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**BRIDGING THE GAP IN EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION THROUGH EMPATHY AND
CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN CHINESE-OWNED COMPANIES
OPERATING IN ZIMBABWE**

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ABSTRACT

In our increasingly interconnected world, teams made up of people from various cultural backgrounds are becoming the norm, especially in multinational companies like Chinese manufacturing firms operating in Zimbabwe. This study delves into how the combination of empathy and effective communication across cultures in leadership roles impacts employee satisfaction in these diverse settings. The research was guided by Cultural Intelligence Theory and Social Exchange Theory. To gather insights, the researchers employed a quantitative approach, guided by a post-positivist philosophy, and distributed a structured questionnaire to 510 employees. By analysing the data through structural equation modelling (SEM) with AMOS, the researchers examined how empathy and cross-cultural communication directly affect employee satisfaction. The findings were quite revealing: both empathy and cross-cultural communication play significant roles in enhancing employee satisfaction. However, many employees expressed that they often found empathy to be lacking among their Chinese leaders. Interestingly, the study found that effective cross-cultural communication made an even stronger positive impression, reinforcing its vital importance in bridging cultural gaps and nurturing inclusive leadership. This research emphasises the need for developing leadership strategies that are both culturally aware and emotionally intelligent in diverse organisations. By doing so, we can improve employee

engagement and overall organisational success. These insights can serve as valuable guidance for enhancing labour relations in workplaces where Chinese and Zimbabwean cultures intersect.

KEYWORDS: Empathy, Cross-Cultural Communication, Leadership, Cross-Cultural Workforce, Chinese-Owned Companies, Zimbabwe.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

In our increasingly connected world, multinational teams are becoming a vital part of how organisations operate. These teams bring together individuals from different cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds, creating a rich blend of talent, innovative ideas, and varied perspectives (Kock et al., 2019). However, to truly tap into the benefits of this diversity, leaders need to develop interpersonal and intercultural skills that encourage collaboration, trust, and engagement among team members. Two key traits that make a real difference in this context are empathy and cross-cultural communication (Gentry et al., 2016). When leaders effectively combine these qualities, they foster a positive environment that enhances understanding, alleviates tensions, and ultimately improves employee satisfaction in diverse settings. In multicultural working environments, empathy enables leaders to connect with their team on a deeper emotional level, allowing them to appreciate each person's unique needs and viewpoints. This connection helps them offer support that resonates on both personal and cultural levels. On the other hand, cross-cultural communication is about effectively sharing and understanding messages across cultural boundaries (Zhou & Manyeruke, 2021). Leaders who can bridge these divides while demonstrating empathy are better equipped to inspire loyalty, motivate their teams, and create a unified work environment.

Zimbabwe's economy has been changing rapidly in recent years, largely due to an influx of investment from China. This investment has mainly flowed into sectors like mining, energy, agriculture, and construction, resulting in a surge of Chinese-owned businesses throughout the country. While this has created job opportunities and spurred infrastructure development, it has also brought to light serious challenges related to leadership styles, employee welfare, and cross-cultural dynamics in the workplace.

One of the most significant issues facing Chinese-run companies in Zimbabwe is the ongoing tension between Chinese managers and local workers. This friction often stems from poor communication and a perceived lack of understanding and empathy from leadership. Numerous investigations and media reports have shed light on cases where local employees felt undervalued, exploited, or mistreated. A particularly troubling incident occurred in 2020, when the Zimbabwe Environmental Law Association (ZELA) and the Centre for Natural Resource Governance (CNRG) published reports that detailed instances of violence, verbal abuse, and unsafe working conditions at Chinese-run mining operations in cities like Mutoko, Gweru, and Hwange (Zhou & Manyeruke,

2021). In one shocking event, a Chinese supervisor shot and injured two Zimbabwean workers during a dispute over wages, a situation that sparked national outrage and drew international scrutiny regarding labour relations in these enterprises.

Beyond the extreme cases of abuse, many local employees face everyday challenges such as language barriers and limited opportunities to engage with their managers. These obstacles often lead to widespread dissatisfaction among workers. For example, at a ceramics factory in Norton, employees protested against unfair dismissals, poor communication, and a lack of channels for voicing their concerns. Reports from Zimbabwean workers reveal a frustrating experience where they are often reprimanded without clear explanations, given ambiguous instructions due to language gaps, and feel excluded from decisions that impact their work. These factors contribute to a workplace culture where local staff feels undervalued, misunderstood, and emotionally disconnected from their leaders.

These issues highlight a significant lack of effective leadership strategies in many Chinese-owned businesses in Zimbabwe, particularly when it comes to empathetic engagement and cross-cultural communication. Many of these companies are run using authoritarian approaches that focus on productivity and discipline, leaving little room for relational leadership or emotional intelligence. As a result, even if employees' contracts and salaries are respected, their psychological and emotional well-being often suffers.

While research on cross-cultural management is expanding globally, there is a striking gap in the literature specifically addressing the context of Zimbabwe. It remains unclear how leaders in Chinese enterprises can embrace empathy and culturally aware communication to enhance employee satisfaction. This study aims to fill that void by examining how empathetic and cross-cultural leadership can work together to improve workplace relations within Chinese-owned businesses in Zimbabwe. The goal is to discover practical strategies for enhancing worker morale and organizational performance through emotionally intelligent and culturally sensitive leadership practices, ultimately fostering more inclusive and respectful relationships between employers and employees.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this study are to:

1. Explore the link between empathetic leadership and employee satisfaction in cross-cultural teams.
2. Examine the impact of cross-cultural communication on employee satisfaction in cross-cultural teams.

1.2 Hypotheses

H₁: Empathetic leadership is positively associated with employee satisfaction in cross-cultural teams.

H₂: Effective cross-cultural communication significantly enhances employee satisfaction in cross-cultural teams.

2.0 THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This research is built on two important ideas, which are Cultural Intelligence Theory and Social Exchange Theory. These concepts help the researchers to understand how leadership behaviours can impact employee experiences in Chinese companies operating in Zimbabwe.

2.1.1 Cultural Intelligence Theory

Cultural Intelligence Theory sheds light on how leaders in such companies can effectively navigate cultural differences between Chinese expatriates and Zimbabwean employees by adjusting their behaviours, thoughts, and motivations to fit various cultural contexts. Cultural Intelligence (CQ) is about being adaptable and understanding the unique perspectives that diverse team members bring to the table (Offermann & Coats, 2024). Cultural Intelligence theory was developed by Earley and Ang in 2003. It highlights the importance of leaders navigating and thriving in diverse cultural settings. Unlike traditional intelligence measures like IQ or emotional intelligence (EQ), CQ zeros in on our ability to interact across cultural boundaries. This is particularly important in today's global organisations, where leaders often work with teams from various cultural backgrounds (Bar-On, 2006).

The significance of CQ in leadership cannot be overstated. Leaders with high cultural intelligence are better equipped to minimise misunderstandings, foster inclusion, and build trust across diverse groups. This ultimately boosts team unity and productivity. They can interpret cultural cues properly and adapt their communication styles, leading to fewer conflicts and greater respect among team members. Moreover, Cultural Intelligence enhances empathetic leadership. It ensures that a leader's empathy is expressed appropriately for different cultural contexts; just being emotionally aware isn't enough if one lacks cultural insight. CQ allows leaders to show empathy in ways that resonate with their teams, making their support more impactful. This connection between empathy and cultural intelligence is a focal point of this study, showing how both qualities can greatly influence employee performance and job satisfaction. CQ Theory offers valuable insights into how effective cross-cultural communication can boost leadership effectiveness in diverse environments. It highlights the vital roles of empathy and communication in successful leadership and underscores the importance of cultural intelligence in achieving positive outcomes for employees.

2.1.2 Social Exchange Theory

On the other hand, Social Exchange Theory focuses on the dynamics of workplace relationships, highlighting how elements like fairness, trust, and mutual obligations shape interactions among employees (Holt et al., 2009). It emphasises that when leaders cultivate a supportive environment, it can lead to stronger bonds and better collaboration. Together, these theories illustrate how emotionally intelligent and culturally adaptable leadership can enhance employee satisfaction and performance, particularly in Chinese-controlled companies operating in Zimbabwe. By blending these insights, the researchers can better grasp how leaders can create a more inclusive and productive workplace.

Social Exchange Theory (SET), introduced by Blau in 1964, offers an interesting lens for understanding human relationships as ongoing exchanges centred around reciprocity and mutual

benefit. Essentially, it suggests that when we engage socially, there's often an underlying expectation to receive something valuable in return. In the context of Chinese and Zimbabweans working together, this theory can help grasp how leader-employee relationships are nurtured, maintained, and reinforced through an exchange of both tangible and intangible resources like; trust, support, recognition, and respect.

When leaders treat their employees with fairness, respect, and support, employees typically respond with increased loyalty, job satisfaction, and performance (Early & Ang, 2003). In leadership, SET provides a useful framework to explore how empathetic actions and cross-cultural communication aren't just nice-to-haves but are, in fact, crucial investments in relationships. When leaders show genuine concern for their employees' well-being, especially in a culturally diverse environment, it conveys a sense of care and respect that fosters emotional trust and psychological safety (Thomas, 2006). This deeper connection encourages employees to go the extra mile, commit to their team's goals, and cultivate positive relationships with both leaders and their peers. Such reciprocity enhances organisational cohesion and effectiveness, particularly in teams that are diverse and navigate complex interpersonal dynamics.

Moreover, SET sheds light on how effective cross-cultural communication can improve perceptions of fairness and relationship quality. Leaders who take the time to understand and adapt to various cultural communication styles are often seen as more inclusive and respectful, which can help diminish misunderstandings and foster a more engaged workforce. Employees who feel understood are more likely to invest themselves in the organisation, leading to better performance, greater collaboration, and more effective knowledge sharing (Nkomo & Zhou, 2020). Social Exchange Theory is highly relevant for understanding the roles of empathy and cross-cultural communication in leadership. It clarifies why and how empathetic and culturally responsive behaviours can lead to improved outcomes in diverse teams. By framing leadership as a reciprocal process rather than a strictly top-down approach, SET encourages individuals to view empathy and cross-cultural communication as strategic assets that can elevate employee performance and drive organisational success.

2.2 Literature Review

2.2.1 The Link between Empathetic Leadership and Employee Satisfaction in Cross-Cultural Teams

The growing cultural diversity in the workplace isn't just a trend; it actually demands a new approach to leadership. It's no longer enough for leaders to simply have technical skills or strategic know-how. One of the most crucial qualities a leader can possess in a multicultural team is empathy, which is the ability to understand and relate to the emotions and viewpoints of others. Empathy in leadership is essential for creating a positive work atmosphere, especially in environments where cultural misunderstandings and communication hurdles can easily arise. Researchers like Gentry et al., (2016) show a strong connection between empathetic leadership and employee satisfaction. When leaders show genuine empathy, it fosters trust, engagement, and commitment among team members. Understanding empathy in leadership often goes hand-in-hand with emotional intelligence. This encompasses skills like self-awareness, emotional regulation, and social awareness. Goleman (1998) highlights empathy as a key part of emotionally intelligent

leadership. It helps leaders navigate team dynamics, resolve conflicts, and build strong interpersonal relationships. In cross-cultural teams, empathy allows leaders to bridge language and cultural gaps, demonstrating respect for diverse values and traditions. This cultivation of a sense of belonging is vital for job satisfaction.

The significance of empathy in multicultural workplaces is further supported by Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964). When employees feel that their leaders truly care about their well-being, they tend to respond with increased loyalty, job satisfaction, and performance. Similarly, Cultural Intelligence (CQ) Theory (Earley & Ang, 2003) emphasises how empathy enables leaders to thrive in culturally diverse settings. Empathetic leaders are more adept at interpreting cultural signals, tweaking their communication styles, and responding sensitively to different cultural expectations. Organisations around the world are starting to recognize the importance of empathetic leadership. For instance, IKEA in Sweden is well-known for its inclusive leadership approach that honours cultural diversity and integrates local customs while prioritising employee well-being. This empathetic strategy has resulted in high employee satisfaction and low turnover rates across its global operations (Al-Khalifa & Aspinwall, 2001). Likewise, DBS Bank in Singapore has initiated empathy-based leadership training to help managers connect more effectively with their multicultural teams (Tan, 2020). These efforts have led to improved communication, reduced workplace tensions, and higher levels of employee engagement.

The Zimbabwean landscape tells a multifaceted story when it comes to leadership styles. On one side, we see NGOs and development agencies that have successfully adopted empathetic leadership practices, fostering a positive work environment. In contrast, some foreign-owned companies, especially Chinese firms involved in mining and manufacturing, have faced significant criticism for their autocratic and culturally unaware leadership approaches. Research by Chingono and Nakana (2022) and LEDRIZ (2021) brings to light troubling accounts from employees in Chinese-run factories who have experienced mistreatment, neglect, and harsh discipline. These workers often express a deep frustration stemming from supervisors who overlook their cultural backgrounds and personal situations. The repercussions of such leadership styles are evident; strikes and protests in places like Norton and Hwange highlight the detrimental effects of low-empathy management on employee morale and overall job satisfaction. However, it's not all gloom and doom. There are shining examples of how empathetic leadership can make a difference in Zimbabwe. Organisations like Plan International Zimbabwe and World Vision have successfully implemented inclusive and community-focused leadership models that respect cultural norms and foster emotional connections. Employees in these organisations frequently report feeling more fulfilled in their roles, with a stronger sense of purpose and loyalty to their employers.

This contrast serves to illuminate the transformative power of empathetic leadership, particularly in environments rich in cultural diversity. Supporting this notion, studies by researchers like Jordan and Troth (2011) show that leaders who demonstrate empathy boost team cohesion and communication, ultimately leading to increased job satisfaction. In multicultural teams, especially, empathetic leadership plays a vital role in minimising misunderstandings and conflicts, creating an atmosphere where employees feel appreciated and understood. Similarly, research by Zhang et al.

(2012) indicates that when employees trust their leaders and feel their opinions are valued, their commitment and satisfaction in their roles soar.

Yet, the journey to implement empathetic leadership comes with its own set of challenges. In many settings, empathy is still mistakenly viewed as a soft skill or a secondary consideration, especially in high-performance industries. In Zimbabwe, some foreign managers may not have the training or desire to prioritise empathy, particularly if their leadership preparation has focused heavily on authority and control (Nkomo & Zhou, 2020). Cultural biases, language barriers, and structural inequalities further complicate the application of empathy in leadership roles.

Nevertheless, as businesses start recognising the tangible costs of employee dissatisfaction, such as low productivity, high absenteeism, and turnover, there's a growing recognition of empathy as a crucial leadership quality. In essence, empathetic leadership is vital for nurturing employee satisfaction, especially in cross-cultural teams. It serves to bridge cultural divides, improve communication, and establish trust, which are all essential in today's varied work landscapes. While organisations worldwide are increasingly adopting empathy-driven leadership models, the situation in Zimbabwe illustrates both the repercussions of neglecting empathy and the advantages of embracing it. To foster better workplace relationships and enhance employee well-being, particularly in foreign-led companies, it's essential to champion leadership development initiatives that nurture empathy, cultural awareness, and emotional intelligence. As companies continue to navigate the complexities of cross-border operations, empathy will undoubtedly remain a cornerstone of effective and inclusive leadership.

2.2.2 Impact of Cross-Cultural Communication on Leadership and Employee Satisfaction

Effective communication is at the heart of great leadership, especially in our diverse world where teams often include people from various ethnic, linguistic, and national backgrounds. As organisations expand globally, leaders must be adept not only at sharing ideas but also at understanding different cultures. This skill is critical for creating a positive work environment and ensuring that employees feel satisfied and valued. Cross-cultural communication goes far beyond just translating words; it's about grasping how culture influences the way we interpret messages, build relationships, and read body language. Leaders who invest time in understanding these cultural nuances can foster stronger connections within their teams, ultimately leading to more effective leadership and a more harmonious workplace (Gudykunst, 2004).

Scholarly literature has highlighted the ways cultural differences impact how people communicate in organisations. For instance, in high-context cultures, people often rely on subtle messages and non-verbal cues, making the conversation more about the context than the words themselves. On the other hand, low-context cultures tend to value straightforward and clear communication, where what you say is just as important as how you say it. This variety in communication styles showcases the richness of human interaction across different cultures. Hall's Context Theory (Hall, 1976) explains how differences in communication styles can lead to misunderstandings, frustration, and lower job satisfaction. In a multicultural workplace, it's crucial for leaders to cultivate intercultural competence, allowing them to understand and adjust to the diverse communication expectations of

their team members. By doing so, they can foster a more harmonious and productive work environment (Ang et al., 2007).

The success of cross-cultural communication hinges on a leader's knack for creating an environment where clarity, trust, and psychological safety flourish. When employees feel genuinely understood, respected, and kept in the loop, no matter their cultural background, they're much more likely to enjoy their work, collaborate seamlessly with their colleagues, and stay loyal to the organisation. It's all about building connections and making sure everyone feels valued and included (Ting-Toomey, 2012). When communication falls apart, it can lead to misunderstandings, conflicts, and feelings of being left out. This is especially true in organisations where the hierarchy makes it hard for people to talk openly across different cultures. It's important for everyone to feel heard and valued to avoid these issues.

In countries like Ghana and Nigeria, cross-cultural leadership programs in West Africa have been tackling the unique challenges that arise from language differences and varying views on hierarchy in the workplace. By emphasising inclusive communication styles, these programs have made a real difference, leading to noticeable boosts in employee morale and productivity. People feel more connected and understood, which creates a more harmonious and effective working environment (Mensah, 2020). In multinational hospitality companies working in East Africa, there have been reports of positive results due to the use of multilingual and multicultural communication. These approaches have fostered better teamwork and enhanced the quality of service provided to customers (Omolo & Ogutu, 2019).

In Zimbabwe's private sector, internal communication challenges often arise not just from the presence of foreign companies, but also within local businesses and regional franchises. These struggles can often be traced back to the diverse backgrounds of employees, shaped by differences in generation and ethnicity (Munyoro & Mhlanga, 2022). One common scenario is the gap between corporate leaders based in urban areas and branch staff located in rural settings. These two groups may find it hard to connect, primarily because they communicate in different ways influenced by their respective cultural contexts. For instance, an employee who has learned to communicate in formal English might encounter misunderstandings with colleagues who prefer to use indigenous languages like Shona or Ndebele. This misalignment can significantly impact how tasks are carried out, how clear instructions are understood, and overall performance expectations. Bridging this gap is crucial for ensuring that all team members are on the same page and can work together effectively. It's about finding common ground and respecting each other's communication styles to build a more cohesive workplace.

In academic institutions and donor-funded programs with diverse teams, the ability to communicate across cultures is really important for making interdisciplinary and international collaborations work smoothly. Sometimes, differences in communication styles between expatriate project managers and local staff can lead to misunderstandings about timelines, decision-making, and how to engage everyone involved. On a brighter note, programs that focus on multilingual meetings, inclusive policies, and feedback that takes the local context into account often see happier staff and

better teamwork. This shows just how valuable it is to embrace cultural diversity and adapt our communication approaches accordingly (Chimhanda & Ncube, 2021).

There's a growing understanding that fostering effective cross-cultural communication is essential in leadership development. Research from companies in South Africa and Namibia highlights that managers who participate in intercultural communication training tend to be more successful in reducing misunderstandings and building inclusive relationships among their teams. Employee feedback in these settings consistently shows higher levels of satisfaction, not just because policies are clearer, but because individuals feel genuinely heard and respected, regardless of their cultural backgrounds (Mayer, 2011; Louw & Muller, 2019).

However, it's crucial to point out that the use of digital communication tools can either help bridge or widen cultural divides, depending on how they're utilised. In some workplaces, relying heavily on emails or text messages can lead to challenges, particularly in cultures that lean towards oral communication. This disconnect can result in delays, miscommunications, and sometimes conflict. Therefore, leaders must be thoughtful about their communication approaches, making sure they resonate with the cultural preferences of their teams. Striking this balance can enhance both effectiveness and a sense of inclusion in diverse work environments (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000). In today's multicultural workplaces, the way we communicate across different cultures is crucial for both effective leadership and employee satisfaction. Various factors like company structures, cultural backgrounds, and historical influences shape our communication styles. However, a leader's ability to navigate these differences is incredibly important. When leaders take the time to understand cultural signals and adjust their communication approaches accordingly, it can lead to a more inclusive environment where everyone feels valued. This, in turn, boosts employee satisfaction. For countries like Zimbabwe, which are rich in cultural diversity, making cross-cultural communication a key part of leadership isn't just an added bonus; it's essential for fostering growth and achieving long-term success as a team.

3.0 MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was guided by a post-positivist philosophical perspective, which presumes that reality exists and can be subjectively verified using our sensory observations. The research aimed to determine the effect of empathy and cross-cultural communication skills on employee satisfaction in Chinese-owned manufacturing companies. A quantitative research strategy was adopted, anchored on a deductive approach. The study administered 510 structured questionnaires to Chinese-owned manufacturing companies as guided by the Yamane formula, and these were randomly selected using stratified random sampling to ensure that each research unit had an equal chance of being selected. The data collection period for this research was three (3) months, from early May to the end of July 2024. Data was analysed utilising covariance-based structural equation modelling (SEM) using SPSS extension module analysis of moment structures (AMOS), which allowed testing of stated hypotheses. The method was preferred as it allowed the researcher to test both direct and indirect effects of the variables under consideration, as well as measurement of unobserved variables (latent variables) in the form of empathy and cross-cultural communication skills in Chinese-owned manufacturing companies. Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to help test the reliability and validity of the instrument utilised to collect data. Discriminant and

convergence validity were tested, and the instrument was found to be both reliable and valid. Results are presented below.

4.0 RESULTS

Results showed that 430 questionnaires were returned fully completed from the 510 administered self-administered questionnaires, giving a 90% response rate, which comprises 114 Chinese nationals and 286 Zimbabwean nationals. Demographic data showed that the sample was representative as it mirrors population dynamics in Chinese-owned manufacturing companies, and the data was collected from knowledgeable respondents. A summary of socio-demographic characteristics is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Demographics of respondents

		Count	Column N %
Gender of respondent	male	377	87.9%
	female	53	12.1%
	Total	430	100.0%
age of respondent	18-28	61	14.2%
	29-39	220	51.2%
	40-50	127	29.5%
	51-61	22	5.1%
	above 61	0	0.0%
	Total	430	100.0%
Level of Education	O level	42	9.8%
	A level	72	16.8%
	Diploma	127	29.6%
	First degree	157	36.6%
	master's degree	32	7.2%
	Others	0	0.0%
	Total	430	100.0%
nationality of respondent	Chinese	144	33.5%
	Zimbabwean	286	66.5%
	Total	430	100.0%
Leader's Nationality	Zimbabwean	286	66.5%
	Chinese	144	33.5%
	Total	430	100.0%

Sampling adequacy entails evaluation of the quality and suitability of a sample for a specific study to run, given modelling (CFA and structural equation modelling). It involves assessing whether the sample is representative of the population, has sufficient size and diversity and addresses the research objectives. To test sample adequacy Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett test of sphericity were used. KMO is a statistical technique which is used in research to assess the suitability of data for factor analysis (both confirmatory and exploratory factor analysis). It

measures the proportion of variance in the data explained by the factors. The results are shown in Table2 below.

Table 2: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.969
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	68.744
	Df	6
	Sig.	.000

The KMO value has been found to be 0.969 as presented in the table above. This value falls within the range 0.9 and above, which implies that the sample size is (excellent), adequate to conduct factor analysis (exploratory or confirmatory factor analysis in assessing the validity of instruments. This is further confirmed by Bartlett`s test of sphericity, which was found to be 68.744 with a significant value of 0.000, which is far less than 0.05, thus allowing the study to accept that the correlation matrix is not an identity matrix and, as such, the data set is suitable for factor analysis. This paves way to confirmatory factor analysis (CFA).

4.1 Confirmatory factor analysis (Validity)

Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted in order to assess the validity of items used to measure research variables. Factors with factor loading of less than 0.4 were suppressed, leaving only those with 0.5 and above. The contribution of such variables to the total variance explained for a given construct was minimal. This was used to assess construct validity (convergent validity and discriminant validity). Confirmatory factor analysis was used to test factor structure (whether the observed variables load on the expected factors or not, supporting construct validity. Factor loadings and average factor loading per research variable are presented in Table3 below;

Table 3: Construct, Items and Factor loadings, & Average factor loadings

Construct/ Variable	Items	Factor Loadings	Average Factor loading
Empathy (EMP)	EMP1	.750	.740
	EMP2	.630	
	EMP3	.960	
Effective communication (EFC)	EFC1	.830	.723
	EFC2	.590	
	EFC3	.780	
	EFC4	.850	
	EFC5	.660	
Employee satisfaction (EMS)	EMS2	.880	.764
	EMS3	.960	
	EMS4	.550	
	EMS6	.760	

The three study variables and their corresponding factor loadings are presented in Table3 above. Note items with factor loadings less than 0.5 were suppressed as they were not contributing much to explaining their corresponding research variables, as explained by the total variance extracted. Some items were therefore suppressed. As shown in the table, all constructs had average factor loadings at least 0.7, signifying that the condition for convergent validity was met, as the average factor loading for each construct is expected to be at least 0.7 (Franke & Sarstedt, 2019).

Table 4: Discriminant validity, the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) (in bold) and correlations between constructs (off-diagonal).

Discriminant validity is an important concept used to determine whether different constructs are truly distinct from one another. Essentially, it checks if each construct represents a unique idea that isn't overlapping with other constructs in the model. To assess this, the researchers rely on the Fornell-Larcker criterion. According to this criterion, the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) should be higher for each construct than its correlation with any other construct. When this condition is met, it indicates that a construct relates more strongly to its own indicators than to other constructs, reinforcing the idea of discriminant validity. This is shown in Table 4, where the square roots of AVE are highlighted in bold along the diagonal, while the correlations between the constructs are shown off to the side.

	EMS	EMP	EFC
EMS	0.883		
EMP	0.211**	0.788	
EFC	0.346**	0.208**	0.749

In table 4 above, the diagonal bolded values are the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE), which are all above 0.5. These values are all greater than their corresponding inter-item correlations (not bolded), off-diagonal. Using Fornell and Larcker (1971), the discriminant validity was evaluated by comparing the off-diagonal correlation coefficients for each variable in the respective rows and columns with the square root of each AVE in the diagonal. The off-diagonal correlation coefficients were all less than the square root of the average variance extracted (the difference was huge, as it's greater than 0.2 in all cases. This signifies that the condition for discriminant validity is met (limited multicollinearity challenge across specified research constructs). It can therefore be concluded that construct validity was met as both convergent and discriminant validity conditions were met.

4.2 Results on empathy and cross-cultural communication skills in Chinese companies

To describe empathy levels and cross-cultural communication skills among Chinese-owned manufacturing companies, univariate analysis using minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation statistical tools was utilised, and the results are presented in Table 5 below.

Table: 5 Descriptive statistics

	N	min	max	mean	Mean response	Standard Dev
EMP Empathy	430			2.11	Disagree	
EMP1 My leader recognises and understands emotions in subordinates	430	1	4	1.73	Disagree	.521
EMP2 My leaders can see things from another person's perspective	430	1	3	1.32	S/disagree	.432
EMP3 My leader feels and is able to share emotions with others	430	1	5	3.50	Agree	1.385
EFC Effective communication	430	1	5	2.84	Neutral	1.312
EFC1 My leader clearly articulates what needs to be done to subordinates	430	1	5	2.58	Neutral	1.252
EFC2 My leader speaks with authority and conviction	430	1	5	3.32	Neutral	1.341
EFC3 My leader is precise and to the point in his dealings	430	1	5	2.81	Neutral	1.434
EFC4 My leader provides encouraging feedback and allows communication to start from anywhere	430	1	5	2.17	Disagree	1.197
EFC5 My manger is transparent, open and honest in all communication	430	1	5	2.96	Neutral	1.301

The results show that Chinese owned manufacturing companies overly depicts that the leaders do not show empathy with their employees as shown by an overall mean response of 2.11 which corresponds to disagree mean response implying that there is no empathy while cross cultural skills show a mean score of 2.84 (3) which corresponds with neither agree nor disagree mean response implying that respondents held varied views on the leaders whether they possess cross cultural communication skills or not as some were agreeable while some were not agreeable.

4.2.1 Model Fit results and hypotheses results

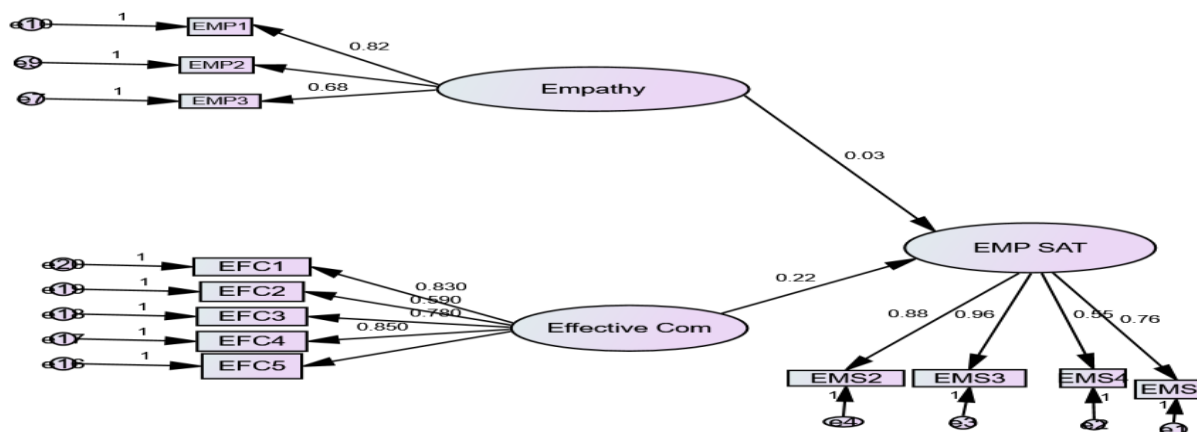
In structural equation modelling, it is important to assess the fitness of the model before evaluating different specified hypotheses. The tests were done using Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS), which is an extension of covariance-based structural equation modelling (COV- SEM). The model was evaluated using different sets of indices namely CMIN/DF (2/Df), Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), Adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI), Normed Fit Index (NFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). The model fit metrics ($\chi^2/DF = 2.432$, GFI=0.916, CFI= 0.976, RMSEA = 0.038, TLI= 0.922, and AGFI=0.931) were found to be satisfactory by the evaluation model. This is displayed in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Model Fit summary

Fit indices	Original model	Modified Model	Commended	Sources
χ^2/DF	2.866	2.432	≤ 3.00	
GFI	0.832	0.916	> 0.900	Reisinger and
AGFI	0.892	0.931	> 0.900	Mavondo (2007),
NFI	0.848	0.946	> 0.900	Hooper et al. (2008)
TLI	0.875	0.922	> 0.900	Hair et al. (2010)
CFI	0.890	0.976	> 0.900	
RMSEA	0.072	0.038	< 0.08	

Source: Researcher (extracted from AMOS output)

Table above illustrates that the CMIN/DF 2.432 results demonstrate a strong model fit (Zadow, Hunter, Rosenberg, Wood, Houghton, 2017). According to Mbizi (2024), 2/DF must be less than 3 in order to be acceptable. According to Soares, Monteiro, and Rua (2017), a model's RMSEA needs to be less than 0.07, and its GFI, AGFI, NFI, TLI, and CFI need to be close to 1 but less than 0.9. As the model was seen to be fit, the next stage was to test the research hypotheses. This was tested using structural equation modelling and the results can be summarised by the path diagram below.



4.2.2 Hypotheses results (path diagram)

The research sought to evaluate the effect of empathy and cross-cultural communication on employee satisfaction in Chinese-owned manufacturing companies in Zimbabwe. The two four dimensions, namely empathy (EMP) and effective communication (EFC), were modelled on employee satisfaction using AMOS structural equation modelling. The hypotheses results are presented in table 7 below.

Table 7: Results of Hypotheses testing (H₁ to H₂)

Path relationship	SRW	S.E.	C.R.	P	Label
EMS <--- EMP	.030	.020	3.082	***	H ₁
EMS <--- EFC	.220	.030	2.192	***	H ₂

A look at the table above shows all predictor variables and the respective standardised regression weights, and employee satisfaction in Chinese-owned manufacturing companies operating in Zimbabwe was significant in explaining variability in employee performance. Empathy was found to have a positive impact on employee satisfaction. The standardised regression coefficient of 0.03 shows that a unit increase in empathy by the leader of a Chinese-owned manufacturing company leads to an improvement in employee satisfaction, and the opposite is true. The ability to recognise and understand emotions in subordinates, the ability to see things from another person's perspective, as well as the ability to feel and share emotions with others, leads to a boost in employee satisfaction.

5.0 DISCUSSION

The research looked into how cross-cultural communication and empathy impact employee satisfaction in Chinese-owned manufacturing companies in Zimbabwe. The results revealed valuable insights that not only support but also broaden the current understanding of cross-cultural leadership and communication.

The findings show that having empathy in the workplace has a positive impact on employee satisfaction; however, the extent of this influence is relatively moderate ($\beta = 0.03$, $p < 0.001$). Even though the impact may seem small, the fact that it's statistically significant indicates that even a little bit of empathy from leaders can really boost employee satisfaction. It shows that when leaders make an effort to connect on a personal level, it can make a positive difference in how happy and fulfilled employees feel at work. This aligns with the foundational ideas of Goleman (1998), who emphasizes that empathy is a crucial aspect of emotional intelligence and plays a vital role in building trust and emotional connections in leadership. In multicultural workplaces, where communication styles and power dynamics can vary widely, having the ability to understand and resonate with the emotions of others becomes a key leadership quality. Ting-Toomey (2012) also highlighted this, suggesting that empathy fosters interpersonal sensitivity and enhances intercultural understanding, both of which are essential for effectively managing diverse teams.

However, looking at the descriptive statistics reveals a more troubling reality: the average score for empathy among leaders was just 2.11, indicating that many employees feel their leaders do not demonstrate empathetic behaviours. This gap suggests a disconnect between what employees expect from their leaders and what they actually experience, particularly among local Zimbabwean workers. It appears that the lack of emotional sensitivity from many Chinese managers may be rooted in differing cultural perceptions of leadership and authority. Hall's context theory from 1976 sheds some light on the differences in communication styles between leaders from high-context cultures, like China, and workers in Zimbabwe. Leaders in China often rely on implicit communication and a clear hierarchy, while Zimbabwean employees may prefer a more open, supportive, and relationship-focused approach.

Additionally, the impact of cross-cultural communication on employee satisfaction is significant, showing a positive correlation ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$). This highlights how crucial it is for leaders to communicate effectively and adaptively in diverse environments. Echoing this, Thomas and Inkson (2009) pointed out that leaders who tailor their communication to fit different cultural contexts are more likely to foster clarity, inclusivity, and overall satisfaction among their teams. Interestingly, a survey resulted in an average mean response of 2.84 for communication practices, suggesting that while some employees were satisfied with how communication was handled, others were not. This variance demonstrates the mixed effectiveness of communication strategies across various managers and work sites.

The study's overall model fit was impressive (CFI = 0.976; RMSEA = 0.038), showcasing that the proposed structural relationships indeed mirrored the realities faced by Chinese-owned firms operating in Zimbabwe. Such strong fit indices surpass the recommended guidelines from experts like Tan (2020) and Mensah (2020). Moreover, these findings align with previous studies in the

region that highlight how a lack of cultural sensitivity in communication can diminish employee morale and trust. For instance, Mayer (2011) discovered that communication breakdowns were common in multicultural workplaces where leaders lacked the necessary intercultural skills.

In Zimbabwe, there's a noticeable difference in communication styles, especially when it comes to Chinese supervisors. Many people have observed that these supervisors tend to adopt a top-down, directive approach. This can clash with the local expectation for more mutual dialogue and relational engagement. The emphasis on authoritative communication can leave local employees feeling disconnected, as they typically value open discussions and collaborative relationships in the workplace. It's a fascinating example of how cultural differences can shape interactions in a professional setting (Chimhanda & Ncube, 2021).

The limited display of empathy and the mixed quality of communication practices identified in this study could be interpreted through the lens of Cultural Intelligence Theory (Ang et al., 2007). Leaders who struggle with cultural intelligence often find it difficult to adjust their behaviours in new cultural settings. This can lead to misunderstandings, conflicts, and overall dissatisfaction among team members. It seems that many leaders in these environments might not be tapping into the empathetic practices or the balanced way of evaluating communication that's essential for leading multicultural teams effectively.

There's also a noticeable cultural disconnect between the leadership styles of Chinese managers and the expectations of Zimbabwean workers. As highlighted by Munyoro and Mhlanga (2022), communication in Zimbabwe tends to be more informal, interactive, and deeply connected to shared cultural values. This often clashes with the formal and hierarchical approach that expatriate managers usually adopt. If there isn't a conscious effort to bridge these cultural gaps, perhaps through training in cultural competence, active listening, and empathy, employee satisfaction is likely to remain low. In essence, the study underscores the importance of cross-cultural communication and empathetic leadership as key factors influencing employee satisfaction in Chinese-owned firms in Zimbabwe. However, the limited expression of empathy and inconsistent communication from leaders signal a pressing need for leadership development programs. These programs should focus on enhancing intercultural communication skills and emotional intelligence. This finding aligns with broader trends showing that leaders who are culturally competent and empathetic not only perform better but also create a more engaged, satisfied, and harmonious workplace environment (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000; Gudykunst, 2004).

6.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Conclusion

This study aimed to explore how cross-cultural communication and empathetic leadership affect employee satisfaction in Chinese-owned manufacturing companies in Zimbabwe. By analysing a substantial and varied sample of employees, the researchers found that both communication and leadership play vital roles in enhancing employee satisfaction among cross-cultural workforce, with effective communication standing out as particularly important.

However, the findings also raised some concerns. Many employees reported feeling a lack of empathy from their leaders, and the communication methods used were often inconsistent and sometimes did not align with local cultural expectations. This aligns with established theories like Cultural Intelligence Theory and Social Exchange Theory, which highlight the importance of culturally sensitive leadership and emotional awareness in promoting positive outcomes in varied workplaces.

While empathy showed a weaker statistical impact than communication, it remains a crucial element in building trust and fostering strong relationships in the workplace. The mixed perceptions surrounding communication practices suggest that there is a blend of effective and ineffective approaches across different companies. This highlights the urgent need for structured leadership development programs that focus on nurturing intercultural skills and emotional intelligence.

Ultimately, this study emphasises that employee satisfaction in Chinese-owned firms is closely linked to how well leaders adjust their communication styles and relational behaviours to suit local cultural norms. For sustainable success and improved workplace relations, it's essential for Chinese managers and business owners to invest in training for cultural competence, empathetic leadership, and participatory communication strategies. Without these efforts, the ongoing cross-cultural tensions could continue to impact employee morale, productivity, and retention in Zimbabwe's manufacturing sector.

6.2 Recommendations

To enhance leadership effectiveness and boost employee satisfaction, organisations should incorporate cultural intelligence and empathy into their leadership training programs. It's important for these initiatives to be tailored to the specific cultural values and workplace expectations of Zimbabwean employees, as this will foster a greater sense of understanding and connection.

Creating an environment that encourages inclusive communication is crucial. This means promoting open dialogues, involving employees in decision-making, and implementing feedback mechanisms that resonate culturally. Leaders should focus on building relationships and prioritise respect, support, and acknowledgement of each employee's unique identity and background.

Regularly conducting cultural audits and employee satisfaction surveys can help organisations gauge the impact of their leadership and communication strategies. The insights gathered from these evaluations should guide ongoing improvements in human resource practices and managerial approaches.

Moreover, human resource teams should be prepared to handle cross-cultural mediation effectively, ensuring that policies promoting respectful communication and conflict resolution are clearly defined and consistently enforced. Lastly, forging partnerships with local academic institutions and cultural experts can deepen the understanding of cross-cultural dynamics and help develop leadership models that are more aligned with the realities of Zimbabwe's industrial landscape.

7.0 ETHICAL CLEARANCE

Prior to the commencement of this study, ethical clearance was obtained from the Chinhoyi University of Technology Post Graduate Research Committee where the researcher is a PhD student. Ethical Clearance number (GRSD 17 SEBS 03/2024). All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the approving authority.

8.0 DECLARATION OF FUNDING

The authors declare that the study was undertaken independently without external funding from organisations, institutions, or funding agencies.

9.0 DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest, whether financial or otherwise, linked to this work.

10.0 DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting this study's findings can be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Due to confidentiality agreements, ethical restrictions, and privacy concerns, these data are not publicly accessible.

11.0 PARTICIPANT CONSENT STATEMENT

All participants in the study provide a written informed consent prior to their involvement in the study. They received detailed explanations of the purpose, procedures, possible risks, and benefits of the study. Participants were also told they could withdraw at any point without any penalty.

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