Formal versus informal supervisor socio-emotional support behaviours and employee trust: The role of cultural power distance

CHO, Jaee[1]; WASTI, S. Arzu[2]; SAVANI, Krishna[3]; TAN, Hwee Hoon[4]; MORRIS, Michael W.[5]

1 Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Kowloon, Hong Kong

2 Sabanci University, Istanbul, Turkey

3 The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Kowloon, Hong Kong

4 Singapore Management University, Singapore City, Singapore

5 Columbia University, New York, New York, USA

Abstract:

This research investigates how formal versus informal supervisor support behaviours shape employees' affect- and cognition-based trust across cultures of varying power distance. Using data from in-depth interviews, Study 1 found that trust-enhancing supervisor behaviours were more formal, status conscious and imposing in India (a high power distance culture) than in the Netherlands (a low power distance culture); unlike in India, supervisors acted more like friends or equals with their subordinates in the Netherlands. Using vignettes, Study 2 found that, compared to informal support behaviours, formal support behaviours increased both affect- and cognition-based trust among Indian participants, but among US participants, formal support behaviours only increased cognition-based trust. Study 3 conceptually replicated those findings by manipulating power distance in an organization. Together, the findings from these three studies suggest that supervisors' formal socio-emotional support behaviours are particularly effective in increasing affect-based trust in societal and organizational cultures that are high power distance.

Keywords: culture, formal, informal, power distance, socio-emotional support, trust

Introduction

Employees' trust in their leaders is one of the critical success elements for organizations (Hernandez et al., 2014). In their seminal meta-analysis, Dirks and Ferrin (2002) found that subordinates' trust in their leaders varied as a function not only of leaders' personal characteristics but also of their relationship. Indeed, subsequent research established that various leadership styles (e.g., transformational leadership, servant leadership, paternalistic leadership) that supervisors could adopt were conducive to engendering subordinates' affect-based trust (e.g., Chen et al., 2014; Legood et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2013). Affect-based trust is defined as a social and emotional exchange-based relationship, whereas cognition-based trust refers to a trustor's calculated expectations about a trustee's competence and reliability (McAllister, 1995). Different leadership styles are conducive to increasing subordinates' affect- versus cognition-based trust. For example, transformational leadership is more likely to engender employee cognition-based trust, whereas servant leadership is more likely to foster employee affect-based trust (Schaubroeck et al., 2011). Recent meta-analytic evidence shows that subordinates' affect-based trust in their leader is a more powerful predictor of their performance and organizational citizenship behaviours than cognition-based trust (Legood et al., 2021).

In this research, we focused on supervisors' socio-emotional support behaviours that are common to the aforementioned leadership styles, which prioritize relationships and the needs of subordinates (Legood et al., 2021), and we specifically focused on how these support behaviours influence subordinates' affect-based trust in their supervisor. In contrast to instrumental

support behaviours, which refer to task-oriented behaviours such as clarifying roles, planning projects, and managing time and resources, socio-emotional support behaviours involve showing consideration for subordinates' feelings, acting personally supportive to them and being concerned for their welfare (Amabile et al., 2004; Suganuma & Ura, 2001). In doing so, we heeded the call to move away from broad leadership styles to consider more nuanced aspects, such as linguistic styles, body language or material presence, to better understand leader influence (Hughes et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2021). To this end, we differentiated the tone of supervisors' socio-emotional support behaviours (henceforth referred to as support behaviours) drawing on the concept of formality, which refers to the invocation of positional identities in social interactions (Irvine, 1979). Formal interactions entail acknowledgement of differences in social rank and a respect for an established order of social positions, whereas informal situations call for the absence or downplay of status differences (Irvine, 1979). Thus, formal interactions tend to be more deliberate and ceremonial while informal interactions are more spontaneous and casual (Morand, 1995). Given that interpersonal behaviours are strongly regulated by social norms (Morris et al., 2008; Wasti et al., 2011), we investigated whether supervisor support behaviours that are low or high on formality increased subordinates' trust in supervisors and whether this relationship varied across cultural contexts.

We built on culturally endorsed implicit theory of leadership, which posits that there are culturally shared expectations of ideal leadership and conforming to these ideals predicts the judgements of leadership effectiveness (House et al., 2004). We consider power distance as the cultural dimension of relevance as it prescribes normative behaviours for relationships of unequal power, such as the supervisor–subordinate relationship (Kirkman et al., 2009, 2017). Power distance is defined as "the extent to which a society accepts the fact that power in institutions and organizations is distributed unequally" (see Hofstede, 1980, p. 45). In high power distance cultures, supervisors have considerably greater power than subordinates, whereas in low power distance cultures, supervisors' power is relatively less pronounced.

Our research makes both theoretical and practical contributions to the literatures on cross-cultural management in general and trust in leadership in particular. First, the trust literature contains extensive investigations of the relationship between different leadership styles and the types of trust employees have in their supervisors (see Legood et al., 2021 for a meta-analysis). However, we focus on socio-emotional supportive behaviours common to many leadership styles but differentiate them in terms of their tone or formality. By delineating the formality of socio-emotional supportive behaviours and highlighting the importance of the cultural context of relationships, we go beyond studies that

simply call for supervisors to communicate concern for subordinates without considering how concern is most appropriately communicated in different settings (e.g., Hernandez et al., 2014). Second, our research bridges the anthropology and management literatures by focusing on the nuances of supervisor–subordinate interactions. Although the terms formality and informality have been used to describe workspaces, attire, and conversational norms, they have not been systematically examined in the organizational literature. Nevertheless, the sporadic evidence appears to tout the benefits of informality, and attenuation of hierarchy is considered to be a cornerstone of high-involvement work systems (e.g., Morand & Zhang, 2020). Our findings reveal culturally contingent preferences for formality versus informality in supervisor support behaviours and thereby contribute to the recent literature exploring the boundary conditions of status-levelling behaviours or initiatives (e.g., Hu et al., 2018; Pundt & Venz, 2017).

Lastly, we employed a multi-method research strategy that involved content analysing interview transcripts and conducting experimental vignettes with multiple samples of participants from India, the Netherlands and the United States (US), thereby providing an integrative understanding of the influence of cultural context on subordinates' trust in supervisors. Specifically, in Studies 1 and 2, we sampled employees from cultures with varying levels of power distance, and in Study 3 we manipulated power distance in an organizational context to provide causal evidence and to document the generalizability of the findings at different levels of culture.

1.1 | Theoretical overview

The culture of an organization or a society affects individuals' judgements of others by prescribing norms for social behaviour in a given situation (e.g., Leung & Morris, 2015; Yamagishi, 2014). These norms also apply to leaders (e.g., Lord et al., 1984). In particular, Lord et al. (1984) proposed that through socialization and past experiences with authority figures, employees develop implicit leadership theories (ILTs), which refer to cognitive structures or prototypes specifying the traits and abilities of an ideal leader. The better the fit between an individual and the leadership prototype, the more likely the individual will be accepted as a leader (Foti & Luch, 1992; Lord & Maher, 1991). Indeed, when an employee's ILT matches an actual manager's traits, the dyad experiences higher quality leader–member exchange (LMX), which predicts positive outcomes such as employee job satisfaction, commitment, and well-being (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005).

Although ILT was developed primarily to explain inter-individual variation in perceptions of effective leadership, culturally endorsed implicit leadership theory (CLT) proposes that organizational and

national cultures provide leadership prototypes (House et al., 2004). Consistent with this theory, subordinates' expectations and evaluations of leaders' characteristics and behaviours vary across societal cultures (Hofstede, 1980). Indeed, research on strategic leadership across 24 countries (Dorfman et al., 2012) has shown that the fit between culturally shaped subordinates' expectations (e.g., employee participation) and leader behaviour (e.g., employee empowerment) is critical for CEO effectiveness, operationalized as employees' commitment, effort, and team solidarity. Similarly, paternalism, which is defined as a leadership style that combines holistic care and concern for subordinates with strong authority, has been proposed to be more effective in Asian than in Western cultures (see Takeuchi et al., 2020, for a review). Indeed, several studies have underscored the trust-building role of benevolent paternalism in the Chinese context (e.g., Chen et al., 2014; Tian & Sanchez, 2017; Wu et al., 2012).

In this research, we adopted a more nuanced approach to the study of trust formation across cultures in that we compared benevolent and holistic leadership behaviours, i.e., their socio-emotional support behaviours that vary in terms of their tone, which we define as formality versus informality. In the anthropology literature, formality refers to the prevailing tone in a social interaction: a formal situation is characterized by seriousness, politeness, and respect for a normative social order and can be considered the opposite of levity or intimacy (Irvine, 1978, 1979). Adapting these constructs to organizational studies, Morand (1995) identified formality and informality as two distinct types of "interaction orders" (Goffman, 1983), characterized by different cognitive or normative presuppositions as to how actors should conduct themselves in the workplace. Social interactions varying in formality afford different degrees of *status differentiation* versus *status levelling* (Morand, 1995, 2010). Building on the distinction between status-differentiation versus status-levelling social interactions, we conceptualized formal support behaviours as those that invoke individuals' positional or rank-based identities and reinforce formal status differentials between the involved parties. In contrast, we conceived informal support behaviours as those that emphasize individuals' personal identities and diminish status differentials between the parties.

Although these constructs have not been subjected to sufficient inquiry in management research, they are important to understanding workplace relationships. For instance, Morand and his colleagues (e.g., Morand & Zhang, 2020; Zhang & Morand, 2014) have investigated how status-levelling actions taken by an organization, such as eliminating executive dining rooms and adopting informal dress codes, impacted employees' commitment and innovation. In addition, the GLOBE study found "formal" and "status consciousness" as two

of the 35 leadership attributes that were culturally contingent (House et al., 2004). Although House et al. (2004) did not provide information as to which country clusters endorsed these two attributes as being more important for leadership effectiveness, Javidan et al.'s (2006) practitioner-oriented article underlined the importance of leaders' formal style and awareness of status differences in high power distance countries, such as Brazil, Egypt, and China. In their final analysis, the GLOBE researchers created six leadership scales out of the original 112 leadership attributes with the attributes of "formal" and "status conscious" loading onto a scale named "self-protective leadership". While this final scale bears a vague resemblance to the aforementioned conceptualization of formality, it nevertheless displayed a positive correlation with power distance values (House et al., 2004).

Some recent work on leadership behaviours also speaks to the implications of the constructs of formality versus informality. For instance, Hu et al. (2018) found leader humility was related to beneficial outcomes only within teams with a low power distance value. Along the same lines, Alikaj and Hanke (2021) showed that leaders' motivating language characterized by a reduction in leader–member power differential was appreciated more by low power distance-oriented employees, as reflected in their higher perceptions of interpersonal justice. Thus, although indirect and scarce, there is evidence to support the potential of this construct in explaining cultural differences in subordinate–supervisor relationships.

1.1.1 | The role of cultural power distance

Although the behaviours that would elicit trust in different cultures could vary based on several cultural dimensions (Doney et al., 1998), given that our focus is on trust in a hierarchical supervisor–subordinate relationship, we investigated the role of *power distance*. People in high power distance cultures believe in inequality and hierarchy as necessary and legitimate, whereas those in low power distance cultures believe in equality and egalitarianism (Hofstede, 1980). In high power distance cultures, dominance, decisiveness, and other displays of power and authority may be appropriate for leaders (Hu et al., 2018). Thus, supervisors are expected to know better than subordinates and to provide guidance, which subordinates are expected to accept without questioning. In contrast, in low power distance cultures, supervisor behaviours and decisions are open to the suggestions of subordinates, who can participate in the decision-making process (Cole et al., 2013). As noted by Den Hartog et al. (1999, p. 228), "He/She's just like the rest of us" may be a positive comment about a leader in a low power distance culture. In low power distance cultures, employees tend to socialize with their supervisors, whereas in high power distance cultures, employees tend to maintain distance with supervisors (Tyler et al., 2000).

When considering how supervisors' formal versus informal support behaviours would affect subordinates' trust in high versus low power distance contexts, it is important to distinguish two types of trust. Employees exhibit cognition-based trust based on rational calculation regarding dependability, whereas affect-based trust is characterized by shared, positive emotional attachment (McAllister, 1995; Tomlinson et al., 2020). Research in social cognition suggests that repeated exposure to or familiarity with a social stimulus will increase its fluency, that is its ease of processing (Zitek & Tiedens, 2012). Fluency, in turn, has been found to generate positive affect and increased liking (Winkielman et al., 2003; Zitek & Tiedens, 2012). Further, while a cultural match between individuals' norms or values and their environment engenders positive emotions (Higgins, 2006), a cultural mismatch between individual versus institutional norms has been shown to be predictive of negative psychological states and emotions (e.g., Stephens et al., 2012). Thus, our general expectation is that the fit between formal versus informal support behaviours and high versus low power distance cultures might especially influence affect-based trust because the cultural fit makes a supervisor's behaviour "feel right" (Higgins, 2006).

Specifically, we expect that subordinates in high power distance cultures would expect supervisors to be cognizant of the status differences among themselves and their followers and enact their roles and responsibilities based on their position in the hierarchy (Dorfman et al., 2012). We propose that formal support behaviours in high power distance contexts signal *noblesse oblige*, the fulfilment of the cultural norm that obligates those of higher rank to be generous in their dealings with those of lower rank, whereby subordinates are likely to feel honoured and grateful (Fiske, 1992; Keating, 2000). Therefore, we predicted that in high power distance cultures, supervisors' formal support behaviours that conform to supervisors' high status and high power role (e.g., providing personal or professional guidance, protecting subordinates) would be more likely to increase subordinates' affect-based trust. In contrast, low power distance cultures value equality of relationships (Hofstede, 1980). For instance, in the US, desirable leadership typically involves informality based on the belief that it is conducive to openness (Javidan et al., 2006). Therefore, we predicted that supervisors' informal support behaviours that are casual and attempt to break down the hierarchy (e.g., talking about their hobbies, freely sharing positive and negative information) would be more likely to increase affect-based trust in subordinates in low power distance cultures. Specifically, we advanced the following hypotheses:

> **Hypothesis 1a.** Formal (vs. informal) support behaviours by supervisors will increase affect-based trust in a high power distance culture.

> **Hypothesis 1b.** Informal (vs. formal) support behaviours by supervisors will increase affect-based trust in a low power distance culture.

Considering that the ability and competence of the trustor increase cognition-based trust (McAllister, 1995), formal support behaviours, which are characterized by providing guidance and direction, might signal more ability, initiative, and resources. Furthermore, rank-appropriate and role-appropriate behaviours reduce uncertainty and enhance predictability in interactions (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Thus, we posit that formal support behaviours may increase cognition-based trust regardless of cultural power distance. Specifically, we made the following hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 2.** Formal (vs. informal) support behaviours by supervisors will increase cognition-based trust across cultures.

2 | OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

We conducted three studies to understand the influence of formality versus informality on trust in supervisors. We defined culture as a set of publicly shared codes or repertoires (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003), specifically, publicly shared codes or repertoires with respect to power distance. Study 1 comprised a content analysis of interview transcripts across two countries with varying power distances—the Netherlands, a low power distance culture, and India, a high power distance culture—in order to develop a qualitative understanding of the different types of supervisor behaviours that engender trust in subordinates. Study 1 also provided preliminary evidence on the notion that trusted managers enacted behaviours consistent with their respective cultures' power distance expectations. We adapted behaviours narrated in the interviews from India to develop vignettes of formal support behaviours and behaviours found in interviews from the Netherlands to develop vignettes of informal support behaviours. Using these vignettes, in Study 2, we recruited participants from high and low power distance cultures (India and the US) and investigated the influence of formal versus informal support behaviours on affect- and cognition-based trust. To investigate whether the societal cultural differences observed in previous studies were specifically the result of the power distance dimension, in Study 3, we directly manipulated organizational culture and recruiting of US participants, and we tested whether formal versus informal support behaviours had similar effects on affect-based trust and cognition-based trust. Power distance has been operationalized both as a country-level measure (Sivakumar & Nakata, 2001) and as an individual-level measure

(power distance beliefs; Hui et al., 2004). In this paper, considering that we focused on how the cultural context shaped expectations and norms, we operationalized power distance at the country level (Studies 1 and 2) or organizational level (Study 3). These studies were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the authors' institutions, and all participants gave informed consent. Our studies were conducted before preregistration became standard practice, but we report the sample size, the exclusion criteria, all manipulations, and all measures in this article.

3 | STUDY 1

We conducted open-ended interviews with white-collar employees in India and the Netherlands to obtain contextual insight into trust formation in working relationships before directly testing the aforementioned two hypotheses. These open-ended interviews provided us with a sample of actual formal and informal socio-emotional support behaviours enacted by supervisors in cultures varying in power distance, thereby helping increase the ecological validity and cultural appropriateness of the subsequent experiments. Specifically, in Study 1, we investigated which supervisor behaviours enhanced trust and how they were differentially represented in the Netherlands and India. We chose these two countries because the Netherlands scores relatively low on power distance (score = 38; scale 0–100; Hofstede & Minkov, 2010), whereas India scores relatively high on power distance (score = 77).

3.1 | Method

3.1.1 | Participants

Two authors conducted semi-structured interviews with Dutch ($N = 29$) and Indian professionals ($N = 30$) contacted through the researchers' personal and professional networks. Sample characteristics are described in Table 1. The interviewer asked questions about the participants' definitions of trust, their general propensity to trust others, and how they developed trust in the

different people they trusted in their current organization (a supervisor and a peer). As we were interested in the participants' own definition of trust, we did not provide participants with scientific definitions of general trust, affect-based trust, or cognition-based trust. Interviews in both countries were conducted in English, recorded, and transcribed.

3.1.2 | Coding

The respondents described several interactions that led to trust in their supervisors. As our goal was to identify trust-eliciting behaviours, we gleaned descriptions of interpersonal interactions from the interviews. Two independent coders who were blind to the hypotheses selected descriptions of all valid interpersonal interactions that led interviewees to trust their supervisors and peers. This procedure identified 110 Dutch and 95 Indian employee–supervisor interactions along with 72 Dutch and 67 Indian peer-to-peer interactions. Given the lack of consensus around the terms of formality versus informality by researchers and lay persons alike (Irvine, 1978; Morand, 1995), we adopted a bottom-up strategy akin to Pavlick and Tetreault (2016) to attain unguided human judgements as to what constituted formality. Accordingly, two independent coders coded the formality of the selected interactions (high or low). To ensure that we had not confounded formality of the interaction with valence (positive, negative, neutral) and topic (professional, personal, other), the coders created four dummy variables indicating whether each interaction was positive in valence, negative in valence, about a personal topic, or about a professional topic, respectively. The agreement between the two coders was high with κ's > 0.70. The coders resolved their discrepancies through discussion.

3.1.3 | Interview excerpts

Indian employees tended to note how their supervisors guided their work as well as their personal lives and provided support in times of need. For instance, one Indian employee stated, "I wanted to switch over from one

TABLE 1 Sample characteristics (Study 1).

	India	The Netherlands
Number of organizations represented in study	1	13
Size of organization	53,000 full-time employees	Ranging from 30,000 to 60,000 global full-time employees
Location	Hyderabad	Multiple cities
Percentage male	63.3	62.1
Percentage university and above graduates	100	86.2
Percentage in managerial jobs	63.3	51.7
Average work experience (years)	6.5	17.6

project to another project at a point where I was feeling a little bit saturated. But none of the people were happy with the move because the customer was very happy with me, and all the concerned stakeholders were very keen on that I continue there. But for my reasons like I wanted to move on, so that time he stepped in and supported me, and he talked to his boss and made sure that everyone is okay with that." Another Indian employee stated, "… I mean, I just need your guidance. Anyway, if you need to take a decision, it's not like a hasty decision I'm going to take. But he explained to me very patiently for one hour. I mean all the aspect of it, even we had drawing board discussions also for a complete one hour. And I felt satisfied, that I'm working for the person who wants to own my thing and wants to explain all the aspect…." Such interactions, whether personal or professional in nature, were coded as being high on formality.

On the other hand, Dutch employees highlighted how their supervisor treated them as equals or friends both in work as well as non-work interactions, in particular by sharing interests and opinions in a casual manner. For example, one employee cited her supervisor's reaction to a work-related query as follows: "So why are you telling me, why are you asking me to do something? You are in control, go and do it!" Another Dutch employee told the interviewer, "I give, gave him a DVD and he found it brilliant and so we could share what, what really touched my heart, and he also was very interested he said, 'Oh, just beautiful.' And after that he gave two types of DVDs about similar topics which he was also interested in, so yeah." The coders coded these interactions as being low on formality.

3.2 | Results

To investigate whether trust-enhancing employee–supervisor interactions were more formal in India than in the Netherlands, we ran a logistic regression with formality (low=0, high=1) as the dependent measure and interviewees' culture as the primary predictor. We included employees' gender, years of work, and gender composition of the employee–supervisor dyad (0=different genders, 1=same genders) as control variables. We found that formality characterized trust-enhancing interactions with supervisors more frequently in India (70.5%) than in the Netherlands (57.3%), $B=-0.961$, SE=0.49, Wald=3.91, $p=0.048$.

We conducted four additional logistic regressions to test whether there were cultural differences in the positive and negative valence and personal and professional topics of employee–supervisor interactions but found no significant differences. We then ran an analogous logistic regression on the formality coding of peer-to-peer interactions across the two cultures. Trust-enhancing interactions with peers were similar in formality across the two cultures ($p>0.10$), suggesting that cultural differences

in subordinate–supervisor relationships are not due to general cultural differences but rather to cultural differences in the domain of hierarchy.

Lastly, a chi-squared test found that interactions viewed as high formality were associated with more professional rather than non-professional topics (χ^2 (1, $N=205)=38.90$, $p<0.001$). In addition, we found high formality interactions were associated with more personal rather than non-personal issues (χ^2 (1, $N=205)=4.13$, $p=0.042$). These results suggest that formality versus informality is not limited to a particular domain (i.e., professional vs. personal) but may also be observed across domains (see also Morand, 1995).

4 | STUDY 2

The goal of Study 2 was to build on the findings from Study 1 and test the proposed hypotheses by using an experimental methodology. Based on the interview transcripts of Study 1, we created vignettes describing supervisors engaging in either formal or informal support behaviours towards employees and asked participants to rate the extent to which each behaviour would influence their affect- and cognition-based trust in their supervisors. Instead of the Netherlands (power distance score=38), we used the US as a low power distance culture (score=40; Hofstede & Minkov, 2010) and India as a high power distance culture (score=77). Although many workplace social norms might differ across the US and the Netherlands, the two cultures are very similar on power distance. Given the risk that the scenarios based on interviews with Dutch participants might not be relevant in the US, this procedure represents a conservative test of our hypotheses.

4.1 | Method

4.1.1 | Participants

We recruited 203 US citizens (71 women, 132 men, mean age 33.77 years; 80.3% European American) and 144 Indian citizens (47 women, 97 men, mean age 29.93 years; 94.4% South Asian) from Amazon Mechanical Turk to complete an online survey.[1]

4.1.2 | Procedure

Participants were asked to imagine that they had just joined a company and would be rotated across different divisions. They were then presented with vignettes describing their interactions with four different supervisors, one from each division. We created the vignettes by referencing the literature on formality versus informality (e.g., Irvine, 1978, 1979; Morand, 1995) and drawing on

the qualitative evidence in Study 1. In Study 1, we observed that incidents categorized as informal tended to be more casual (e.g., relaxed gestures from the supervisor) and characterized by more intimacy (e.g., sharing of information and resources as if among equals). They also appeared to be looser in that the parties involved had equivalent choices or preferences they could exercise in the interaction. In contrast, incidents categorized as formal tended to be more ceremonial (e.g., grandiose gestures from the supervisor) and characterized by greater social distance (i.e., underlining the status differences among the parties). These incidents also seemed tighter in that the higher-status party was more imposing or pre-emptive regarding the course of action. Indeed, this is consistent with Irvine's (1978) observation that in formal interactions or situations, participation is regulated in a way that is consistent with social rank; for instance, only certain persons have a right to speak "on stage". Thus, we created our formal socio-emotional support scenarios to reflect these notions of tightness, gravity, social distance, and informal socio-emotional scenarios to reflect an interaction characterized by looseness, levity, and intimacy.

In particular, we created two vignettes describing supervisors enacting formal support behaviours as presented below:

> One day, your boss notices that you have the smallest office on the floor. Even though you have no problems with your office, he insists on giving you a larger office. You say again that you are fine with your current office, yet your boss calls up the HR manager and requests them to find a larger office for you.

> One day, you are not feeling well. Your boss asks how you are, and you say that you have a severe migraine. Your boss gives you the rest of the day off and tells you to go home and rest. The next day, you email in sick because the symptoms have worsened. An hour later, you receive an e-mail from your boss introducing you to his brother a neurologist who would see you immediately without charging.

As for informal support behaviours, we again created the following two vignettes presented below:

> During a weekly meeting, it is your turn to present to the team. After the meeting, your boss asks you if you have any plans tonight. You check your calendar and there is nothing for tonight. You tell him you have no plans tonight. Then, he invites you out for after work drinks with colleagues to hang out. He says it would be fun and he will text you the place to meet.

> It's a Friday afternoon, and your boss asks about your weekend plans. You say you were supposed to go on a bike trip with friends, but your bike was stolen last night, so you can no longer go. Your boss says he is not using his bike this weekend, so you can borrow it for the weekend.

The order of the informal versus formal support vignettes was counterbalanced across participants. After participants read each vignette, we measured their affect-based trust in the supervisor using two items (e.g., "After this incident, I would become more comfortable sharing my personal problems with him") and their cognition-based trust using two items (e.g., "After this incident, I could rely on him to approach his work with professionalism"). Given the vignette design, we adapted these items from McAllister (1995) to capture trusting intentions rather than trustworthiness beliefs (McEvily & Tortoriello, 2011). We used two items to measure each type of trust (as in Chua et al., 2009) to reduce participant fatigue, given that participants rated their affect- and cognition-based trust for multiple scenarios. Participants responded using a seven-point Likert-like scale (1=*strongly disagree*, 7=*strongly agree*). We also asked participants to report gender and age as covariates since demographic similarity has been shown to influence trustworthiness assessments (Levin et al., 2006).

4.1.3 | External manipulation check

We conducted a pre-test to ensure that the behaviours described in these vignettes were indeed perceived as formal versus informal support. A separate sample of 194 US participants (99 women, 95 men; mean age 38.61 years, SD=12.24; 94.8% with work experience) and 202 Indian participants (62 women, 140 men; mean age 30.30 years, SD=7.19; 93.6% with work experience) from Amazon Mechanical Turk completed an online survey. Participants were presented with the two formal and the two informal support vignettes in random order. They were asked to rate the extent to which the supervisor's support behaviour was formal (powerful, providing guidance, having authority; $\alpha_{US}=0.76$, $\alpha_{IN}=0.74$ across formal vignettes; $\alpha_{UN}=0.88$, $\alpha_{IN}=0.80$ across informal vignettes) and informal (chummy, friendly, easygoing; $\alpha_{US}=0.79$, $\alpha_{IN}=0.74$ across formal vignettes; $\alpha_{US}=0.83$, $\alpha_{IN}=0.74$ across informal vignettes), on a five-point Likert-like scale (1=*strongly disagree*, 5=*strongly agree*). We created a formality index and an informality index for each of these two dimensions across both vignettes.

For each cultural sample, we conducted a paired-samples t-test to compare the formality index across the formal and informal support vignettes. Participants rated their supervisor's behaviours as more formal in the formal support vignettes ($M_{US}=3.95$, SD=0.55; $M_{IN}=4$,

SD = 0.58) than in the informal support vignettes (M_{US} = 3.19, SD = 0.73, $t(193)$ = 15.78; M_{IN} = 3.83, SD = 0.65, $t(201)$ = 4.63; ps < 0.001), and they rated the supervisor's behaviours as more informal in the informal support vignettes (M_{US} = 4.32, SD = 0.53; M_{IN} = 4.13, SD = 0.54) than in the formal support vignettes (M_{US} = 3.76, SD = 0.59, $t(193)$ = −13.41; M_{IN} = 4.01, SD = 0.58, $t(201)$ = −3.69; ps < 0.001).

4.2 | Results

Table 2 reports the descriptive statistics and correlations among the study variables.

We averaged participants' ratings for affect-based trust (α_{US} = 0.92; α_{IN} = 0.93) and cognition-based trust (α_{US} = 0.86; α_{IN} = 0.92) across the two formal support vignettes and the two informal support vignettes. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics for affect- and cognition-based trust when supervisors' formal and informal support behaviours were presented. We performed a 2 (type of behaviour: formal support vs. informal support; within-person) × 2 (culture: India vs. US; between-person) repeated measures analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) while controlling for participants' age, gender, and the order in which they responded to the formal support and informal support vignettes for each type of trust (affect and cognition).

For affect-based trust, we found a significant interaction, $F(1, 342)$ = 9. 41, p = 0.002, η^2 = 0.027. Pairwise comparisons showed that Indian participants' affect-based trust was higher in the formal support behaviour vignettes than in the informal support behaviour vignettes (p = 0.001, 95% CI [0.12, 0.43]), thereby supporting H1a. However, there was no significant difference in American participants' affect-based trust across formal support and informal support behaviour vignettes (p = 0.529), failing to support H1b.

For cognition-based trust, there was no significant interaction (p = 0.692), but the effect of different types of support behaviour was significant, $F(1, 342)$ = 4.10, p = 0.044, η^2 = 0.012. Participants' cognition-based trust was also higher in the formal support behaviour vignettes than in the informal support behaviour vignettes for Indian participants (p < 0.001, 95% CI [0.25, 0.54]) and for American participants (p < 0.001, 95% CI [0.18, 0.52]), supporting H2.

4.3 | Discussion

The findings of Study 2 converged to those of Study 1 by showing that individuals from a high power distance culture, such as India, trusted supervisors more who displayed formal rather than informal support behaviours, compared to individuals from a low power distance culture, such as the US. Further, Study 2 presented a refinement of the type of trust showing that formal compared to informal support behaviours increased Indians' affect-based trust, whereas informal compared to formal support behaviours were not more effective in increasing Americans' affect-based trust. In addition, compared to informal support behaviours, formal support behaviours engendered cognition-based trust in both cultures.

5 | STUDY 3

Study 2 provided evidence that supervisors' formal support behaviours were more effective than informal support behaviours in eliciting affect-based trust in high power distance cultures. However, it is possible that the differences in trust across formal versus informal support behaviours are driven by cultural dimensions other than power distance. Therefore, Study 3 experimentally manipulated power distance to test its causal effect on the relationship between formal versus informal support behaviours and affect- and cognition-based trust. We manipulated power distance at the organizational

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics and correlations (Study 2).

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age	32.18	10.65						
2. Female (1 = female, 0 = male)	—	—	0.19***					
3. Citizen (1 = India, 0 = US)	—	—	−0.18**	−0.02				
Formal support behaviour								
4. Affect-based trust	5.08	1.35	−0.21***	−0.27***	0.34***			
5. Cognition-based trust	5.33	1.16	−0.16**	−0.19**	0.29***	0.81***		
Informal support behaviour								
6. Affect-based trust	4.99	1.21	−0.22***	−0.26***	0.25***	0.73***	0.62***	
7. Cognition-based trust	4.95	1.11	−0.19***	−0.17**	0.33***	0.59***	0.58***	0.77***

Note: N = 347.
**p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.

TABLE 3 Means for affect- and cognition-based trust (Study 2).

Measure	Indians		Americans	
	Formal support behaviour	Informal support behaviour	Formal support behaviour	Informal support behaviour
Affect-based trust	5.62 (1.20)	5.34 (1.14)	4.70 (1.32)	4.74 (1.19)
Cognition-based trust	5.72 (1.08)	5.38 (1.07)	5.05 (1.13)	4.65 (1.03)

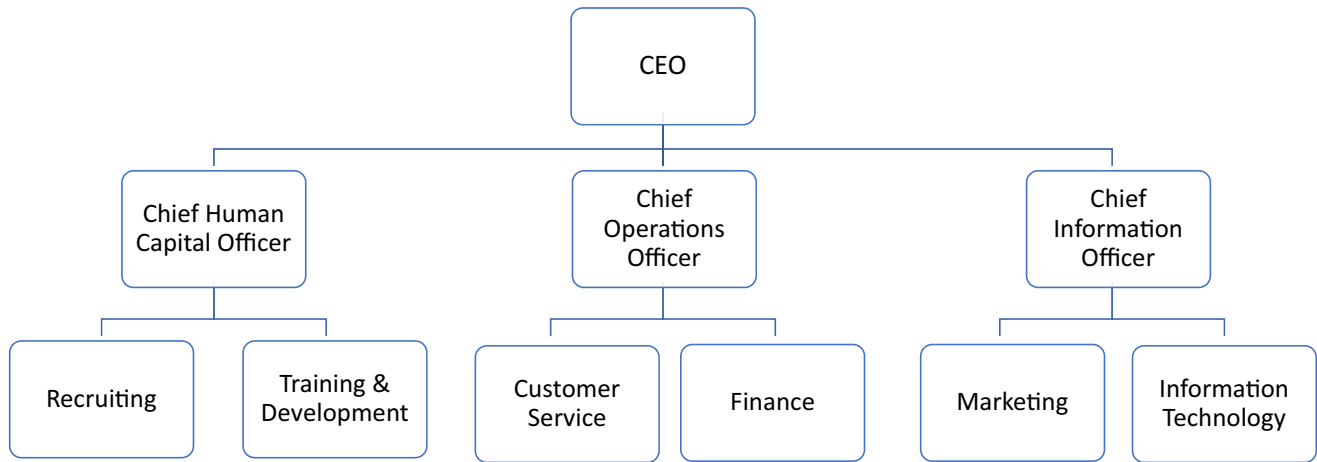*Note*: Standard deviations are given in parentheses.

FIGURE 1 Organizational chart used in high power distance condition (Study 3).

level because evidence suggests that power distance varies not only across cultures but also across organizations (Kirkman et al., 2006). Some organizations, such as those in the financial industry, have low power distance cultures, whereas others, such as those in the food industry, have high power distance cultures (Brodbeck et al., 2004). This manipulation also allowed us to test the generalizability of our findings; in other words, we investigated whether similar support behaviours engendered trust across societal and organizational cultures varying in power distance.

5.1 | Method

5.1.1 | Participants

We recruited 84 European American men between 18 and 30 years of age (mean age 24.12 years; SD = 3.09) from Amazon Mechanical Turk.[2] Participants were randomly assigned to either the high or the low power distance organization condition.

5.1.2 | Procedure

Participants were asked to imagine that they had just started a new job at a company and received a welcome statement from the company. In the high power distance culture condition, participants were presented with the following statement accompanied by an organizational chart (Figure 1):

> Welcome to EMZ Corporation! We are excited to bring you on board, and we are confident that you will be a valued contributor to our organization. With that said, here are some guidelines to help maximize your value as an employee. EMZ Corporation owes its success in large part to a clear hierarchy and organized company structure.
>
> We believe that the company functions most efficiently when employees follow the established structure. Managers are expected to make the right decisions without consulting their subordinates. We have found that managers who lead and guide their employees in decisions succeed at creating the effective environment that has made EMZ Corporation so successful. Thus, we expect you to focus on executing your job and respect authority. When your manager makes a decision, we encourage you to follow it, as important decisions should be centralized to ensure effective implementation. Employees who adapt quickly to the hierarchy and value the guidance and authority of their supervisors tend to be very successful at EMZ.

In the low power distance condition, participants were presented with the following statement followed by a different organization chart (see Figure 2):

> Welcome to EMZ Corporation! We are excited to bring you on board, and we are confident that you will be a valued contributor to our organization. With that said, here are some guidelines to help you maximize your value as an employee. EMZ Corporation owes its success in large part to a flexible company structure that encourages two-way communication. We believe that the company functions most efficiently when employees at all levels work with one another. Managers are expected to consult with their subordinates in order to make the right decisions. We have found that managers who let their employees participate in decisions succeed at creating the empowering environment that has made EMZ Corporation so successful. Thus, we expect you to question authority and value equality. When your manager makes a decision, we encourage you to express disagreement as important decisions should be questioned to ensure effective implementation. Employees who adapt quickly to the flexible structure and value equality tend to be very successful at EMZ.

As in Study 2, participants were asked to imagine that they would be rotated across different divisions and presented with vignettes describing their interactions with four different supervisors. They were also shown a photograph of the hypothetical supervisor along with a vignette to increase the realism of the task. All of the supervisors were European American men who looked to be at least 60 years of age. For this reason, we only recruited young European American men participants to control for age, gender, and ethnicity differences, which influence interpersonal interactions and perceptions of the workplace (Avery et al., 2008; Reskin et al., 1999). We included the same formal support, informal support vignettes, as in Study 2, presented in one of two counter-balanced orders. As in Study 2, after reading each interaction, the participants rated their affect- and cognition-based trust using the same seven-point rating scale.

5.1.3 | External manipulation check

To test whether the power distance manipulation worked as intended, we pre-tested the manipulation with a separate sample of 40 European American men between 18 and 30 years of age (mean age 25.43 years; SD = 3.78) from Amazon Mechanical Turk. Participants were presented with either the high or the low power distance company description. Afterwards, we measured power distance orientation to check whether the manipulation induced different levels of power distance (e.g., "Even if an employee felt he deserved a salary increase, it would be disrespectful to ask his supervisor for one"; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree;* α = 0.79; 11 items; Brockner et al., 2001). Participations in the high power distance condition reported higher power distance orientation (M = 4.0, SD = 0.62) than those in the low power distance condition (M = 3.36, SD = 0.81; $F(1, 38)$ = 8.19, p = 0.007, η^2 = 0.177).

5.2 | Results

Table 4 reports the descriptive statistics and correlations among the study variables. We averaged participants' ratings for affect- and cognition-based trust across the two formal support vignettes (α_{affect} = 0.77; $\alpha_{cognition}$ = 0.77) and the two informal support vignettes (α_{affect} = 0.83; $\alpha_{cognition}$ = 0.86). Table 5 shows the descriptive statistics for affect- and cognition-based trust when a supervisor's formal and informal support behaviours were presented. We performed a 2 (type of behaviour: formal support vs. informal support; within-person) × 2 (high vs. low power distance; between-person) repeated measures ANCOVA controlling for participants' age and the order in which they responded to the formal and informal support vignettes for each type of trust.

For affect-based trust, we found a significant interaction, $F(1, 80)$ = 4.08, p = 0.047, η^2 = 0.049. Pairwise comparisons showed that in the high power distance condition, formal support behaviours increased trust more than informal support behaviours did (p = 0.008; 95% CI [0.08, 0.54]). In the low power distance
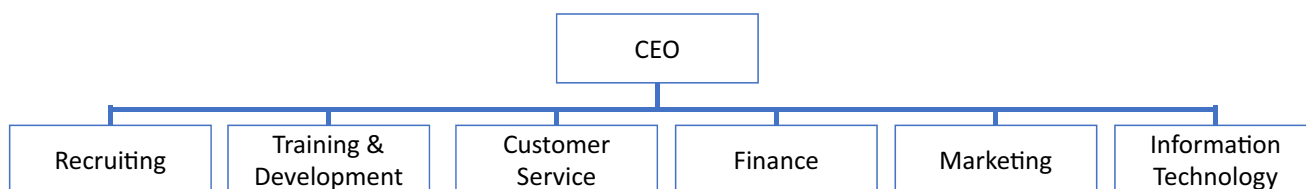

FIGURE 2   Organizational chart used in low power distance condition (Study 3).

TABLE 4 Descriptive statistics and correlations for Study 3.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Power distance (1 = High, 0 = Low)	—	—				
Formal support behaviour						
2. Affect-based trust	5.28	0.92	0.06			
3. Cognition-based trust	5.34	0.90	0.07	0.71***		
Informal support behaviour						
4. Affect-based trust	5.12	0.90	−0.12	0.63***	0.52***	
5. Cognition-based trust	4.68	1.01	−0.15	0.41***	0.50***	0.62***

Note: N = 84.
***p < 0.001.

TABLE 5 Means for affect- and cognition-based trust (Study 3).

	High power distance condition		Low power distance condition	
Measure	**Formal support behaviour**	**Informal support behaviour**	**Formal support behaviour**	**Informal support behaviour**
Affect-based trust	5.33 (0.89)	5.03 (1.02)	5.21 (0.97)	5.25 (0.71)
Cognition-based trust	5.39 (0.88)	4.55 (1.07)	5.27 (0.94)	4.86 (0.90)

Note: Standard deviations are given in parentheses.

condition, there was no significant difference between trust ratings ($p = 0.654$).

For cognition-based trust, the interaction was not significant, $F(1, 80) = 2.87$, $p = 0.094$, $\eta^2 = 0.035$. Participants' cognition-based trust was higher in the formal support behaviour vignettes than in the informal support behaviour vignettes in high ($p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.56, 1.07]) and low power distance conditions ($p = 0.004$, 95% CI [0.15, 0.77]).

5.3 | Discussion

Study 3 replicated the findings of Study 2 while providing experimental evidence that power distance is a key cultural variable that influences whether employees are more likely to trust supervisors engaging in formal or informal support behaviours. Specifically, formal support behaviours increased employees' affect-based trust in a high power distance culture but not in a low power distance culture. In contrast, formal support behaviours increased employees' cognition-based trust across cultures varying in power distance. Further, Study 3 conceptually replicated the findings of Study 1 and 2, which were based on national culture, at the level of organizational culture.

6 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

Workplaces around the world increasingly consist of employees from different cultural backgrounds, and the quest to build and maintain organizational trust is becoming ever more challenging. Research has shown that employees who perceive greater support from their supervisor report higher job satisfaction and affective commitment and lower turnover intentions (e.g., Ng & Sorensen, 2008); they also trust their supervisor more (e.g., Stinglhamber et al., 2006; Tomlinson et al., 2020). In what follows, we briefly summarize our findings on how power distance may affect perceptions as to effective leadership support behaviours and follow this with a discussion of our theoretical and practical contributions as well as this study's limitations and suggestions for future research.

In Study 1, content analysis of interviews indicated that in a high power distance culture (India), social interactions that increased employees' trust in their supervisors were characterized by a higher level of formality than in a low power distance culture (the Netherlands), where supervisors acted like friends or equals with their subordinates. Based on these observations, we conducted two experimental studies. Study 2 found that when individuals in India encountered supervisors who engaged in formal support behaviours, they had higher affect-based trust in them compared to supervisors engaging in informal support behaviours. In contrast, formal support behaviours had no differential effect on affect-based trust in the US, a low power distance culture. This finding aligns with our assertion that formal support behaviours affirm supervisory role obligations regarding protection and pastoral care of subordinates (Fiske, 1992), which increases affect-based trust in high power distance cultures. However, formal support behaviours increased cognition-based trust in both cultures, consistent with the idea that these behaviours signal authority and resources as well as increase predictability across cultures.

Finally, Study 3 manipulated power distance in an organizational setting and replicated the findings of Study 2. In sum, evidence from established trust relations from the field as well as controlled experimental designs converged to support the idea that the formality of supportive behaviour is more consistent with effective leadership prototypes prevalent in high power distance cultures, thereby generating affect- and cognition-based trust in supervisors.

6.1 | Theoretical implications

The importance of high-quality supervisor–subordinate relationships and the role of supervisor support and consideration in its creation is well established (Yukl, 1989). The literature on cross-cultural leadership further posits that supervisor support is composed of a more paternalistic exchange in high power distance, collectivist cultures (e.g., Chen et al., 2014). Although it has been argued that this combination of authority and benevolence might not sit well in individualist, low power distance cultures, empirical evidence indicates that paternalistic leadership is related to positive outcomes in the US as well (e.g., Pellegrini et al., 2010). Rather than refuting the original argument, such findings might be suggesting that capturing cross-cultural differences may necessitate a more nuanced approach. Indeed, role theorists such as Goffman (1983) emphasize how social roles are communicated through a multitude of fine-grained gestures that actors exchange on an ongoing basis.

In this study, we identified cultural differences in the manifestation and effectiveness of formal versus informal support behaviours. Identifying the role of different behaviours in fostering affect-based trust across cultures has important performance-related implications. For instance, the psychological safety afforded by affect-based trust has been found to be essential for creativity (e.g., Chua et al., 2009, 2010; Gong et al., 2012), particularly in intercultural collaborations (Chua et al., 2012). Although there is considerable research that advocates status-levelling leadership behaviours or attributes to foster psychological safety (e.g., Owens & Hekman, 2012), our findings extend the evidence that questions the generalizability of this proposition (e.g., Hu et al., 2018).

Importantly, we also observed that formal support behaviours increased cognition-based trust regardless of power distance differences. Indeed, research suggests that relationships with more hierarchical organizations, due to their omnipresence starting with the parent–child relationship as well as their greater predictability, are easier for people to understand, learn, and remember (Zitek & Phillips, 2020). In contrast, non-hierarchical relationships tend to be perceived as more confusing and unclear (Zitek & Phillips, 2020). Thus, it appears that the formality of supportive behaviours may be associated with greater clarity and

consistency, thereby contributing to the perceptions of dependability.

While our hypothesis regarding formality in high power distance contexts was supported, the expectation that informal support behaviours would lead to greater affect-based trust in low power distance cultures was not confirmed. This may be due to cultural differences in tightness–looseness, which refers to the strength of social norms and tolerance for deviant behaviours (Gelfand et al., 2011). In tight cultures like India, norms around social situations tend to be stronger (Gelfand et al., 2011), suggesting that subordinates may be more discerning of their supervisor's cultural fit as well as more acutely aware of their reciprocal obligations. In contrast, in loose cultures like the US (Gelfand et al., 2011), where situations tend to be weak and less constrained by social expectations, subordinates may be less cognizant with respect to cultural fit, either for the supervisor or for themselves. Taken together, our findings suggest that the predictions of a culturally endorsed implicit theory of leadership that builds on the importance of fit is more likely to hold in tight as opposed to loose cultures (Gelfand et al., 2006).

Finally, this research also contributes to the organizational culture literature by examining the role of power distance on trust. In addition to developing an experimental manipulation of organizational power distance that researchers can use to test causal hypotheses that are not possible to test with measured power distance, Study 3 highlights that organizational power distance shapes whether formal support behaviours on the part of supervisors increase subordinates' affect-based trust. Our results also support the idea that organizational culture, and practices undertaken to convey it (e.g., newcomer socialization), can influence the development of leadership prototypes, which in turn may guide employees' assessments between effective and ineffective leaders (Dickson et al., 2006).

6.2 | Practical implications

Our findings are in line with the extant, albeit sporadic, research, which speaks to the relevance of formality versus informality, as both a leadership and an organizational practice with differential reception in cultures varying in power distance (e.g., Den Hartog et al., 1999; Morand & Zhang, 2020). By identifying particular behaviours, we hope to alert managers to the more subtle sign systems that communicate and maintain status differences and related obligations (e.g., Javidan et al., 2006; Keating, 2000) beyond the more obvious symbols such as organizational space, work attire, or forms of address (Morand & Zhang, 2020).

It should also be noted that leadership training around the world tends to be grounded in Western

(i.e., low power distance) values and practices (Hanges et al., 2016) and promotes decreasing the salience of hierarchical differences between leaders and followers (Morand & Zhang, 2020). The findings of this study suggest that such blanket guidance is potentially unwise. Further, our finding that formal support behaviours increased cognition-based trust across the board points to the benefits of enacting formal support behaviours in initial interactions. Thus, it seems that claims regarding the benefits of status-levelling might be tempered in light of this evidence, or at least subjected to greater scrutiny with context-sensitive, multi-method designs as in this study.

6.3 | Limitations and future research

This research focused on informal and formal supervisor support behaviours using an experimental vignette design. The vignettes were informed by the interviews and may reflect somewhat specific and idiosyncratic exchanges. Manifestations of formality versus informality may vary in other supervisor–subordinate interactions, such as day-to-day encounters, or, for example, in other, unfamiliar situations. Furthermore, even in high power distance cultures, leaders may opt to strategically choose behaviours that reduce the status distance, for instance to counter a stereotype, if they believe it may be conducive to a high-quality relationship (e.g., Phillips et al., 2009). Because our study represents a first attempt to identify behavioural manifestations of supervisor formality versus informality, future research needs to examine the various cues to formality or informality that subordinates perceive in supervisors' behaviours.

Future studies can also aim to complement the limitations of vignette experiments by undertaking methods like diary studies in organizations (e.g., Breevaart et al., 2016). By capturing the fact that supervisors are not confined to one set of behaviours and may exhibit both formal and informal behaviours depending on the situation, such designs would allow the exploration of behaviour situation interactions as well as the moderating role of individual or cultural differences. Furthermore, we observed a positive relationship between cognition- and affect-based trust for the supervisors in the vignettes. This relationship exhibits a similarity to the extant literature (e.g., De Jong et al., 2016; Legood et al., 2021). Despite these positive correlations, empirical studies support the distinction between cognition- and affect-based trust, indicating that individuals develop these two types of trust as a result of distinct precursors (e.g., McAllister, 1995; Ng & Chua, 2006; Tomlinson et al., 2020; Webber & Klimoski, 2004) and result in different outcomes (Legood et al., 2021). Also, we acknowledge that our findings have limited generalizability because of the small sample size and limited cultural samples. Future research should investigate how different types of supporting behaviours are seen and processed by people across a wider range of cultures.

Finally, in our study, power distance was conceptualized as an attribute of the cultural context and not as an individual orientation. As such, our results speak more to the power of prescriptive norms, suggesting that regardless of personal endorsement of power values, individuals are likely to expect effective leaders to act formally in high power distance contexts. Future research can incorporate the role of personal values as well as perceived cultural importance (e.g., Wan et al., 2007) to discern whether their compatibility versus divergence has implications for assessing leadership effectiveness. Furthermore, our study built on cultural differences in the content of social norms; however, as mentioned earlier, societies differ also with respect to the strength of social norms (Elster & Gelfand, 2021). Future studies can incorporate the growing literature on tightness and looseness (Gelfand et al., 2011) for a better prediction of behaviours in socio-normative situations. Indeed, research that treats culture as a nuanced and a multifaceted variable will be most fruitful in furthering our understanding of the global work context.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS
Jaee Cho: Conceptualization; formal analysis; funding acquisition; investigation; methodology; project administration; writing – original draft. **S. Arzu Wasti:** Conceptualization; funding acquisition; investigation; methodology; project administration; writing – original draft. **Krishna Savani:** Conceptualization; funding acquisition; investigation; methodology; supervision; validation; writing – review and editing. **Hwee Hoon Tan:** Conceptualization; investigation; methodology; writing – review and editing. **Michael W. Morris:** Conceptualization; funding acquisition; investigation; methodology; supervision; writing – review and editing.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ETHICS STATEMENT

In accordance with the guidelines set by the Institutional Review Boards at Columbia Business School, all participants in this study gave informed consent.

RESEARCH MATERIALS AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The research materials of the studies in this paper are available on request from the corresponding author.

PRE-REGISTRATION STATEMENT

The studies in this paper were not preregistered.

ORCID

Jaee Cho https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5866-8845

ENDNOTES

[1] The target sample size was 200 participants per culture. A survey seeking 400 US or Indian citizens was posted on www.mturk.com, and 542 participants completed the study before it expired. Excluded were 290 participants who failed to attention checks (i.e., selecting a certain number or writing a certain word) and five participants who did not have Indian or American citizenship. Thus, 347 participants remained. Past research from the same subject pool has found that nearly 40% of Mechanical Turk participants tend to be employed full-time, whereas about 30% tend to be employed part-time (Ross et al., 2009; Shapiro et al., 2013).

[2] The target sample size for Study 3 was 50 participants per cell. A survey seeking 100 male European American US citizens was posted on www.mturk.com, and 105 participants completed the study before it expired. Twenty-one participants failed to answer the reading check questions.

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