based on the leader's idealized influence (i.e., dominating, directive, charismatic), or as of the result of an exchange between the leader and follower (i.e., situational, relational), but as an outcome in terms of knowledge creation through a dynamic and collective effort, and ultimately a shared collective state of connectivity.

“Connectivist Leadership” (Corbett et al., 2018; Corbett & Spinello, 2020) proposes new ways of conceptualizing leadership inspired by the learning theory of connectivism (Downes, 2007; Siemens, 2005), examining leadership as a responsive and networked influence model through shared connections. “Connectivist Leadership” “redefines the leadership paradigm for the 21st century by recognizing that leadership is a dynamic, connected, and collective influence process, based on the principles of digital knowledge and interpersonal neural networks” (Corbett & Spinello, 2020, p. 8). The findings from this study provide new directions for understanding leadership in a changing world.

### **Limitations**

Although this study benefits our research process and creates confidence in the findings, with new emerging leadership views, there are several limitations. First, a portion of the respondents, in both the United States and Asia-Pacific, were samples of convenience with a business or personal relationship with the researchers. Some prior knowledge of our research may have been known and could have biased survey responses. Second, our sample consisted of varying respondent management levels and work experiences. As such, we could have respondents with little or no business environment exposure being assessed equally with respondents in leadership roles with significant work experience. Third, respondents in Asia-Pacific countries were limited to Singapore, Australia, Malaysia and India. Adding additional Asia-Pacific countries may have provided additional perspectives to the leadership phenomenon being studied.

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