

Do Personality Traits and Demographic Characteristics Affect Malaysian Chinese Entrepreneurs' Leadership Effectiveness? A Conceptual Framework for SMEs

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Abstract: *Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) currently face an increasingly challenging business environment, characterized by rapidly changing customer preferences, globalization, intense competition, limited resources, and human resources issues, among others. In this environment, leadership is a critical asset for SME entrepreneurs to align their business resources towards success. Without strong leadership, there can be no grand vision to drive significant business growth. However, the concept of leadership in entrepreneurship suffers from a lack of conceptual clarity, despite substantial growth in entrepreneurial leadership research since the early 1990s. Moreover, there is limited knowledge on whether an entrepreneur's personality traits and personal demographic characteristics influence the effectiveness and style of their leadership. To address these gaps, this paper establishes an integrated conceptual framework to answer the question: "Do personality traits and demographic characteristics influence leadership effectiveness among Malaysian Chinese SME entrepreneurs?" Empirical findings on the proposed relationships in this framework would offer a better understanding and deeper insights into extant studies and emerging trends on entrepreneurial leadership in SMEs, thereby guiding future leadership research and practice.*

Keywords: Entrepreneurs, SMEs, Malaysian Chinese, demographic characteristics, personality traits, leadership effectiveness

1. Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in both the industrial and service sectors have been recognized as the driving force behind Malaysia's rapid economic growth (Alqasimi et al., 2022; Erdin & Azkaya, 2020; Jais et al., 2022; Ramdan et al., 2022). Their pivotal role in the economy is attributed to various reasons, including their active economic participation and high product exports (Ahmed et al., 2022; Usman et al., 2015). SMEs also create jobs at lower capital costs compared to large enterprises and the government, providing numerous job opportunities to unskilled labor and thereby fostering industrial growth. Moreover, SMEs embody the spirit of innovation, a crucial element of entrepreneurship. Thus, they play a crucial

role in nurturing entrepreneurial talent (Aremu & Adeyemi, 2011; Albalushi & Naqshbandi, 2022; Ma'aji et al., 2023; Sri Harini et al., 2023).

However, SMEs are currently facing an increasingly challenging business environment due to factors like fast-changing customer preferences, globalization, intense competition, limited resources, and human resource issues, among others (Ramdan et al., 2022). An empirical study conducted by Ambab et al. (2020) revealed that the failure rate of SMEs in Malaysia is alarming, with 60% of new SMEs shutting down within five years of establishment. It is imperative to take this issue seriously as entrepreneurship has been recognized by governments and communities worldwide as the key to building prosperity and stimulating regional development (Mohamed Noor & Ayob, 2021). In fact, entrepreneurial activities arguably constitute the most effective pathway to improving the economic well-being of individuals, families, local communities, and even countries (Awwad & Al-Aseer, 2021; Ridzwan et al., 2021).

A key concept in relation to entrepreneurship is leadership. According to Luedi (2022), leadership is a continuous, complex, and paradoxical journey that cannot be captured comprehensively. While it is broadly understood as an inherently moral endeavor (Alenazi et al., 2017), there are many ways to lead, and every leader has his or her own leadership behavior (Obuba, 2022). The function of leadership and the role of the leader has therefore been a constant point of debate among scholars, researchers, and practitioners, giving rise to leadership as a major research topic in psychology and management for almost a century, spawning thousands of empirical and conceptual studies.

Notably, researchers have attempted to integrate the distinct terminologies of entrepreneurship and leadership (Engelen et al., 2015). As noted by Nidhan and Singh (2020), “possessing just entrepreneurship or leadership skills is no longer necessary for a business’s success. Today, to be competitive, business owners must possess both entrepreneurial and leadership qualities” (p. 328). Consequently, entrepreneurial leadership has emerged from the existing leadership and entrepreneurship literature as a new leadership theory to meet the dynamic changes of the 21st century (Khassawneh & Elrehail, 2022; Lin & Yi, 2021; Mehmood et al., 2021; Utoyo et al., 2020). However, although this line of leadership research has grown significantly since the early 1990s, the fusion of leadership and entrepreneurship is plagued by a lack of conceptual clarity (Hussain & Li, 2020; Jangu Alhassan, 2022; Leith & Volery, 2017, Nidhan & Singh, 2020, Suyudi et al., 2020).

Leadership is undoubtedly an essential asset for entrepreneurs to effectively align all resources in their business. Without strong leadership, there can be no grand vision to build a huge business empire (Gunawan & Cahayani, 2022). In fact, leadership behavior is the most prevalent factor influencing employees’ attitudes and behaviors (Veliu et al., 2017), as it involves the process of motivating employees to work towards achieving organizational goals (Herlina et al., 2021, Hossin et al., 2023). Therefore, given the potential influence of leadership on organizational performance and success, the study of leadership effectiveness holds great importance for SMEs, which are widely considered a fundamental part of a nation’s economy (Aber Sawaeen et al., 2021; Al Mamun et al., 2018; Dhanhani & Abdullah, 2022; Hensellek et al., 2023; Nor-Aishah et al., 2020; Sandybayev, 2019).

Unfortunately, a review of the literature suggests that rather than focusing on leadership behavior as a key outcome, previous studies have predominantly investigated the determinants of entrepreneurial intentions, especially through the lens of entrepreneurs’ personality traits

and demographic characteristics (e.g., Al-Shibli & Bilal, 2022; Alhaj et al., 2011; Alomar, 2023; Arasteh et al., 2012; Ayub et al., 2017; Barba-Sánchez & Atienza-Sahuquillo, 2018; Bilgiseven & Kasimoğlu, 2019; Bux et al., 2016; Cao et al., 2022; Caro-González et al., 2017; Choo et al., 2022; Dabbous & Boustani, 2023; Donaldson et al., 2021; El-Gohary et al., 2023; Eysel et al., 2019; Hanage et al., 2022; Herman, 2019; Kabung'a, 2022; Kalyoncuoğlu et al., 2017; Maheshwari et al., 2022; Nga & Shamuganathan, 2010; Nguyen, 2017, 2018; Otchengco & Akiate, 2021; Ozaralli & Rivenburgh, 2016; Sarmin & Ashrafuzzaman, 2017; Santoso & Oetomo, 2018; Soni & Bakhru, 2023; Utami, 2017; Yang, 2023; Yasin et al., 2019; Zanabazar & Jigjiddorj, 2020). In contrast, there is limited empirical and practical knowledge on whether personality traits and demographic characteristics affect an entrepreneur's leadership behavior, which is subsequently expressed in their leadership effectiveness and style.

Plausibly, entrepreneurs possess distinct personality traits and demographic characteristics that define how they behave as leaders. Personality traits are partially developed through innate factors, socialization, and education. Notably, these inherent traits are closely intertwined with the values and beliefs an individual holds, playing a pivotal role in guiding entrepreneurial decision-making. Therefore, this study aims to identify the personality traits that influence SME entrepreneurs' leadership effectiveness, reinforcing the notion that personality traits have a significant impact on entrepreneurship as a whole. Additionally, the vital connection between demographic characteristics and entrepreneurs' leadership behavior appears to be an understudied area in the literature. Therefore, this study also explores the effect of entrepreneurs' demographic characteristics on their leadership effectiveness in the SME context.

In summary, the central research question underpinning this conceptual paper is: Do personality traits and demographic characteristics influence leadership effectiveness among SME entrepreneurs in Malaysia?

Specifically, the study attempts to establish a framework to answer the following questions:

- i. Are there significant relationships between the Big Five personality traits (conscientiousness, neuroticism, openness, extraversion, and agreeableness) and leadership effectiveness among Malaysian Chinese SME entrepreneurs?
- ii. Are there significant relationships between demographic characteristics (gender, age, marital status, highest education level, and nature of business) and leadership effectiveness among Malaysian Chinese SME entrepreneurs?

2. Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development

Based on a comprehensive review of the theoretical and empirical literature, this paper develops a conceptual framework hypothesizing the effects of personality traits and demographic characteristics on SME entrepreneurs' leadership effectiveness.

In today's globalized society that is increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA), organizations must navigate various challenges and heightened competition. In response to this demanding environment, one of the most critical aspects of establishing a successful enterprise is cultivating strong leadership (Hadziahmetovic et al., 2023; Sayyadi, 2022; Spain & Woodruff, 2022). Consequently, the effectiveness of leaders has become a pressing issue that warrants exploration to understand how to motivate employees and guide them towards achieving organizational goals (Ahmed Salman & Ali Auso, 2022; Ausat et al., 2022; Alqasimi et al., 2022; Bobina & Sabotnova, 2022; Garad et al., 2022; Singh & Poh,

2022; Kao, 2006; Karacsony, 2021; Muriithi & Kariuki, 2022; Obuba, 2022; Siwiyanti et al., 2022; Skopak & Hadziahmetovic, 2022; Widyaningrum et al., 2022).

Given that effective leaders are those who can flexibly adapt their leadership style to the specific situation, this study adopts Fiedler's (1967) Contingency Model of Leadership Effectiveness to conceptualize leadership effectiveness. This model was introduced by Fiedler (1967) as a result of a series of studies detailed by Fiedler (1964) and Meuwese (1964). Widely regarded as one of the most extensively researched integrative approaches, the Contingency Model posits that leadership effectiveness is an interactive outcome influenced by situational factors and the individual attributes of the leader. Importantly, it takes into account the combined impact of an individual trait and the specific situational context in which the leader operates.

The primary trait considered by the Contingency Model of Leadership Effectiveness is leadership orientation (formerly referred to as leadership style), encompassing task and relationship orientations (Ayman et al., 1995; Fiedler, 1967; Fiedler & Chemers, 1974). As per the model, task-oriented leaders are more successful in high- and low-control situations compared to relationship-oriented leaders. On the other hand, leaders motivated by a relationship orientation are more effective in moderate control situations than their task-oriented counterparts (Fiedler, 1978; Fiedler & Chemers, 1984). Leadership orientation is measured using the “esteem for the least preferred coworker” (LPC) scale (Arjanto et al., 2022; De Souza, 2020), which indicates whether an individual’s leadership is relationship-oriented or task-oriented (Ayman et al., 1995; Beebe, 1974; De Souza, 2020; Streeter, 1990). Arjanto et al.’s (2022) study affirmed the LPC as a valid and reliable instrument for gauging the quality of relationships among coworkers and leaders.

In this study, the Big Five personality model is used as the foundation to explain the influence of entrepreneurs' personality traits on their leadership effectiveness. This model is renowned for its capacity to comprehensively capture an individual's personality due to its stable scale of measurement (Awwad & Al-Aseer, 2021). The personality dimensions in the model are openness (curiosity, freshness, and creativity), conscientiousness (self-discipline, responsibility, and ambition), extroversion (sociability, liveliness, and talkativeness), agreeableness (consideration, empathy, and trust), and neuroticism (impulsiveness, irritability, and nervousness) (Kang, 2012; Yao, 2023).

Extensive literature has validated the Big Five model through trait descriptive adjective analysis in various languages, factor analysis of existing personality inventories, and expert judgments of the dimensionality of existing measures (McCrae & John, 1992; Singh, 2009). It has also been widely adopted in assessing an individual's suitability for entrepreneurship (Zhao et al., 2010). Significantly, the Big Five has been extensively applied to study job performance (e.g., Al-Nagger et al., 2015; De Silva & Gamage, 2017; Halim et al., 2020; Jabbar et al., 2021; John et al., 2020; Kang, 2023; Mohammad Yusof et al., 2022; Tengah & Zumrah, 2022; Sev, 2019; Thoresen et al., 2004; Zell & Lesick, 2021).

Given the valuable role of the Big Five model as a framework for assessing entrepreneurial ability and job performance, it is plausible that the model may similarly benefit the study of leadership effectiveness, which is essentially the measure of a leader’s performance. As evidence, Barrick and Mount (1991) demonstrated that conscientiousness is linked to overall job performance, suggesting a possible connection between this trait and leader effectiveness. In another study, Easley (2019) found a significant negative relationship between

conscientiousness and an autocratic leadership style, implying that individuals who are more organized may be less inclined to be excessively strict leaders.

Moreover, Hill and Ritchie (1977) suggested that self-esteem, an indicator of low neuroticism (Eysenck, 1990), predicts better leadership, indicating a possible negative association between neuroticism and leadership effectiveness. Regarding openness, previous studies have revealed that creativity is linked to effective leadership (Sosik et al., 1998), suggesting that individuals with high levels of openness are more likely to perform well in their leadership roles. Additionally, Hogan et al. (1994) noted that openness is associated with being perceived as leader-like. Similarly, Easley (2019) found a significant positive relationship between extraversion and transformational leadership, indicating that individuals who are more social tend to be leaders who emphasize communication.

However, the relationship between agreeableness and leadership remains somewhat ambiguous, even though the hallmark qualities of an agreeable personality (i.e., altruism, tact, and sensitivity) are often exhibited by good leaders (Singh, 2009). Considering the Big Five together, Simic and Rastic (2017) demonstrated a statistically significant relationship between personality traits and leadership styles, with the most prominent associations being that of high extraversion and low neuroticism with transformational leadership.

Based on the discussion above, this study proposes the following main hypothesis and corresponding sub-hypotheses:

H1: There is a significant relationship between the Big Five personality traits and leadership effectiveness.

H1a: There is a significant relationship between conscientiousness and leadership effectiveness.

H1b: There is a significant relationship between neuroticism and leadership effectiveness.

H1c: There is a significant relationship between openness and leadership effectiveness.

H1d: There is a significant relationship between extraversion and leadership effectiveness.

H1e: There is a significant relationship between agreeableness and leadership effectiveness.

In addition to personality traits, a multitude of studies (e.g., Aldoory & Toth, 2004; Baba, 2022; Bell et al., 2015; Cha et al., 2019; Eagly et al., 1995; Githaiga & Kipsoi, 2020; Gunawan & Cahayani, 2022; Jones & Bekhet, 2015; Khan et al., 2019; Latten, 2019; Mehmood & Hussain, 2015; Mohammed et al., 2013; Mustafa & Kanbur, 2019; Sürücü et al., 2018; Vidyakala et al., 2019; Wachira et al., 2015; Yadav et al., 2020) have demonstrated that individual characteristics, such as demographics and skills, can predict leadership behavior. It is widely acknowledged among researchers that demographic factors play a vital role in understanding leadership. For example, based on early theoretical perspectives, a leader's age has been considered a significant demographic factor influencing leadership effectiveness (Stogdill, 1948; Bass & Stogdill, 1990). With regard to gender, however, the literature presents both supporting and opposing findings on its role in leadership behavior, leading to a lack of consensus on this relationship (Casimir, 2001; Engen et al., 2001).

Kabacoff and Stoffey (2001) and Oyewole and Popoola (2015) took a broader perspective by adopting the demographic theory, which posits that leaders' traits (e.g., age, gender, years of experience, level of education, tenure, occupation, and ethnicity) tend to influence the dynamics of the workforce, thereby affecting organizational goals (Albejaidi et al., 2020; Kao,

2006; Larsson & Björklund, 2020; Vidyakala et al., 2019). Indeed, support for the significance of these demographic factors in leadership emerges from studies indicating that leaders' personal characteristics impact organizational outcomes and success (e.g., Abdelhay et al., 2022; Ahmed & Kar, 2019; Bashir et al., 2011; Gacusan & Calangi, 2022; Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Janardhanan & Raghavan, 2018; Khan et al., 2022; Kónya et al., 2016; Omori & Bassey, 2019; Prihatini & Widakdo, 2022; Rosenbusch & Townsend, 2004; van den Oever, 2021).

Additionally, a vast number of studies have highlighted that the shifting demographics, rapid technological advancements, globalization, environmental and social issues, and changes in the work environment pose significant challenges to contemporary leadership practices and effectiveness in the 21st century (Akinniyi et al., 2021; Al Khajeh, 2018; Al-Maaitah et al., 2021; Billari, 2022; Cavagnaro & van der Zande, 2021; Decuypere & Schaufel, 2021; Githaiga & Kipsoi, 2020; Hama Amin et al., 2021; Hao & Yazdanifard, 2015; Hickman, 2009, Ichsan et al., 2021; Jibreal, 2021; Kiss, 2022; Korwatanasakul et al., 2021; Mason et al., 2022; Mohanty et al., 2016; Mumford et al., 2000; Muttarak, 2021; Perkins, 2022; Shaari et al., 2021; Suib et al., 2021; Sürücü et al., 2018; Vogel et al., 2021; Zheng, 2020).

From the above discussion, it is apparent that demographic characteristics are closely connected to leadership behavior. Therefore, this study proposes the following main hypothesis and corresponding sub-hypotheses:

H2: There is a significant relationship between demographic characteristics and leadership effectiveness.

H2a: There is a significant relationship between gender and leadership effectiveness.

H2b: There is a significant relationship between age and leadership effectiveness.

H2c: There is a significant relationship between marital status and leadership effectiveness.

H2d: There is a significant relationship between highest education level and leadership effectiveness.

H2e: There is a significant relationship between the nature of business and leadership effectiveness.

Figure 1 depicts the conceptual framework of this study, which proposes that personality traits and demographic characteristics affect the leadership effectiveness of SME entrepreneurs.

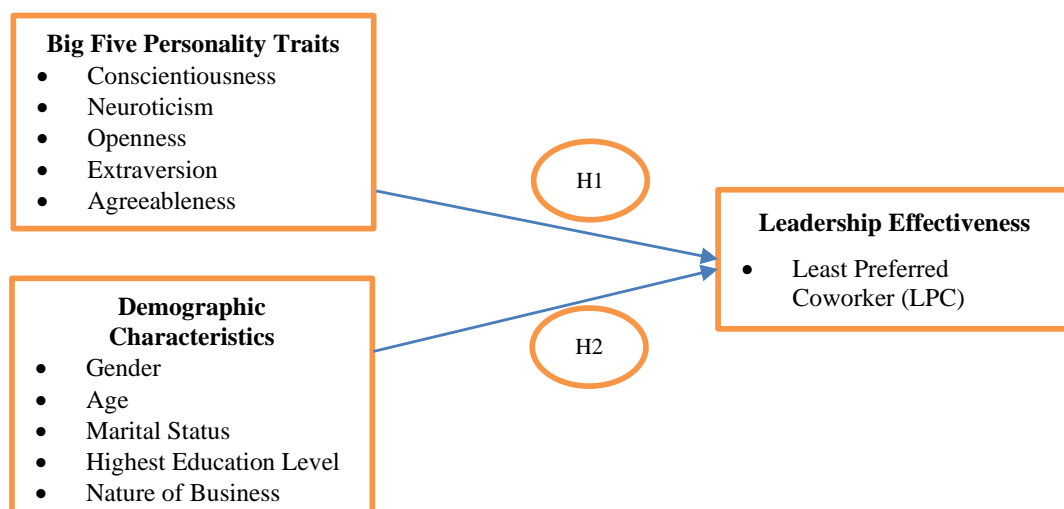


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

3. Research Methodology

To investigate the effects of personality traits and demographic characteristics on leadership effectiveness among SME entrepreneurs, the research sample will be drawn from entrepreneurs registered as members of the Penang Chinese Chamber of Commerce (PCCC), Kedah Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCCI), and the Small and Medium Enterprises Association Malaysia (SAMENTA) located in Northern Malaysia. Registered members of these associations are chosen as the target sample because they have played a significant role in protecting Northern Malaysia's commercial interests and lead among the most influential commercial SMEs in the region. Importantly, nearly 95% of the selected associations' members are SME entrepreneurs, spanning from manufacturing suppliers to service providers and everything in between. Almost all their members are Chinese Malaysians as well; thus, the sample will exclusively comprise SME entrepreneurs from the Chinese ethnic group in Malaysia, which controls for the potential interfering effect of race and ethnicity on the study results.

Regarding the sampling technique, convenience sampling will be adopted to select the entrepreneurs in the targeted associations. Probability sampling techniques like simple random sampling and systematic sampling are ruled out on the basis that such procedures would serve little purpose due to the absence of a suitable sampling frame. Furthermore, convenience sampling enables the gathering of data that might not otherwise be feasible, expedites the research process, and saves time and costs. The sample size calculation for this study has been determined as 384 using the Krejcie and Morgan Table, introduced in 1970. Therefore, a minimum of 384 entrepreneurs' responses will be obtained in this study.

Following a quantitative methodology to test the hypotheses, the research instrument will be a three-part survey questionnaire. Section One will collect demographic data, including gender, age, marital status, highest education level, and nature of business. Section Two will measure the Big-Five personality traits (agreeableness, extraversion, openness, neuroticism, and conscientiousness) using a 10-item questionnaire modified by Rammstedt and John (2007). Lastly, Section Three will assess respondents' leadership effectiveness based on the 18-item LPC scale developed by Fiedler and Chemers (1974). According to this scale, participants describing themselves in positive terms (high scores) indicate a preference for relationship-oriented leadership behavior, while negative descriptions (low scores) indicate a preference for task-oriented leadership behavior.

As mentioned above, the respondents of the questionnaire will be Chinese entrepreneurs who use the Chinese language as their main medium of communication. Since the selected measurement scales in this study are in English, it is necessary to translate the questionnaire. Therefore, a native translator of English will translate the questionnaire into Chinese, which will then be proofread by a native Chinese translator. Subsequently, another native Chinese translator will back-translate the Chinese version into English to compare it with the original text and identify any discrepancies. Working closely with the translators, the final version of the Chinese questionnaire will be crafted to ensure accuracy and consistency. Finally, a pretest will be conducted before formal distribution to confirm the questionnaire's comprehension and content validity.

In this study, the collected data will be empirically analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics offer a preliminary and straightforward method of data analysis and representation, providing an overview and characterization of the data (Schafer, 2018). In

contrast, inferential statistics are used to speculate about relationships among variables based on data collected from a sample, drawing conclusions about the population. For inferential analysis, partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) via SmartPLS will be performed. The primary steps in PLS-SEM involve assessing the reliability and validity of the measurement model, followed by estimating and testing the structural model.

4. Conclusion

Leadership effectiveness holds paramount importance within organizations as it directly influences the supervisor-subordinate relationship, thereby impacting employees' performance, job satisfaction, and commitment, as well as overall organizational coherence. However, although the extensive research on leadership and entrepreneurial behavior within organizational contexts has yielded intriguing insights, SME entrepreneurs still face critical challenges as they strive to foster an empowering environment characterized by effective communication, accountability, emotional intelligence, motivation, and exemplary work ethics. Therefore, this paper contributes to the ongoing research in this field by introducing a conceptual framework that establishes the impacts of personality traits and demographic characteristics on the leadership effectiveness of SME entrepreneurs. Empirical investigations into the proposed relationships and influential factors in the framework are essential to advance the research and practice of entrepreneurial leadership.

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