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Article

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Strategic leadership practices in emerging economies: a systematic review and empirical investigation

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ABSTRACT

Research on strategic leadership practices in emerging economies is crucial due to increasing global influence. This study explores strategic leadership by addressing four key research questions using an integration approach. The first three questions are answered through a systematic review, while the fourth is explored through an empirical study. A total of 27 journal articles were selected based on strict inclusion and exclusion criteria, and were analyzed using content analysis, while empirical data were analyzed descriptively. The majority of reviewed literature related the concept of strategic leadership with executives' functions that have strategic consequences. Whereas factors contributing to ineffective strategic leadership include short-termism, hubris, greed, and unethical behavior. The empirical study revealed that Ethiopian higher education institutions positively view institutional innovativeness, information management, strategic decision-making, and HRM activities. However, priority management, strategic control, ethical leadership, strategic influence, and stakeholder engagement were less favorably regarded. Strategic leadership in emerging economies, including Ethiopian higher education institutions, is shaped by both universal leadership principles and context-specific challenges. To thrive, strategic leaders must balance immediate pressures with long-term organizational vision, focusing on innovation, ethical practices, and robust stakeholder engagement. As well as the study inform leadership development, global business strategies, and supports sustainable economic growth in emerging markets.

Abbreviations: PRISMA: Preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and Meta-analyses; RQ: Research question

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1. Introduction

The twenty-first century organizations have been experiencing the overvaluation of new internet-based companies, which led to the loss of billions of dollars by investors and the loss of many jobs. These problems are intensified by global economic interdependencies, strategic leadership incompetency, and lack of adequate oversight by formal institutions. Strategic leadership takes up necessarily a relevant role in strategically focused organizations (Samimi et al., 2022). Eacott (2006) provides a definition of strategic leadership as the strategies and behaviors employed in initiating, developing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating strategic actions within an educational institution. This definition takes into account the unique context (past, present, and future) and the availability of resources, including physical, financial, and human resources.

In addition, there are strategic leadership researchers who relate the concept of strategic leadership with different aspects. For example, some of the most recent studies related to decisions made (Vera et al., 2022), with ability Kurzahls et al. (2020). This indicated, that there are numerous considerations of

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strategic leadership in literature (Samimi et al., 2022). So, the arena's significant variety and lack of a cohesive set of findings demonstrate the need to establish a more convincing understanding of strategic leadership and organize it through an integrative concept that identifies areas for future research and organizational attention.

It is commonly acknowledged that to thrive in today's environment, businesses must think strategically and engage in strategic leadership. However, in today's complicated global environment, an organization's potential to improve its performance is put at risk when strategic leaders fail to respond to changes. Hitt et al. (2010) argued that strategically leading is the biggest problem organizations face in the twenty-first century. However, the reason for the inability to strategically lead from either of business environment or individual strategic leaders was not clearly identified. Additionally, the existing kinds of literature emphasized strategic leadership conceptualization, examining the strategic leadership attributes and comparing strategic leadership with different leadership styles (Lear, 2012; Samimi et al., 2022; Vera et al., 2022). Nevertheless, there are lack of research conducted in the context of reasons for strategic leadership incompetency in the twenty-first century (Al Thani & Obeidat, 2020).

In spite of these difficulties faced by the current organizations a great deal of strategic leadership literature from classical works on executive behavior Mintzberg (1973) to Hambrick and Mason's (1984) influential upper echelons perspective, and the extensive research on boards of directors (Davies, 2003) has been devoted to the analysis of behaviors and decisions of strategic leaders. Some of the previous strategic leadership studies are puzzling. For example, studies conducted by Finkelstein et al. (2009) concluded that where managers are not strategically aligned with the CEO, visionary leadership has a negative impact on collective strategic consensus as it reduces the team's commitment to the strategy. This finding has significant implications for when and when not to use strategic leadership, as well as the need to account for contingency variables.

Further, Kurzahls et al. (2020) argued that strategic planning processes in an organization are often done with the assistance of a specialist or consultant in collaboration with top management far away from the organization's premises. As a result, while top management has complete control over strategy formulation, employees are expected to put it into action. In order to properly put the strategic issues into action clear identification of functions performed by strategic leadership is required.

Samimi et al. (2022) clinched that different scholars identified strategic leadership functions in different aspects. For example, the prominent strategic leadership scholars Davies (2003) and Davies and Davies (2010) related strategic leadership function to what strategic leaders do (organizational abilities) and what characteristics strategic leaders display (personal characteristics). The other is Ireland and Hitt (2005) which discuss the twenty-first century nature of the organization in which effective strategic leadership practices occur and the need for the top management team to discharge their strategic leadership responsibilities. Therefore, based on the above-discussed Ireland and his colleagues the twenty-first century organization requires interactions between the firm's great leaders (the top managers) and its great group (stakeholders) through the configuration of activities. This shows that, as there is no universally accepted strategic leadership functions in the existing literature.

Others like Eacott (2006) and Al Thani and Obeidat (2020) argued that the key elements of strategic leadership include being proactive in response to contextual changes, leading the analysis and response to a changing environment, planning and taking action for school effectiveness and improvement in the face of contextual challenges, and leading monitoring and evaluation processes to strategically inform decision-making. This perspective presents strategic leadership as a complex and dynamic social activity that considers historical, economic, technological, cultural, social, and political influences and challenges. Hence, research is needed for a clear identification of functions performed by strategic leadership and attributes that lead the twenty-first century strategic leadership incompetency.

Likewise, the previous research looked at various leadership styles and their effects on organizational performance. As well, strategic leadership practice was identified as a major factor in organizational performance. However, how this relates to the emerging economy, is unclear. Even if the organization practices strategic leadership, factors like adequate budget, skilled manpower, technological advancement, etc., affect the strategic leader's performance. This implies the need for additional research in this area to clarify the concept from emerging economy contexts.

Moreover, the works of Pitelis and Wagner (2019) and Vera et al. (2022) argued that the majority of the existing empirical literature has solely examined the impact of strategic leadership at the micro level (specifically focusing on demographic variables), without integrating both the micro and macro perspectives of leadership. The impact of strategic leadership on performance may be systematically undermined by the absence of pertinent control variables and contexts. Thus, this study will fill these gaps by reviewing the concepts from emerging economy aspects.

Despite the growing significance of strategic leadership in driving economic growth and competitiveness in emerging economies, there remains a lack of comprehensive understanding of how leadership models in these contexts differ from those in developed economies. Much of the existing literature focuses on leadership practices in established markets, often overlooking the unique challenges and opportunities faced by organizations in emerging economies, such as rapid market shifts, resource constraints, and socio-political instability. Moreover, limited empirical research has been conducted to explore the effectiveness of strategic leadership functions specific to these regions, particularly in sectors like higher education, where leadership plays a crucial role in shaping innovation and institutional growth.

This study fills this gap by employing an Integration method approach to examine strategic leadership practices specifically in the context of emerging economies, with a focus on higher education institutions in Ethiopia. Through a systematic review, the study identifies key leadership variables and frameworks relevant to these economies, while the empirical study provides practical insights into how these leadership functions are perceived and applied. By addressing both theoretical and practical dimensions of strategic leadership, this research offers a more nuanced understanding of leadership practices in emerging markets, helping to inform leadership development, organizational strategy, and policy-making in these rapidly evolving environments.

As well as a result of this, the study will also orient the emerging economy policymakers and strategic leaders on the importance of applying appropriate strategic leadership practices to the performance of an organization. Based on this, the Research Questions (RQ) to be answered in this study are as follows:

RQ₁: What is a definition of the concept of strategic leadership?

RQ₂: What is a strategic leader factors that affect strategic leadership practices in emerging economies?

RQ₃: What is the function performed by strategic leaders to cope with factors that affect strategic leadership practices in emerging economies?

RQ₄: What is the strategic leadership practices of Ethiopian higher education institutions looks like?

2. Research methods

To answer the research question we combined two distinct yet complementary methodologies, which are a systematic review followed by an empirical study. The systematic review allows to synthesize and consolidate of existing research to identify key variables or frameworks, while the empirical study enables to apply, validate, or explore these variables in a real-world setting. Hence, to answer the first three research questions systematic review procedure was followed and the fourth research question was answered using empirical study.

2.1. Systematic reviews

2.1.1. Source of information

This study presents a systematic review of the literature on strategic leadership, aiming to evaluate specific aspects of the topic. Following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, the review assesses evidence quality, clarifies concepts, and identifies research gaps. The methodology includes clear criteria for article selection, search strategy, data extraction, and analysis procedures to synthesize available evidence and ensure rigor in addressing research questions.

2.1.2. Resources and study selection

The review aimed to identify strategic leadership practices in emerging economies using a Systematic Review approach, following PRISMA guidelines. The best academic research databases Scopus, Web of Science, Science Direct, Elsevier, Wiley Online library, Taylor & Francis, Emerald Insight and SpringerLink were employed in this study to find relevant and up-to-date literature on strategic leadership. Additional studies were found through reference scanning and personal collections. Search strategies for all databases were ("strategic leadership" OR "strategic leader" OR "strategic leadership dimensions" OR "Definition of strategic leadership" OR "Hindrances of strategic leadership" OR "Hindrances of strategic leaders" OR "Strategic leadership incompetency" OR "Cause of strategic leadership incompetency" AND ("quantitative" OR "qualitative" OR "mix method")) [Title/Abstract].

2.1.3. Data collection and eligibility criteria

Data collection involved manual extraction using content analysis to capture information such as article type, journal details, publication year, topic, methodology, variables, and results related to strategic leadership. Inclusion criteria focused on studies presenting strategic leadership in emerging economies, with research areas including Management, Strategy, and Leadership. Only original, peer-reviewed literature in English, using any research methods was considered. The review covered articles published between 2000 and early 2024 to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant literature. The year 2000 was chosen as the starting point for collecting the relevant data because the literature has reported the concepts of strategic leadership since the 1980s. However, it gained expansion after the millennium with studies flourishing mostly about strategic planning Eacott (2006). Therefore, the extended time gives a chance to get rich evidence to answer the raised research questions.

Likewise, the beginning of 2024 was selected as the endpoint to include the most recent academic journal publications in light of the increase in articles that have addressed this highly significant topic. Exclusion criteria included studies not related to emerging economies or not written in English, without restrictions on publication year or type. Eligibility of studies was confirmed through purposive selection of articles meeting inclusion criteria.

2.1.4. Data items

Data items extracted from each article are summarized into the following categories: year of publication, researcher, research method, research variables, and research results. From an initial pool of 193 articles identified through key search terms, 80 relevant empirical studies were selected after abstract evaluation. Duplicate entries were removed, leaving 27 articles deemed pertinent for inclusion in this systematic literature review, ensuring focus and minimizing bias.

2.1.5. Data analysis

At first, all the strategic leadership data were collected from the involved studies in this review study. The collected data were processed iteratively in order to answer the questions raised in the introduction part of this study. As well as the data were presented descriptively and content analysis was used to analyze the data. Because this approach helps to determine the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts within some given data, such as qualitative or quantitative (Elo et al., 2014). Thus, using this analysis method, researchers and scholars can quantify and analyze the presence, meanings, and relationships of certain words, themes, or concepts, for instance, strategic leadership.

2.2. Empirical study

Once the key variables are identified through the systematic review, the next step is to design and conduct an empirical study to explore or test these variables in a real-world context. Hence, to answer the fourth research question empirical study was conducted. The descriptive research design was employed. The data was obtained from Strategic leaders (Executives, Directors, Deans, Department heads, and Coordinators) of some selected higher education institutions in Ethiopia. Using Yamane (1967) sample

size determination formula the sample of 266 with an 81% return rate was used, as Table 1 makes evident. The collected data was analyzed using descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation.

3. Results and discussions

This section of the study delves into findings from relevant research exclusively focused on twenty-first century strategic leadership and its challenges. It examines three key areas: providing general insights on strategic leadership, and addressing research questions outlined in the introduction.

3.1. The concept of strategic leadership

The concept of strategic leadership was initially articulated by Hosmer (1982) and gained traction with the formulation of the Upper Echelon theory by Hambrick and Mason (1984), leading to continuous exploration by scholars (Samimi et al., 2022). The concept of strategic leadership is discussed based on Table 2 as follows:

Among all the actors participating in organizational operations, strategic leaders such as the CEO and other top management team members, as well as members of the board of directors, stand out as being capable of leadership in the companies (Finkelstein et al., 2009; Kurzahls et al., 2020). Such competencies lead to the ability to influence organizations, particularly in the context of addressing organizational crises (Al Thani & Obeidat, 2020). The above-stated authors considered the concept of strategic leadership to the people and activities at the top of the organization. Some consider strategic leadership as roles played and the unique capabilities strategic leaders possess for accomplishing organizational tasks that are beyond those of one individual, micro level, or heroic leadership (Singh et al., 2023). Going beyond acts of bravery, strategic leadership is viewed from the top management teams or the macro level of a business (Schaedler et al., 2022).

Other researchers associated strategic leadership with the leader's abilities. This set of abilities is associated with anticipating, visualizing, and maintaining flexibility; strategic thinking; and laying the groundwork for future change that will provide a competitive advantage for the business, as well as empowering others to implement strategic change as needed (Davies, 2003; Hitt et al., 2010; Lear, 2012). Others linked strategic leaders' abilities to the formation of strategy through proper analysis of the organization's internal and external environments, the implementation of the appropriate strategy at the right time, and the evaluation and adoption of appropriate behavior that is appropriate for the current environment (Tutar et al., 2011). Additionally, strategic leadership was defined as a person's capacity to foresee, preserve flexibility, think strategically, and collaborate with others to bring about changes that will ensure the organization's viability in the future (Ireland & Hitt, 2005).

Moreover, other researchers associated strategic leadership with the process of achieving corporate goals (Pitelis & Wagner, 2019; Max, 2017). This process is related to giving the guidance and inspiration required to build a company's vision, purpose, and strategy, as well as defining the essential stages for implementation. This indicates that a strategic leader deals with strategic decisions of the organization rather than operational or daily decisions. Further, other studies equated strategic leadership with collaboration with others, partnering with numerous stakeholders to implement strategies to respond quickly to complex situations that frequently necessitate new ways of thinking and understanding constantly

Table 1. Selection of respondents from clusters.

Cluster	N=Number of target population	Sample from each cluster
Addis Ababa University	216	72
AASTU	29	10
Ambo University	95	32
Debank University	53	17
Injibara University	95	32
Jijiga University	71	24
Jimma University	149	50
Wachemo University	90	30
Total	798	266

Source: Survey, 2024.

Table 2. Literature on strategic leadership.

Author(s)	SL definition	Focus	SL function	Theory	Conclusions
Davies (2003)	Strategic leadership the ability to create, articulate, and sustain a compelling vision for the school's future	Apply strategic leadership to educational settings	Direction setting, strategic alignment, capacity building, innovation and change management, sustainability	Educational leadership theory and strategic management theory	Schools need to adopt a strategic approach to leadership. Effective SL in education requires a shift from traditional, reactive management to a more forward-thinking, proactive style that prepares the school for future challenges.
Carpenter et al. (2004)	Strategic leadership the process by which top executives and senior leaders influence the key decisions that determine an organization's long-term success.	The influence of top executives on the direction and performance	Setting a strategic direction, building and sustaining an effective organizational culture, making high-impact decisions, managing external relationships, developing and leveraging capabilities	Upper echelons theory	The authors conclude that strategic leadership at the top levels is crucial for long-term success. Executives' backgrounds, values, and decision-making styles shape outcomes, and their ability to adapt, manage environments, and align resources ensures organizations remain competitive and innovative.
Ireland and Hitt (2005)	Strategic leadership as the ability to anticipate, envision, maintain flexibility, and empower others to create strategic change as necessary	The critical role of strategic leadership in ensuring organizational competitiveness in a rapidly evolving business environment	Developing a vision, exploiting core competencies, fostering innovation, strategic decision-making, building and nurturing relationships, ensuring ethical practices	Strategic management theory and leadership theory	SL is essential for organizations to achieve and sustain competitiveness. Leaders who combine vision with flexibility, encourage innovation, and nurture organizational capabilities are better positioned to navigate the complexities of modern business environments
Eacott (2006)	Strategic leadership as the ability of educational leaders to set a long-term vision, align resources, and guide their institutions toward achieving broader educational goals.	Strategic leadership within the educational context	Vision and mission setting, decision-making and strategic planning, Adaptability to change, Influence and stakeholder management, cultural leadership	Strategic theory and educational leadership theory	Strategic leadership is crucial for ensuring that educational institutions remain competitive, relevant, and capable of meeting both current and future educational needs.
Slawinski (2007)	Strategic leadership as the ability to influence an organization's direction and performance through the effective alignment of its resources, capabilities, and strategic objectives.	Role and importance of strategic leadership in organizational contexts	Vision articulation, strategic decision-making, resource allocation, culture building, change management	Strategic management theory and leadership theory	The integration of strategic leadership with organizational strategy is essential for navigating complex environments and maintaining a competitive advantage.

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Author(s)	SL definition	Focus	SL function	Theory	Conclusions
Finkelstein et al. (2009).	Strategic leadership as the ability of executives to influence the organization's strategic direction and performance through their decisions and actions.	Broadening the scope of strategic leadership research	Decision-making, resource allocation, and setting the organizational vision	Upper echelons theory	Understanding strategic leadership requires a broader perspective that accounts for the interplay of individual leader characteristics, organizational dynamics, and environmental factors.
Hitt et al. (2010)	Strategic leadership as the ability to influence an organization's long-term direction, while aligning resources and stakeholders to achieve strategic goals.	Importance of adaptability and responsiveness in a rapidly changing environment	Formulation of vision, fostering a culture of innovation, and enhancing organizational learning	Dynamic capabilities	Effective strategic leadership is crucial for navigating complexities in the twenty-first century, particularly in fostering resilience and competitiveness in organizations
Davies and Davies (2010)	Strategic leadership as the ability to create a vision for the future and align the organization's resources, people, and actions with that vision.	framework for understanding strategic leadership in organizational contexts	Creating and communicating a vision, building capacity for strategic action, strategic thinking, strategic decision-making, change leadership, sustainability	leadership theory and strategic management theory	Effective SL requires the integration of strategic thinking with strategic action hence it is essential for organizational sustainability and success in complex, dynamic environments
Tutar et al. (2011)	Strategic leadership as the ability to influence others in making decisions that enhance the long-term viability and competitive advantage of an organization.	Integrating perspectives	Balancing ethical considerations	Leadership theory	A strategic leader who also prioritizes ethical behavior can create a more sustainable and respected organization. Ethical leadership enhances trust and commitment among stakeholders, which can improve long-term strategic outcomes.
Lear (2012)	Strategic leadership is the ability to influence an organization's direction and align its resources effectively to achieve strategic objectives.	Integration of strategic leadership and alignment	Development of strategic vision, the fostering of strategic alignment among various organizational levels, and the facilitation of change and innovation.	Resource-based view theory	effective strategic leaders play a crucial role in ensuring that all parts of the organization work cohesively towards shared goals
Carter and Greer (2013)	Strategic leadership as the ability of leaders, particularly those at the top of organizations, to shape the long-term direction and success of the organization	relationship between strategic leadership, the values and styles of leaders, and how these factors influence performance	Values alignment, leadership styles, Strategy execution, cultural influence	Upper echelons theory and values-based leadership theory	Leaders' values influence the strategies they choose and the way they interact with stakeholders, which has a direct impact on the organization's culture and success

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Author(s)	SL definition	Focus	SL function	Theory	Conclusions
Özera and Tinaztepe (2014)	Strategic leadership is defined as the ability of leaders to drive an organization towards long-term success by influencing and directing employees toward achieving strategic objectives	Relationship between strategic leadership styles and small to medium-sized enterprise performance	Vision creation and articulation, motivating and inspiring employees, adaptability and change management, effective decision-making, performance management	leadership styles theory	Leaders who are able to inspire employees, foster innovation, and align them with the company's strategic goals tend to drive better performance outcomes.
Houck (2019)	Strategic leadership is the process by which leaders influence the organization to achieve its long-term goals through the alignment of strategic objectives with performance management practices	The role of strategic leadership in driving organizational performance	Vision and goal alignment, performance measurement, feedback and communication, employee development and motivation, accountability and adaptability	Performance management theory	By integrating performance management with strategic leadership, organizations can better align individual performance with overall strategy, leading to improved outcomes
Pitelis and Wagner (2019)	Strategic leadership is a collective process that involves multiple leaders working together to develop and implement strategies that enhance organizational adaptability and competitiveness.	Shared strategic leadership and its role in enhancing an organization's dynamic capabilities.	Collaborative decision-making, resource reconfiguration, fostering innovation, building organizational agility, enhancing communication and coordination	Shared leadership theory, dynamic capabilities theory	By distributing leadership responsibilities across multiple individuals, organizations can tap into a wider range of expertise, foster more innovative solutions, and become more agile in their strategic decision-making.
Samimi et al. (2022)	Strategic leadership as the functions performed by individuals at the top levels of an organization (CEOs, TMT members, Directors, General Managers) that are intended to have strategic consequences for the firm	Clarify and expand the concept of strategic leadership, offering a framework for future research	Strategic decision making, stakeholder engagement, HRM activity, motivating and influencing, managing information overseeing operations and administration, managing social and ethical issues, managing conflicting demands	Dynamic capabilities theory, upper echelons theory, strategic leadership theory	Strategic leadership is critical for long-term organizational success because it directly influences how an organization adapts to external changes and achieves competitive advantage.
Al Thani and Obeidat (2020)	Strategic leadership is the ability of leaders to anticipate, envision, and maintain flexibility while empowering others to create strategic change.	How effective leadership can mitigate the negative effects of crises	Determining strategic direction, exploiting and maintaining core competencies, developing human capital, Sustaining an effective organizational culture, emphasizing ethical practices, establishing balanced organizational controls	Crisis management theory and strategic leadership theory	Organizations with strong strategic leaders are more likely to survive and thrive after a crisis, as these leaders ensure that responses are not only immediate but also aligned with long-term goals.

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Author(s)	SL definition	Focus	SL function	Theory	Conclusions
Kurzahls et al. (2020)	Strategic leadership as the process by which top executives influence the long-term direction and success of an organization, particularly in relation to technological innovation	How leaders influence technological advancements	Creating a vision for innovation, resource allocation for innovation, building an innovation-friendly culture, managing technological change, maintaining strategic flexibility	Upper echelons theory	Leaders who prioritize technological innovation and strategically integrate it into their organizational goals can maintain competitive advantages in dynamic markets
Schaedler et al. (2022)	Strategic leadership is the ability of key decision-makers, particularly at the top levels of an organization, to influence others to achieve long-term organizational objectives.	Comprehensive review of strategic leadership in times of organizational crises	Sense-making, decision-making, communication, visionary leadership, resilience and adaptability	Strategic leadership theory	Leaders who can effectively sense the environment, make quick decisions, communicate well, and maintain a strong vision are more likely to help their organizations navigate crises successfully
Ambilichu et al. (2023)	Strategic leadership as the ability of top executives or leaders to create and sustain organizational competitive advantage through the development and execution of strategies that are aligned with long-term objectives	Explores the relationship between strategic leadership, organizational ambidexterity, and firm performance in SMEs	Visionary leadership, decision-making, resource allocation, change management, ambidextrous leadership	Upper echelons theory and ambidexterity theory	Strategic leaders, who foster an ambidextrous approach, balancing exploration and exploitation, tend to drive better firm performance.
Vera et al. (2022)	Strategic leadership is the process of influencing others to achieve organizational goals within complex and dynamic environments	Extending strategic leadership research	Innovation, alignment, engagement	Multidisciplinary approach	Strategic leadership should be viewed as a multifaceted and evolving practice that significantly impacts organizational outcomes, urging researchers to explore its broader implications in various contexts
Singh et al. (2023)	Strategic leadership is the process by which leaders influence the development and execution of organizational strategies to achieve sustainable competitive advantage	Outlining strategic leadership, its evolution, key dimensions, and research directions	Vision and foresight, strategic decision-making, change management, influence and motivation, stakeholder engagement, risk management	Upper echelons theory	strategic leadership remains a pivotal factor in determining organizational success, particularly in dynamic and complex environments

Source: Survey, 2024.

changing information (Samimi et al., 2022; Al Thani & Obeidat, 2020). Generally, from the above definition the concept of strategic leadership can be considered as the top levels of an organization's function that have strategic consequences.

3.2. Strategic leaders factors that affecting strategic leadership in emerging economy

Today's strategic leadership in emerging economies intensified turbulence. This leads to poor strategic leadership practices. This strategic leadership incompetency in emerging economy attributed to the Short-Termism of Strategic Leaders, Hubristic Strategic Leaders, Materialistic Strategic Leaders, and Immoral Strategic Leaders. The term short-termism refers to whether the focus of Strategic Leaders are future oriented or not. Sternad and Kennelly (2017) classified time orientation as short-term and long-term orientation. Time orientation is also linked to strategic considerations and the company's planning horizon, within the business world. Short-term orientation (short-termism) is the excessive concentration of business executives, investors, and analysts on short-term quarterly profits to the detriment of long-term corporate objectives (Sappideen, 2011). Short-termism is the prevailing attitude in Western society, in particular, because leaders and managers evaluate and judge their short-term success based on their short-term achievements. Thus, most managers understand the importance of long-term thinking, but the mechanisms that their organizations use primarily reward short-term results.

One of the most prominent explanations for focusing on short-term goals is the difficulty associated with appraising long-term objectives. This issue can be overcome by dividing the long-term strategy into several short-term initiatives. This change is complicated and, in some situations, impossible. According to Gerlich (2023), the majority of today's global challenges cannot be remedied in the short future. They demand long-term strategy. In the business world, product or business growth involves long-term strategy and dedication. The business environment is dynamic and becoming more competitive by the day, which fuels the culture of short-term reactive strategies.

Managers in emerging economies, such as Africa, often exhibit a short-term orientation characterized by individualism, present or past focus over the future, conservatism, adherence to social hierarchy, and fulfilling immediate social obligations.

The other factor attributed to strategic leadership incompetency in emerging economies is the hubristic nature of strategic leaders. Hubris is characterized as overstated pride of self-confidence. When administrators display hubris, they are inclined to require over-the-top dangers (Haynes et al., 2010) since they accept that they are superior and prepared to overcome particular firm and natural challenges. Hubristic supervisors accept that their capacities are prevalent to those of their peers, and they can thus make more hazardous vital and monetary choices. It has appeared, be that as it may, that procurement choices (for example) made by directors with hubris have not produced higher execution or superior integration of the companies, but or maybe have driven to misfortunes in shareholder esteem due to intemperate premiums (Sadler-Smith et al., 2017). In none, the extraordinary dangers and their consequences can also be watched within the key activities taken and major ventures made by beat officials amid the twenty-first century. Those undue dangers were driven to the end of a few major companies, to liquidations, and significant government advances made to fight off the misfortunes of other monetary educate.

Aside from hubris, individuals in strategic leadership positions at numerous organizations moreover displayed greed. Agreeing with Haynes et al. (2010), greed is characterized as the intemperate interest in fabric riches. Greediness spurred a few officials to craftily seek after procedures that were based on intemperate self-interest, instead of expanding firm execution. In spite of the fact that a few degrees of self-interest can be anticipated for illustration, to propel person directors in utilizing their gifts and capabilities for the benefit of the firm and in benefiting society over the top self-interest within the shape of ravenousness guides activities that benefit only the person director.

Self-interest gets to be ravenousness as increments in official benefits surpass the marginal returns given to shareholders and to society. This assumes that all assets held by a company should add more to shareholder esteem than required. Within the past decade, numerous supervisors have displayed greediness by utilizing the opportunities their company and the administrative environment given to construct their claim of individual riches, or maybe to produce returns to partners counting shareholders by building energetic capabilities. An especially unsafe combination of managerial characteristics is hubris and greediness. Hubris can persuade directors to require intemperate dangers, but greediness complements this action since as the stock cost increments, directors get a significant boost in individual stipends.

African leaders only intend to use the resources that are already available; they have no idea how to mobilize resources for the African people. As a result, they lack a vision for Africa. In camps of liberation movements, freedom fighters were not instructed in the maintenance and growth of the national economy. In Africa, leaders and liberation fighters battle amongst themselves. Every African leader who steps down from office takes with him or her a substantial sum of money that they did not have prior to winning the election. Government officials live different lives from what they are paid. The leadership position in government becomes a point of influence and a source of receiving kickbacks.

Going beyond hubris and greed, evidence proposes that currently there are companies and officials acting unethically. For example, it has as of late been famous that companies, as well as football players, are committed to assessing fraud in Africa. Of course, other examples exist unethical hones were indeed more serious and reflect illicit movement. Interests, issues of hubris, covetousness, and morals have been watched in each of the final few decades. The problems that have been experienced over a number of decades speak to the disappointment of key administrations. Leaders of governments still operate under the tenet of rewarding allies and punishing adversaries.

Family and friends of leaders in Africa are treated differently when compared to other people. Leaders in Africa are viewed as above the law, meaning that not all Africans are subject to the same laws. Nepotism has led to the collapse of many government institutions in Africa (Lear, 2012). In Africa, nepotism is common and the practice of appointing friends and relatives to positions of authority is on the rise. Additionally, members of the same ethnic group frequently work together. In most African nations, nepotism has become accepted and is a common occurrence.

3.3. Strategic leaders' functions

The strategic leadership functions and their respective proportions provided in Table 2 offer a perspective on the perceived importance of various roles within leadership as derived from the reviewed literature. Analyzing this distribution through a scholarly lens reveals key insights, potential strengths, and areas of concern in the approach to strategic leadership. Table 3 presents a detailed analysis of each function's weight:

Table 3 indicates that direction setting is assigned the highest proportion, 80%, indicating a heavy reliance on setting the vision and overall strategy for the organization. This is a critical element of strategic leadership, as establishing a clear direction provides guidance for the organization. However, this overwhelming focus may come at the expense of other essential leadership functions. Scholars such as Boal and Hooijberg (2000) suggest that strategic leadership must balance setting direction with execution and adaptation. While direction setting is foundational, overemphasis on this function may overlook the operational and practical elements needed to turn strategy into action. Innovation at 65% indicates a strong commitment to fostering creativity, adaptability, and long-term competitiveness. This aligns well

Table 3. Strategic leaders' functions.

Strategic functions	Proportion in the literature reviewed
Direction setting	80%
Innovation	65%
Strategic decision	60%
Stakeholder engagement	35%
Ethical practices	20%
Strategic influence	20%
HRM activities	20%
Capability/core competency	20%
Communication/Information management	20%
Strategic control	10%
Managing conflicting demand/priority management	10%
Organizational culture	5%
Flexibility	5%
Capacity building	5%
Strategic alignment	5%
Strategic thinking	5%
Strategic execution	5%
Organizational learning	5%

Source: Survey, 2024.

with the dynamic capabilities theory (Gallego et al., 2013), which stresses the need for organizations to innovate in order to remain competitive. A high focus on innovation also supports the idea that strategic leadership is forward-thinking and seeks to embrace change.

Strategic decision-making at 60% further reinforces this, emphasizing the importance of making informed, future-oriented decisions. In the literature, decision-making is frequently positioned as a core leadership function (Guerra-López & Blake, 2011). This high proportion suggests the organization values not only the generation of innovative ideas but also the ability to make strategic decisions that guide the organization toward its goals. The proportion of stakeholder engagement at 35% is moderate, reflecting a recognition of the importance of managing relationships with key internal and external stakeholders, such as employees, customers, shareholders, and partners. Stakeholder theory (Kivits et al., 2021) posits that engaging stakeholders is essential for the long-term success of an organization. However, given the increasing complexity of stakeholder demands in modern organizations, 35% could indicate an underestimation of the role that stakeholders play in shaping strategy, particularly in industries where social responsibility, sustainability, and community relations are crucial.

Ethical practices (20%) and strategic influence (20%) are considered secondary in importance. This is a potential area of concern, as ethical leadership has gained significant traction in both academic literature and practice. Ethical leadership has been shown to influence trust, employee engagement, and organizational reputation (Brown & Treviño, 2006), and underplaying its importance could have negative implications for long-term sustainability and public perception. Similarly, capability/core competency at 20% may indicate an undervaluation of the foundational skills, processes, and competencies that give the organization a competitive advantage. According to Martín-Rojas et al. (2017), core competencies are a central component of organizational strategy, enabling long-term growth and differentiation from competitors.

Strategic control at 10% reflects the limited focus on monitoring progress and ensuring alignment with strategic objectives. In the strategy execution literature, failure to implement proper control mechanisms is one of the key reasons for strategic failure (Kaplan & Norton, 2008). Without adequate control, there is a risk of misalignment between strategic goals and actual performance. Similarly, priority management at 10% seems disproportionately low, given its recognized role in shaping behavior, promoting innovation, and driving strategic outcomes (Hogan & Coote, 2014). Underestimating culture might lead to challenges in implementing strategy, as cultural resistance can be a significant barrier to change.

Organizational culture (5%), Flexibility (5%), Strategic thinking (5%), and strategic execution (5%) are critically underemphasized. This presents a significant imbalance, as strategic execution is widely regarded as a crucial phase of the strategic process. Research by Bernardo et al. (2017) suggests that many organizations fail not because of poor strategies but due to poor execution. Execution is the bridge between direction setting and tangible results, and neglecting it could hinder the realization of strategic goals.

Similarly, organizational culture at 5% seems disproportionately low, given its recognized role in shaping behavior, promoting innovation, and driving strategic outcomes (Schein, 2004). Underestimating culture might lead to challenges in implementing strategy, as cultural resistance can be a significant barrier to change. Flexibility at 5% is also concerning, especially in today's fast-changing environments where the ability to adapt is crucial for survival. Scholars like Teece (2007) argue that organizational agility is essential in responding to market shifts, technological advancements, and competitive pressures. A stronger focus on flexibility could help organizations better manage uncertainty and capitalize on emerging opportunities. In addition, organizational learning at 5% suggests limited emphasis on building a learning culture, which is fundamental to long-term innovation and competitiveness. In today's knowledge-based economy, fostering learning organizations is key to adapting and evolving in response to new challenges and opportunities.

The disparity between a high focus on direction setting (80%) and innovation (65%) with a very low focus on execution (5%) and learning (5%) suggests a potential gap between strategy creation and implementation. This may indicate a top-heavy approach where leaders prioritize visionary thinking but struggle to convert those visions into actionable results. Successful organizations tend to balance both strategic planning and execution (Pisano, 2015), and the absence of this balance could lead to significant strategy execution gaps.

This proportional breakdown suggests a strong emphasis on setting direction, innovation, and strategic decision-making, which is important for driving vision and future competitiveness. However, the lower emphasis on strategic execution, organizational learning, culture, and flexibility reveals a potential disconnect between strategy formulation and execution. Effective strategic leadership requires not just creating a compelling vision but also ensuring that the strategy is implemented, monitored, and adjusted in response to changing conditions. A more balanced approach would involve increasing focus on strategic control, HRM, execution, and learning, which are essential for long-term success. Furthermore, greater attention to ethical practices and stakeholder engagement could enhance organizational sustainability and trust. Generally, the strategic leadership function that possessed the highest proportion is the strategic leadership function identified by Samimi et al. (2022). Therefore, we will use these functions to conduct the empirical study.

3.4. Who are strategic leaders?

The majority of the scholars taken into account in the literature review above section associated the idea of strategic leadership with a phrase most frequently used to refer to leadership that is provided "for the entire enterprise" and suggests practical decision-making responsibilities beyond the interpersonal and relational aspects of an organization. This evidenced that the attention in the study of strategic leadership focuses overwhelmingly on the leadership provided by an organization's CEO, TMT, Board of Directors, General Managers. As well as the concept of strategic leadership can and does sometimes reference the very small group of leaders who comprise the top executive team. For instance, it encompasses the breadth of strategic decisions by top personnel, or the roles assumed by top organizational members to impact strategy. Some view strategic leadership beyond individual heroism, focusing on top management teams and macro-level business operations.

3.5. Empirical study result and discussions

The empirical study was conducted to answer the fourth research question through descriptive statistics as shown in Table 4:

As shown in Table 4 a mean of 3.36 suggests a moderate level of agreement with the effectiveness of strategic decision-making. Respondents generally perceive strategic decisions as slightly above average but not highly effective. The relatively low standard deviation (0.41) indicates that most respondents hold a similar view, with limited variation in their responses. According to Elbanna and Child (2007), effective strategic decision-making is crucial for organizational performance. However, achieving higher effectiveness often depends on contextual factors such as the decision-making environment and the availability of resources, which may explain the moderate score in this case.

Regarding Human Resource Management Activities, a mean of 3.31 indicates a generally neutral to slightly positive perception of human resource management (HRM) activities, suggesting that respondents believe HR practices are functioning adequately but have room for improvement. The extremely low standard deviation (0.05) suggests that respondents overwhelmingly share a similar view on HRM, implying a strong consensus. Studies by Wood (2018) highlight that effective HRM activities significantly

Table 4. Descriptive statistics.

Strategic leaders functions	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Strategic decision making	3.3627	.40782	216
Human resource management activities	3.3148	.05250	216
Ethical leadership	2.8889	.15750	216
Stakeholders engagement	2.9815	.05250	216
Information management	3.4444	.15750	216
Strategic influence	3.0556	.15750	216
Strategic control	2.7037	.10500	216
Priority management	2.5185	.05250	216
Institutional innovativeness	4.1119	.46501	216

Source: Survey 2024.

enhance organizational performance. This relatively neutral score could indicate that while HR practices are in place, they may not be optimized to fully support strategic goals.

Concerning Ethical Leadership, A mean of 2.89 indicates a slight level of dissatisfaction or neutrality toward ethical leadership, suggesting that respondents do not strongly agree that leaders demonstrate ethical behavior. The moderate standard deviation (0.16) reflects some variation in responses, indicating differing opinions on leadership ethics. Brown et al. (2005) underscore the importance of ethical leadership in fostering trust and integrity in organizations. The score suggests that respondents may not perceive their leaders as consistently ethical, which could have negative implications for organizational culture and employee morale.

Stakeholder Engagement is one of the strategic leadership practices that resulted from a mean of 2.98 suggesting neutrality regarding stakeholder engagement, indicating that respondents neither strongly agree nor disagree that the organization effectively engages its stakeholders. The very low standard deviation (0.05) suggests high consistency in the responses, indicating a shared perception of the organization's stakeholder engagement practices. Stakeholder engagement is essential for building trust and long-term relationships, as noted by Kivits et al. (2021). The neutral score may suggest that the organization's stakeholder engagement efforts are perceived as sufficient but not robust, potentially lacking strategic focus.

The Information Management practice of higher education institutions in Ethiopia has a mean of 3.44 suggesting a moderately positive perception of information management, with respondents indicating that information systems and processes are working relatively well. The standard deviation (0.16) shows some variability in responses, indicating that while most respondents agree, a few have differing views on how well information is managed. According to Ajibade (2017), effective information management is a key driver of organizational efficiency and knowledge sharing. The moderately positive score aligns with findings that organizations with sound information management practices are better positioned for strategic success.

Strategic Influence shows that a mean of 3.06 suggests neutrality to slight positivity toward strategic influence. Respondents may believe that strategic decisions influence the organization, but the impact is not perceived as strong. The low standard deviation (0.16) indicates consistency in the responses, meaning most people have similar views on strategic influence. In line with research by Caughron and Mumford (2012), the effectiveness of strategic influence often hinges on leadership and communication. This neutral score could reflect room for improving how strategies are communicated and executed.

Strategic Control has a mean of 2.70 which indicates a level of dissatisfaction with strategic control, suggesting that respondents perceive weaknesses in the organization's ability to monitor and adjust strategies effectively. The moderate standard deviation (0.11) suggests some variation in responses, reflecting differing opinions on the adequacy of strategic control. Wijethilake et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of strategic control systems in ensuring that organizational strategies are aligned with goals. This relatively low score indicates that respondents may feel that strategic control mechanisms are underdeveloped or ineffective.

Regarding Priority Management in higher education institutions in Ethiopia, the respondents replied that a mean of 2.52 suggests dissatisfaction with priority management, indicating that respondents do not believe priorities are managed effectively within the organization. The low standard deviation (0.05) shows strong agreement among respondents, with most sharing the perception that priority management needs improvement. Effective priority management, as highlighted by Sibbald et al. (2009), is essential for organizational success. This low score could point to confusion or misalignment regarding the prioritization of tasks and goals, potentially leading to inefficiencies.

Institutional Innovativeness shows a mean of 4.11 indicating a strong positive perception of the organization's innovativeness. Respondents feel that the institution is forward-thinking and embraces new ideas. The relatively high standard deviation (0.47) indicates that while the overall perception is positive, there are some divergent opinions, with some respondents potentially viewing the institution as less innovative. Research by Gallego et al. (2013) suggests that institutional innovativeness is a critical driver of competitive advantage. This high score shows that respondents believe the organization fosters a culture of innovation, which can be a key differentiator in dynamic environments.

Overall, the data reveals that respondents view Institutional Innovativeness and Information Management positively, while Priority Management and Strategic Control are viewed less favorably. The relatively low scores for Ethical Leadership, Strategic Influence, and Stakeholder Engagement suggest that the organization may need to strengthen its leadership practices, stakeholder interactions, and strategy communication. Previous studies support the idea that these factors are essential for long-term organizational success. The study points to areas where the organization can improve, particularly in strategic control, priority management, and ethical leadership. However, the positive results in institutional innovativeness highlight strengths that can be leveraged for future growth.

4. Conclusion and recommendation

4.1. Conclusion

Based on the results of the study, the following conclusions were made. The concept of strategic leadership is typically defined as the function of top-level leaders responsible for guiding the long-term direction and performance of an organization. Strategic leaders make decisions that align the organization's vision with external and internal dynamics, ensuring sustainable competitive advantage. This role emphasizes foresight, adaptability, and the ability to inspire innovation while managing complexities unique to emerging economies. There are several factors that challenge effective strategic leadership in emerging economies, including short-termism, hubris, greed, and unethical behavior. These factors hinder the implementation of long-term strategies and foster an environment where quick, often reactive, decisions dominate over visionary leadership.

The findings highlighted that successful strategic leaders in emerging economies adopt functions such as institutional innovation, strategic decision-making, information management, and human resource management to cope with the challenges identified. These functions enable leaders to navigate uncertainty, build organizational resilience, and maintain a focus on long-term strategic goals, despite external pressures. Leaders also foster a culture of adaptability, ethical decision-making, and stakeholder engagement to mitigate the negative impacts of the aforementioned factors.

The empirical investigation revealed that within Ethiopian higher education institutions, strategic leadership practices are generally viewed favorably in areas like institutional innovativeness, information management, strategic decision-making, and human resource management (HRM). However, leadership practices related to priority management, strategic control, ethical leadership, strategic influence, and stakeholder engagement were found to be less effective or underdeveloped. This suggests a need for these institutions to strengthen their leadership practices in these critical areas, particularly to enhance stakeholder collaboration and ethical governance.

Strategic leadership in emerging economies, including Ethiopian higher education institutions, is shaped by both universal leadership principles and context-specific challenges. To thrive, strategic leaders must balance immediate pressures with long-term organizational vision, focusing on innovation, ethical practices, and robust stakeholder engagement. This study offers a comprehensive understanding of the strategic leadership practices required for emerging economies, providing insights that can improve leadership effectiveness and contribute to the sustainable development of these regions.

4.2. Recommendation

Based on the conclusions that were made above, the following recommendations were provided. Organizations, particularly in emerging economies, should adopt a clear and comprehensive definition of strategic leadership that emphasizes long-term vision, adaptability, and ethical decision-making. Leadership development programs should focus on enhancing leaders' ability to align organizational strategies with dynamic market conditions, ensuring that strategic goals are responsive to both internal and external challenges. Strategic leaders must actively work to mitigate negative factors such as short-termism, hubris, greed, and unethical behavior. This can be achieved by fostering a culture of accountability, transparency, and ethical leadership within the organization. Leadership training should emphasize long-term thinking, humility, and social responsibility to counteract the pressures of short-term

gains and unethical practices. To effectively cope with the challenges specific to emerging economies, strategic leaders should strengthen their core functions in areas like institutional innovation, information management, strategic decision-making, and human resource management (HRM). These leaders should prioritize continuous learning and development, encouraging a culture of innovation and resilience. Additionally, they should employ strategies that enhance stakeholder engagement, ethical governance, and strategic control to improve overall organizational performance. Ethiopian higher education institutions should focus on strengthening their priority management, strategic control, ethical leadership, and stakeholder engagement practices. These areas are critical for ensuring long-term institutional growth and sustainability. Institutions should implement leadership development initiatives that promote collaborative decision-making, ethical leadership frameworks, and effective communication strategies to better engage stakeholders and improve strategic outcomes. Leaders should also be encouraged to adopt inclusive leadership practices to foster greater stakeholder participation and innovation. By addressing these recommendations, organizations in emerging economies can cultivate strong, innovative, and ethical leadership that drives long-term success and fosters sustainable development in rapidly evolving market conditions.

5. Contribution of the study

Conducting a systematic review and empirical investigation on the concept of strategic leadership practices in emerging economies offers several key contributions. The finding of a systematic review consolidates existing research on strategic leadership in emerging economies, providing a clear synthesis of what is already known. This helps identify key leadership models, practices, and gaps in the current knowledge, laying the groundwork for further research. Many strategic leadership theories have been developed in the context of developed economies, the empirical study allows these theories to be tested, validated, or adapted in emerging economies. This contributes to refining or expanding leadership theories by incorporating new perspectives from under-researched contexts.

By combining the insights from both the review and empirical investigation, this research provides actionable recommendations for organizations and leaders in emerging economies. It helps to identify leadership practices that foster innovation, resilience, and long-term success, offering guidance for leadership development programs and strategic decision-making. This integrative approach helps identify critical gaps in both the literature and practical applications. The findings from the systematic review can inform future research agendas, while the empirical investigation sheds light on areas needing further exploration, especially in industries or sectors specific to emerging economies. Generally, this study contributes to both academic knowledge and practical application by deepening our understanding of strategic leadership in the dynamic and complex environments of emerging economies.

6. Limitation and future directions of the study

Research on strategic leadership in emerging economies faces several limitations, which can have a notable impact on the interpretation of findings. These limitations can skew results, reduce generalizability, and create gaps that affect the practical and theoretical understanding of leadership in such contexts. Many strategic leadership frameworks are developed in Western contexts, and applying these directly to emerging economies can lead to misinterpretations. Cultural differences in leadership styles, values, and power dynamics may not be adequately captured. This cultural misalignment can limit the relevance of findings in local contexts. In many emerging economies, informal networks (e.g., family ties, political connections) and unofficial practices (e.g., bribery, cronyism) play significant roles in strategic leadership. Studies that focus solely on formal organizational structures and leadership methods may overlook these realities, leading to an incomplete interpretation of how leadership actually functions in these settings. Directly comparing leadership in emerging economies with that in developed economies can overlook key contextual differences, leading to inappropriate or irrelevant conclusions. Differences in market maturity, institutional frameworks, and societal expectations of leaders can make such comparisons

problematic. These limitations can lead to biased, incomplete, or contextually inappropriate interpretations. Future research should focus on culturally adapted models, dynamic contextual analysis, informal networks, and leadership that incorporates innovation and sustainability to better capture the complex realities of these economies.

Author contributions

Debebe Alemu Kebede: has contributed to developing the manuscript by being involved in the conception and design, analysis and interpretation of the data; drafting of the paper, revising it critically for intellectual content; and the final approval of the version to be published; and that the author agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Shimelis Zewdie Werke: has contributed to developing the manuscript by being involved in the conception and design, analysis and interpretation of the data; drafting of the paper, revising it critically for intellectual content; and the final approval of the version to be published; and that the author agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Taye Amogne Kebede: has contributed to developing the manuscript by being involved in the conception and design, analysis and interpretation of the data; drafting of the paper, revising it critically for intellectual content; and the final approval of the version to be published; and that the author agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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Data availability statement

The data and materials that support the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request.

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