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Research Insights
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LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT CULTURES IN BULGARIAN AND U.S. UNIVERSITIES: AN EXPLORATORY CROSS-NATIONAL STUDY

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Abstract. This cross-national study examines how university employees perceive leadership and management culture in higher education institutions in Bulgaria and the United States. Using a comparative survey design grounded in organizational leadership and cultural theory, we assess perceptions across five domains Leadership and Organizational Culture, Planning, Organization, Motivation, and Control, collectively operationalized as Perceived Management Culture and Leadership (PMCL). Participants included academic staff and university employees from Bulgaria and the United States who completed a standardized Likert-scale instrument. Reliability analyses indicated acceptable to strong internal consistency across domains (Bulgaria: N=29: α = .76 – .77; U.S. N = 20: α = .78 – .91 across domains; overall PMCL $\alpha \approx .95$). Bulgarian respondents most strongly emphasized planning clarity, administrative consistency, and control, reflecting a more hierarchical and rule-bound management orientation. In the U.S. sample, perceptions were also favorable but more variable across items, with comparatively greater emphasis on relational leadership and motivation and less uniform endorsement of control and cross-unit consistency, consistent with a more decentralized, collaborative model. Across both contexts, clear expectations, constructive feedback, and leaders' emotional regulation under pressure emerged as recurring markers of a positive academic work climate.

Keywords: leadership; management culture; higher education; cross-cultural comparison; educational management

Introduction

Organizational leadership and management are being reshaped by profound social, technological, and institutional shifts associated with an increasingly digital

and interconnected world (Fantozzi et al., 2025). In higher education, these changes are particularly visible. Universities now operate within environments marked by digital transformation, global competition, intensified accountability demands, and evolving expectations of faculty and staff (Bolman & Deal, 2021; Williams, 2022). As a result, long-standing bureaucratic models of management designed for stability and control are being tested by the need for adaptability, responsiveness, and human-centered leadership.

Research on organizational effectiveness suggests that while control-oriented structures can support predictability and compliance, they often struggle to foster innovation, engagement, and learning in complex environments (Cameron & Quinn, 2006; Kaul, 2019). In contrast, leadership approaches that emphasize trust, communication, emotional regulation, and shared decision-making are more closely associated with positive organizational climate, psychological safety, and employee commitment particularly in professional and academic settings where autonomy and expertise are central (Brendel et al., 2021; Goleman, 1998). These competing demands create persistent tension within higher education institutions as leaders attempt to balance regulatory oversight and administrative control with collegiality, academic freedom, and relational leadership.

Importantly, the way faculty and staff experience leadership and management often matters more than their formal design. Prior studies indicate that employees' perceptions of leadership and management culture shape job satisfaction, engagement, and institutional effectiveness more directly than organizational charts, policies, or strategic plans alone (Schein, 1990; Williams, 2022). Perceptions reflect the lived realities of governance, how decisions are made, how communication occurs, how emotions are managed, and how people experience authority in their daily work. Examining these perceptions therefore provides a valuable lens for understanding management culture within universities.

Cross-national scholarship further demonstrates that perceptions of leadership and management are deeply embedded in broader cultural contexts. National cultural orientations such as power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and expectations for participation in decision-making shape how organizational members interpret authority, planning, motivation, and control (Hofstede, 1991; Hofstede & Bond, 1984). Bulgaria and the United States offer a theoretically meaningful comparison in this regard. Bulgaria's higher power distance and stronger uncertainty avoidance suggest a greater reliance on hierarchy, formal authority, and structured control, whereas the United States' more individualistic and decentralized orientation aligns with participatory leadership and relational management practices (Hofstede, 1991). These cultural differences provide an important backdrop for interpreting how leadership and management are perceived in higher education institutions across the two contexts.

At the organizational level, management culture remains a complex and evolving construct. It encompasses patterns of leadership behavior, decision-making practices, communication norms, and underlying values that are not easily examined in isolation (Bolman & Deal, 2021). Organizational culture expressed through shared assumptions, norms, and beliefs shapes how management practices are enacted and experienced in everyday work (Koleva, 2023). When adaptive and coherent, culture can become a source of institutional strength; when misaligned, it can constrain even well-designed strategies (Kuswati, 2020). As Schein (1990) argues, culture both enables and limits strategic action, operating through deep assumptions, espoused values, and visible artifacts that collectively influence organizational life.

Within this context, management and leadership intersect as complementary yet distinct functions. Management involves planning, organizing, motivating, and controlling resources in pursuit of institutional goals, relying on formal authority and administrative systems (Williams, 2022). Leadership, by contrast, is rooted in influence mobilizing people, shaping meaning, and aligning individual capabilities with shared purpose (Bennis, as cited in Koleva, 2023). In higher education, these functions are often intertwined within what has been described as administrative leadership, where formal authority and relational influence coexist. Understanding how this intersection is perceived by staff is critical for assessing the effectiveness of leadership and management in academic organizations.

The objective of this study is to conduct a cross-national comparison of leadership and management culture within Bulgarian and U.S. higher education institutions through the lens of employee perceptions. Using a shared, theory-informed survey instrument, the study examines Perceived Management Culture and Leadership (PMCL) across five domains: Leadership and Organizational Culture, Planning, Organization, Motivation, and Control. By focusing on staff perceptions across two distinct cultural contexts, this collaborative research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how leadership and management are experienced in higher education and offers a framework that may be extended to additional national and institutional settings.

Conceptual Framework: Perceived Management Culture and Leadership (PMCL)

The PMCL framework conceptualizes leadership and management culture as employees' perceptions of how authority, coordination, motivation, and accountability are enacted in day-to-day institutional life. Rather than treating "management culture" as a single monolithic construct, PMCL operationalizes it as five interrelated domains that reflect both structural and human elements of organizing in higher education. PMCL is aligned with classic culture and leadership theory that emphasizes visible managerial practices and routines and deeper assumptions that shape expectations and interpretations.

Domain 1: Leadership and Culture (sensemaking, climate, and adaptive capacity): This domain captures perceived leadership behaviors and cultural signals that shape climate communication quality, adaptability, stability, and leaders' capacity to regulate emotions under pressure. It reflects the idea that leadership is partly a cultural practice. Leaders influence the "feel" of the workplace through how they frame challenges, communicate priorities, and respond in stressful conditions. A key feature here is emotion regulation, which affects psychological safety, openness, and trust conditions that strongly shape whether employees interpret management actions as supportive or threatening. From an Organization Development (OD) perspective, this domain aligns with contemporary shifts away from purely directive change toward approaches that prioritize dialogue, inclusion, and human-centered development.

Domain 2: Planning (predictability, administrative coherence, and anticipatory coordination): Planning captures perceived clarity and quality of direction-setting, such as predictability, risk awareness, administrative preparedness, and alignment of schedules and expectations. In university settings, planning is often where the tension between accountability requirements and academic flexibility becomes visible. Strong planning can support stability, but overly rigid planning can also constrain responsiveness in dynamic environments (Bolman & Deal, 2021; Cameron & Quinn, 2006).

Domain 3: Organization (structuring work for performance, teamwork, and follow-through): Organization captures perceptions of how effectively the institution mobilizes people and resources, such as teamwork, proactive problem-solving, innovation, results orientation, and alignment around a practical vision. It treats "organization" not as a static structure but as an enacted capability influencing how well units coordinate, how barriers get removed, and whether staff experience momentum or friction. This domain is compatible with OD perspectives that view organizations as living systems requiring continuous alignment and learning rather than one-time restructuring.

Domain 4: Motivation (trust, voice, psychological safety, and encouragement): Motivation represents the relational and psychological side of management culture trust, encouragement of creativity, psychological safety, voice, and support. In academic workplaces, motivation is closely tied to whether employees feel respected, heard, and able to express concerns without penalty conditions widely associated with stronger engagement and commitment in professional settings (Yoon et al., 2021). This domain also connects to coaching- and strengths-oriented perspectives emphasizing that supportive conversations, strengths recognition, and well-being practices can shape a more engaged and resilient culture.

Domain 5: Control (accountability, feedback loops, precision, and consistency of directives): Control captures perceptions of monitoring, feedback, precision, consistency of directives, and the maintenance of safe conditions. In higher

education, control is not inherently negative. It can promote fairness, quality assurance, and reliability yet excessive control may signal low autonomy and reduced participation in decision-making (Bolman & Deal, 2021; Hofstede, 1991).

Because PMCL is measured through staff perceptions, it is also inherently sensitive to national culture and shared expectations about authority and participation. Hofstede's cultural dimensions provide a useful interpretive lens: higher power distance and stronger uncertainty avoidance are often associated with greater acceptance of hierarchy, rules, and control, while lower power distance contexts tend to emphasize voice and decentralized decision processes (Hofstede, 1991; Hofstede & Bond, 1984). Finally, PMCL is intended to be practically useful not only as a descriptive index, but as a diagnostic map for identifying which aspects of the management culture are experienced as strengths and which represent opportunities for improvement. This emphasis is consistent with contemporary OD thinking that integrates diagnostic clarity with dialogic and human-centered practices to strengthen culture and resilience (Brendel et al., 2021).

Research Questions

RQ1 (Levels). What are Bulgarian staff members perceived management culture and leadership (PMCL) levels across four domains, Leadership & Organizational Culture, Planning, Organization, Motivation, and Control and the Overall index?

RQ2 (Cross-national profile). How do Bulgarian and U.S. staff PMCL profiles compare across domains?

RQ3 (Demographics, exploratory). Are PMCL scores associated with age and gender?

Methodology

The study aims to assess academic staff members' views of management culture and leadership at the Vratsa Branch and the Faculty of Education of *St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo*, and to compare these findings with results from a U.S. context by examining perceived levels of planning, organization, motivation, leadership, and control. The research seeks to expand understanding of management culture within higher education and to explore how these dimensions affect the quality and effectiveness of administrative and organizational processes in two cultural contexts. Overall, this cross-sectional survey captures how staff perceive management culture and leadership in one Bulgarian university setting and in a broader U.S. higher education environment.

Instrumentation and Measures

Cross-sectional survey data were collected between May and September 2025 from two higher education contexts: (1) St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo (including the Vratsa Branch), Bulgaria, and (2) U.S. universities

included for cross-national comparison. The final sample comprised 29 Bulgarian staff members and 20 U.S. staff members after data cleaning. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, consistent with best practices for organizational and educational research involving human subjects (Podsakoff et al., 2003). U.S. participants were recruited through professional academic networks and comprised a convenience sample of adult participants, who are faculty members and professional staff employed at public universities in the United States, primarily within colleges of education and related academic units. These institutions typically operate within decentralized governance structures characteristic of U.S. higher education, thereby offering a useful comparative contrast to the more centralized organizational traditions observed in many Bulgarian universities. Participation in both national contexts was voluntary and anonymous, consistent with established methodological practices for organizational and educational research involving human subjects (Podsakoff et al., 2003). This sampling strategy allowed the study to examine perceptions of leadership and management culture across distinct institutional environments while preserving reasonable comparability in participant roles and organizational contexts. Yellow color is for reviewer 1 and suggestion 3 of reviewer 2

Participants completed a standardized Likert-type questionnaire administered online, with response options ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 4 (Strongly agree). The instrument was designed to assess Perceived Management Culture and Leadership (PMCL) across five theoretically grounded domains: Leadership and Organizational Culture (8 items including Creativity; Adaptivity; Personal example; Giving instructions; Communication; Support, Empowerment, and Informal relations), Organization (7 items including Effectiveness; Predictability; Organization; Gradually changes; Rationality, Administrative culture, and Risk assessment), Planning (7 items including Innovation; Results-oriented; People-oriented, Team-oriented; Proactive approach; Stability; and Vision for the future), Motivation (8 items including Trust; Encouragement of creativity; Communication; Safety; Influences people through ideas and motivation; Entrepreneurship; Personal emotional stability, and Security), and Control (7 items including Risk minimization; Planning; Administrative control; Feedback; Precision; Alignment between goals and activities, and Unity of directives). Items were intentionally phrased so that higher scores reflected more favorable perceptions of how leadership and management practices are enacted in everyday institutional life, aligning with perceptual approaches commonly used in organizational culture and leadership research. The instrument has been newly developed for the study and its internal consistency and reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. The survey was distributed electronically following informed consent procedures, and no incentives were offered. No personally identifiable information was collected or retained, reducing the

likelihood of evaluation apprehension or social desirability effects (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960).

Scoring and Analysis Plan

For each domain, scale scores were computed by averaging item responses, and an overall PMCL index was calculated by averaging domain-level scores. This aggregation approach reflects established practices in leadership and organizational climate research, where composite perceptions are used to capture holistic assessments of management culture (Cameron & Quinn, 2006; Bolman & Deal, 2021).

Reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, which is appropriate for assessing internal consistency in multi-item perceptual scales. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were computed for all domains. Within the Bulgarian sample, one-way ANOVA tests were conducted to explore differences by organizational unit and specialty. Cross-national comparisons focused on contrasts in scale means and item-level response patterns between Bulgarian and U.S. respondents. Statistical assumptions for group comparisons were assessed using Levene's tests, and the significance level was set at $\alpha = .05$. Given the relatively small U.S. sample size, subgroup analyses for that group were interpreted with appropriate caution.

Internal consistency estimates indicated acceptable to strong reliability across both national samples, with Bulgarian domain alphas ranging from .76 to .77 and U.S. domain alphas ranging from .87 to .88. All corrected item–total correlations exceeded .40, indicating adequate item discrimination; therefore, no items were removed from the final instrument (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Table 1. Internal Consistency Reliability (Cronbach's α) for PMCL Domains by Country (Bulgaria N = 29; U.S. N = 20)

Scale	Items (n)	Bulgaria α	U.S. α
Leadership & Organizational Culture	8	0.819	0.894
Organization	7	0.775	0.862
Planning	7	0.865	0.914
Motivation	8	0.738	0.890
Control	7	0.685	0.777

Results

Overall, mean scores across all PMCL domains were above 3.0 (on a 1–4 scale) for both Bulgarian and U.S. staff, indicating generally favorable perceptions of leadership and management culture. The overall PMCL mean was higher for

Bulgarian respondents (M = 3.56, SD = 0.72) than for their U.S. counterparts (M = 3.29, SD = 0.48), with greater variability observed in the U.S. sample.

Bulgaria – Descriptive Result

Domain means for the Bulgarian sample were uniformly high, reflecting broadly positive perceptions across all five PMCL domains (Table 1). The highest mean scores were observed for Control (M = 3.64, SD = 0.58) and Planning (M = 3.59, SD = 0.69), suggesting strong emphasis on monitoring, administrative consistency, and structured planning. Slightly lower but still favorable ratings were reported for Leadership and Organizational Culture (M = 3.53, SD = 0.82) and Organization (M = 3.49, SD = 0.83).

Table 2. Bulgarian staff: descriptives by scale (1 – 4)

Scale	Mean	SD	N
Leadership & Organization Culture	3.53	0.82	29
Organization	3.49	0.83	29
Motivation	3.57	0.69	
Planning	3.59	0.69	29
Control	3.64	0.58	29
Overall	3.56	0.72	29

Item-level patterns further indicate that Bulgarian staff rated highly aspects of task monitoring, precision, alignment between goals and activities, and cross-unit consistency, reinforcing a management profile characterized by structure, predictability, and hierarchical coordination.

U.S. Snapshot

Using the same PMCL instrument, U.S. staff (N = 20) also reported favorable perceptions across all domains (Table 2), though with greater dispersion in responses. Domain means ranged from M = 3.11 to M = 3.26, with Leadership and Organizational Culture rated highest (M = 3.26, SD = 0.62) and Control rated lowest (M = 3.11, SD = 0.52). The overall PMCL mean for the U.S. sample was M = 3.29 (SD = 0.48).

Table 3. U.S. staff: descriptives by scale (1 – 4)

Scale	Mean	SD	N
Leadership	3.26	0.62	20
Planning	3.19	0.58	20
Organization	3.23	0.64	20
Motivation	3.21	0.61	20
Control	3.11	0.52	20
Overall	3.29	0.48	20

Cross-National Patterns

Figure 1 illustrates contrasting PMCL profiles between the two contexts. Two robust descriptive patterns emerged:

Control: Bulgarian staff reported substantially higher perceptions of control-oriented practices than U.S. staff (BG M = 3.64 vs. U.S. M = 3.11). Bulgarian respondents rated highly items related to monitoring task completion, precision, alignment between goals and activities, and cross-unit consistency, indicating strong administrative oversight. In contrast, U.S. respondents reported lower ratings on these same indicators, suggesting a weaker emphasis on control and greater reliance on leadership and autonomy.

Planning: Bulgarian staff again reported higher perceptions of planning effectiveness (M = 3.59) compared to U.S. staff (M = 3.19). Both groups rated regulatory knowledge and workplace safety relatively highly, though Bulgarian respondents expressed greater confidence in schedule planning and procedural predictability.

Leadership and Motivation: While Bulgarian respondents reported slightly higher overall leadership scores, U.S. staff placed stronger emphasis on relational leadership and motivation, particularly confidence in employees' abilities and trust. Bulgarian staff reported stronger encouragement of creativity and openness to proposing ideas, whereas both groups reported comparatively lower scores for being consulted in decision-making and for informal communication.

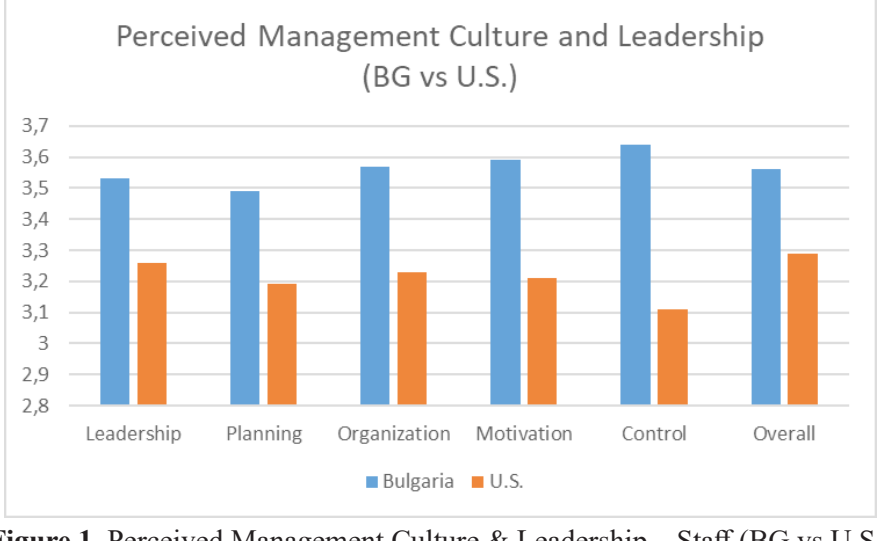


Figure 1. Perceived Management Culture & Leadership – Staff (BG vs U.S.)

Subgroup analyses (age, gender)

For the U.S. sample, one-way ANOVAs by age revealed no statistically significant differences across PMCL domains or the overall index (all $p \geq .24$). Independent-samples tests (male vs. female) also showed no statistically significant differences on any PMCL scale (all $p \geq .22$). Levene's tests were non-significant across domains (all $p \geq .11$), supporting the homogeneity assumption.

Within the Bulgarian sample, significant differences emerged by organizational unit. Employees from the Vratsa Branch reported higher perceptions of planning effectiveness and risk assessment ($F(1,27) = 9.26$, $p = .05$), greater people orientation ($F(1,27) = 15.43$, $p < .01$), and more favorable ratings of reasonable deadlines and planning consistency within the Control domain ($F(1,27) = 9.16$, $p = .05$). No consistent differences were observed by age or gender.

Demonstrating cross-national differences in PMCL scores highlights how leadership and management practices are experienced differently across cultural and institutional contexts.

Table 4. Cross-national comparison of PMCL domain means (Bulgaria vs. United States)

PMCL Domain	Bulgaria Mean	Bulgaria SD	U.S. Mean	U.S. SD	Difference (BG − US)
Leadership & Organizational Culture	3.53	0.82	3.26	0.62	+0.27
Planning	3.59	0.69	3.19	0.58	+0.40
Organization	3.49	0.83	3.23	0.64	+0.26
Motivation	3.57	0.69	3.21	0.61	+0.36
Control	3.64	0.58	3.11	0.52	+0.53
Overall PMCL	3.56	0.72	3.29	0.48	+0.27

Table 4 presents a direct comparison of PMCL domain means for Bulgarian and U.S. respondents. Bulgarian staff reported higher mean scores across all domains, with the largest differences observed in the Control and Planning domains. The smallest difference occurred in the Organization domain, where perceptions were relatively similar across the two national samples.

Discussion

This study examined how university staff in Bulgaria and the United States perceive leadership and management culture across five PMCL domains. Overall, respondents in both contexts reported favorable perceptions, with mean scores consistently above the midpoint of the scale. This result indicates that staff in both national contexts generally perceive leadership and management practices as supportive and effective.

At the same time, the findings reveal distinct national profiles that reflect deeper cultural, structural, and managerial orientations within higher education systems.

The Bulgarian profile is characterized by strong emphasis on planning, control, administrative consistency, and monitoring, patterns that align with hierarchical organizational cultures and higher uncertainty avoidance (Cameron & Quinn, 2006; Hofstede, 1991). In particular, the highest Bulgarian domain means were observed for Control (M = 3.64) and Planning (M = 3.59), indicating strong perceptions of monitoring, coordination, and administrative predictability. These results suggest that Bulgarian university management practices prioritize predictability, rule adherence, and coordination across units features that can support stability and compliance in complex institutional environments. However, the same emphasis on control appears to coexist with comparatively weaker perceptions of relational leadership capacities, including trust, empowerment, and employee voice. This combination reflects a management culture that is structurally robust yet more limited in its affective and relational dimensions (Bolman & Deal, 2021).

In contrast, the U.S. profile reflects stronger perceptions of relational leadership and motivation, including trust in employees' abilities, support, and participatory leadership practices. U.S. respondents reported their highest scores in Leadership and Organizational Culture (M = 3.26), while Control received the lowest rating (M = 3.11), suggesting a comparatively weaker emphasis on formal monitoring. These patterns are consistent with more decentralized and collaborative management models, often associated with clan or adhocracy-oriented cultures (Cameron & Quinn, 2006). At the same time, U.S. respondents reported comparatively lower perceptions of control and cross-unit consistency, suggesting that coordination and alignment may rely less on formal monitoring and more on leadership influence and professional autonomy. Overall PMCL scores were also lower and more variable in the U.S. sample (M = 3.29) compared with the Bulgarian sample (M = 3.56). Taken together, these patterns indicate that U.S. institutions may trade some degree of administrative uniformity for greater flexibility, empowerment, and relational engagement.

Across both contexts, specific indicators point to shared challenges. In particular, items related to freedom to express criticism, informal communication, and being consulted in decision-making received lower ratings in both samples. This pattern suggests that opportunities for employee voice and upward communication remain limited even in organizational environments where overall perceptions of leadership are positive. These findings echo broader concerns in higher education regarding limited employee voice and constrained opportunities for upward communication, even in systems that otherwise value participation and collegiality. Prior research highlights psychological safety, the ability to speak openly without fear of negative consequences as a key driver of learning, innovation, and trust in professional organizations (Goleman, 1998). The present findings suggest that strengthening psychological safety remains an important area for leadership development in both national contexts.

The Bulgarian data further suggest that strong control and planning mechanisms may come at the expense of perceived emotional regulation, individualized support, and empowerment. Lower ratings related to emotional self-control and rationality point to potential strain in leadership practices, which can undermine motivation and well-being over time. While cultural norms may partially shape how emotions are expressed and interpreted, sustained deficits in emotion regulation are likely to hinder effective leadership and administrative decision-making in academic settings. These findings reinforce the importance of leadership development approaches that integrate structural competence with emotional intelligence and relational awareness.

At the same time, the consistently high Bulgarian means raise the possibility of response-style effects, such as social desirability or acquiescence, which have been documented in cross-cultural survey research (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). Although most domain means were above 3.5, variation at the item level suggests that the results do not represent a simple ceiling effect. The presence of lower item-level scores within leadership-related indicators suggests that a simple ceiling effect is unlikely, but future studies should explicitly examine response patterns and cultural norms surrounding evaluation and critique.

From a practical perspective, the findings point to different leverage points for improvement across contexts. In Bulgaria, leadership development efforts may be most impactful if they focus on strengthening emotional regulation, individualized support, and participatory practices while preserving existing strengths in planning and coordination. In the U.S. context, efforts should prioritize enhancing cross-unit alignment and consistency without undermining existing strengths in relational leadership, trust, and staff support. In both settings, attention to voice, feedback, and psychological safety is likely to yield meaningful improvements in perceived management culture.

Overall, the PMCL framework demonstrates value as a diagnostic lens for understanding how leadership and management are experienced by staff in higher education. The results show that perceptions of management culture reflect both structural management practices (planning and control) and relational leadership dynamics (trust, motivation, and communication). By capturing perceptions across both structural and relational dimensions, PMCL helps illuminate how administrative practices translate into lived organizational climates. These insights underscore the importance of balancing control with leadership, structure with flexibility, and formal authority with human-centered influence in contemporary universities.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the relatively small sample sizes in both contexts (Bulgaria N = 29; United States N = 20) limit statistical power and constrain the precision of subgroup analyses. As such, the results should be interpreted as indicative rather than conclusive, particularly

for exploratory comparisons. Second, the consistently high mean scores observed in the Bulgarian sample raise the possibility of response-style effects, including social desirability or acquiescence, which are common concerns in cross-cultural survey research. While item-level variation suggests that a strict ceiling effect is unlikely, future research should explicitly account for cultural response tendencies.

Third, all data were collected through self-report measures, which may be subject to common method variance. Subsequent studies would benefit from triangulating perceptual data with administrative records, observational indicators, or behavioral measures to strengthen inference. Methodologically, future work should also assess measurement invariance across cultural contexts to ensure that PMCL domains are interpreted consistently across national settings (Podsakoff et al., 2003). In fourth place, because the PMCL instrument was administered in two national contexts, potential issues related to cross-cultural measurement equivalence should be acknowledged. Although internal consistency estimates indicated acceptable reliability in both samples, cross-cultural survey research suggests that respondents from different cultural settings may interpret Likert-type scales differently or exhibit distinct response tendencies such as acquiescence or social desirability (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). The present study did not formally test measurement invariance across cultural groups. Future research should therefore examine the cross-cultural validity of the PMCL framework using measurement invariance procedures to ensure that the constructs are interpreted consistently across national contexts and that observed differences reflect substantive variation rather than measurement artifacts.

Finally, linking PMCL scores to downstream outcomes such as job satisfaction, engagement, retention, or institutional performance would further clarify the practical significance of perceived management culture and leadership in higher education.

Conclusion

This study provides a cross-national examination of how university staff in Bulgaria and the United States perceive leadership and management culture through the lens of Perceived Management Culture and Leadership (PMCL). Employees in both contexts reported generally favorable perceptions, underscoring the central role of leadership and management culture in shaping academic work climates. Distinct national patterns also emerged. Bulgarian respondents reported higher overall PMCL scores (M = 3.56), particularly in the domains of planning and control, suggesting a management culture characterized by strong administrative coordination, monitoring, and procedural predictability and most strongly emphasized planning, control, and administrative consistency. In contrast, U.S. respondents reported slightly lower overall perceptions (M = 3.29) and showed relatively stronger endorsement of relational leadership and motivational support alongside weaker emphasis on control and cross-unit consistency.

Despite these contextual differences, both national samples reported comparatively lower ratings for employee voice, consultation in decision-making, and informal communication, indicating shared opportunities for improving participatory leadership practices.

By integrating leadership, management, and cultural perspectives, the PMCL framework offers a practical and theory-informed approach for diagnosing organizational climates in higher education. The framework highlights the importance of balancing structural management functions such as planning and control with relational leadership practices that foster trust, motivation, and psychological safety.

In addition to its analytical value, the PMCL framework may also serve as a practical diagnostic tool for university leaders and administrators seeking to evaluate management culture within their institutions. By systematically examining perceptions across the five domains, institutions can identify areas where management practices are perceived as effective as well as areas that may benefit from targeted leadership development, improved communication, or stronger participatory processes. Periodic use of the framework could support internal organizational assessments, facilitate dialogue between leadership and staff, and provide evidence-informed insights for strengthening leadership practices and organizational climate within universities.

Positioned within established theories of organizational culture and leadership, PMCL provides a foundation for evidence-based, context-sensitive leadership practice and invites future research to extend its application across institutions, sectors, and national settings.

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