Innovations

Beyond the Dichotomy: A Hybrid Model of Instructor Leadership in Ethiopian Universities

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Abstract: *This study quantitatively investigated university instructor leadership styles in the Amhara Region, Ethiopia, through the perceptions of 321 third-year students from ten universities. Our analysis reveals that both transformational (TFL) and transactional (TSL) leadership styles are substantially practiced, with TSL (mean = 3.73) marginally surpassing TFL (mean = 3.60). Both approaches were perceived at moderate to high levels. The observed lean towards TSL may stem from the institutional and cultural emphasis on structure, discipline, and performance-driven outcomes within Ethiopian higher education. Notably, a robust positive correlation (r = .68) exists between TSL and TFL, highlighting instructors' adaptable, situational leadership. This synergy suggests a de facto hybrid model, challenging the Western-centric view of these styles as dichotomous and offering a contextually nuanced understanding of educational leadership. These findings emphasize the crucial role of context in leadership dynamics and suggest that a consciously cultivated hybrid leadership model, integrating elements of both traditional and student-led leadership, may be most effective for enhancing academic performance and student motivation within Amhara Region's public universities and similar resource-constrained, high-power-distance cultural contexts.*

Keywords: *Transformational Leadership Style, Transactional Leadership Style, Student Motivation, Academic Performance, Sub-Saharan Africa*

1. Introduction

The pivotal role of leadership in fostering student outcomes, motivation, and academic achievement within educational settings is widely recognized (Leithwood et al., 2004). Among the prominent leadership conceptualizations,

transformational and transactional leadership styles have garnered considerable scholarly attention across both organizational and pedagogical domains (Bass, 1990; Burns, 2004). Transformational leadership, characterized by its emphasis on inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, has been associated with increased levels of student engagement, motivation, and academic performance (Balwant, 2016). Conversely, transactional leadership, operationalized through contingent rewards and corrective measures, exerts influence on student conduct through established structures and disciplinary frameworks. However, its efficacy in cultivating sustained engagement and intrinsic motivation may be limited (Odumeru & Ogbonna, 2013). Contemporary research suggests that a synthetic approach, combining elements of both leadership paradigms, may offer a more robust strategy for enriching the learning environment (Erdel & Takkaç, 2020).

However, the vast majority of this research is situated in Western, industrialized contexts. The socio-cultural and institutional environment of the Amhara Regional State, characterized by resource limitations, large class sizes, high instructor-student ratios, and a high-power-distance culture, may uniquely shape the manifestation and effectiveness of leadership styles compared to Western contexts (Hailegebreal & Temesgen, 2020; Hofstede, 2011). Studying leadership styles in higher education is essential because instructor leadership directly influences student engagement, academic performance, and the overall learning experience in under-resourced educational systems, such as those found in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. Understanding which leadership styles are most effective can inform targeted interventions, professional development, and policy reforms. Moreover, as universities adapt to post-pandemic realities and digital learning environments, leadership practices must evolve to meet emerging challenges and ensure inclusive, motivating, and effective learning environments (Avolio et al., 2000; Bogler et al., 2013).

Recent studies have explored the impact of leadership styles on student outcomes in various contexts. Bass and Riggio (2006) emphasized the motivational benefits of transformational leadership, while Northouse (2007) highlighted the structural advantages of transactional leadership. Todorov (2018) discussed the theoretical potential of hybrid leadership models in educational settings, though empirical validation remains limited. Berjaoui and Karami-Akkary (2020) examined how bureaucratic structures can hinder flexible leadership practices, particularly in public institutions. However, most of these studies are situated in Western or organizational contexts and do not fully address the complexities of African higher education systems.

Despite these contributions, a notable gap persists in understanding how transformational, transactional, and hybrid leadership styles affect student outcomes within Ethiopian public universities, especially in the Amhara Regional State. Existing literature lacks empirical studies that capture student perceptions of instructor leadership in this region. This study aims to fill that gap by not only evaluating the leadership styles practiced by university instructors but also by contextualizing the findings within the unique socio-cultural framework of Ethiopian higher education. Specifically, the research seeks to answer the following questions: (1) What leadership styles are practiced by instructors, as perceived by students at public universities in the Amhara Regional State? (2) Which leadership style, transformational or transactional, is predominantly exhibited by university instructors, as perceived by students? (3) What is the nature of the relationship between these two leadership styles in this context?

2. Empirical Literature Review

2.1. Instructors' Leadership Styles

Leadership within educational contexts varies considerably, reflecting the diverse approaches adopted by instructors. Scholars typically differentiate between leadership (TFL), which fosters inspiration, motivation, and innovation (Avolio et al., 2009), and transactional leadership (TSL), which operates through structured systems of rewards and consequences (Bass, 1997). Beyond these conventional models, distributed leadership, where leadership responsibilities are shared among faculty, has garnered increasing attention within higher education (Bolden, 2011). Empirical evidence suggests that these distinct leadership styles have a direct influence on student engagement, classroom dynamics, and overall learning outcomes (Alig-Mielcarek & Hoy, 2005).

2.2 Transformational, Transactional, and Blended Leadership Styles

2.2.1 Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership is characterized by four core dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Instructors employing this style empower students by articulating a compelling vision, cultivating trust, and encouraging critical thinking (Avolio et al., 2009). Research consistently indicates that transformational leadership significantly enhances student motivation, engagement, and academic performance (Balwant, 2016). For example, Islam et al. (2012) observed that university instructors utilizing this approach positively impacted students' motivation and grades.

Furthermore, this leadership approach is associated with increased student satisfaction, as it fosters a supportive and intellectually stimulating learning environment (Bogler et al., 2013). Despite these advantages, some critics argue that an excessive reliance on transformational leadership, without clear structural boundaries, may lead to unrealistic expectations or inadequate accountability (Bass, 1990). Consequently, while TFL effectively fosters innovation and commitment, it may necessitate complementary strategies to ensure a well-rounded and structured educational setting.

2.2.2 Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership is fundamentally built upon contingent rewards and corrective actions (Bass, 1997). This methodology prioritizes explicit expectations, structured feedback, and performance-based incentives (Odumeru & Ogbonna, 2013). Such an emphasis proves particularly effective in maintaining discipline, ensuring task completion, and providing immediate reinforcement (Northouse, 2007). In standardized learning environments, TSL plays a vital role in sustaining consistency in student performance (Hailegebreal & Temesgen, 2020).

Despite its merits, transactional leadership also presents notable limitations. Its strong emphasis on extrinsic rewards, such as grades and praise, can inadvertently impede creativity and intrinsic motivation (Gagné & Deci, 2005). By primarily focusing on external incentives, this leadership style may fail to cultivate sustained engagement or independent thought (Yukl, 2006). Moreover, studies suggest that an exclusive reliance on transactional methods can lead to superficial learning rather than deep conceptual understanding (Leithwood et al., 2004). Therefore, while transactional leadership excels in promoting structure and accountability, it often requires integration with approaches that encourage creativity and intrinsic motivation to optimize overall learning outcomes.

2.2.3 Blended Leadership

Blended leadership intelligently integrates both transformational and transactional elements, harmonizing inspiration with accountability (Erdel & Takkaç, 2020). This hybrid methodology enables instructors to motivate students through vision and mentorship while maintaining clear expectations and structured feedback mechanisms (Todorov, 2018). For instance, an educator might employ transformational techniques, such as open-ended discussions, to cultivate critical thinking, while concurrently utilizing transactional strategies, like rubrics and deadlines, to ensure academic rigor. Research indicates that

blended leadership is particularly effective in diverse educational settings, as it can flexibly accommodate the varying needs of students (Yukl, 2006).

A study by Eyal & Kark (2004) demonstrated that leaders who skillfully adapt between different styles achieve superior organizational results, which, by extension, can enhance classroom dynamics. However, the successful implementation of blended leadership necessitates strong situational awareness; its misapplication, such as excessive control that stifles creativity, can undermine its intended benefits (Chemers, 2014). In the context of Ethiopian higher education, characterized by large classes and limited resources, a deliberate blend may not just be ideal but necessary for effective management and student motivation. While transformational leadership is highly effective in fostering motivation and academic performance, transactional leadership provides the essential structure and discipline. Consequently, a blended approach may offer the most balanced solution, leveraging the distinct strengths of both styles.

Future research should investigate the optimal conditions for each leadership style and explore how instructors can dynamically adjust their approaches to maximize student success. This particular study aims to assess the predominant leadership styles of university instructors in Ethiopia's Amhara Regional State, based on students' perceptions within the Ethiopian context.

3. Methods and Materials

3.1 Research Design and Context

A correlational research design was employed to explore the relationship between students' perceptions of their instructors' leadership styles, specifically transformational and transactional leadership. This design is particularly suitable for educational research as it allows for the examination of naturally occurring associations among variables without researcher manipulation, making it ideal for analyzing real-world educational phenomena (Creswell, 2023). The design enabled the researchers to determine the strength and direction of these relationships, offering valuable insights into leadership dynamics within the unique context of Ethiopian higher education institutions.

3.2 Sampling and Participants

The study was conducted in public universities located in the Amhara Regional State of Ethiopia. From a total population of 1,620 third-year students, a sample of 321 was selected using a simple random proportionate sampling technique. This method ensured that every eligible student had an equal chance of selection while maintaining proportional representation across various academic disciplines (Adeoye, 2023). Third-year students were specifically targeted because they have had substantial exposure to university instructors,

enabling them to assess consistent patterns in teaching and leadership behaviors. Their academic maturity enables more informed and reflective responses regarding how instructor leadership affects their motivation and academic performance, thereby enhancing the reliability and generalizability of the study's findings.

3.3 Instrument and Data Collection

To achieve the study's objective, a structured questionnaire was utilized. The instrument was adapted and refined from the foundational work of Churchill and Peter (1984) and the widely recognized Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) to ensure relevance to the local research context. It employed a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), allowing students to express their level of agreement with statements describing their instructors' leadership behaviors.

The questionnaire included 20 items assessing transformational leadership (questions 1–20), eight items measuring transactional leadership (questions 21–28), 11 items evaluating student learning motivation (questions 29–39), and five items addressing academic performance (questions 40–44), totaling 44 items. To ensure validity and contextual relevance, the instrument was pretested with experts, including professors and senior lecturers, whose feedback led to necessary revisions. Data collection was administered by trained research assistants to ensure consistency and minimize bias.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 28. First, a one-sample t-test was conducted to determine whether the mean scores for transformational and transactional leadership styles significantly differed from the neutral midpoint (test value = 3) on the Likert scale. Second, a paired-samples t-test was performed to compare the relative prominence of the two leadership styles. Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine the relationship between TFL and TSL. The effect sizes (Cohen's d) were calculated to determine the practical significance of the findings.

3.5 Validity, Reliability, and Ethics

To ensure that the data collected accurately reflected students' perceptions of instructors' leadership styles, the instrument underwent thorough validation and reliability testing. The questionnaire was reviewed by experts in leadership, motivation, and academic performance, who evaluated each item for clarity, contextual relevance, and alignment with the study objectives. Content validity was further supported through item-to-total correlation analysis, which revealed significant positive correlations between all items related to transformational and transactional leadership and their respective total scores ($p < .05$), thereby confirming construct validity.

Reliability was established through a pilot test involving 40 third-year students from the University of Gondar's College of Informatics. Cronbach's Alpha coefficients demonstrated high internal consistency for transformational leadership (α = 0.939) and acceptable reliability for transactional leadership (α = 0.725). In the main study, these values remained strong (0.904 for transformational and 0.721 for transactional leadership), indicating that the instrument reliably captured students' perceptions of the two leadership styles.

The normality of the data was assessed to justify the use of parametric statistical techniques such as one-sample and paired-sample t-tests, which were essential for identifying the presence and relative dominance of each leadership style. The pilot data passed the Shapiro-Wilk test for normality, and the main study confirmed normal distribution through Z-tests for skewness and kurtosis, histograms, and Q-Q plots.

Ethical standards were rigorously observed. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Gondar (Ref. No: Edpm/504/2017; Date: 16/01/2025). Participation was voluntary, and all respondents provided written informed consent about the study's purpose. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained to ensure honest and unbiased responses, thereby strengthening the credibility of the findings.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

This study examined students' perceptions of the leadership styles employed by instructors in public universities in Amhara Regional State, Ethiopia. Two main research questions guided the analysis: (1) How do students perceive their instructors' leadership behaviors? and (2) Which leadership style, transformational (TFL) or transactional (TSL), is predominantly exhibited? The data collected were analyzed using one-sample and paired-samples t-tests, with results presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Students' Perceptions of Leadership Styles

A one-sample t-test was conducted to examine whether the mean scores for transformational and transactional leadership significantly differed from the neutral midpoint of 3 on the Likert scale.

Table 1: One-Sample t-Test Comparing TFL and TSL to a Test Value of 3 (N = 321)

Variable	M	SD	Mean Difference [95% CI]	t (320)	p	Cohen's d
TFL	3.60	0.61	0.60 [0.53, 0.67]	17.48	<.001	0.98
TSL	3.73	0.60	0.73 [0.67, 0.80]	21.77	<.001	1.22

Source: Field Survey (2024)

The results indicate that both transformational leadership (TFL) and transactional leadership (TSL) are perceived as being significantly practiced by instructors, with mean scores well above the midpoint of the Likert scale ($p < .001$). Specifically, TFL had a mean score of 3.60 (SD = 0.61), while TSL was slightly higher at 3.73 (SD = 0.60). These findings suggest that instructors actively engage in both leadership styles, demonstrating a strong leadership presence within the academic environment. The large effect sizes (Cohen's d = 0.98 for TFL and 1.22 for TSL) further highlight the practical significance of these results.

Predominant Leadership Style and Correlation

To identify the predominant leadership style and its relationship, a paired-samples t-test and correlation analysis were conducted.

Table 2: Paired-Samples t-Test and Correlation for TFL and TSL

Variable	M	SD	Mean Difference [95% CI]	t (320)	p	Correlation (r)
TFL	3.60	0.61	-0.14 [-0.19, -0.08]	-4.97	<.001	.68***
TSL	3.73	0.60				

*p < .001

Source: Field Survey (2024)

The results show that transactional leadership (M = 3.73) was perceived as significantly more prevalent than transformational leadership (M = 3.60). Critically, a strong positive correlation (r = .68, $p < .001$) indicates that instructors tend to use both leadership styles in concert rather than exclusively.

Predicting Student Outcomes: Regression Analysis

To understand the impact of these leadership styles on key educational outcomes, two standard multiple regression analyses were performed. The results, presented in Table 3, reveal the unique predictive power of each leadership style on student motivation and academic performance.

Table 3: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Motivation and Academic Performance

Criterion Variable	Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p	R^2
Motivation	Constant	0.921	0.192		4.80	<.001	0.411
	TFL	0.712	0.045	0.693	15.82	<.001	
	TSL	0.203	0.047	0.192	4.32	<.001	
Academic Performance	Constant	1.452	0.241		6.03	<.001	0.288
	TFL	0.583	0.056	0.569	10.41	<.001	
	TSL	0.194	0.059	0.183	3.29	0.001	

Source: Field Survey (2024)

The model for Student Motivation was significant, $F (2, 318) = 110.95$, $p < .001$, and explained 41.1% of the variance ($R^2 = .411$). Both TFL ($\beta = .693$, $p < .001$) and TSL ($\beta = .192$, $p < .001$) were significant positive predictors. Transformational leadership was a much stronger, unique predictor of student motivation.

Similarly, the model for Academic Performance was significant, $F (2, 318) = 64.28$, $p < .001$, accounting for 28.8% of the variance ($R^2 = .288$). Again, both TFL ($\beta = .569$, $p < .001$) and TSL ($\beta = .183$, $p = .001$) were significant positive predictors, with transformational leadership demonstrating a stronger unique contribution.

4.2 Discussion

These findings align with existing literature, which posits that both transformational and transactional leadership styles are commonly observed in educational institutions (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Avolio et al., 2009). The dominance of transactional leadership likely reflects the organizational and cultural context

of Ethiopian public universities, which are often characterized by formal, hierarchical structures, large class sizes, high power distance, and a strong focus on performance outcomes and accountability (Alig-Mielcarek & Hoy, 2005; Berjaoui & Karami-Akkary, 2020; Hofstede, 2011). In such an environment, TSL provides a necessary framework for managing resources and maintaining order.

Despite this prevalence, the notable presence of transformational leadership (M = 3.60) is encouraging and signifies a shift beyond purely authoritarian styles. This style is associated with inspiring students, fostering creativity, and promoting a shared long-term vision (Bass & Avolio, 1994). It is also linked to higher levels of student engagement, satisfaction, and emotional well-being (Leithwood et al., 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

The most critical finding is the strong positive correlation (r = .68) between the two styles. This suggests a synergistic, hybrid approach where instructors maintain structure and clear expectations (TSL) while also motivating and intellectually stimulating their students (TFL). The regression analysis powerfully reinforces this finding. The fact that both styles are significant positive predictors of motivation and performance, with TFL being the stronger driver, but TSL still making a unique andimportant contribution, provides empirical validation for the effectiveness of the observed hybrid model. It moves beyond noting the coexistence of styles to demonstrating their functional utility in driving positive educational outcomes. This challenges the simplistic dichotomy often presented in literature and instead supports a more nuanced, context-driven application of leadership theory (Bass, 1997; Yukl, 2006).

These findings resonate with existing research within the Ethiopian higher education context. For instance, Demissie (2017) and Kidane (2019) reported the prevalence of transactional leadership due to hierarchical and rule-based cultures, while Tesfaye et al. (2019) highlighted the benefits of transformational leadership. Jinga et al. (2024) emphasize the complementary roles these leadership styles play in managing change. Our study bridges and extends these perspectives by not only empirically demonstrating their coexistence and positive correlation but also by quantifying their combined impact on critical student outcomes.

In conclusion, students perceive that instructors employ both leadership styles, with transactional leadership being the more dominant style. The significant correlation and regression results suggest that a pragmatic, blended model is already in operation and is effective. However, fostering more transformational behaviors, such as individualized consideration and intellectual

stimulation, is recommended to enhance further student motivation, satisfaction, and long-term academic success (Leithwood et al., 2004; Bass & Riggio, 2006).

5. Conclusion

This study confirms that both transformational and transactional leadership styles are actively practiced by instructors in Ethiopian public universities, with transactional leadership emerging as the slightly more dominant approach. These findings reflect the structured, performance-driven, and high-power-distance nature of the academic culture in the Amhara Regional State, consistent with previous research (Demissie, 2017; Kidane, 2019).

The most significant contribution of this research is the identification of a strong positive correlation ($r = .68$, $p < .001$) between the two styles and, more importantly, the empirical demonstration that both are significant predictors of student motivation and academic performance. This suggests that instructors are not adhering to a single paradigm but are instead employing a contextually adaptive, hybrid model that proves effective for student outcomes. This challenges the often Western-centric view of these styles as mutually exclusive, offering a more nuanced, evidence-based understanding of leadership in resource-constrained educational systems.

The significant presence and predictive power of transformational leadership behaviors highlight their critical role and potential for further development to enhance student motivation, satisfaction, and academic success. To foster this balance, university leaders should invest in professional development programs that consciously cultivate transformational skills, including mentorship, vision-setting, and individualized support, within the existing structured framework.

While the study's scope was limited to one region and two leadership styles, its findings underscore the need for broader, culturally responsive leadership models. Future research should expand to include diverse areas, qualitative methods to explore instructor intent, and additional leadership frameworks to better inform policy and practice. Ultimately, a deliberate and refined hybrid leadership approach offers a promising pathway toward more dynamic, inclusive, and student-centered academic environments in Ethiopia and similar contexts globally.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

For University Instructors: Consciously integrate more transformational strategies (such as inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation) into their existing transactional framework to create a more motivating and engaging

learning environment, as the data shows this combination maximizes student outcomes.

For University Administrators: Develop and implement continuous professional development (CPD) programs focused on blended leadership models, emphasizing how to effectively combine structure (TSL) with inspiration (TFL) in large-class settings. The regression evidence provides a strong rationale for investing in such training.

For Policymakers: Review pedagogical and leadership evaluation frameworks to recognize and reward effective hybrid leadership practices that are tailored to the local context, moving beyond metrics that may only value rigid compliance or abstract inspiration.

For Future Researchers: Conduct longitudinal studies to establish causal relationships between hybrid leadership and student outcomes. Also, employ mixed-methods approaches to gain deeper insights into the instructors' perspectives on their leadership choices and the specific contextual factors that influence them.

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Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Gondar (Ref. No: Edpm/504/2017; Date: 16/01/2025). Informed consent was obtained from all research participants, and confidentiality was strictly preserved throughout the reporting of the data.

Data availability statement: The corresponding author will provide data upon reasonable request.

Credit authorship contribution statement

- **Sisay Fekadie Molla:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.
- **Markos Tezera Taye:** Validation, Investigation, Review& editing, Supervision.
- **Tesfaye Ketsela: Woldyesus:** Validation, Investigation, Review & editing, Supervision.

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