Factors influencing the leadership style of principals at private K-12 schools in Vietnam: A case study of Ho Chi Minh city

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Abstract

This study identifies and analyzes the factors influencing the leadership style of principals at private K-12 schools in Ho Chi Minh City, a highly competitive, market-driven educational environment. Employing a sequential explanatory mixed methods design, the research begins with a quantitative survey of 435 teachers and education administrators, followed by semi-structured in-depth interviews. Data were analyzed using inferential statistics (ANOVA and t-tests) and thematic analysis. The main findings reveal a pronounced "perception gap" between staff groups: while the school leadership team is primarily shaped by external pressures such as market competition and accountability requirements, teachers and department heads are more affected by internal factors, notably the principal's personal competencies and the school's organizational culture. Qualitative analysis elucidates this divergence, showing that each group interprets the environment through its own lens of responsibilities and concerns. The study concludes that private school principals in Ho Chi Minh City must perform a dual role both as business managers and as educational leaders. To succeed, they need to cultivate a balanced, comprehensive leadership capacity that reconciles market-driven pressures with staff expectations, thereby narrowing the perception gap and fostering a sustainably thriving institution.

Keywords: Ho Chi Minh City, Influencing factors, Leadership style, Perception gap, Private education, School principal, Vietnam.

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization and the knowledge economy, education is recognized as a national priority and serves as the foundation for a country's sustainable development. At pre-tertiary education institutions, efforts to reform and enhance quality revolve centrally around the role of the school principal. A wealth of international research has consistently confirmed that principal leadership is the second most important determinant after teacher instructional quality of school effectiveness and student achievement [1, 2]. A principal's chosen leadership style not only shapes the organizational culture but also motivates teaching staff [3, 4] but also profoundly influences overall school performance and educational quality [5].

A principal's leadership style is a multidimensional construct manifested in models such as transformational leadership [6], servant leadership [7], instructional leadership [8], and democratic leadership [9]. No single style is universally optimal; its effectiveness depends critically on the context in which it is applied. Accordingly, decoding the factors that shape and modify a principal's leadership style has become both an urgent and important research agenda. International studies show that leadership style emerges from a complex interplay of personal attributes and external conditions. On the personal side, a principal's professional competence, character, experience, beliefs, and educational philosophy are foundational [10]. Simultaneously, internal school characteristics such as teacher professionalism [11] and readiness for change [12] also powerfully shape leadership behaviors.

Beyond these internal drivers, external pressures and expectations exert an increasingly dominant influence. Policy reforms[13] accountability requirements, strategies for overcoming educational challenges [14] parental and community involvement, and especially market-competition pressures all play pivotal roles. Research in other Asian contexts Malaysia [15] China [16] and Nepal [17] has likewise underscored how the sociocultural environment shapes principal leadership practices. In Vietnam, attention to the principal's role has grown significantly, particularly since the Ministry of Education and Training issued the National Standards for Pre-tertiary School Principals [18]. Domestic studies have begun to explore various leadership dimensions, including vision setting [19] and Instructional leadership under educational innovation [20] to its relationship with teacher satisfaction [21].

However, a notable research gap remains when considering the particular context of private K-12 schools in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). As one of Vietnam's most dynamic educational markets, private schools here operate with high autonomy under intense market competition. Factors such as financial self-sufficiency, accountability to investors, brand-building and positioning demands, and ever-rising parental expectations where parents act as "customers" create a leadership environment markedly different from that of public schools or private schools elsewhere [22]. Thus, a principal's leadership style in this setting is not merely a matter of personal preference or administrative compliance but a complex, adaptive response to a volatile ecosystem. Understanding which factors truly shape leadership style in this context is therefore essential both academically and practically.

Building on these considerations, the present study aims to identify, analyze, and evaluate the key factors influencing principals' leadership styles at private K-12 schools in HCMC. Specifically, the research addresses the following questions:

1. Which factors such as market competition and branding pressures, autonomy and accountability, parental expectations, the principal's personal competencies, and staff culture influence principals' leadership styles in HCMC's private schools?

2. What is the relative influence of each factor, and which is most impactful?

Do perceptions of these factors' influence differ among school roles (administration team, department heads, and teachers)?

The study's findings are expected to provide robust empirical evidence to help education managers, investors, and principals themselves gain deeper insight into the challenges and drivers of school leadership, thereby informing targeted management implications to enhance school effectiveness in this evolving context.

2. Literature review

This section synthesizes and analyzes foundational theories and previous studies related to principals' leadership styles and their influencing factors, thereby constructing a solid theoretical framework for the present research.

2.1. Leadership and Principals' Leadership Styles

Leadership in educational contexts is a complex social influence process in which the principal not only manages but also guides, directs, and creates an effective learning environment. Numerous studies emphasize that leadership is a decisive factor in the success of school improvement efforts [23]. Leadership style, therefore, can be defined as the set of relatively stable behaviors, traits, and skills that a leader displays when interacting with and influencing others [24]. A school's effectiveness is closely linked to leadership practices aimed at positive educational outcomes, and a principal's style is regarded as an important predictor of both student achievement [25] and overall school performance.

Within the corpus of educational leadership theory, several models describe how principals enact their roles. Instructional leadership focuses on the principal's role in curriculum management, supervision of teaching, and evaluation to create a rigorous academic environment [26] emphasizing the principal as the "leader of learners" with deep subject-matter expertise and academic guidance capacity [27]. Transformational leadership, by contrast, centers on the principal's ability to inspire a shared vision, elevate ethical values, motivate and engage teachers, and encourage creativity to exceed current goals [28].

Other valuable perspectives include Distributed Leadership, which recognizes that leadership should be shared

among multiple individuals in the school to leverage collective intelligence and build system-wide capacity [12]. Servant leadership, which prioritizes staff well-being and development above all else [7] and Democratic leadership, which emphasizes teacher participation in decision-making to foster an open, trusting work environment [9].

In practice, principals rarely adhere to a single style. They often flexibly combine behaviors from multiple models to respond to diverse situations. Cross-national comparisons, such as between Germany and China, continue to provide valuable insights [29] or among Hong Kong, Mainland China, and the United States [30] demonstrate that cultural, social, and political contexts profoundly influence both the preference for and effectiveness of particular leadership styles. This underscores the need to analyze the situational factors shaping principal leadership.

2.2. Factors Influencing Principals' Leadership Styles

Drawing on existing research, the factors affecting a principal's leadership style can be organized into the following five categories.

2.2.1. Principal's Personal Attributes

A principal's innate competencies and qualities form the foundation of all leadership behaviors. The vision and educational philosophy they uphold guide their decision-making [19]. Studies by Dyantyi et al. [10] and Nuryana et al. [31] identify core competencies such as strategic vision, communication skills, problem-solving ability, and emotional intelligence as key predictors of effective leadership style. The relationship between leadership style and staff motivation Krishnamoorthy and Mehar [32] as well as the bases of power a principal employs [33] stem from these personal attributes. Moreover, work experience and professional development also play crucial roles in shaping a mature, adaptable leadership style capable of guiding the team [34].

2.2.2. Staff Characteristics and School Culture

Principals do not lead in a vacuum; their style must align with and influence the existing staff. School climate has a bidirectional relationship with leadership style: a positive, collaborative culture enables principals to exercise democratic and open styles, while a principal's behaviors strongly affect teachers' professionalism and motivation [3] and job satisfaction [35, 36]. Research by Subandi and Mispani [37] and Mulongo and Jemutai [38] confirms the direct link between leadership style and teacher performance, and leadership can even influence how disciplinary issues are managed [39]. The rise of Teacher Leadership models [40] further demands that principals adopt a distributed style, empowering and developing potential leaders within their staff.

2.2.3. Parental Expectations and Involvement

In modern, especially private, education, parents have become "customers" with high service and quality demands. Their engagement in school activities and ever-higher expectations for academic outcomes and holistic development place significant pressure on principals. This pressure compels principals to adopt an outward-oriented style, emphasizing communication, dialogue, and transparency [15]. Managing these relationships and potential crises requires principals to exhibit a responsive, flexible, and accountable leadership style [14].

2.2.4. Degree of Autonomy and Accountability

Each school's governance structure, specifically the balance between autonomy and accountability, deeply affects leadership. In private schools, high autonomy over curriculum design, staffing, and financial decisions allows principals to demonstrate innovative, entrepreneurial styles. However, this autonomy comes with heavy accountability to boards, investors, and society for operational effectiveness and student outcomes [22]. The tension between autonomy and accountability compels principals to adopt a balanced approach that is both business-oriented and rigorously upholds educational standards [41].

2.2.5. Market Competition and Brand Positioning

The emergence of an education market has created fierce competition among schools. Principals must act not only as educational professionals but also as brand strategists [17]. Pressures to recruit and retain students and differentiate the school's brand in the marketplace drive principals toward decisive, results-focused styles and proficiency with marketing and communication tools, especially amid digital transformation [42]. Achieving high performance and building reputation are not merely professional goals but the institution's lifelines, inevitably reshaping leadership priorities and behaviors [43].

2.3. Proposed Research Model

Synthesizing the theoretical foundations and empirical studies above, we propose a research model in which five independent factor groups (1) Principal's Personal Attributes, (2) Staff Characteristics and Culture, (3) Parental Expectations and Involvement, (4) Degree of Autonomy and Accountability, and (5) Market Competition and Brand Positioning jointly influence the central dependent variable of (6) Principals' Leadership Style. Demographic variables such as experience, professional qualifications, school size, and type will also be examined as potential moderating or clarifying variables. This theoretical model will guide the subsequent research steps, including survey instrument development and hypothesis testing.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

To explore the problem comprehensively, both measuring the influence of various factors and providing a detailed explanation of the complex mechanisms behind the numbers, this study employs a mixed-methods approach [44]. Mixed methods allow researchers to integrate the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative approaches, thereby enhancing the reliability and value of the findings [45]. Specifically, a sequential explanatory design is adopted [46] consisting of two main phases:

- Phase 1 (Quantitative - QUAN): A large-scale survey is conducted to collect quantitative data. The aim of this phase is to identify general trends, test relationships, and compare differences in perceptions among respondent groups.
- Phase 2 (Qualitative - qual): Semi-structured, in-depth interviews are conducted with a purposively selected subsample from Phase 1. This phase aims to explore, interpret, and clarify the most salient or unexpected statistical results, addressing the "why" and "how" questions.

By combining these phases, the qualitative data not only supplement but also explain the quantitative results, yielding a richer, multidimensional understanding of the research problem [47].

3.2. Population and Sampling
3.2.1. Population

Table 1.
Descriptive Statistics of the Study Sample (N = 435)

Characteristic	Category	Leadership Team (n=40)	Department Heads (n=65)	Teachers (n=330)	Total (N=435)
Gender	Male	18 (45.0%)	25 (38.5%)	122 (37.0%)	165 (37.9%)
	Female	22 (55.0%)	40 (61.5%)	208 (63.0%)	270 (62.1%)
Age	Under 40	4 (10.0%)	25 (38.5%)	210 (63.6%)	239 (54.9%)
	40-50	18 (45.0%)	30 (46.1%)	95 (28.8%)	143 (32.9%)
	Over 50	18 (45.0%)	10 (15.4%)	25 (7.6%)	53 (12.2%)
Education	Bachelor's	4 (10.0%)	13 (20.0%)	264 (80.0%)	281 (64.6%)
	Master's	28 (70.0%)	48 (73.8%)	66 (20.0%)	142 (32.6%)
	Doctorate	8 (20.0%)	4 (6.2%)	0 (0.0%)	12 (2.8%)
Experience	Under 10 years	2 (5.0%)	15 (23.1%)	200 (60.6%)	217 (49.9%)
	10-20 years	16 (40.0%)	35 (53.8%)	105 (31.8%)	156 (35.9%)
	Over 20 years	22 (55.0%)	15 (23.1%)	25 (7.6%)	62 (14.2%)

Note: The data reveal clear demographic distinctions among the groups. The school leadership team (principal and vice-principals) is the oldest and most experienced group, with 90 percent holding postgraduate degrees. In contrast, teachers constitute a younger cohort, predominantly bachelor's degree holders with under ten years of experience. Department heads occupy an intermediate position, combining substantial experience with higher professional qualifications.

3.2.2. Sampling Strategy

Sampling follows the two phases of the mixed-methods design. In the initial quantitative phase, we use convenience sampling combined with stratification. Schools are approached based on accessibility and willingness to participate, but to enhance representativeness, the sample is stratified by school size (small, medium, large) and type (national curriculum vs. international-program schools). We target approximately 400-500 respondents for this phase. In the subsequent qualitative phase, purposive sampling selects 10-15 information-rich participants for in-depth interviews, based on criteria such as: (1) having distinctive or contrasting survey responses; (2) representing different roles (leadership team, department heads, teachers); and (3) representing different school types [48]. The final sample size will depend on actual response rates but will be large enough to support meaningful inferential analyses.

3.3. Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

Data collection is conducted systematically in both phases. For the quantitative phase, a survey instrument is developed from the theoretical framework. It comprises two sections: demographic information and 30 statements measuring the influence of the five factor groups on a five-point Likert scale (1 = "Not at all influential" to 5 = "Highly influential"). For the qualitative phase, a semi-structured interview guide is created, with open-ended questions refined after preliminary analysis of the survey results, an essential step in the sequential explanatory design [46]. Field procedures begin with research approval from each school's leadership. The survey is then distributed both online (Google Forms) and in print to maximize response rates. After data entry and cleaning, initial quantitative results inform the selection of interviewees. Finally, in-depth interviews are scheduled, recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis.

3.4. Data Analysis
3.4.1. Quantitative Analysis

Cleaned and coded survey data are analyzed using SPSS 26. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations) provide an overview of sample characteristics and factor influence. Internal consistency is assessed via Cronbach's Alpha. To address the research questions, inferential statistics are applied [48]. Independent samples t-tests compare means between two groups (e.g., by gender). One-way ANOVA compares means across three or more groups (e.g., leadership team, department heads, teachers), with Tukey HSD post hoc tests identifying specific group differences. Pearson correlation analysis examines linear relationships among the five factor groups.

Table 2.
Reliability Results (Cronbach's Alpha) for the Measurement Scales (N = 435).

Factor (Scale)	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
1. Market Competition & Brand Positioning	6	0.908
2. Autonomy & Accountability	6	0.881
3. Parental Expectations & Involvement	6	0.895
4. Principal's Personal Competencies & Qualities	6	0.931
5. Staff Characteristics & School Culture	6	0.869

Note: All Cronbach's Alpha coefficients exceed 0.85, indicating excellent reliability for the scales.

3.4.2. Qualitative Analysis

Interview transcripts are analyzed using thematic analysis [49]. This involves: (1) familiarization with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing and naming themes; and (5) producing a narrative report with exemplar quotations.

3.4.3. Data Integration

In line with the sequential explanatory design, qualitative findings are used to interpret and enrich quantitative results. Integration occurs primarily in the Discussion chapter, where interview themes are linked with statistical outcomes to produce a coherent, in-depth interpretation [48].

4. Research Findings

Table 3.
Descriptive Statistics of Factor Influence by Role.

Factor and Sample Item	Mean	SD
1. Market Competition & Brand Positioning	3.84	1.05
1.2 The requirement to build and maintain the school's image and reputation.	4.45	0.72
1.3 Pressure to meet annual enrollment targets and retain students.	4.38	0.81
1.6 The importance of communication and marketing activities for promotion.	4.25	0.85
2. Autonomy & Accountability	3.72	1.10
2.5 Personal responsibility for student learning outcomes and overall safety.	4.35	0.79
2.3 Accountability for reporting operational performance to the Board of Directors/investors.	4.21	0.95
2.2 Authority over hiring, contracting, and designing remuneration policies.	4.10	0.91
3. Parental Expectations & Involvement	4.12	0.92
3.6 Parents' demand for a safe, inspiring educational environment.	4.55	0.65
3.4 Pressure from parents regarding student outcomes (grades, overseas study).	4.42	0.78
3.2 Parents' desire for regular, transparent communication channels.	4.31	0.75
4. Principal's Personal Competencies & Qualities	4.38	0.78
4.4 Crisis management skills and the ability to resolve complex, unexpected issues.	4.58	0.68
4.3 Ability to inspire, motivate, and influence staff.	4.52	0.71
4.1 The principal's personal vision and educational philosophy.	4.47	0.75
5. Staff Characteristics & School Culture	4.30	0.75
5.3 Spirit of cooperation, sharing, and mutual support among the teaching staff.	4.48	0.70
5.2 Teachers' readiness to innovate, be creative, and apply technology.	4.41	0.77
5.6 Staff demand for professional development and career advancement.	4.35	0.80

Note: The full table includes all 30 items. (M: Mean, SD: Standard deviation).

A closer examination of Table 3 highlights which specific aspects most strongly influence leadership style. Foundational pressures and expectations related to safety and performance are rated exceptionally high. In particular, "Parents' demand for a safe, inspiring educational environment" (M = 4.55), "Personal responsibility for student safety" (M = 4.35), and "Pressure regarding student outcomes" (M = 4.42) rank among the top mean scores. This underscores that safety and learning effectiveness are non-negotiable priorities shaping leadership decisions. Simultaneously, high-level personal competencies and a positive staff culture emerge as central. The principal's "Crisis-management skills" (M = 4.58) and "Ability to inspire" (M = 4.52) are the most influential personal attributes. On the staff side, "Spirit of

cooperation and sharing" (M = 4.48) and "Readiness to innovate" (M = 4.41) stand out. Overall, this detailed analysis demonstrates that leadership style is driven not only by broad factors but also by concrete demands for risk management, performance outcomes, and human capital capabilities.

Table 4.
ANOVA Results Comparing Factor Influence by Role.

Factor	Mean (Leadership Team)	Mean (Dept. Heads)	Mean (Teachers)	F	p-value	Post-Hoc (Tukey HSD)
1. Market Competition & Brand Positioning	4.51	4.15	3.68	35.124	<0.001	Leadership Team > Dept. Heads > Teachers
2. Autonomy & Accountability	4.48	4.02	3.55	41.228	<0.001	Leadership Team > Dept. Heads > Teachers
3. Parental Expectations & Involvement	4.45	4.28	4.05	11.531	<0.001	Leadership Team, Dept. Heads > Teachers
4. Principal's Personal Competencies & Qualities	4.20	4.35	4.41	3.987	0.019	Teachers > Leadership Team
5. Staff Characteristics & School Culture	4.15	4.31	4.33	3.112	0.045	Dept. Heads, Teachers > Leadership Team

Note: Mean = the average rating for each group; F = the ANOVA F-statistic, measuring the magnitude of between-group differences; p-value = the probability of observing the result by chance (p < .05 indicates statistical significance); Post-Hoc (Tukey HSD) = identifies which group pairs differ significantly.

The ANOVA results in Table 4 confirm statistically significant differences in perceptions among the three role groups (leadership team, department heads, and teachers) for all five factors (all p < .05). These differences are particularly pronounced for externally driven factors. For "Market Competition & Brand Positioning" (F = 35.124, p < .001) and "Autonomy & Accountability" (F = 41.228, p < .001), post-hoc tests reveal a clear hierarchy: the leadership team perceives these pressures most strongly, followed by department heads, then teachers. Similarly, "Parental Expectations & Involvement" is rated significantly higher by the leadership team and department heads than by teachers. By contrast, for the internal factors, teachers rate the influence of the principal's personal competencies significantly higher than the leadership team does. Likewise, both teachers and department heads view the influence of "Staff Characteristics & School Culture" as greater than does the leadership team. These findings provide robust statistical evidence that one's organizational role shapes their perspective on the drivers of school leadership style.

Table 5.
T-Test Results Comparing Factor Influence by School Type.

Factor	School Type	N	Mean	SD	t	p-value
1. Market Competition & Brand Positioning	National Curriculum	250	3.65	1.01	-5.871	<.001
	International Program	185	4.11	0.98		
2. Parental Expectations & Involvement	National Curriculum	250	3.98	0.95	-3.142	.002
	International Program	185	4.30	0.86		
3. Autonomy & Accountability	National Curriculum	250	3.61	1.12	-2.049	.041
	International Program	185	3.87	1.05		
4. Principal's Personal Competencies & Qualities	National Curriculum	250	4.37	0.79	-0.345	.730
	International Program	185	4.39	0.76		
5. Staff Characteristics & School Culture	National Curriculum	250	4.28	0.77	-0.621	.535
	International Program	185	4.32	0.72		

Note: N is the number of participants per group. p-value < .05 indicates a statistically significant difference between groups.

The t-test results in Table 5 show statistically significant differences in perceptions between national-curriculum schools and those with an international program for three of the five factors. Specifically, international-program schools report higher mean scores for "Market Competition & Brand Positioning" (M = 4.11 vs. 3.65, p < .001), "Parental Expectations & Involvement" (M = 4.30 vs. 3.98, p = .002), and "Autonomy & Accountability" (M = 3.87 vs. 3.61, p = .041). This indicates that international-program schools operate under stronger market pressures, customer expectations, and investor accountability requirements. Conversely, no significant differences are found between the two school types for the internal factors "Principal's Personal Competencies & Qualities" (p = .730) and "Staff Characteristics & School Culture" (p = .535). This suggests that, regardless of market context, the importance of leadership competency and cultivating a positive staff culture is equally recognized and influential in both types of schools.

Table 6.
Pearson Correlation Matrix Among Factors (N = 435).

Factor	1	2	3	4	5
1. Market Competition & Brand Positioning	1				
2. Autonomy & Accountability	0.521**	1			
3. Parental Expectations & Involvement	0.588**	0.412**	1		
4. Principal's Personal Competencies & Qualities	0.376**	0.405**	0.381**	1	
5. Staff Characteristics & School Culture	0.315**	0.329**	0.340**	0.682**	1

Note: ** ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The Pearson correlation results in Table 6 show that all five factor groups are positively and significantly intercorrelated at the 0.01 level, revealing a tightly connected system of influences. The strongest correlation is between "Principal's Personal Competencies & Qualities" and "Staff Characteristics & School Culture" (r = .682), suggesting that leadership competency and a supportive school culture reinforce each other in practice. External pressure factors also show moderate to strong correlations. Notably, "Market Competition & Brand Positioning" correlates strongly with "Parental Expectations & Involvement" (r = .588) and "Autonomy & Accountability" (r = .521). This reflects the logic of private-school operations, where market pressures are closely linked to parental satisfaction and investor demands. Although the remaining correlations are somewhat lower, they remain statistically significant, confirming that these factors do not operate in isolation but intertwine to form a complex network of pressures and drivers that principals face daily.

Table 7.
Synthesis of Key Themes from Different School Perspectives.

Key Theme	Exemplary Quotations
1. "Brand" Pressure and Institutional Survival	Leadership Team 1: "My mission is to keep this ship afloat. That means enrolling students and maintaining our reputation. Every academic decision must factor in our brand." Teacher 1: "We understand the need to recruit, but sometimes that pressure translates into superficial extracurricular programs that overload teachers without real academic depth."
2. Parents as "Customers": Partners or Pressures?	Leadership Team 3: "I have to treat parents as strategic partners. They pay high fees, and their expectations are directives. My job is to manage those expectations." Dept. Head 1: "The hardest part is when the leadership makes a 'please the parents' demand that doesn't make pedagogical sense. We're stuck in the middle, explaining and implementing it for the teachers."
3. The Principal's Personal Stamp	Dept. Head 4: "When the principal has vision and decisiveness, our department works with real energy. She defends teachers against unreasonable demands. We deeply respect her for that." Teacher 2: "For us, whether the principal is fair, listens, and creates a joyful work environment matters far more than how many awards the school has."
4. The "Staff Room" Culture: Motivator or Barrier?	Leadership Team 5: "I strive for an open culture, but changing long-standing habits in a large staff is very difficult. It's the longest-running battle of my leadership role." Teacher 4: "No matter how capable a principal is, if colleagues don't cooperate or are ready to 'stab you in the back,' you can't get anything done. School culture directly affects how I feel about coming to work every day."

The qualitative findings in Table 7 vividly confirm and deepen the perceptual differences revealed by the quantitative analysis. They show that views on leadership influences vary sharply by role. Strategic and market pressures vital for the leadership team to "keep the ship afloat" are experienced by teachers as burdensome, superficial tasks that dilute academic value. Similarly, parental expectations are framed by the leadership team as "strategic partner management," whereas department heads see them as a daily balancing act between top-down demands and pedagogical integrity. Expectations of the principal also diverge: department heads seek a visionary, decisive leader who protects staff, while teachers prioritize relational qualities such as fairness, listening, and a positive environment. Finally, school culture is perceived oppositely: the leadership team views it as a long-term strategic challenge, whereas teachers experience it as an immediate determinant of their daily motivation. Overall, the qualitative data weave a coherent narrative explaining why the statistical results differ; each role interprets the same educational environment through a distinct lens of responsibilities and concerns.

5. Discussion
5.1. Discussion of the Main Findings
The central finding of this study is the existence of a deep "perception gap" between the school leadership team (SLT) and the department heads and teachers regarding the factors influencing leadership style. This divergence is not a

random contradiction but a systematic manifestation of the multifaceted, high-pressure nature of the principal's role in private education within a large urban center like Ho Chi Minh City.

For the SLT, the quantitative results Table 4 show they are overwhelmingly shaped by external factors such as Market Competition & Brand Positioning (M = 4.51) and Autonomy & Accountability (M = 4.48). This aligns with the operational reality of private schools as education-business organizations [22]. As the highest executive officers, principals bear direct responsibility to investors for the institution's survival and growth. Enrollment pressures, brand positioning, and financial performance cease to be ancillary concerns and become strategic imperatives shaping every decision. As SLT1 put it: "My mission is to keep this ship from sinking." This argument is reinforced by previous studies in similar Asian contexts, where principals increasingly assume the role of brand strategists under fierce market pressures [15, 17]. Their leadership style must therefore be outward-oriented, decisive, and attuned to market dynamics.

In contrast, department heads and teachers focus on internal factors, specifically the Principal's Personal Competencies & Qualities (M = 4.41 for teachers) and Staff Characteristics & School Culture (M = 4.33 for teachers). For them, macro-level pressures around branding or finance may seem abstract; what directly impacts their work environment, motivation, and job satisfaction is the principal's daily behavior. They expect a leader who is visionary, fair, attentive, and capable of creating a collaborative, safe, and inspiring workplace. This finding strongly echoes extensive research linking principal leadership style to teacher motivation [3] job satisfaction [36] and performance [37]. As Teacher 2 noted: "For us, whether the principal is fair and listens… matters far more than how many awards the school has."

The interplay of these two perspectives also explains the strong correlation between Principal's Competencies and Staff Culture (r = .682). This relationship is not merely co-occurrence but bidirectional causality: a principal with strong competencies and character will architect a positive school culture, while a robust, innovative, and cooperative culture [12] provides the foundation for the principal to implement effective leadership strategies.

Finally, the perceptual differences between international-program schools and national-curriculum schools (Table 5) further highlight the market context's role. International-program schools, with higher tuition and more direct competition, naturally face greater market pressures and parental-customer expectations. This compels their principals to demonstrate a more corporate, transparent, and accountable leadership style.

5.2. Implications
From these analyses, the study proposes several key implications for stakeholders:

For Principals: The findings confirm the dual roles they must perform. To succeed, they need to develop balanced, comprehensive leadership "bilingualism," fluent in both market language (strategy, finance, marketing) and pedagogical language (professional practice, psychology, culture). Principals should proactively narrow the perception gap by:
1. Communicating the school's pressures and strategies transparently and consistently to staff;
2. Practicing distributed leadership [12] empowering the team and involving them in decision-making in appropriate areas;
3. 1Acting as a buffer, shielding teachers from unnecessary external non-academic pressures while building their capacity to meet legitimate demands.

For investors and boards of governors: they need a more holistic view when evaluating principal performance. Financial and enrollment KPIs are necessary but not sufficient. Leadership effectiveness must also be measured by organizational health indicators such as teacher engagement rates, job satisfaction levels, and the quality of school culture. Granting principals full autonomy [22] should be accompanied by support and resources to balance their managerial and pedagogical roles.

For Leadership Preparation Providers: Principal training programs must be updated to reflect this complex reality. Beyond traditional administrative and instructional content, curricula should include specialized modules on strategic management, educational branding, crisis communication, financial literacy for school leaders, and especially skills in influential leadership, emotional intelligence, and culture building. Programs should align with national principal standards but be tailored to the private-school context.

5.3. Limitations And Future Research Directions
5.3.1. Despite its Valuable Contributions, this Study Has Several Limitations
1. Scope: Conducted solely in Ho Chi Minh City, a unique socioeconomic and highly competitive educational market, which limits the generalizability to private schools in other regions, particularly rural areas.
2. Sampling Method: The convenience sampling used in the quantitative phase may introduce selection bias, despite stratification efforts to improve representativeness.
3. Self-report data: Reliance on participants' self-reported perceptions may be influenced by subjectivity and lacks triangulation with objective indicators such as student achievement or financial metrics.

Based on these limitations, future research should:

Expand geographic coverage to diverse contexts such as Hanoi, Da Nang, and other provinces to test the generalizability of the proposed factor model, and conduct direct comparisons between autonomous public and private schools to clarify similarities and differences in pressures and leadership practices.

Extend the temporal dimension through longitudinal designs, tracking principals over multiple years to capture how their leadership styles evolve in response to environmental changes.

Integrate diverse data sources, combining perceptual surveys with "hard" metrics such as teacher retention rates,

enrollment figures, standardized student performance, and financial reports to build more robust predictive models of leadership effectiveness.

Employ advanced causal-modeling techniques such as Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to rigorously test complex relationships, for example, the mediating role of school culture between principal competency and overall school effectiveness, thus providing stronger empirical evidence and higher-value insights.

6. Conclusion

This study was conducted to unravel the complex factors influencing principals' leadership styles at private K-12 schools in Ho Chi Minh City, a dynamic educational environment heavily shaped by market forces. The core finding is the existence of a deep "perception gap" between the school leadership team and the teaching staff. Principals' leadership styles are molded by the tension between two distinct worldviews. For the leadership team, external pressures competition, branding imperatives, accountability demands, and parental expectations dominate, compelling a strategic, outward-focused leadership style. In contrast, teachers and department heads are driven primarily by internal factors: the principal's personal competencies, fairness, inspirational capacity, and a collaborative staff culture elements which directly affect their work environment and motivation. In sum, this research not only provides a model of the influencing factors but also emphasizes that, to succeed, modern private-school principals must be "bilingual" leaders, equally fluent in the language of the market and the language of the teaching community. Only by mastering both can they narrow the perception gap, reconcile diverse expectations, and build a sustainably thriving educational institution.

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