

Leading Under the Lens: The Role of Subjective Norms in Shaping Leadership in Sabah's Islamic School

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of subjective norms on the leadership behaviors of principals in Islamic schools in Sabah, Malaysia. The primary aim is to elucidate how cultural and community expectations impact leadership dynamics within these distinctive educational settings. Adopting a qualitative research design, this study engaged in-depth interviews with five esteemed Islamic school principals, providing a comprehensive analysis of leadership practices in these institutions. The research findings indicate that leadership behavior is significantly shaped by multiple factors: the prevailing organizational culture, adherence to professional standards, and the implementation of best practices inspired by high-performing schools. Additionally, the alignment with religious and ethical principles, alongside community expectations, is pivotal in defining effective school management. These subjective norms are integral to formulating a leadership approach that aligns with both professional standards and communal values. The results underscore the necessity for leadership practices that are both culturally and contextually appropriate, thereby enhancing school performance and management quality. The alignment of leadership behavior with professional and community expectations fosters an environment conducive to academic excellence, ethical development, and community engagement. This study provides valuable insights and recommendations for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders, aimed at guiding the development of training programs, policy frameworks, and support mechanisms to advance leadership effectiveness in Islamic educational contexts.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by exploring the role of subjective norms in shaping leadership behaviors in Islamic

schools. This study is one of very few studies which have investigated leadership practices in the context of Islamic educational institutions in Sabah. The paper's primary contribution is finding that subjective norms, including cultural, religious, and community-driven values, significantly influence principals' leadership behaviors, balancing academic excellence with moral and ethical development.

1. Introduction

Leadership in Islamic schools hold a unique and influential position, particularly in regions like Sabah, Malaysia, where the cultural and religious fabric is deeply interwoven into educational institutions. These schools are not merely centers of academic instruction but also serve as key establishments for moral and spiritual development (Memon & Alhashmi, 2018). The role of school principals in these settings extends beyond traditional administrative duties, requiring them to embody and promote Islamic values while navigating the complex cultural landscape of their communities (Mohd Said et al., 2023). As leaders, principals in Islamic schools are expected to fulfill the dual objectives of upholding high academic standards and fostering the religious and ethical growth of students, thus making their leadership a critical element in shaping the future of Islamic education in Sabah.

The leadership behavior of school principals has been a topic of significant interest in educational research, as it plays a crucial role in shaping the academic environment and student achievement (Jaffar et al., 2019). In such culturally rich environments, subjective norms—defined as the social expectations and pressures exerted by the community—play a pivotal role in shaping leadership behavior (Javalagi et al., 2024). These norms are often rooted in religious teachings and community values, creating a framework within which leaders must operate. For principals in Islamic schools, subjective norms may include the expectation to adhere strictly to Islamic teachings, model religious behavior (Mohd Said et al., 2023), and maintain the school's alignment with community values and cultural heritage (Ajzen, 1988). Failure to meet these norms could lead to tension (Awang et al., 2019) between school leaders and the community, impacting the effectiveness (Bananuka et al., 2019) of leadership and the school's overall success. Therefore, understanding the role of subjective norms is crucial for leaders to balance professional leadership practices with the cultural and religious expectations placed upon them.

The significance of subjective norms in Islamic school leadership cannot be understated, as they influence not only the behavior of the principal but also the overall functioning and reputation of the institution within the community. School leadership has evolved beyond the traditional notion of instructional leadership, with new expectations and demands placed on school leaders by various stakeholders. The community, religious scholars, and other stakeholders have a significant influence on how school leadership is perceived and executed (Şenol, 2019). School leaders are expected to provide examples of teaching excellence, motivate staff towards training, shape a future vision, contribute to successful staff collaboration, make the right decisions, and could solve crises that may arise in the school environment (Kalkan et al., 2020). By studying the role of subjective norms in leadership within Sabah's Islamic schools, this research provides valuable insights into how leadership is influenced by cultural context, highlighting the need for leadership practices that are responsive to the unique demands of Islamic educational settings.

Despite the expanding body of research on leadership in educational institutions, the role of subjective norms in shaping leadership within Islamic schools remains a largely underexplored area. [Arar et al. \(2022\)](#), in their comprehensive international review of educational leadership literature from 1990 to 2021, found that much of the existing scholarship on Islamic school leadership primarily centres on educational policies, including policy reform, curriculum implementation, professional development, and the appointment of principals. Moreover, the literature tends to focus on various leadership models, often overlooking the nuanced influence of cultural and community expectations—subjective norms—on leadership practices in these unique educational settings. Particularly in Islamic schools, where leadership is closely tied to religious and community values ([Salamun & Rahman, 2022](#)), while [Asrar-ul-Haq and Anwar \(2018\)](#) discusses the influence of national culture on leadership behaviours and decision-making, he does not specifically address the role of subjective norms in shaping the leadership of school principals within Islamic schools. This reveals a gap in the current research, as empirical studies focusing on how cultural and religious expectations influence leadership in such settings remain limited. Therefore, further investigation into how subjective norms impact leadership within Islamic schools is needed to better understand the unique challenges and dynamics faced by principals in these institutions. This is especially true in the context of Sabah, Malaysia, where the unique blend of local culture ([George et al., 2022](#)) and Islamic teachings exerts a distinct influence on educational leadership ([Sallehuddin & Nor, 2024](#)).

The limited research that does exist on subjective norms and leadership tends to focus on broader organizational contexts, often overlooking the specific cultural and religious dimensions of Islamic schools. Leadership in these schools is not only about managing the institution effectively but also about fulfilling moral and spiritual responsibilities that are closely monitored by the community ([Brooks & Mutohar, 2018](#)). However, there has been little exploration into how principals in Islamic schools navigate these cultural expectations while striving to uphold professional standards ([Mohd Said et al., 2023](#)). This gap in the literature calls for a deeper understanding of the role subjective norms play in shaping leadership behaviors and the impact these norms have on the overall effectiveness of leadership in Islamic educational settings.

This study aims to address this gap by specifically examining the influence of subjective norms on leadership behaviors in Islamic schools in Sabah. Through qualitative research involving in-depth interviews with school principals, this research provides insights into how cultural and community expectations intersect with professional leadership practices. By focusing on Islamic schools in a Malaysian context, this study fills a critical void in the literature, offering new perspectives on the ways in which subjective norms influence leadership. The next sections present the research objectives and an overview of the relevant literature. The research methods are then outlined, describing how the study was conducted and the data were analysed. The results section highlights the key findings, focusing on the impact of subjective norms on leadership. Finally, the conclusion discusses the implications of these findings and offers recommendations for future research and practical applications.

1.1. Research Objectives

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- i. To explore the cultural, religious, and community-driven subjective norms that shape the leadership behaviors of school principals in Islamic schools in Sabah, Malaysia.
- ii. To analyze how these subjective norms influence leadership practices in achieving a balance between academic excellence and the promotion of moral and ethical values.

1.2. Research Questions

This study addresses the following questions:

- i. What are the cultural, religious, and community-driven subjective norms that influence the leadership behaviors of school principals in Islamic schools?
- ii. How do these subjective norms guide leadership practices in harmonizing academic excellence with moral and ethical development?

2. Literature Review

The concept of subjective norms is a foundational aspect of social psychology, extensively explored in Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Subjective norms refer to the perceived social pressures individuals experience regarding whether to engage in specific behaviors. These pressures are shaped by the beliefs and expectations of important social groups, such as family, colleagues, and the wider community (Ajzen, 1988). In leadership contexts, subjective norms influence how leaders make decisions, implement policies, and interact with their followers. Leaders often adjust their behaviors to align with the expectations of their communities in order to gain approval or avoid disapproval (Ajzen, 1991).

The influence of subjective norms on leadership behavior in Islamic schools is a critical area of study, given that these norms reflect the collective expectations of the community, which includes parents, religious leaders, and the broader Muslim community (Brooks & Mutohar, 2018). In such educational settings, principals are often guided by these expectations, which significantly shape their decision-making processes and leadership styles (Meyer et al., 2023). When these subjective norms are aligned with Islamic values, leadership effectiveness is typically enhanced, as leaders who embody such values are more likely to garner the trust and support of their communities (Fontaine, 2023). This alignment is especially crucial in Islamic schools, where educational leadership is closely intertwined with religious and community expectations.

The cultural and religious contexts in which Islamic school leaders operate further emphasize the importance of subjective norms. Leadership in these schools is not just about academic excellence but also about fostering a moral and ethical environment that adheres to Islamic teachings. Principals must navigate these dual responsibilities, balancing academic leadership with the expectation of promoting students' moral development. This dynamic interplay between leadership styles and community norms has been shown to significantly influence school culture and student outcomes (Mohd Said et al., 2023). Despite this understanding, there remains a gap in the literature regarding the specific ways subjective norms influence the daily leadership practices of Islamic school principals, indicating a need for further exploration (Abed, 2005).

Researchers have increasingly recognized the importance of moving beyond Western-centric leadership models to better capture the nuances of leadership within Islamic educational contexts. Leadership in Islamic schools is deeply rooted in Islamic principles

such as humility, justice, and consultation, which play a central role in shaping the character and spirituality of students, alongside their academic development (Ali, 2009; Brooks & Mutohar, 2018). Research highlights that Islamic leadership emphasizes adherence to Shariah principles as well as social and moral responsibilities, where leaders are viewed as stewards entrusted by Allah to lead with justice and integrity (Faris & Abdalla, 2018). In the Islamic leadership model, leaders are expected to emulate the qualities of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), including justice, compassion, and moderation. Islamic school leaders are accountable for ensuring that their decisions not only meet academic objectives but also align with the high moral and spiritual values of Islam (Usman et al., 2021). This leadership model is more in line with Islamic teachings, which prioritize the moral development of students and the well-being of the community (Yahya & Rahmat, 2019).

Building on these principles, an essential element of Islamic leadership is "taqwa," or God-consciousness, which plays a pivotal role in guiding the actions and decision-making processes of Islamic school leaders (Taufik, 2023). Principals who embody taqwa are seen as being accountable not just to their communities but also to Allah, ensuring that their leadership aligns with Islamic values and contributes to the flourishing of the school community (Usman et al., 2021; Yahya & Rahmat, 2019). This spiritual dimension of leadership sets Islamic school leadership apart from secular models, emphasizing the importance of religious devotion in the daily practices of school leaders. Additionally, research highlights the complexity of the relationship between leadership and the development of follower identities. Leaders in Islamic schools, who are attuned to the subjective norms of their community, can significantly shape the attitudes and behaviors of their followers, fostering environments of collaboration, innovation, and spiritual growth (Gilbert & Kelloway, 2018).

In summary, the literature demonstrates that subjective norms are a significant factor in shaping leadership behaviors within Islamic schools. Principals who effectively align their leadership practices with the cultural and religious expectations of their communities are more likely to succeed in fostering environments that support both academic achievement and moral integrity. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for advancing leadership in Islamic schools, as it highlights the need for leadership models that are both culturally responsive and aligned with Islamic values. Future research should continue to explore the intersection of leadership, subjective norms, and community expectations to deepen our understanding of how these factors influence the effectiveness of school leadership in Islamic contexts (Lipke & Manaseri, 2019).

3. Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the intricate role of subjective norms in shaping leadership behavior within Islamic schools in Sabah. Given the complexity and culturally embedded nature of leadership in Islamic educational contexts, qualitative methods provide a suitable approach for gaining a deeper understanding of these dynamics. The use of qualitative inquiry allows for the exploration of personal experiences and contextual factors, enabling the study to capture the nuances of how community expectations and religious values influence leadership practices.

The participants of this study were selected using purposive sampling, a method well-suited for qualitative research that involves selecting individuals who can provide the most relevant and meaningful insights into the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2002).

Specifically, five school principals from Islamic schools in Sabah were chosen based on their schools' outstanding performance over the past five years. These principals were deliberately selected for their ability to provide rich data on effective leadership, as their schools had demonstrated notable academic and moral achievements. The selection criteria ensured that the participants had extensive experience in navigating the complex interplay of educational leadership and subjective norms, thus enhancing the relevance of the findings. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Each participant was briefed on the purpose of the study, the confidentiality measures in place, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. This process ensured that their participation was fully voluntary and ethical.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the five principals, using a semi-structured interview guide. The use of in-depth interviews is widely regarded in qualitative research as an effective way of capturing the richness of participants' experiences and insights, particularly when exploring complex social phenomena such as leadership (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). To enhance the credibility of the data, triangulation was employed as a key methodological strategy. Triangulation, by incorporating multiple perspectives, adds depth and robustness to qualitative findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In this study, triangulation was achieved by conducting peer interviews with senior teachers from the same schools, who provided additional perspectives on the principals' leadership behaviors.

The collected data were subjected to thematic analysis, a systematic approach for identifying and interpreting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis began with an in-depth familiarization process, whereby the interview transcripts were reviewed multiple times to ensure a deep understanding of the content. Following this, key themes related to leadership behaviors and subjective norms were identified, coded, and refined through an iterative process. The thematic analysis not only helped to uncover common patterns across the participants' experiences but also illuminated the subtle ways in which cultural and religious expectations influenced their leadership practices.

4. Results

This study reveals the complex dynamics that shape leadership behaviors among principals of Islamic schools in Sabah. As illustrated in Figure 1, the research identifies key themes such as Organizational Culture, Professional Standards, Religious Expectations, and Social Expectations, which highlight the diverse influences guiding leadership practices within these institutions. Together, these themes depict the intricate responsibilities that school leaders face as they strive to balance the demands of academic excellence with the preservation of cultural and religious values.

4.1. Organizational Culture

Organizational culture stands out as a critical factor in shaping how Islamic school principal's lead. This culture, characterized by the shared norms and values within the school community, plays a fundamental role in guiding leadership behaviors. Two significant aspects of organizational culture emerged: School Norms and Type of School. School Norms reflect the collective attitudes, responsibilities, and competencies of teachers, forming the backbone of the school's environment. Principals displayed a deep

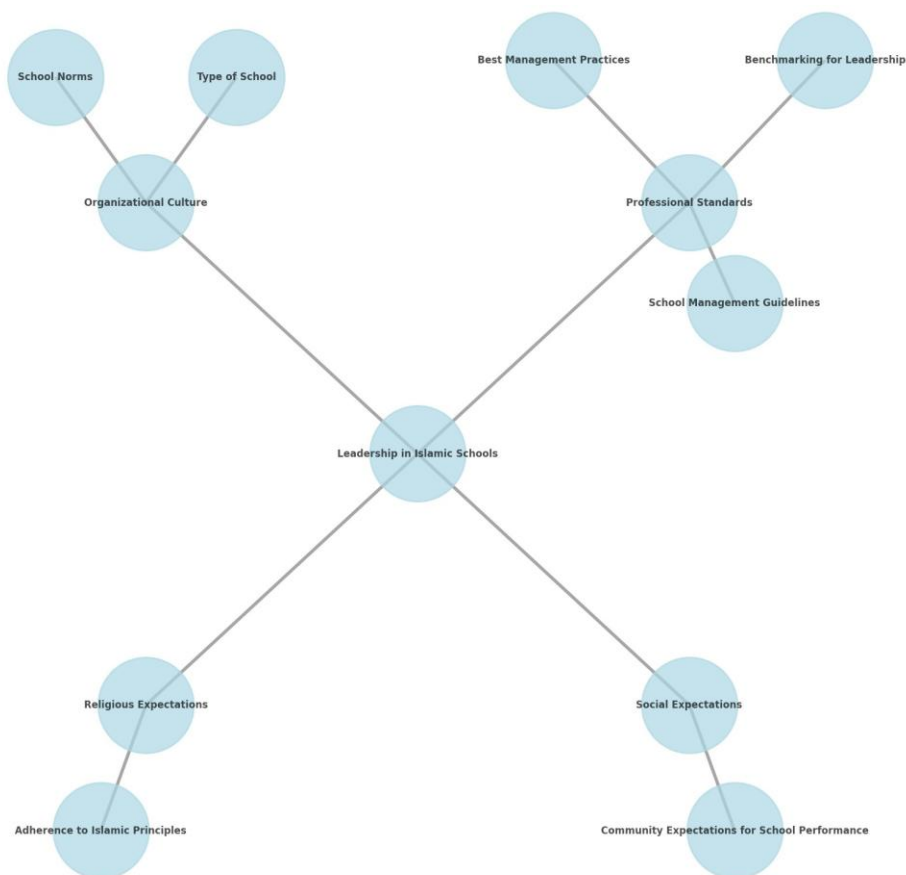
understanding of these norms, incorporating them into their leadership strategies to align with the school's overarching mission.

“But they need to, as I mentioned earlier, when they are posted to a place, the first thing they have to do is go and conduct a study first. It’s not the same... as I mentioned earlier. A school that has long been prestigious and a school that is underperforming are not the same.” (Principal 1).

The Type of School further influences the organizational culture, particularly in shaping how principals approach their leadership roles. For example, principals of SMKA schools often emphasized rigorous academic standards and a culture of continuous improvement, while SABK school principals focused on enhancing teacher competencies and refining administrative practices. *“Another strength of mine, maybe... because it’s an Islamic school. Because in an Islamic school, you see... I have my goal, this is an Islamic school, this is my asset for this world and the hereafter. I... I need to improve everything.” (Principal 4).*

This diversity highlights the adaptability of organizational culture to meet the specific needs and goals of different Islamic schools.

Figure 1: Findings on Subjective Norms Influencing Leadership in Islamic Schools



4.2. Professional Standards

Professional Standards play a pivotal role in guiding the leadership practices of Islamic school principals. This theme is reflected in several key areas, including Best Management

Practices, Benchmarking for Excellent School Leadership, and School Management Guidelines. Best Management Practices involve the application of recognized management techniques, such as Professional Learning Communities (PLC) and SWOT analysis, which are essential for improving school efficiency and effectiveness. *“I also read books written by former JUSA principals. For example, one book written by a JUSA principal from an SMKA, which is a management guidebook based on the experiences and best practices they have implemented.” (Principal 3)*

Benchmarking for Excellent School Leadership shows how successful principals model their practices on exemplary schools, adapting these best practices to fit their unique contexts. *“I observed what was done at the Science Secondary School... I asked what the principal did and how he achieved the school’s excellence...”. (Principal 2)*

Additionally, School Management Guidelines emphasize the importance of adhering to protocols established by the Malaysian Ministry of Education, ensuring that school operations are both efficient and compliant with national educational policies. *“Standard 1 teaches how a principal should work—what a principal needs to do. Standard 2 teaches principals how to manage the school climate—how to make the school great, lively, and cheerful, that’s it. Standard 3 is about managing the curriculum, co-curriculum, character development, HEM counseling. If you follow that, it’s okay. Then, Standard 4 is about how we monitor and manage the teaching and learning process. Standard 5 is about achievements. That’s why I said SKPMg2 is focused on the current year—what we need to accomplish that year,” (Principal 1).*

4.3. Religious Expectations

Religious Expectations significantly influence the leadership behaviors of Islamic school principals. A key focus within this theme is the integration of Islamic teachings into leadership practices. Principals who prioritize these values use them as a guiding framework for their decision-making, ensuring that their actions align with the moral and spiritual principles of Islam. *“Do something with sincerity, or more precisely, do it with ihsan. Ihsan means doing something sincerely and with full dedication... as if we are worshiping and feeling as though we are being observed by Allah SWT,” (Principal 3).*

This approach not only strengthens the ethical foundation of the school but also creates an environment where students’ moral and spiritual growth is nurtured alongside their academic development. *“Creating a climate or conducive environment, yes, a conducive environment that can stimulate achievement, specifically towards the excellent achievement of students, whether in academics or in other areas,” (Principal 3).*

The emphasis on religious expectations underscores the unique challenge faced by Islamic school leaders in balancing educational objectives with religious obligations central to their leadership roles.

4.4. Social Expectations

Social Expectations encompass the community and societal influences on the leadership and management of Islamic schools. This theme is particularly evident in the community’s expectations for school performance. The findings show that principals are highly aware of the pressures from the surrounding community and stakeholders to achieve and maintain high academic standards. *“It means that if we talk about quality, we can see it in*

the results later—the results of the children. That’s why we also aim to move up from being ranked 16th in all of Malaysia, as stated in the Department’s motto and as people expect...,” (Principal 2).

These expectations drive principals to pursue excellence, ensuring that their schools meet or even surpass the academic standards demanded by the community.

This theme highlights the dual accountability Islamic school principals face: fulfilling their educational mission while also meeting the social expectations of their communities.

In conclusion, this study offers a comprehensive look at the factors that shape leadership practices in Islamic schools in Sabah. The themes of Organizational Culture, Professional Standards, Religious Expectations, and Social Expectations together reveal the complex interplay of influences that principals must navigate. These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of leadership in Islamic educational settings, where leaders are tasked with promoting academic excellence while upholding the cultural and religious values that define their schools. The insights gained from this research contribute to a deeper understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities in leading Islamic schools, providing valuable direction for future research and practical leadership applications.

5. Discussion

This study provides valuable insights into how subjective norms shape the leadership behaviors of principals within Islamic schools in Sabah. It became evident from the findings that the expectations of parents, religious leaders, and the wider Muslim community play a significant role in guiding the actions and decisions of these school principals. These subjective norms, deeply intertwined with cultural and religious values, resonate strongly with Ajzen’s Theory of Planned Behavior, which highlights the impact of perceived social pressures on individual behavior (Ajzen, 1991). When these norms align with Islamic values, they naturally enhance leadership effectiveness by fostering trust and cohesion within the school community (Fontaine, 2023; Brooks & Mutohar, 2018). This alignment is crucial, as it allows leaders to navigate their complex roles more effectively, ensuring that their decisions resonate with the collective expectations of their stakeholders.

Building on this understanding, the dual responsibilities that Islamic school leaders must balance—pursuing academic excellence while also promoting moral and ethical development—emerge as particularly challenging yet essential aspects of their roles. Principals in these schools are not merely educational leaders; they serve as moral guides, responsible for creating environments that nurture both intellectual growth and spiritual well-being (Meyer et al., 2023). The findings suggest that successfully integrating academic leadership with the cultural and religious values of the community contributes significantly to a school culture that supports holistic student development. This dynamic interplay between leadership and community norms not only shapes the school environment but also directly impacts student outcomes, reinforcing the need for further research into the specific ways subjective norms influence daily leadership practices (Mohd Said et al., 2023).

In addition to the challenges of balancing academic and moral responsibilities, the study highlights the pivotal role of religious expectations, particularly the concept of *taqwa* or

God-consciousness, in shaping leadership behaviors. Principals who prioritize *taqwa* align their decisions with Islamic principles, viewing their leadership as a form of stewardship entrusted by Allah (Usman et al., 2021; Yahya & Rahmat, 2019). This religious dimension of leadership sets Islamic school leadership apart from secular models, as it deeply embeds spiritual devotion into the fabric of leadership practices (Taufik, 2023). The emphasis on *taqwa* not only guides ethical decision-making but also fosters a profound sense of accountability to both the community and Allah. This finding reinforces the argument that effective leadership in Islamic contexts cannot be divorced from religious values, as these are integral to the moral and spiritual development of students (Faris & Abdalla, 2018; Ali, 2009).

Moreover, the study illuminates the significant influence of social expectations on the leadership behaviors of Islamic school principals. It was found that these leaders are highly attuned to the expectations of their communities, particularly regarding academic performance and the school's reputation (Spillane et al., 2004). This awareness of social accountability drives principals to align their leadership practices with the broader aspirations of the Muslim community. Given the close-knit nature of these communities, educational outcomes are often seen as a reflection of communal values and beliefs. The ability to manage these social expectations while maintaining the integrity of leadership practices underscores the complex nature of leadership within Islamic schools (Gilbert & Kelloway, 2018). The insights gained from this study contribute to a deeper understanding of how social expectations interact with cultural and religious norms to shape effective leadership.

In conclusion, this study makes significant contributions to our understanding of how subjective norms influence leadership behaviors in Islamic schools. The findings suggest that leadership development programs should be specifically tailored to address the unique cultural and religious contexts of these institutions. Additionally, there is a clear need for ongoing research into the intersection of leadership, subjective norms, and community expectations (Lipke & Manaseri, 2019; Oino, 2023). As educational landscapes continue to evolve, understanding these dynamics will be crucial for developing leadership models that are both culturally responsive and aligned with Islamic values. Future research should explore these influences over time, offering valuable insights into how they shape the effectiveness of leadership practices in Islamic schools.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to explore the influence of subjective norms on the leadership behaviors of principals in Islamic schools in Sabah, with a focus on understanding how cultural, religious, professional, and social expectations shape their leadership practices. The findings reveal that these norms, deeply embedded in the community's religious and cultural fabric, play a critical role in guiding principals' decision-making processes. The alignment of these norms with Islamic values was found to significantly enhance leadership effectiveness, fostering trust and cohesion within the school community. This research contributes to the broader field of educational leadership by emphasizing the importance of culturally responsive leadership models, particularly in non-Western contexts, where the dominance of Western-centric frameworks often fails to capture the nuances of leadership dynamics in Islamic educational settings. The study underscores the need for leadership development programs that are specifically tailored to the unique cultural and religious contexts of Islamic schools, equipping school leaders with the skills and insights necessary to navigate these complex environments.

While the study provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations, including its focus on a specific cultural and geographical context, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the research, while rich in detail, might not fully capture the complexities of leadership dynamics. Future research could address these limitations by adopting a mixed-methods approach or exploring similar leadership dynamics in other cultural or religious contexts. Such studies could further illuminate the intricate relationship between leadership and the social and cultural environment in which it operates, providing a deeper understanding of how subjective norms influence leadership effectiveness over time. Ultimately, the insights gained from this study are crucial for educators and policymakers aiming to support school leaders in fostering environments that promote both academic excellence and moral integrity, ensuring that leadership practices are aligned with the values and expectations of the communities they serve.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The research was conducted in accordance with the research guidelines set by Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). The researchers also referred to the ethical standards outlined by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (RECUKM) as a guideline to ensure recognized ethical practices were followed. This included obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring confidentiality, and safeguarding participants' rights.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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