AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Emotion

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ISSN: 1528-3542

https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0001634

Leader Choices Reflect Cultural Differences in Ideal Affect More During Organizational Growth Than Decline

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What emotions do people prefer in their leaders, and do these emotional preferences vary depending on how their organizations are performing? In three studies conducted between 2018 and 2023 with European American, East Asian American, and Hong Kong Chinese participants, we predicted that people would choose leaders whose emotional expressions matched their culture's ideal affect (the affective states they value) more during *growth*, when conditions are favorable and people default to cultural ideals, than during *decline*, when conditions are unfavorable, and people are more open to other options. In Study 1 ($N = 304$), participants imagined that their own organizations were undergoing growth or decline and rated the emotions they would ideally like their leaders to have. In Studies 2 ($N = 449$) and 3 ($N = 558$), participants read hypothetical scenarios of student organizations undergoing growth and decline, and chose a leader among excited, calm, and neutral candidates. Across the studies, during growth, European Americans and East Asian Americans chose excited candidates more and calm candidates less than did Hong Kong Chinese, consistent with cultural differences in the valuation of high arousal positive affect. During decline, however, these cultural differences disappeared. Moreover, in Study 3, participants' ideal high arousal positive affect predicted their positive judgments of the excited candidate when conditions were favorable but not when they were unfavorable, suggesting one mechanism underlying these cultural differences in leader choice. Together, these studies suggest that people prefer leaders who express culturally ideal emotions more during organizational growth than decline.

Keywords: culture, emotional expression, growth, organizational behavior, ideal affect

Supplemental materials: https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0001634.supp

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Lucy Z. Bencharit and Elizabeth Blevins share first authorship of this article and are listed in alphabetical order. Stimuli, data, scripts, and preregistrations are available at https://osf.io/bn65m/. Some of the findings have been presented at conferences.

This work was funded by two grants from the Division of Behavioral and Cognitive Sciences, National Science Foundation (Grants 1324461 and 1732963), awarded to Jeanne L. Tsai, and a General Research Fund Grant from Research Grants Council, University Grants Committee, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (Grant 442813) awarded to Helene H. Fung.

The authors thank Austyn Lee, Stephanie Lin, Angela Lee, Haoxue Che, Nia Wang, Zhuolin Chen, and Lorraine Cioffi for their research assistance. The authors also thank Hazel Markus, the Stanford Culture Collaboratory, and the Stanford Culture and Emotion Lab for their valuable feedback on these studies.

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Lucy Z. Bencharit played an equal role in conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, project administration, software, supervision, validation, writing–original draft, and writing–review and editing and a supporting role in visualization. Elizabeth Blevins played an equal role in conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, project administration, software, supervision, validation, writing–original draft, and writing–review and editing and a lead role in visualization. Michael Ko played a supporting role in data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, software, visualization, writing–original draft, and writing–review and editing. Yang Qu played a supporting role in data curation, investigation, methodology, project administration, supervision, writing–original draft, and writing–review and editing. Dwight C. K. Tse played an equal role in investigation and project administration, and a supporting role in data curation, supervision, writing–original draft, and writing–review and editing. Helene H. Fung played a supporting role in funding acquisition, investigation, supervision, writing–original draft, and writing–review and editing and an equal role in resources. Jeanne L. Tsai played a lead role in conceptualization, funding acquisition, and supervision, an equal role in methodology, resources, writing–original draft, and writing–review and editing, and a supporting role in investigation and visualization.

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Social groups need effective leaders to survive and thrive, and therefore, choosing a leader can be one of the most consequential decisions that people make for their organizations. When choosing among different leader candidates, people consider their personalities (Foti & Hauenstein, 2007), particularly their emotional qualities (e.g., extraversion; Ashkanasy, 2003; Ensari et al., 2011; Gooty et al., 2010). What factors influence the specific emotional qualities that people look for in their leaders? Here, we propose that these emotional preferences depend on people's cultural contexts and on how well people's organizations are performing. To test these predictions, we conducted three studies comparing the leader choices of European Americans, East Asian Americans, and Hong Kong Chinese for organizations that were undergoing growth or decline. Prior to describing the studies, we review relevant research on emotion and leadership and present our theoretical framework, affect valuation theory (AVT).

Previous Research on Emotion and Leadership

Previous research suggests that leaders who express more positive emotions and fewer negative emotions appear more effective to their constituents (Bono & Ilies, 2006; Cherulnik et al., 2001; Elfenbein, 2007; Erez et al., 2008; Lewis, 2000), presumably because positive emotions inspire and motivate others as well as promote social bonds (Shiota et al., 2004). Relatedly, individuals who report experiencing more positive emotions and fewer negative ones are often rated as better leaders (Carleton et al., 2018; Sy et al., 2005; Wunderley et al., 1998). Certain positive emotions seem to be particularly important. For instance, leaders who express excitement and enthusiasm are viewed as more competent and increase their followers' confidence, optimism, and enjoyment (Cattell & Stice, 1954; George, 1996).

These findings, however, are largely based on Western samples (Elfenbein, 2023). Cross-cultural research suggests that leadership styles and their associated emotions differ across cultures. In a meta-analysis of 18 nations, leaders in Western nations, such as the United States and Canada, scored higher on "transformational" leadership styles, or those that are charismatic, inspirational, and stimulating, than leaders in East Asian nations, like China and South Korea (Leong & Fischer, 2011). Similarly, research conducted by the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness team found that countries with less clearly defined norms (e.g., the United States and other Western countries) valued charismatic and visionary leaders who evoke positive emotions more than did countries with well-defined, formal norms (e.g., China and other East Asian countries; Aktas et al., 2016; Den Hartog et al., 1999; Hanges et al., 2016; Stephan & Pathak, 2016).

Why do cultural differences in leadership preferences exist, and are they reflected in whom people choose as leaders in everyday life? In this article, we propose that such differences reflect in part the emotions people value and ideally want to feel.

AVT

AVT states that how people ideally want to feel (their "ideal affect") differs from how people actually feel (their "actual affect") and that cultural factors shape ideal affect more than actual affect (Tsai, 2007, 2024; Tsai et al., 2006, 2025). In previous studies, European Americans ideally wanted to feel high arousal positive (HAP) states, like excitement and enthusiasm, more than Hong Kong Chinese and other East Asians (Tsai et al., 2006, 2007). In contrast, Hong Kong Chinese ideally wanted to feel low arousal positive (LAP) states, like calm and peacefulness, more than their European American counterparts (Tsai et al., 2006, 2007). However, a recent meta-analysis surveying over 20 years of ideal affect research reveals that these latter differences in ideal LAP have changed over time, driven by increasing ideal LAP among European Americans. As a result, European Americans report valuing LAP states as much as or even more than East Asians (Tsai et al., 2025), although how these changes translate into behavior is less clear.

According to AVT, ideal affect influences how people behave and what decisions they make, including how they judge others (Tsai, 2007, 2017, 2021, 2024). For instance, European Americans rated open, toothy "excited" smiles as more affiliative (i.e., friendlier and more extraverted) than did Hong Kong Chinese, and this cultural difference was mediated by how much people valued HAP (Tsai et al., 2019). Importantly, these social judgments have behavioral consequences. Compared to Hong Kong Chinese and other East Asians, European Americans were more likely to share resources with excited (vs. calm) recipients (Cachia et al., 2025; Park et al., 2017, 2020); to choose excited (vs. calm) physicians (Sims et al., 2018); and to hire excited (vs. calm) job applicants (Bencharit et al., 2019), in part because they perceived excited recipients, physicians, and job applicants to be more trustworthy and knowledgeable.

Based on AVT and previous research, we expected that cultural differences in ideal affect would influence the emotions that people look for when choosing leaders. Some evidence already supports this prediction: Top-ranking leaders in the United States were over six times more likely to show excited smiles in their official website photos than were leaders in China (Tsai et al., 2016, Study 1). In addition, across 11 nations, the more nations valued HAP states, the more likely their legislators were to show excited smiles in their official website photos, and the more nations valued LAP states, the more likely their legislators were to show closed "calm" smiles in their official website photos (Tsai et al., 2016, Study 3). These findings suggest that leaders' emotional expressions reflect their culture's affective ideals.

Leader Choice During Organizational Growth and Decline

What remains unclear, however, is whether people *choose* leaders whose emotional expressions reflect their culture's affective ideals, and whether this varies depending on how well an organization is performing. Although choosing leaders is in some ways similar to choosing other authority figures like physicians, leaders typically hold significantly more power and status. Leaders are responsible for individuals beyond those who choose them and are expected to respond to their organization's immediate circumstances as well as to plan for its future success (Thompson & Vecchio, 2009; Zaccaro et al., 2018). Although nations vary in terms of whether constituents choose their top leaders like heads of state, people across nations often choose leaders for their local organizations, clubs, or social groups. Therefore, it is important to investigate the factors that shape people's judgments and choices of leaders to better understand how people make these decisions in everyday life.

We predict that people will be more likely to choose leaders whose emotional expressions match their ideal affect when organizations are doing well or are in "growth." When organizations are

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doing well, people in those organizations may rely more on their default ways of thinking and feeling to judge and choose leaders (Kahneman, 2003; Levine et al., 2018; Loewenstein et al., 2015), which are in part shaped by their cultures (Markus et al., 2024). Consistent with this idea, under conditions of certainty, participants were more likely to support a "prototypical" leader (e.g., a "typical student" who "shares the same interests, values, and opinions") than a "nonprototypical" leader (e.g., an "atypical student" who does "not share the same interests, values, and opinions"; Rast et al., 2012).

But what about when organizations are failing or in decline? Some evidence suggests that under these conditions, people take more risks and choose more nontraditional or unorthodox leaders (Barr, 1998). Indeed, student participants who felt less certain about themselves, their places in the world, and their futures showed reduced support for the prototypical leader (Rast et al., 2012). This may be because when an organization is declining, its members feel anxiety, fear, and even anger, which may signal to them that they should "stop" and consider other alternatives (Huntsinger et al., 2010). For example, Huntsinger et al. (2010) instructed participants to view an ambiguous stimulus in one of two ways. Participants who were induced to feel positive emotions stuck with their instructed way of processing the stimulus, whereas participants who were induced to feel negative emotions processed that stimulus in the alternate, uninstructed way (Huntsinger et al., 2010). Thus, during decline, negative emotions may drive people to choose leaders whose emotional expressions do not match their cultural ideals.

Yet, a different body of research suggests that people's intuitive, culturally shaped defaults may be *even more* important during periods of uncertainty (Bonn & Rundle-Thiele, 2007; Markus et al., 2024; Sayegh et al., 2004). As a result, people may choose leaders who express the emotions valued by their cultures as much or more during decline compared to growth perhaps because one function of culture is to provide a script for how to operate during uncertain, stressful, and even threatening times (Markus et al., 2024; Pyszczynski et al., 2015; Sullivan, 2016).

There is also evidence that leaders who match cultural defaults and ideals may be more effective during periods of decline. In the United States, "charismatic" and "transformational" leaders produce more positive organizational outcomes under risky, stressful, and rapidly changing circumstances (Cannella & Monroe, 1997; House et al., 1991; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996; Lowe et al., 1996; Waldman et al., 2001; Waldman & Yammarino, 1999). Similarly, among top-ranking chief executive officers in the United States, charismatic leadership was associated with better organizational performance under uncertain conditions (Tosi et al., 2004).

In summary, while previous literature supports the prediction that cultural differences in ideal affect would be reflected in leader choice during growth, it remains unclear whether this would be the case during decline. Some research suggests that cultural ideals would matter less, whereas other research suggests that cultural ideals might matter more. Moreover, the *mechanisms* through which people choose their leaders remain unclear. People's ideal affect influences their social judgments of others and ultimately their decisions to share resources with (Cachia et al., 2025; Park et al., 2017, 2020) and hire them (Bencharit et al., 2019;Tsai et al., 2019), but it remains unknown whether a similar mechanism applies to leader choices under conditions of growth and decline.

The Present Research

To address these gaps in the literature, we conducted three studies on the links between ideal affect and leader choices under different performance scenarios among European Americans, East Asian Americans, and Hong Kong Chinese. We focused on these cultural groups for two reasons. First, we wanted to build on previous work demonstrating differences in ideal affect among European Americans, East Asian Americans, and East Asians (e.g., Tsai et al., 2006). Second, some East Asian Americans describe hitting a "bamboo ceiling," making it very difficult for them to advance to top leadership positions because of cultural mismatches with mainstream U.S. values (Lu et al., 2020), and we wanted to have a better understanding of their own leader choices. In previous work on hiring decisions, European Americans reported being more likely to hire the excited candidate than did Hong Kong Chinese (Bencharit et al., 2019, Study 4a). East Asian Americans, who were less oriented to American culture than their European American peers and similarly oriented to East Asian culture as their Hong Kong Chinese peers, reported being less likely than European Americans, but more likely to than Hong Kong Chinese to hire the excited candidate. In other words, East Asian Americans' responses "fell" in between those of the other two cultural groups. However, when they had to choose one candidate to hire, East Asian Americans chose the excited candidate as much as European Americans and more than Hong Kong Chinese did. We predicted that East Asian American ideal leader judgments and choices would follow a similar pattern as in Bencharit et al. (2019).

In Study 1, participants imagined that their *own* organizations were undergoing growth or decline and rated what emotions and traits they wanted their ideal leader to show. In Study 2, participants read hypothetical scenarios about student organizations undergoing growth and decline, and then chose an excited, calm, or neutral leader for the student organization. In Study 3, participants read hypothetical scenarios about a student business undergoing growth and decline but also provided ratings of the scenario and the different candidates so that we could assess the features of organizational growth and decline that actually moderate the links between people's ideal affect and their judgments and choices of the leader candidates. We focused on *student* organizations in Studies 2 and 3 because they were most relevant to our participants and were comparable in the United States and Hong Kong.

Transparency and Openness

All procedures were approved by the Stanford University's Institutional Review Board under the protocol, "Cultural variation in the expression and perception of affect" (IRB No. 15307).

Study 1 was conducted in 2023; Study 2 was conducted in 2018; and Study 3 was conducted in 2020. Although Study 1 was conducted most recently, we report it first because it is related to participants' own organizations and therefore, had less experimental control than Studies 2 and 3, which were more similar to each other. The methods, hypotheses, and data analysis plan for Studies 1 and 3 were preregistered prior to data collection. Facial stimuli, anonymized data, analysis scripts, and preregistrations are available on the Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/bn65m/.

Data Analysis Approach

Data were analyzed in SPSS (Version 31) and RStudio (Posit team, 2025). Across studies, we conducted a mixed-design analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) and post hoc pairwise comparisons in SPSS to probe for cultural differences in mean ratings of ideal affect, controlling for actual affect. For post hoc pairwise comparisons, we report adjusted means, standard error estimates, and effect sizes. To test for cultural differences in ideal leader judgments, we conducted a mixed-design analysis of variance (ANOVA) and post hoc comparisons in RStudio using the "afex" (Singmann et al., 2024) and "emmeans" (Lenth, 2024) packages. We applied a Huynh-Feldt correction when assumptions of sphericity were violated (Blanca et al., 2023). To examine cultural differences in participants' leader choices, we fit binomial logistic regression models using the "lme4" package (Bates et al., 2015). We conducted the tests of indirect effects (mediation, moderated mediation) for all studies using the PROCESS macro (Version 3.5.3; Hayes, 2022) in SPSS (Version 31). Throughout the studies, we standardized ratings within participants to control for cultural differences in response style bias (C. Chen et al., 1995; Fischer, 2004).

Study 1: Do Cultural Differences in Ideal Affect Predict Ideal Leader Judgments More During Growth Than Decline for People's Own Organizations?

Hypotheses

We predicted that: (a) European Americans would value HAP states more than Hong Kong Chinese (Tsai et al., 2006, 2025), (b) when imagining an ideal leader for their organizations during growth, European Americans would rate their ideal leaders as more excited and less calm compared to Hong Kong Chinese, (c) East Asian Americans' judgments of their ideal leaders would fall between those of European Americans and Hong Kong Chinese in terms of excitement and calm, as in prior work (Bencharit et al., 2019), and (d) cultural differences in judgments of ideal excited leaders during growth would be mediated by cultural differences in ideal HAP. In addition, we examined two competing possibilities for organizations during decline: (a) cultural differences in ideal leader judgments would be as or even more pronounced during decline compared to growth, or (b) there would be no cultural differences in ideal leader judgments during decline.

Method

Power Analysis

As described in our preregistered a priori power analysis, we needed 279 participants to achieve 80% power ($f^2 = 0.05$), with main effects of cultural group, ideal leader judgment, performance scenario, and their interactions resulting in five tested and six total predictors, critical $F(5, 256) = 2.25$. We therefore aimed to recruit 100 participants from each cultural group to allow for missing data and attrition.

Participants

We recruited participants for a 30-min online survey from email listservs for community members and university alumni in the United States and Hong Kong. European Americans identified as White or European American; East Asian Americans identified as East Asian American or a specific East Asian American group (e.g., Chinese American, Japanese American, Korean American), and Hong Kong Chinese identified as East Asian or Chinese. In addition, all participants were 18 years and older. One hundred twenty-nine European Americans, 45 East Asian Americans, and 166 Hong Kong Chinese completed the survey.

We excluded 36 participants: 16 had missing open-ended responses; three typed random, nonsense letters; three had participated more than once (based on their IP addresses and nearly identical open-ended responses); and 14 had ambiguous or mixed descriptions of their organizations' performances. Thus, we conducted our analyses on 304 participants: 124 European Americans (41.9% female, 55.6% male, 2.4% nonbinary or agender), 44 East Asian Americans (61.4% female, 38.6% male), and 136 Hong Kong Chinese (72.1% female, 27.9% male). While we did not reach our targeted number of East Asian Americans in this study due to limited availability (we were more successful in Studies 2 and 3), we included them in our analyses to ensure we had sufficient power to test our main hypotheses.

To ensure that we sampled participants from the cultural groups of interest, participants completed one item from the General Ethnicity Questionnaire (GEQ; Tsai et al., 2000) for each culture they were oriented to (see Materials and Measures section). European Americans ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.91$) reported greater orientation to American culture than East Asian Americans ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 0.78$), $t(165) = 2.93$, $p = .004$, 95% CI [0.15, 0.76], $d = 0.51$. Hong Kong Chinese reported being moderately oriented to Chinese culture ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 0.83$). East Asian Americans who also reported being oriented to Asian American or East Asian cultures (e.g., Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, Korean) were moderately oriented ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 0.78$) to these cultures and did not differ from Hong Kong Chinese in this regard, $p = .421$, $d = 0.16$. For additional information about East Asian Americans, including their generational status, for all three studies, please see Supplemental Section 1.

The three cultural groups differed in age, $F(2, 298) = 9.45$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$. European Americans ($M = 29.32$, $SD = 5.75$) were significantly younger than East Asian Americans ($M = 32.50$, $SD = 6.85$) and Hong Kong Chinese ($M = 33.00$, $SD = 8.05$); European American versus East Asian American: $t(165) = -2.99$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [−5.28, −1.08], $d = -0.53$; European American versus Hong Kong Chinese: $t(255) = -4.19$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−5.42, −1.95], $d = -0.52$. There were no significant differences in age between East Asian Americans and Hong Kong Chinese, $p = .710$, $d = -0.07$. In addition, the three groups differed in gender distribution, with East Asian Americans and Hong Kong Chinese having a greater percentage of females compared to European Americans, $\chi^2(4, N = 304) = 26.81$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = 0.21$. However, when we included age and gender in our analyses, the pattern of results remained the same. For parsimony, we omitted these covariates from our final analyses reported below (see Supplemental Section 6a for analyses and results with age and gender included).

Leader Judgment Task

Participants thought of an organization that they belonged to and with which they strongly identified. Participants briefly described the organization, how long they had been a member of it, their specific role, and why they felt strongly connected to it. Then, participants were randomly assigned to one of two performance

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scenarios: growth or decline. Participants were given examples of growth (e.g., "your business has reported an increase in profits" or "your sports team has won multiple games") or decline[1] (e.g., "your business has reported a decrease in profits" or "your sports team has lost multiple games"). To make the scenario more vivid and relevant, participants were asked to describe in a few sentences what "growth" (or "crisis") looked like for their own organization. Participants were then asked to imagine they were selecting a leader for their organization during a time of "growth" (or "crisis") and then made judgments about their ideal leader under those conditions.

Materials and Measures

European American and East Asian American participants completed all the measures in English, and Hong Kong Chinese participants completed the measures in Chinese, except for the Affect Valuation Index (AVI), which was presented in both Chinese and English as in Tsai et al. (2006). All materials and measures were written in English, translated into Chinese by bilingual speakers, and back-translated into English by native Chinese speakers using back-translation approaches (Brislin, 1970). Any discrepancies between the original English version and the back-translated English version were reconciled by a group of bilingual research assistants from the United States and Hong Kong research teams.

Descriptions of Organizations. We developed a coding scheme to examine whether the types of organizations that participants described were similar across cultures as well as to ensure that participants clearly described conditions of growth or crisis/decline (see exclusions under Participants section). Most participants (66.1%) described nonwork-related organizations (i.e., related to recreation, service, or volunteer work) that they had been involved in for an average of 6 years ($M = 6.10$, $SD = 5.95$). There were no cultural differences in the types of organizations participants described or how long participants had been members of their organizations. For additional details regarding the coding scheme, descriptives within each cultural group, examples, and analyses, please see Supplemental Section 2.

Ideal Leader Judgments. Participants used a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*) to rate how much they wanted their ideal leader to be: even-tempered, objective, dominant, friendly, passionate, assertive, nervous, competent, composed, calm, hard-working, enthusiastic, energetic, sluggish, excited, warm, sleepy, angry, relaxed, dull, rational, serene, emotionally stable, and extraverted under the imagined performance condition (i.e., growth, decline). This list included emotional states (e.g., enthusiastic, calm) as well as interpersonal traits (e.g., dominant, friendly, competent, emotionally stable; Tsai et al., 2019). We also included negative emotional states (e.g., angry) to examine whether participants wanted their ideal leaders to express negative emotions during decline. Based on results from factor analyses (provided in Supplemental Section 3), we calculated four aggregates that showed consistency across cultures: (1) *excited* (extraverted, enthusiastic, energetic, passionate, excited), (2) *calm* (composed, calm, emotionally stable), (3) *nonemotional* (competent, rational, objective), and (4) *negative* (angry, nervous, dull, sleepy, sluggish). Internal consistency estimates were moderate to high across cultural groups ($\alpha_{excited}$: .62–.81; α_{calm}: .61–.72; $\alpha_{nonemotional}$: .51–.75; $\alpha_{negative}$: .69–.74).

To control for cultural differences in response style, as outlined in our Data Analysis Approach section, we ipsatized ideal leader judgments within participants. For each judgment, we subtracted the participant's mean (across all 24 judgments) and divided by the participant's standard deviation (across all 24 judgments). We then calculated the mean of the ipsatized judgments for each of the four aggregates.

Ideal and Actual Affect. Participants completed the AVI (Tsai et al., 2006), which asks respondents to rate on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*all the time*) how much they actually feel and how much they would ideally like to feel the following emotions over the course of a typical week: enthusiastic, dull, excited, sleepy, sluggish, idle, aroused, rested, astonished, quiet, surprised, still, passive, strong, inactive, fearful, calm, hostile, peaceful, nervous, relaxed, elated, lonely, content, sad, happy, unhappy, satisfied, serene, and euphoric.

We calculated actual and ideal HAP aggregates by averaging participants' ratings for actual and ideal excited, enthusiastic, elated, and euphoric, respectively, and actual and ideal LAP aggregates by averaging ratings for actual and ideal relaxed, calm, peaceful, and serene, respectively. Internal consistency estimates were moderate to high across cultural groups ($\alpha_{ideal\ HAP}$: .71–.79; $\alpha_{actual\ HAP}$: .78–.84; $\alpha_{ideal\ LAP}$: .70–.82; $\alpha_{actual\ LAP}$: .74–.85).

To control for cultural differences in response styles, we also calculated ipsatized actual and ideal HAP and LAP aggregates. For each actual affect item, we subtracted the participant's actual affect mean (across all actual affect items) and then divided by the participant's actual affect standard deviation (across all actual affect items). We followed the same procedure to ipsatize ideal affect items using each participant's ideal affect mean and standard deviation (across all ideal affect items). We then calculated the ipsatized HAP and LAP aggregates using the items described above. As mentioned above, in most cases, we report results from analyses of ipsatized values; for descriptives and analyses using raw ideal affect aggregates for this study as well as the subsequent studies, see Supplemental Section 4.

Cultural Orientation. Participants completed one item from the GEQ (Tsai et al., 2000) for each culture they were oriented to using a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). Specifically, European Americans and East Asian Americans rated the extent to which they were oriented to mainstream American culture, and Hong Kong Chinese rated the extent to which they were oriented to Chinese culture. In addition, all participants had the opportunity to report their orientation to another culture with which they identified.

Demographics. Participants reported their age, education and work experience, language(s) spoken, birthplace, and their parents' ethnicities and birthplaces.

Procedure

Participants completed an online study on leader choices related to their own organizations. Participants first answered three prescreening questions that asked for their self-identified racial/ethnic/cultural background, age, and gender. Eligible participants then completed the leader judgment task, AVI, GEQ, and demographics. Afterwards, participants were debriefed and compensated. Consistent with local norms, European Americans and East Asian Americans received a

[1] In this study, we used the term "crisis" to refer to declining conditions specific to the organization rather than a life threatening emergency affecting the larger society (e.g., pandemic). This was reflected in the examples we provided. Based on their open-ended responses, participants understood that we were referring to the former more than the latter.

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$10 Amazon gift card, and Hong Kong received $30HKD cash as compensation for their participation.

Data Analyses and Results

Are There Cultural Differences in Ideal Affect?

We conducted a 3 (Cultural Group [between-subjects: European American, East Asian American, Hong Kong Chinese]) × 2 (Ideal Affect [within-subjects: HAP, LAP]) analysis of covariance, controlling for ipsatized actual HAP and actual LAP. There was a significant Cultural Group × Ideal Affect interaction, $F(2, 290) = 4.07$, $p = .018$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$.

As predicted and consistent with prior work (Tsai et al., 2006, 2025), European Americans ($M = 0.53$, $SE = 0.04$) valued HAP states more than Hong Kong Chinese ($M = 0.37$, $SE = 0.04$), $p = .005$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.26], $d = .41$. Like their European American counterparts, East Asian Americans ($M = .52$, $SE = 0.06$) also valued HAP states more than Hong Kong Chinese, $p = .046$, 95% CI [0.003, 0.28], $d = 0.38$, but European Americans and East Asian Americans did not differ from each other, $p = .883$, $d = 0.03$. Consistent with recent findings (Tsai et al., 2025), there were no significant differences among the three cultural groups in their valuation of LAP (European American: $M = 0.79$, $SE = 0.04$; East Asian American: $M = 0.91$, $SE = 0.06$; Hong Kong Chinese: $M = 0.86$, $SE = 0.04$), ps > .091, ds ranged from −0.32 to 0.13. Within cultures, European Americans, East Asian Americans, and Hong Kong Chinese valued LAP more than HAP, ps < .001 (European American: 95% CI [0.15, 0.37], $d = 0.63$; East Asian American: 95% CI [0.21, 0.57], $d = 0.96$; Hong Kong Chinese: 95% CI [0.38, 0.59], $d = 1.19$).

Are There Cultural Differences in Ideal Leader Judgments for Organizations Undergoing Growth Versus Decline?

Based on our preregistration, we conducted a 3 (Cultural Group [between-subjects: European American, East Asian American, Hong Kong Chinese]) × 2 (Performance Scenario [between-subjects: growth, decline]) × 3 (Ideal Leader Judgment [within-subjects: excited, calm, nonemotional]) mixed-design ANOVA. As predicted, there was a significant Culture × Performance Scenario × Ideal Leader Judgment interaction, $F(3.69, 543.85) = 3.14$, Huynh-Feldt corrected $p = .017$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$. Mean ideal leader judgments for each cultural group and performance scenario are presented in Table 1. While we focused on participants who clearly described organizations undergoing either growth or decline (see Participants section), the results remained the same when we also included participants who described organizations with ambiguous or mixed performance (see Supplemental Section 5 for findings).

Between-Culture Comparisons. As predicted and shown in Figure 1 (left), when imagining their organizations in growth, European Americans rated their ideal leader as more excited than Hong Kong Chinese did, $t(295) = 3.80$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.11, 0.34], $d = 0.69$. Partly consistent with our prediction, East Asian Americans rated their ideal leader as more excited than did Hong Kong Chinese, $t(295) = 3.90$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.17, 0.51], $d = 1.04$, but contrary to our hypotheses, East Asian Americans and European Americans rated their ideal leader as similarly excited, $p = .201$, $d = -0.35$. Also as predicted, Hong Kong Chinese rated their ideal leader as calmer than did both European Americans and East Asian Americans, who did not differ from each other, European American versus Hong Kong Chinese: $t(295) = -2.90$, $p = .004$, 95% CI [−0.31, −0.06], $d = -0.56$; East Asian American versus Hong Kong Chinese: $t(295) = -2.47$, $p = .014$, 95% CI [−0.41, −0.05], $d = -0.70$; European American versus East Asian American: $p = .629$, $d = 0.14$. Although we did not predict differences in nonemotional ratings, for organizations in growth, Hong Kong Chinese rated their ideal leader as more nonemotional than European Americans did, $t(295) = -2.40$, $p = .017$, 95% CI [−0.26, −0.03], $d = -0.45$. East Asian Americans' ratings did not differ from those of the other two cultural groups, East Asian American versus Hong Kong Chinese: $p = .377$, $d = -0.24$; European American versus East Asian American: $p = .458$, $d = -0.21$.

In contrast, when imaging their organizations in decline, as shown in Figure 1 (right) there were no significant differences among European Americans, East Asian Americans, and Hong Kong Chinese in their ratings of their ideal leader as excited, calm, or nonemotional, ps > .123, ds ranged from −0.16 to 0.30. These findings suggest that people's ideal affect matters *less* when they are choosing leaders during decline compared to growth.

Within-Culture Comparisons. European Americans rated their ideal leader as more excited and less nonemotional when imagining their organizations in growth than in decline, excited: $t(295) = 2.55$, $p = .011$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.28], $d = 0.41$; nonemotional: $t(295) = -2.67$, $p = .008$, 95% CI [−0.29, −0.04], $d = -0.44$. However, they rated their ideal leader as similarly calm during both growth and decline, $p = .114$, $d = -0.27$. Like their European American counterparts, East Asian Americans rated their ideal leader as more excited during organizational growth than decline, $t(295) = 3.33$, $p = .001$, 95% CI [0.14, 0.55], $d = 0.90$, but they also rated their ideal leader as similarly calm and nonemotional in both scenarios, ps > .081, ds = −0.51 and −0.15, respectively. Hong Kong Chinese rated their ideal leader as similarly excited, calm, and nonemotional during organizational growth and decline, ps > .617, ds ranged from 0.03 to 0.08.

Table 1
Ideal Leader Judgments by Cultural Group and Performance Scenario (Study 1)

	European American		East Asian American		Hong Kong Chinese	
Judgment	Growth	Decline	Growth	Decline	Growth	Decline
Excited	0.46 (0.31)	0.30 (0.37)	0.57 (0.32)	0.23 (0.25)	0.24 (0.38)	0.21 (0.34)
Calm	0.42 (0.31)	0.52 (0.32)	0.37 (0.39)	0.56 (0.34)	0.60 (0.42)	0.57 (0.37)
Nonemotional	0.48 (0.33)	0.65 (0.28)	0.54 (0.35)	0.60 (0.27)	0.62 (0.37)	0.61 (0.42)
Negative	−1.37 (0.49)	−1.41 (0.37)	−1.51 (0.30)	−1.36 (0.42)	−1.29 (0.38)	−1.21 (0.53)

Note. Mean judgment ratings are ipsatized, and standard deviations are reported in parentheses.

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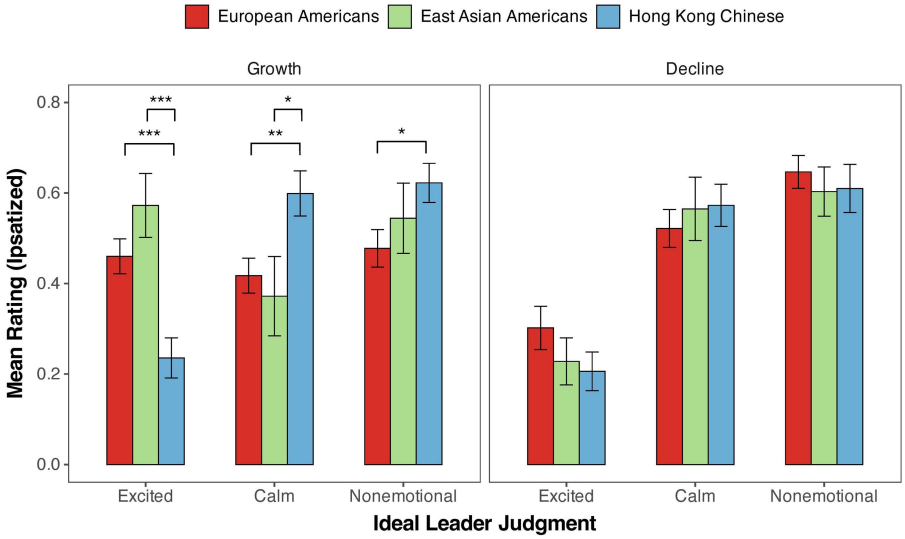
Figure 1

Ideal Leader Judgments During Organizational Growth (Left) and Decline (Right) by Cultural Group (Study 1)



Note. Error bars represent ±1 standard error of the mean, and asterisks indicate significant pairwise differences between cultural groups within growth and decline. See the online article for the color version of this figure.
$^{*}p < .050$. $^{**}p < .010$. $^{***}p < .001$.

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When Organizations Are in Decline, Do People Want Their Leaders to Express Negative Emotions?

We also examined the possibility that participants would want their ideal leaders to express negative emotions when their organizations were in decline by conducting a 3 (Cultural Group [between-subjects: European American, East Asian American, Hong Kong Chinese]) × 2 (Performance Scenario [between-subjects: growth, decline]) ANOVA on the negative aggregate. The main effect of cultural group was significant, $F(2, 295) = 4.66$, $p = .010$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$.

Both European Americans and East Asian Americans rated their ideal leader as less negative than did Hong Kong Chinese, European American versus Hong Kong Chinese: $t(295) = -2.58$, $p = .010$, 95% CI [−0.25, −0.03], $d = -0.32$; East Asian American versus Hong Kong Chinese: $t(295) = -2.42$, $p = .016$, 95% CI [−0.33, −0.03], $d = -0.42$; European American versus East Asian American: $p = .574$, $d = 0.10$. However, the mean negative aggregate scores were below 0 for all three cultural groups (Table 1), suggesting that negative emotional traits were *the least* desirable relative to the other traits. In addition, there was no significant main effect of Performance Scenario or Cultural Group × Performance Scenario interaction (ps > .275), suggesting that these ratings did not vary as a function of organizational growth versus decline. Thus, during times of decline, participants across groups wanted their leaders to be more excited, calm, and nonemotional than negative.

Do Cultural Differences in Ideal Affect Mediate Differences in Ideal Leader Judgments During Growth?

We tested whether ideal HAP (controlling for actual HAP) mediated cultural differences in ideal leader excitement judgments during growth, collapsing across European Americans and East Asian Americans since they did not differ in ideal HAP or ideal leader excitement judgments (see Supplemental Section 6b for results separating European Americans and East Asian Americans). As described previously, cultural group predicted ideal HAP: European Americans and East Asian Americans valued HAP states more than did Hong Kong Chinese, $B = 0.11$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = 2.46$, $p = .014$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.19]. Ideal HAP, in turn, predicted ideal leader excitement judgments, such that the more participants valued HAP states, the more they rated their ideal leader as excited, $B = 0.34$, $SE = 0.05$, $t = 6.37$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.23, 0.44]. After accounting for ideal HAP, the direct effect of cultural group on ideal leader excitement judgments was no longer significant. Furthermore, the indirect effect of ideal HAP was significant (Figure 2). These results suggest that although the indirect effect was small, as predicted, ideal HAP fully mediated cultural differences in ideal leader excitement judgments during growth.

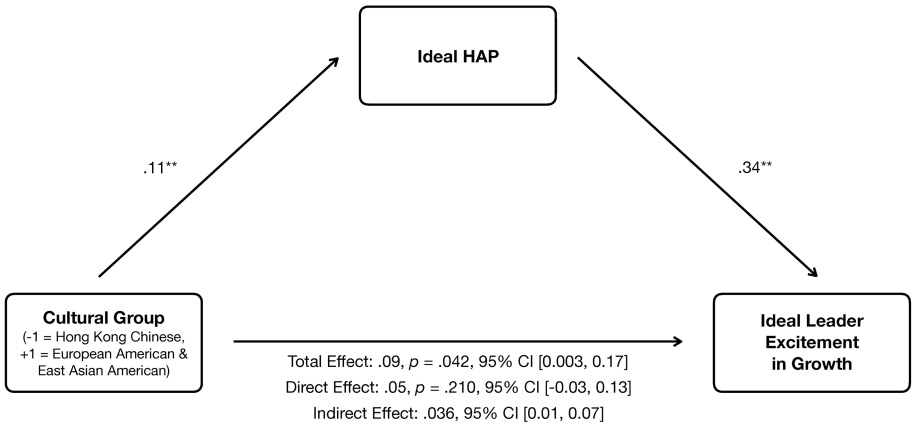
In addition, we examined whether ideal LAP (controlling for actual LAP) mediated cultural differences in ideal leader calm judgments during growth. As reported earlier, cultural group did not significantly predict ideal LAP ($p = .753$), and the indirect effect was not significant, indirect effect = 0.005, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI [−0.03, 0.04]. However, ideal LAP (controlling for actual LAP) *did* significantly predict ideal leader calm judgments during growth, $B = 0.39$, $SE = 0.05$, $t = 8.20$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.29, 0.48]. Thus, while there were no cultural differences in ideal LAP, the more participants ideally wanted to feel LAP states, the more they rated their ideal leader as calm when imagining their own organizations in growth.

Study 1 Discussion

In Study 1, we found that culture and organizational performance predicted the emotions that people wanted in their ideal leaders. When imagining their own organizations in growth, European

Figure 2

Cultural Differences in Ideal Leader Excitement Are Mediated by Ideal HAP (Study 1)



Note. Mediation model is based on 5,000 bootstrapped samples and controls for actual HAP. HAP = high arousal positive.
** $p < .010$.

Americans and East Asian Americans were more likely to want an excited leader than were Hong Kong Chinese, whereas Hong Kong Chinese were more likely to want a calm leader than were European Americans and East Asian Americans. When imagining their organizations during decline, however, there were no cultural differences in participants' ideal leader judgments, suggesting that cultural differences in ideal affect influenced judgments of their ideal leader more under conditions of growth than decline.

Although we had predicted that East Asian Americans' responses would fall in between those of European Americans and Hong Kong Chinese, as in Bencharit et al. (2019), we observed that East Asian Americans were more like their European American than their Hong Kong Chinese counterparts when rating their ideal leaders. In hindsight, this is perhaps not surprising since European Americans and East Asian Americans in the present study did not differ in their ideal HAP and because most of the East Asian Americans in our study were born and raised in the United States, and therefore primarily exposed to U.S. leadership ideals.

Interestingly, European Americans and East Asian Americans seemed to change their view of an ideal leader more than Hong Kong Chinese as a function of organizational growth versus decline. Hong Kong Chinese valued calm and nonemotional leaders more than excited ones across the two performance scenarios. Although it is possible that Hong Kong Chinese leader choices are less influenced by performance scenario, it is also possible that Hong Kong Chinese imagined situations that less strongly differentiated between growth and decline.

Study 2: Do Cultural Differences in Ideal Affect Predict Leader Choice More During Growth Than Decline for Hypothetical Organizations?

Study 1 showed that cultural differences in ideal affect are reflected in people's leader choices more during growth than decline for organizations to which people belonged and with which they identified. This was particularly true for European Americans and East Asian Americans.

This study, however, had several limitations. First, while most participants described nonwork organizations of similar types, there was some variability in the specific organizations as well as the growth and decline scenarios participants described. Therefore, in Study 2, we presented European Americans, East Asian Americans, and Hong Kong Chinese with the *same* hypothetical organizations and performance scenarios. Second, Study 1 primarily focused on nonwork-related organizations. In Study 2, we focused on work-related organizations that were relevant to university samples. We sampled three different sectors (i.e., business, research, and government; see Supplemental Section 7 for a preliminary study with the business sector only) because we wondered whether cultural differences in leader choices might be greater during growth than decline for more client- and public-facing sectors like business and government organizations than less client- and public-facing sectors like research organizations.

Third, Study 1 focused on growth and decline. In Study 2, we also presented scenarios in which organizations were maintaining the status quo ("stability"), to examine whether people's ideal affect mattered under conditions that were less favorable than growth but more favorable than decline. Fourth, participants in Study 1 rated their ideal leaders across multiple traits, but in real life, people need to choose one leader. In Study 2, we presented participants with equally qualified excited, calm, and neutral candidates, and we asked them to choose one of the candidates to be their leader.

Hypotheses

We predicted that: (a) European Americans would choose excited leaders more and calm leaders less than Hong Kong Chinese would for organizations undergoing growth, (b) East Asian Americans' leader choices would most resemble those of European Americans, and (c) cultural differences in excited leader choice during growth would be mediated by ideal HAP. Consistent with the possibility that ideal affect matters less for leaders during decline, we did not predict cultural differences in participants' leader choices for organizations in

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decline. We also examined whether there were cultural differences in leader choice during stable conditions that were in between growth and decline, as well as across sectors that varied in how client- and public-facing they were.

Method

Power Analysis

In our original a priori power analysis, we estimated the sample size for a different task, which we do not report here (279 participants; 80% power; $f^2 = 0.05$; seven total predictors). For the analysis reported in this article, we needed 105 participants across the three cultural groups to achieve 95% power ($f = 0.18$) for three groups and three measures, critical $F(4, 204) = 2.42$.

Participants

We recruited participants from universities in the United States and Hong Kong for a 1-hr online study on leadership through university subject pools, email listservs, and lab web pages. Participants completed a prescreening questionnaire. European Americans were required to identify as White/European American, be born in the United States or Canada, and currently live in the United States. East Asian Americans were required to identify as East Asian/East Asian American, be born in the United States or an East Asian country, and currently live in the United States. Hong Kong Chinese were required to identify as Chinese, be born in Hong Kong or China, and currently live in Hong Kong.

We invited 199 European Americans, 133 East Asian Americans, and 130 Hong Kong Chinese to participate. Following the same exclusion procedure as Study 1, we excluded participants who had missing data or typed random, nonsense letters for open-ended questions (seven participants) as well as participants who had previously participated in the study (six participants). Our final sample consisted of 449 participants: 197 European Americans (71.1% female, 28.9% male), 129 East Asian Americans (72.9% female, 27.1% male), and 123 Hong Kong Chinese (72.4% female, 27.6% male).

As in Study 1, participants completed one item from the GEQ (Tsai et al., 2000) that assessed their cultural orientation to mainstream American culture (see Materials and Measures section). The cultural groups differed in their orientation to American culture, $F(2, 446) = 112.61$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.34$. European Americans ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.01$) were significantly more oriented to American culture than East Asian Americans ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.80$), who in turn, were more oriented to American culture than Hong Kong Chinese ($M = 2.61$, $SD = 0.80$), European American versus East Asian American: $t(324) = 4.14$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.23, 0.65], $d = 0.47$; East Asian American versus Hong Kong Chinese: $t(250) = 10.96$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.91, 1.30], $d = 1.38$; European Americans versus Hong Kong Chinese: $t(318) = 14.34$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.33, 1.75], $d = 1.65$. East Asian Americans and Hong Kong Chinese also completed one item that assessed their orientation to East Asian culture and Chinese culture, respectively, and they were similarly oriented to these cultures (East Asian American: $M = 3.10$, $SD = 0.77$; Hong Kong Chinese: $M = 3.01$, $SD = 0.70$), $p = .389$, $d = -0.12$. However, East Asian Americans were significantly more oriented to American than to East Asian culture, $t(95) = 4.09$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.28, 0.80], $d = 0.42$. In contrast, Hong Kong Chinese were more oriented to Chinese culture than to American culture, $t(122) = 4.16$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.21, 0.59], $d = 0.38$.

While the three cultural groups did not differ in gender distribution ($p = .932$, Cramer's $V = 0.02$), they differed in age, $F(2, 443) = 8.57$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$. European Americans ($M = 20.29$, $SD = 3.42$) and East Asian Americans ($M = 19.67$, $SD = 1.68$) were younger than Hong Kong Chinese ($M = 21.12$, $SD = 2.56$), European American versus Hong Kong Chinese: $t(317) = -2.33$, $p = .020$, 95% CI [−1.54, −0.13], $d = -0.27$; East Asian American versus Hong Kong Chinese: $t(248) = -5.32$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.99, −0.92], $d = -0.67$; European American versus East Asian American: $p = .060$, $d = 0.22$. When we controlled for these age differences, the results remained the same, and therefore, we dropped age from our final analyses for parsimony (see Supplemental Section 9b for results controlling for age).

Leader Choice Task

Participants were randomly assigned to one sector: business, government, or research. Participants read three scenarios, each describing an organization in that sector undergoing growth, decline, and stability. We focused on organizations that would be relevant to our university sample (student business, student government, research lab). For example, the growth scenario described a student business organization that was performing above average (e.g., increase in sales); the decline scenario described an organization that was performing below average (e.g., decline in sales); and the stability scenario described an organization that was performing at average levels (e.g., average sales). Examples of business scenarios are presented in Table 2 (see Supplemental Section 8a for examples of student government and research scenarios).

After reading each scenario, participants viewed a set of three candidates who varied in emotional expression but matched participants' ethnicity and gender (e.g., East Asian American female participants saw three Asian female candidates) and were asked to choose one to lead the organization.[2] The presentation order of the three performance scenarios was counterbalanced across participants. The order of the three leader candidates was also counterbalanced across performance scenarios, so that participants saw excited, calm, and neutral candidates in a different order for each scenario, and participants viewed a different set of candidate profiles for each scenario.

Materials and Measures

As in Study 1, European American and East Asian American participants completed the measures in English, and Hong Kong Chinese participants completed the measures in Chinese, except for the AVI, which was presented in both Chinese and English.

[2] While it is possible that having three candidates that matched the participant's self-identified race/ethnicity and gender may have caused suspicion in a corporate setting, participants were from university settings and were asked to make decisions about student organizations, which are more diverse in terms of ethnicity and gender. We did not systematically vary the ethnicity and gender of the leader candidates because this was not the main focus of our study, and doing so would have added considerable length to the study.

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Table 2
Examples of Performance Scenarios in the Business Sector (Study 2)

Performance	Scenario
Growth	Student Business A reported a **substantial increase** in net profits, and the net profits have continued to **increase** over the course of the fiscal quarter. It has also **succeeded in securing additional investors** since the beginning of the fiscal quarter. Further, its product has become **more popular**, as indicated by **increasing brand awareness**. In summary, Student Business B has experienced **considerable growth** throughout the fiscal quarter.
Stability	Student Business B reported **average** sales, with **no change** in revenue over the course of the fiscal quarter. It also received **moderate** student reviews and news coverage, which **have not changed over the course of the quarter**. Further, the number of stores and clubs on campus carrying its product **remained the same**; therefore, the number of customers **has not changed**. In summary, Student Business C has remained **moderate and stable** throughout the fiscal quarter.
Decline	Student Business C experienced a **massive decline** in sales, and the rate has continued to **decrease** over the course of the fiscal quarter. It also has reported a **substantial drop** in the number of sponsorships, as indicated by **fewer companies advertising its product** compared to the beginning of the quarter. Further, it **failed to recover** its original development costs, and **has not made any profit**. In summary, Student Business A has experienced a **substantial downturn** throughout the fiscal quarter.

Note. Selected text is bolded to illustrate differences across the scenarios but was not bolded in the actual study.

Leader Candidate Profiles. We created leader candidate profiles that contained a photo, description of the candidate's education and internship experience, and adjectives that the candidate used to describe themselves. Candidates varied by race (White, Asian), gender (male, female), and emotional expression (excited, calm, neutral). Because there were no well-controlled facial stimuli that varied along these dimensions at the time we conducted the research, we had to develop candidate photos ourselves. We imported White and Asian targets with excited (i.e., bigger, open-mouth) smiles, calm (i.e., smaller, closed-mouth) smiles, and neutral expressions from the Interdisciplinary Affective Science Lab Face Set (Barrett & Bliss-Moreau, 2009) and the Taiwanese Facial Expression Database (Chen & Yen, 2007) into Facegen Modeller (https://facegen.com) to standardize the faces in terms of size and lighting. Although these facial stimuli were used in previous research (Park et al., 2017), we pretested them to ensure that they conveyed the intended emotions for each cultural group. The leader candidate profiles, including photos and descriptions of their education and internship experience, and the pretest results are presented in Supplemental Sections 8b and 8c.

Ideal and Actual Affect. Participants completed the AVI (Tsai et al., 2006) as in Study 1. Internal consistency estimates were high across cultural groups ($\alpha_{\text{ideal HAP}}$: .77–.80; $\alpha_{\text{actual HAP}}$: .80–.82; $\alpha_{\text{ideal LAP}}$: .79–.85; $\alpha_{\text{actual LAP}}$: .85 for all groups).

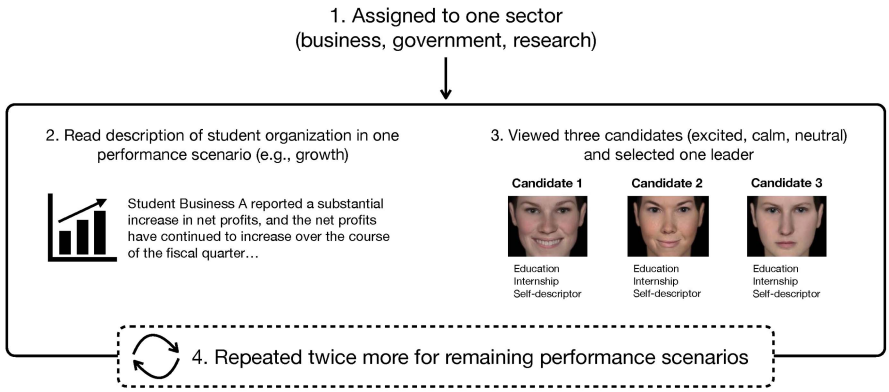
Cultural Orientation. Participants completed the same item from the GEQ (Tsai et al., 2000) assessing their orientation to American culture, as in Study 1. In addition, East Asian Americans and Hong Kong Chinese rated the extent to which they were oriented to East Asian and Chinese culture, respectively.

Demographics. Participants reported their ethnicity, gender, age, year in school, education and work experience, language(s) spoken, birth country, age living in the United States (if applicable), parents' birthplaces, and parents' and grandparents' ethnicities.

Procedure

Participants first answered questions about their ethnicity and gender. Participants then completed the leader choice task for three performance scenarios (growth, stability, decline) within one sector (Figure 3). Afterward, participants completed the AVI and the rest of

Figure 3
Schematic of Leader Choice Task (Study 2)



Note. Leader candidates were matched to each participant's self-reported ethnicity and gender, and the order in which the three candidates were presented was counterbalanced across performance scenarios. The order in which the performance scenarios were presented was also counterbalanced. The faces were taken from the Interdisciplinary Affective Science Lab Face Set (Barrett & Bliss-Moreau, 2009) and the Taiwanese Facial Expression Database (L. F. Chen & Yen, 2007) and standardized with Facegen Modeller. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

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the demographics. Finally, they were debriefed and compensated as in Study 1.

Data Analyses and Results

Are There Cultural Differences in Ideal Affect?

We examined whether cultural differences in ideal HAP and LAP emerged, controlling for actual HAP and LAP. While the Cultural Group × Ideal Affect interaction was not significant ($p = .259$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$; see Supplemental Section 4 for significant main effects), we conducted a planned comparison to test if European Americans valued HAP more than Hong Kong Chinese.

Consistent with Study 1, European Americans ($M = 0.57$, $SE = 0.03$) and East Asian Americans ($M = 0.56$, $SE = 0.03$) valued HAP more than Hong Kong Chinese ($M = 0.46$, $SE = 0.03$), but did not differ from each other, European American versus Hong Kong Chinese: $p = .013$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.19], $d = 0.34$; East Asian American versus Hong Kong Chinese: $p = .026$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.20], $d = 0.33$; European American versus East Asian American: $p = .946$, $d = 0.01$. East Asian Americans ($M = 0.96$, $SE = 0.03$) also valued LAP more than European Americans ($M = 0.86$, $SE = 0.03$) and Hong Kong Chinese ($M = 0.83$, $SE = 0.03$), East Asian American versus Hong Kong Chinese: $p = .003$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.22], $d = 0.42$; European American versus East Asian American: $p = .016$, 95% CI [−0.18, −0.02], $d = -0.31$. However, European Americans and Hong Kong Chinese did not differ in ideal LAP, $p = .401$, $d = 0.11$, which again is consistent with recent trends (Tsai et al., 2025).

Comparing Models: Do Cultural Differences in Leader Choice Vary by Performance Scenario and Sector?

To test whether cultural differences in leader choices varied by performance scenario and sector, we fit four binary logistic regression models to predict choice of excited or calm leaders (0 = leader not chosen, 1 = leader chosen) and then compared model fit (see Supplemental Section 9a for models predicting choice of neutral leaders).

In Model 1, we entered cultural group (European American, East Asian American, Hong Kong Chinese) as the fixed effect. In Model 2, we added performance scenario (growth, stability, decline) and the Cultural Group × Performance Scenario interaction. In Model 3, we entered cultural group, sector (business, government, research) and the Cultural Group × Sector interaction. In Model 4, we included cultural group, performance scenario, sector, all two-way interactions, and the three-way interaction. Categorical predictors were dummy coded with Hong Kong Chinese, decline, and research group serving as the reference categories for cultural group, performance scenario, and sector, respectively. Although we initially entered participants as random intercepts in all four models, there was little variability among participants and therefore we omitted the random effects from the models described below.

We then used two methods to compare the models and to select the best fitting, most parsimonious one. For nested models (e.g., Model 1 vs. Model 2), we used the "anova" function to compare whether one model (e.g., Model 2) had significantly lower deviance than the other (e.g., Model 1). To compare nonnested models (e.g., Model 2 vs. Model 3) as well as models with more predictors (e.g., Model 3 vs. Model 4), we compared the Bayesian information criterion to determine which model had the lower Bayesian information criterion and better fit (Charpentier et al., 2016; Dziak et al., 2020; Kass & Raftery, 1995).

Model 2, which included cultural group, performance scenario, and their interaction, was the best fit to predict the choice of both excited and calm leaders (Table 3). This suggested that leader preferences depended on participant's culture as well as the organization's performance (growth, stability, decline), *but not on the sector of the organization* (student business, government, research group). Results of Model 2 are presented below. To parse significant Cultural Group × Performance Scenario interactions, we examined the simple effects using the "emmeans" package (Lenth, 2024) and calculated odds ratios, adjusting p values for multiple comparisons.

Decomposing the Cultural Group × Performance Scenario Interaction in Model 2

Choice of Excited Leaders. There were significant Cultural Group × Performance Scenario interactions for growth and stability

Table 3
Models to Predict Choice of Excited and Calm Leaders (Study 2)

Model predictor	Comparison of nested models (AIC)	Comparison of nonnested models (BIC)	AIC	BIC	Log likelihood	Deviance
Choice of excited leaders						
M1: Cultural group			1,794.1	1,809.7	−894.0	1,788.1
M2: Cultural Group × Performance Scenario	Outperforms M1: $\chi^2(6) = 37.42$, $p < .001$		1,768.6	1,815.5	−875.3	1,750.6
M3: Cultural Group × Sector	Does not outperform M1: $\chi^2(6) = 2.85$, $p = .827$	Does not outperform M2	1,803.2	1,850.1	−892.6	1,785.2
M4: Cultural Group × Sector × Performance Scenario		Does not outperform M1, M2, or M3	1,766.7	1,907.3	−856.4	1,712.7
Choice of calm leaders						
M1: Cultural group			1,670.0	1,685.6	−832.0	1,664.0
M2: Cultural Group × Performance Scenario	Outperforms M1:$\chi^2(6) = 22.06$, $p = .001$		1,659.9	1,706.8	−821.0	1,641.9
M3: Cultural Group × Sector	Does not outperform M1: $\chi^2(6) = 3.07$, $p = .800$	Does not outperform M2	1,678.9	1,725.7	−830.4	1,660.9
M4: Cultural Group × Sector × Performance Scenario		Does not outperform M1, M2, or M3	1,684.8	1,825.4	−815.4	1,630.8

Note. AIC = Akaike information criterion; BIC = Bayesian information criterion; M1 = Model 1; M2 = Model 2; M3 = Model 3; M4 = Model 4.

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versus decline (Table 4), suggesting that the likelihood of choosing excited leaders for organizations in these scenarios differed across cultures.

Between-Culture Comparisons. As predicted, when organizations were in *growth*, European Americans were 2.76 times more likely to choose excited leaders than Hong Kong Chinese, 95% CI [1.56, 4.89], $p < .001$. East Asian Americans were also 3.79 times more likely to choose excited leaders than were Hong Kong Chinese, 95% CI [2.03, 7.10], $p < .001$. European Americans and East Asian Americans did not differ from each other in their likelihood of choosing excited leaders when organizations were undergoing growth, $p = .355$.

When organizations were *stable*, both European Americans and East Asian Americans were more likely to choose excited leaders than were Hong Kong Chinese, and again they did not differ from each other, European American versus Hong Kong Chinese: $OR = 2.63$, 95% CI [1.43, 4.82], $p = .001$; East Asian American versus Hong Kong Chinese: $OR = 3.45$, 95% CI [1.80, 6.61], $p < .001$; European American versus East Asian American: $p = .458$.

When organizations were in *decline*, however, there were no differences among the three cultural groups: European Americans, East Asian Americans, and Hong Kong Chinese were similar in their likelihood of choosing excited leaders, $ps > .650$.

Within-Culture Comparisons. Within cultural groups, European Americans were 2.06 times more likely to choose excited leaders for organizations in growth compared to decline, 95% CI [1.27, 3.34], $p = .001$. However, European Americans did not differ in their likelihood of choosing excited leaders between stability and decline or between stability and growth, $ps > .087$. East Asian Americans were 3.27 times more likely to choose excited leaders for organizations in growth than decline, 95% CI [1.77, 6.01], $p < .001$. They were also 2.03 times more likely to choose excited leaders in stability compared to decline, 95% CI [1.11, 3.71], $p = .016$, but did not differ between stability and growth, $p = .145$. In contrast, Hong Kong Chinese were as likely to choose excited leaders across growth, stability, and decline scenarios, $ps > .259$.

Choice of Calm Leaders. There were significant Cultural Group × Performance Scenario interactions for growth and stability versus decline (Table 4), again suggesting that the likelihood of choosing calm leaders differed across these scenarios for the cultural groups.

Between-Culture Comparisons. As predicted, when organizations were in *growth*, European Americans and East Asian Americans were less likely to choose calm leaders than Hong Kong Chinese, $ps < .001$, European American versus Hong Kong Chinese: $OR = 0.36$, 95% CI [0.21, 0.63]; East Asian American versus Hong Kong Chinese: $OR = 0.34$, 95% CI [0.18, 0.63]. In fact, Hong Kong Chinese were 2.78 times more likely than European Americans and 2.95 times more likely than East Asian Americans to choose calm leaders when organizations were undergoing growth. European Americans and East Asian Americans did not differ from each other in their likelihood of choosing calm leaders during growth, $p = .970$.

When organizations were *stable*, East Asian Americans were less likely to choose calm leaders than were Hong Kong Chinese, $OR = 0.37$, 95% CI [0.19, 0.71], $p = .001$. In other words, Hong Kong Chinese were 2.73 times more likely to choose calm leaders than East Asian Americans. European Americans, however, did not differ from East Asian Americans or Hong Kong Chinese in their likelihood of choosing calm leaders during stability, $ps > .109$.

When organizations were in *decline*, there were no cultural differences in the likelihood of choosing calm leaders, $ps > .407$.

Within-Culture Comparisons. Within cultures, European Americans and East Asian Americans were similarly likely to choose calm leaders during growth, stability, and decline (European American: $ps > .214$; East Asian American: $ps > .265$). In contrast, Hong Kong Chinese were significantly *more* likely to choose calm leaders during growth than decline, $OR = 2.86$, 95% CI [1.53, 5.34], $p < .001$. Hong Kong Chinese, however, did not differ in their likelihood of choosing calm leaders during stability and decline or during stability and growth, $ps > .104$. Thus, unlike Study 1, in Study 2, Hong Kong Chinese *did* differ in their choice of calm leaders during growth and decline conditions.

In summary, based on our model comparisons, cultural group and organizational performance—but not the sector of the organization—influenced participants' leader choices in response to hypothetical scenarios. When organizations were undergoing growth, European Americans and East Asian Americans were more likely to choose

Table 4
Models to Predict Choice of Excited and Calm Leaders (Study 2)

Comparison	Model statistic			
	b	*SE*	*z*	*p*
Choice of excited leaders				
Cultural Group × Performance Scenario (growth vs. decline)				
European Americans (vs. Hong Kong Chinese)	0.80	.34	2.33	.020
East Asian Americans (vs. Hong Kong Chinese)	1.26	.38	3.32	<.001
Cultural Group × Performance Scenario (stability vs. decline)				
European Americans (vs. Hong Kong Chinese)	0.75	.36	2.11	.034
East Asian Americans (vs. Hong Kong Chinese)	1.16	.39	3.01	.003
Choice of calm leaders				
Cultural Group × Performance Scenario (growth vs. decline)				
European Americans (vs. Hong Kong Chinese)	−0.70	.35	−1.99	.047
East Asian Americans (vs. Hong Kong Chinese)	−0.86	.38	−2.23	.026
Cultural Group × Performance Scenario (stability vs. decline)				
European Americans (vs. Hong Kong Chinese)	−0.15	.35	−.43	.670
East Asian Americans (vs. Hong Kong Chinese)	−0.78	.40	−1.98	.048

Note. Cultural group and performance scenario were dummy coded, with Hong Kong Chinese and decline serving as the reference groups, respectively. *SE* = standard error.

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excited leaders and less likely to choose calm leaders than were Hong Kong Chinese. When organizations were stable, most of the cultural differences in choice of the excited leader held, but only some of the cultural differences in choice of the calm leader did. When organizations were in decline, however, there were no cultural differences in the likelihood of choosing excited or calm leaders. Moreover, European Americans and East Asian Americans chose excited leaders more during growth than decline, whereas Hong Kong Chinese chose calm leaders more during growth than decline.

To help illustrate these findings, Figure 4 shows the percentage of participants from each cultural group that chose each candidate during growth, stability, and decline.

Do Cultural Differences in Ideal Affect Mediate Differences in Leader Choice During Growth?

Choice of Excited Leader. As in Study 1, we tested whether ideal HAP mediated cultural differences in choice of the excited leader during organizational growth. We again collapsed across European Americans and East Asian Americans because they did not differ in ideal HAP or their likelihood of choosing the excited leader during growth (see Supplemental Section 9c for analyses using three cultural groups). Contrary to hypotheses and Study 1, the indirect effect was *not* significant, indirect effect = 0.02, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [−0.04, 0.08], and ideal HAP (controlling for actual HAP) did *not* predict choice after accounting for cultural group, $p = .554$. However, the direct effect of cultural group on choice of the excited leader remained significant, $B = 0.55$, $SE = 0.12$, $z = 4.76$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.33, 0.78]. It is possible that ideal HAP did not account for additional variance above and beyond cultural group, which we have observed in prior work (e.g., Blevins et al., 2023). To test whether individual differences in ideal HAP alone were associated with choice of the excited leader, we conducted a regression, controlling for actual HAP. Supporting our predictions, ideal HAP significantly predicted choice of the excited leader, $B = 0.29$, $SE = 0.12$, $Wald = 5.71$, $p = .017$.

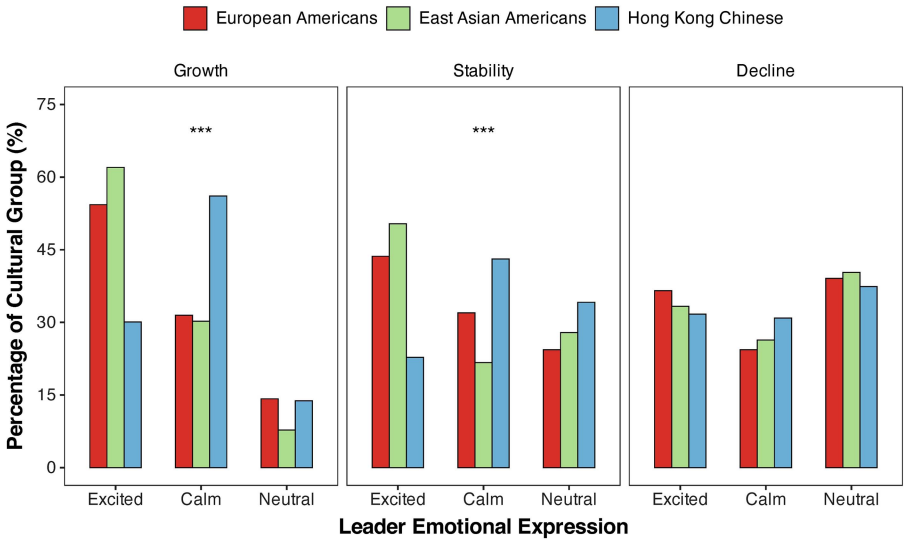
Choice of Calm Leader. We then tested whether ideal LAP mediated cultural differences in choice of the calm leader during growth. The indirect effect was not significant, indirect effect = 0.02, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [−0.03, 0.08], and ideal LAP (controlling for actual LAP) did not predict choice after accounting for cultural group, $p = .453$, but the direct effect of cultural group on choice of the calm leader remained significant, $B = -0.53$, $SE = 0.11$, $z = -4.74$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.75, −0.31]. This was perhaps not surprising because as in Study 1, European Americans and Hong Kong Chinese did not differ in their ideal LAP. Unlike Study 1, however, when we conducted a regression analysis across cultural groups to examine whether ideal LAP, controlling for actual LAP, predicted choice of the calm leader, we found that it did not, $p = .716$.

Study 2 Discussion

Consistent with Study 1, when participants read hypothetical scenarios about work-related student organizations, European Americans and East Asian Americans were more likely to choose excited leaders and less likely to choose calm leaders than Hong Kong Chinese for organizations undergoing growth, but these cultural differences disappeared for organizations undergoing decline. As in Study 1, East Asian Americans resembled their European American counterparts in their choices of excited leaders. Moreover, all three cultural groups showed changes in their leader choices across performance scenarios: European Americans and East Asian Americans were more likely to choose excited leaders during growth than decline, and Hong Kong Chinese were more likely to choose calm leaders during growth than decline. During decline, participants

Figure 4

Leader Choice Across Sectors by Performance Scenario and Cultural Group (Study 2)



Note. Asterisks denote significant cultural differences in the distribution of participants who chose excited, calm, and neutral leaders within the performance scenario based on chi-squared analyses (Supplemental Section 10). See the online article for the color version of this figure.
*** $p < .001$.

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appeared to choose excited, calm, and neutral leaders to similar degrees, suggesting that they were open to all options. This is a different pattern from Study 1, where there was a preference for the nonemotional option during decline. This might be due to the fact that the organizations were work-related and/or hypothetical, making it less clear to participants which choice was best.

Cultural differences in choice of the excited leader during growth were mediated by cultural differences in ideal HAP in Study 1 but not Study 2, although ideal HAP was significantly associated with choice of the excited leader during growth. This might have been because there was significant overlapping variance between cultural group and ideal HAP, which we have seen in prior work (Blevins et al., 2023). Also contrary to Study 1, ideal LAP was not associated with choice of the calm leader during growth, suggesting that this particular association may be less consistent than the link between ideal HAP and choice of the excited leader.

Finally, some cultural differences in choice of excited and calm leaders emerged for organizations that were stable, although the magnitude of these differences was smaller than those for growth. These findings suggest that there may be more continuous features of growth and decline that are important in determining when ideal affect matters for leader choice. We explored this and other questions in the next study.

Study 3: Two Potential Mechanisms

While Studies 1 and 2 show a clear association between ideal HAP and choice of the excited leader during growth, they do not speak to how this occurs. In previous work, we demonstrated that people judge others more positively when others' emotional expressions match people's ideal affect, which in turn increases their willingness to share resources with or hire those individuals (Bencharit et al., 2019; Cachia et al., 2025; Park et al., 2020; Tsai et al., 2019). We examined whether a similar process occurred for leader choice and if so, how features of organizational performance might moderate this process.

Study 2 findings suggest that there may be more continuous features of growth and decline that are important in determining when ideal affect matters for leader choice. For instance, growth may be perceived as more favorable and beneficial, as well as less threatening or uncertain, than decline. Therefore, one possibility is that under more favorable, more predictable, and less threatening conditions, people's ideal affect may more strongly predict their judgments of candidates, which influences their leader choices. Another possibility is that people's ideal affect may influence their judgments of candidates regardless of organizational performance, but these judgments may have a stronger influence on leader choice when conditions are more favorable, more predictable, and less threatening.

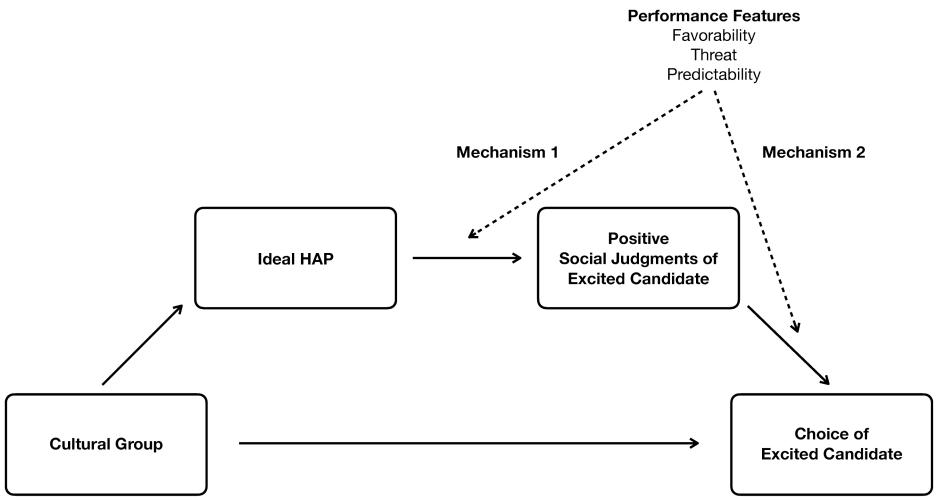
To test these two possible mechanisms (illustrated in Figure 5), in Study 3, we asked participants to rate how favorable, threatening, and predictable they perceived the organization's performance to be after reading the scenarios, and then to choose a leader. We focused on the relationship between ideal HAP and choice of the excited leader because it was more consistent than the link between ideal LAP and choice of the calm leader in Studies 1 and 2.

Hypotheses

We tested two mechanisms (Figure 5), focusing on choice of excited leaders. For both mechanisms, we predicted that: (a) European Americans and East Asian Americans would choose excited leaders more than Hong Kong Chinese and that (b) European Americans and East Asian Americans would value HAP more than Hong Kong Chinese. Mechanism 1 predicted that (c) ideal HAP would be associated with positive social judgments of the excited candidate, especially when the organization's performance was more favorable, more predictable, and less threatening, and that (d) positive social judgments of the excited candidate

Figure 5

Two Potential Mechanisms for How Ideal Affect May Shape Leader Choice Under Different Performance Scenarios (Study 3)



Note. HAP = high arousal positive.

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would predict choice of the excited candidate. In contrast, Mechanism 2 predicted that (c) ideal HAP would be associated with positive social judgments of the excited candidate, and that (d) positive social judgments of the excited candidate would predict choice of the excited candidate as the leader, especially when the organization's performance was more favorable, more predictable, and less threatening. Thus, the two mechanisms differed in how features of the performance scenario moderated associations between ideal HAP, judgments of the excited candidate, and choice of the excited candidate as leader.

Method

Power Analysis

We conducted two preregistered power analyses prior to data collection. To replicate the effects found in Study 2, we needed 279 participants to achieve 80% power, $f^2 = 0.05$; seven total predictors; critical $F(6, 271) = 2.13$. To estimate sample sizes for the predicted indirect effect of ideal HAP and positive social judgments on choice of the excited leader, we based our power analysis on a linear multiple regression deviation from 0. Based on the power analysis, we needed 100 participants for each condition, 80% power; estimated $f^2 = 0.10$, $F(2, 97) = 3.09$. We multiplied this value by three since there were three scenarios, and therefore, we aimed to recruit at least 300 participants to test the predicted moderated mediation.

Participants

We invited 245 European American, 190 East Asian American, and 165 Hong Kong Chinese university students and community affiliates using the same eligibility criteria and recruitment methods as in Study 2. A total of 15 European Americans, 14 East Asian Americans, and 13 Hong Kong Chinese participants were excluded from data analysis because of data quality concerns (e.g., responding to open-ended questions with random letters or numbers) or because they had already participated in the present study or in a related one. Thus, our final sample consisted of 558 participants: 230 European Americans (73.0% female, 27.0% male), 176 East Asian Americans (74.4% female, 25.6% male), and 152 Hong Kong Chinese (66.4% female, 33.6% male).

As in Studies 1 and 2, European Americans ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 0.85$) were more oriented to American culture than East Asian Americans ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.86$) were, $t(404) = 6.01$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.35, 0.68], $d = 0.60$. East Asian Americans ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 1.04$) and Hong Kong Chinese ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 0.87$) were similarly oriented to East Asian culture and Chinese culture, respectively, $p = .721$, $d = -0.04$. Within cultures, East Asian Americans were significantly more oriented to American than to East Asian culture, $t(161) = 7.71$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.67, 1.12], $d = 0.61$.

The three cultural groups did not differ in gender distribution, $p = .233$, Cramer's $V = 0.07$, but differed in age, $F(2, 554) = 94.90$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.26$. European Americans ($M = 25.60$, $SD = 4.32$) were older than East Asian Americans ($M = 23.84$, $SD = 4.11$), who in turn, were older than Hong Kong Chinese ($M = 20.21$, $SD = 1.91$), $ps < .001$, European American versus Hong Kong Chinese: $d = 1.51$, East Asian Americans versus Hong Kong Chinese: $d = 1.10$, European American versus East Asian American: $d = 0.42$. When we controlled for age, the results remained the same, so we dropped it from our final analyses for parsimony.

Leader Choice Task

Participants were randomly assigned to read one scenario about a student business that was undergoing either growth, stability, or decline and then rated the scenario along several features. Participants then viewed three candidates who varied in their emotional expression (excited, calm, and neutral) but matched participants' ethnicity and gender; made social judgments about each candidate; and then selected one to be the leader. We used the business scenarios and candidate profiles from Study 2, and the order in which the candidates were presented was counterbalanced.

Materials and Measures

As in Studies 1 and 2, European American and East Asian American participants completed the study in English, and Hong Kong Chinese completed the study in Chinese.

Performance Scenario Features. Participants rated the degree to which they thought that the business scenario was predictable, inescapable, uncertain, possible to change, threatening to the future of the business, and beneficial for the future of the business on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). Based on a factor analysis (Supplemental Section 11a), we created three aggregates: (1) *threatening* (threatening, uncertain), (2) *favorable* (beneficial, possible to change), and (3) *predictable* (predictable, inescapable). Because each aggregate only had two items, internal consistencies were essentially Pearson-moment correlations and suggested moderate reliability ($\alpha_{threatening}$: .41–.74; $\alpha_{favorable}$: .41–.42; $\alpha_{predictable}$: .32–.51).

We ipsatized performance scenario ratings to control for cultural differences in response style, following the procedures described earlier. To test whether participants rated favorability, threat, and predictability differently across the performance scenarios, we conducted a 3 (Cultural Group [between-subjects: European American, East Asian American, Hong Kong Chinese]) × 3 (Performance Scenario [between-subjects: growth, stability, decline]) mixed-design ANOVA (see Supplemental Section 11b for full description of main effects and interactions).

Across the three cultural groups, participants rated the growth scenario as more favorable than the decline scenario (growth: $M = 0.70$, $SE = 0.04$; decline: $M = -0.33$, $SE = 0.04$), $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.92, 1.15], $d = 1.91$. They also rated the growth scenario as less threatening than the decline scenario (growth: $M = -0.50$, $SE = 0.04$; decline: $M = 0.52$, $SE = 0.04$), $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.91, 1.12], $d = 1.99$. However, participants rated the growth and decline scenarios as similarly predictable (growth: $M = -0.20$, $SE = 0.04$; decline: $M = -0.18$, $SE = 0.04$), $p = .697$, $d = 0.04$.

Participants rated the stability scenario as less favorable ($M = 0.11$, $SE = 0.04$) than the growth scenario but more favorable than the decline scenario; as similarly threatening ($M = -0.52$, $SE = 0.04$) as the growth scenario but less threatening than the decline scenario; and more predictable ($M = 0.41$, $SE = 0.04$) than the growth and decline scenarios, for favorability, growth versus stability: $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.48, 0.70], $d = 1.10$, stability versus decline: $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.33, 0.55], $d = 0.82$; for threat, decline versus stability:

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$p < .001$, 95% CI [0.93, 1.14], $d = 2.04$, stability versus growth: $p = .698$, $d = 0.04$; for predictability, stability versus growth: $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.51, 0.72], $d = 1.20$, stability versus decline: $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.49, 0.70], $d = 1.17$.

Because there were no differences in predictability between growth and decline scenarios, we dropped this variable from our analyses and focused on how favorable and how threatening the business was as features of growth and decline.

Social Judgments of Candidates. Participants made a series of social judgments about each candidate on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). Specifically, participants rated the candidates on the following characteristics: extraverted, transparent, team-oriented, flexible, friendly, self-directed, competent, experienced, assertive, articulate, future-oriented, and able to manage stress. We conducted a factor analysis on the social judgments (see Supplemental Section 12), which revealed two factors: (1) *competent* (articulate, competent, experienced, future-oriented, able to manage stress, self-directed, assertive) and (2) *affiliative* (extraverted, flexible, friendly, team-oriented, transparent). Because the aggregates were correlated (Supplemental Table S13a), and the pattern of findings was similar for each aggregate, we aggregated all 12 judgments into an overall positive social judgment composite ($\alpha_{excited}$: .78–.86; α_{calm}: .79–.86; $\alpha_{neutral}$: .84–.86).

Ideal and Actual Affect. As in Studies 1 and 2, participants completed the AVI. Because data were collected in fall of 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we modified the instructions slightly to ask participants to report on their prepandemic ideal and actual affect. Internal consistency estimates were high across cultural groups ($\alpha_{ideal\ HAP}$: .76–.84; $\alpha_{actual\ HAP}$: .82–.88; $\alpha_{ideal\ LAP}$: .78–.82; $\alpha_{actual\ LAP}$: .83–.89).

Cultural Orientation. In Study 3, East Asian Americans were asked about their orientation to American culture and to East Asian culture, as in Studies 1 and 2. Hong Kong Chinese were asked about their orientation to Chinese culture, and European Americans were asked about their orientation to American culture.

Demographics. We collected the same demographics as in Study 2.

Procedure

Participants completed the leader choice task, AVI, and demographic measures. At the end of the study, participants were debriefed and compensated.

Data Analyses and Results

We first replicated cultural differences in choice of the excited and calm leaders during growth (see Supplemental Section 13a for descriptives, analyses, and results for excited, calm, and neutral leaders). We focused on ideal HAP and choice of excited leaders for the rest of our analyses because it was the most consistent association across studies.

As we observed in Studies 1 and 2, European Americans and East Asian Americans were more likely to choose excited leaders during growth than Hong Kong Chinese, and there were no significant cultural differences in choice of excited leaders during decline. Within-cultural groups, similar to Study 2 findings, European Americans and East Asian Americans were more likely to choose excited leaders in growth than decline, whereas Hong Kong Chinese were similarly likely to choose excited leaders across growth, stability, and decline scenarios.

Next, we used the "PROCESS" macro with 5,000 bias-corrected boot-strapped resamples to simultaneously test which mechanism best accounted for these differences. We entered cultural group as the independent variable (+1 = European Americans and East Asian Americans, −1 = Hong Kong Chinese), collapsing across European Americans and East Asian Americans because they did not differ in their ideal HAP or choice of the excited leader in Studies 1 and 2. We entered ideal HAP as the first serial mediator (controlling for actual HAP), positive ratings of the excited candidate as the second serial mediator, and choice of the excited candidate as leader as the dependent variable. We defined the moderator as mean-centered favorability (or threat) ratings across the three performance scenarios (growth, stability, and decline). The Pearson-moment correlations among the variables in these moderated mediation analyses are presented in Supplemental Section 13b. To test Mechanism 1, we examined whether favorability ratings moderated the link between ideal HAP and positive social judgments of the excited candidate, and to test Mechanism 2, we examined whether favorability ratings moderated the link between positive social judgments and choice of the excited candidate as leader.

As shown in Figure 6, European Americans and East Asian Americans valued HAP more than Hong Kong Chinese, $B = 0.11$, $SE = 0.03$, $t = 3.39$, $p = .001$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.17]. Ideal HAP, in turn, predicted positive social judgments of the excited candidate, although this relationship depended on favorability, ideal HAP: $B = 0.07$, $SE = 0.03$, $t = 2.25$, $p = .025$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.13], Ideal HAP × Favorability: $B = 0.09$, $SE = 0.03$, $t = 3.15$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.14]. Consistent with Mechanism 1, ideal HAP predicted positive judgments of the excited candidates when participants viewed the situation as highly (+1 *SD* from the mean) favorable or moderately (mean) favorable, but not when they viewed the situation as less (−1 *SD* from the mean) favorable, high favorability: indirect effect = .02, $SE = 0.01$, 95% CI [0.003, 0.05]; moderate favorability: indirect effect = 0.01, $SE = 0.01$, 95% CI [0.001, 0.02]; low favorability: indirect effect = −0.002, $SE = 0.01$, 95% CI [−0.02, 0.01] (see Supplemental Section 13c for visualization). Positive social judgments of the excited candidate then predicted participants' choice of the excited candidate as leader, $B = 1.34$, $SE = 0.22$, $z = 6.11$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.91, 1.77]. This relationship was similar across all levels of favorability, providing no evidence for Mechanism 2, Positive Social Judgments × Favorability: $B = 0.01$, $SE = 0.21$, $z = 0.04$, $p = .965$. We also found converging results when we used a Bayesian approach (see Supplemental Section 13d).

We then tested the two mechanisms using threat ratings of the performance scenarios as the moderator. There was no significant interaction between ideal HAP and threat ratings, $p = .360$, and no significant interaction between positive social judgments and threat ratings, $p = .108$. These results suggest that how threatening the conditions were did not moderate the relationship between cultural differences in ideal HAP, judgment of the excited candidate, and choice of the excited candidate as leader. See Supplemental Sections 13e–f for analyses controlling for age, using other moderators, separating competence and affiliation aggregates, and separating the three cultural groups.

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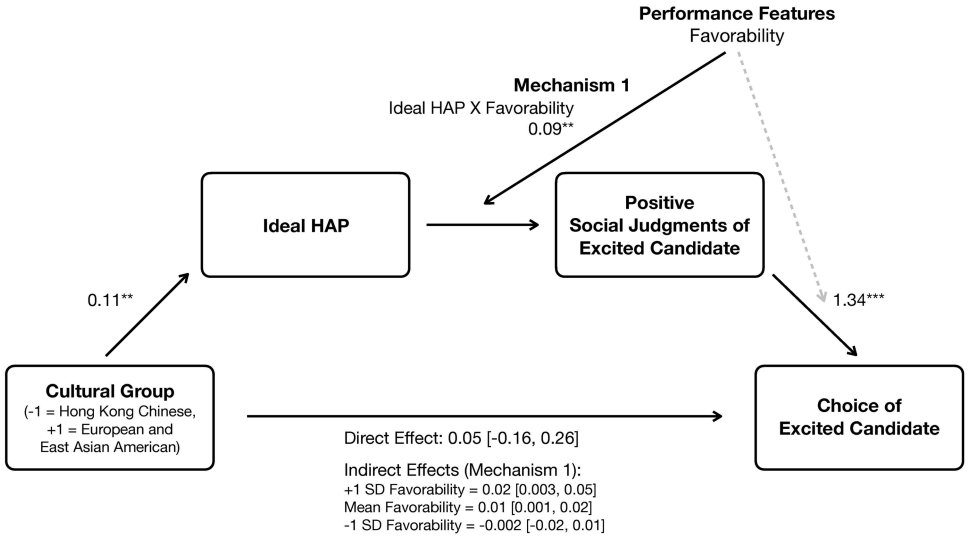
Figure 6
Support for Mechanism 1 (Study 3)



Note. Favorability ratings of the scenario moderated the indirect effect of ideal HAP on positive judgments of the excited candidate. HAP = high arousal positive.
** $p < .010$. *** $p < .001$.

In summary, we found evidence for Mechanism 1 but not Mechanism 2 (Figure 6): the more favorable the conditions, the greater the relationship between participants' ideal HAP and their positive judgments of the excited candidate, which in turn, increased their likelihood of choosing the excited candidate as leader. These findings are consistent with the prediction that under less favorable conditions, people may base their judgments of leader candidates on different factors than they do under more favorable conditions.

Study 3 Discussion

Study 3 tested two ways in which performance scenario might moderate the associations between people's ideal affect, their judgments of leader candidates, and their ultimate choice of a leader. Our findings suggest that when conditions are favorable for an organization, people's ideal affect is more likely to shape their judgments of leader candidates than when conditions are not favorable, which in turn impacts their subsequent leader choices. Contrary to our predictions, the link between ideal affect and social judgments of the candidates did not vary as a function of how threatening conditions were. Favorability ratings did *not* influence the link between social judgments and leader choice, suggesting that people's choice of leaders depends on how they judge the candidates, regardless of how their organization is performing.

General Discussion

In three studies conducted in the United States and Hong Kong, we examined the emotional qualities that people look for in their leaders when their organizations are undergoing growth or decline. Although previous studies have examined cultural differences in leader choices or have examined leader choices during various performance scenarios, few if any have looked at how leader choices during various performance scenarios might vary across cultures, and the role that cultural differences in emotion might play in this process.

Cultural Differences in Leader Choice During Growth but Not Decline

As predicted, we observed consistent cultural differences in leader choices among European Americans, East Asian Americans, and Hong Kong Chinese during growth, but not decline. Specifically, European Americans and East Asian Americans were more likely to choose excited and less likely to choose calm candidates as leaders than were Hong Kong Chinese during growth. We observed a similar pattern during stability in Study 2. However, during decline, there were no cultural differences in leader choice. Across cultures, in Study 1, participants were more likely to see ideal leaders for their own organizations as nonemotional during decline, but in Study 2, participants chose excited, calm, and neutral leaders to similar degrees.

Comparisons within cultural groups also suggested that overall, people were more likely to choose leaders who reflected their ideal affect during growth than decline, although this was particularly true for European Americans and East Asian Americans. Across all three studies, European Americans and East Asian Americans were more likely to choose excited leaders during growth than decline. While Hong Kong Chinese were more likely to choose calm leaders during growth than decline in Study 2, they showed no significant differences in choices for excited, calm, or neutral leaders in Studies 1 and 3. One possible reason may be the greater dialecticism in Chinese than U.S. contexts characterized in previous research (e.g.,

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Peng & Nisbett, 1999): even under conditions of growth and decline, Hong Kong Chinese may have believed that their circumstances would change, making them prefer calm and neutral leaders who could adjust to these changes (Tsai et al., 2007).

In Study 3, we examined *how* ideal affect might influence leader choices during growth. We observed that when circumstances were more favorable, participants who valued HAP more were more likely to judge the excited candidate positively, and as a result, were more likely to choose that candidate to lead. We did not find this pattern for how threatening circumstances were, suggesting that favorability may be an important aspect of performance that determines whether people choose leaders whose emotional expressions match their cultural ideals. This is consistent with the notion that when people are feeling good, they use heuristics like ideals when making decisions (Kahneman, 2003; Loewenstein et al., 2015; Rast et al., 2012). Study 3 also ruled out the possibility that performance features moderated the link between social judgments and leader choice, suggesting that under different conditions, how people judge candidates still has implications for their ultimate choice of a leader.

What Types of Leaders Do People Look for During Decline?

In Study 1, participants of all cultural groups seemed to prefer calm and nonemotional leaders during decline perhaps to offset the negative emotions, like anxiety and fear, that might accompany these conditions, as well as the instability that might ensue. In Studies 2 and 3, however, participants did not show a clear preference for one type of leader when forced to make a choice. This might also be due to the negative emotions that arise from organizational decline, which might serve as a "stop" signal for members, directing them to think in different ways, and as a result, consider other leader choices (Barr, 1998; Huntsinger et al., 2010). In general, people's leader choices were more varied during decline than growth, suggesting that participants were more open to options that did not necessarily reflect their ideal affect. Future studies are needed to identify what specific factors shape judgments of candidates under these conditions.

East Asian American Leader Choices

Consistent with prior research (Bencharit et al., 2019), our East Asian American samples identified with American *and* East Asian cultures. Even though they were less oriented to American culture than European Americans, they were similar to European Americans in their ideal HAP and their leader choices. This may not be entirely surprising since most East Asian Americans were second generation (see Supplemental Section 1) and therefore primarily raised with U.S. leadership ideals. Of course, it is also possible that these participants may have consciously or unconsciously experienced identity concerns around not being "American" enough and thus overcompensated in their ideal HAP and leader choices to fit American ideals (Cheryan & Monin, 2005). These findings suggest that while East Asian Americans may generally be perceived as not qualified to lead, many (i.e., second generation) may share the same leadership ideals as their European American peers. Future research is needed to explore this further as well as among first-generation East Asian Americans who have had greater exposure to East Asian ideals prior to living in the United States.

Implications for Research on Emotion, Leadership, and Culture

The present work integrates and contributes to research on culture and emotion (Tsai & Clobert, 2019), emotion and organizations (Elfenbein, 2023), and emotion and leader choice (Gooty et al., 2010) in novel and important ways. First, while most studies of emotion and leadership have been conducted in the United States and other Western cultures, our studies examined emotion-based leader choices in the United States and Hong Kong. By including another culture that differs from the United States in its valuation of HAP states, we showed that although people prefer positive emotions (vs. neutral expressions) in their leaders, the specific types of positive emotions they value in their leaders differs by culture during times of organizational growth. Thus, the work is part of increasing efforts to broaden research in psychology beyond Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic contexts (Henrich, 2020).

Second, these studies examine the specific circumstances under which culture may shape emotion-based leader choices (see Ma et al., 2018; Talhelm et al., 2019). While our results contradict previous research suggesting that cultural values may matter more during decline or crisis (Pyszczynski et al., 2015; Sayegh et al., 2004), they are consistent with other findings that people are more open to other and even unorthodox choices during decline (Rast et al., 2012; Ryan et al., 2016). Indeed, European Americans, East Asian Americans, and Hong Kong Chinese did not differ in their choice of excited versus calm leaders during decline.

Finally, this work adds to growing research examining the circumstances under which norm (or ideal) violators attain power in different cultures (e.g., Kinias et al., 2014; Stamkou et al., 2019). Literature on the "glass cliff," suggests that women and people of color in the United States are more likely to be appointed to leadership positions during times of crisis and decline, and are more likely to accept leadership positions in worse circumstances compared to majority group members (Ryan et al., 2016). Building on this work, our research suggests that during times of decline, people may be open to leaders with *emotional* traits that differ from the cultural ideal. That said, our results were not in complete alignment with the glass cliff literature because participants did not systematically choose candidates who showed the opposite expression of their ideals during decline. For instance, Hong Kong Chinese did not choose excited leaders more during decline than growth. Moreover, in the real world, there may be other motivations on the part of companies when appointing more diverse leaders (e.g., wanting a scapegoat). Future research is needed to examine these dynamics in the real world.

Implications for AVT

The present research also supports and extends previous research and theory on ideal affect. First, we replicated previous findings that European Americans valued HAP more than Hong Kong Chinese, and that European Americans judge excited (vs. calm) targets more positively than Hong Kong Chinese because of cultural differences in ideal HAP. In our previous work, however, ideal affect predicted affiliative judgments but not competence judgments (Tsai et al., 2019). In the current work, we show for the first time that ideal HAP

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also predicted competence ratings, likely because competence is more relevant in the context of leadership. Second, previous studies have shown that ideal affect shapes what people do for exercise, what consumer products they purchase, what doctors they prefer, and even with whom they are more willing to share resources (Tsai, 2017, 2021). The current research shows that ideal affect also shapes whom people choose to lead during organizational growth. Third, this work shows the moderators of AVT. Cultural differences in leader choice only occurred under more favorable circumstances (i.e., growth). These findings are part of a series of studies in which we are examining the conditions under which ideal affect match matters more for interpersonal behavior (e.g., Blevins & Tsai, 2025; Cachia et al., 2025; Lua et al., 2025).

This work also raises important questions about ideal LAP. Despite cultural differences in choice of the calm leader, we found no cultural differences in self-reported ideal LAP, and therefore, ideal LAP did not mediate cultural differences in choice of the calm leader. In Tsai et al. (2025), we find that European Americans report higher ideal LAP in more recent compared to previous studies, which may be related to the lack of cultural difference in ideal LAP between European Americans and Hong Kong Chinese in the present studies. Interestingly, this increase in ideal LAP has not translated into greater preferences for calm (vs. excited) options among European Americans, and the results presented here provide another illustration of this. It is of course also possible that the link between ideal LAP and judgment of calm candidates is weaker or more context-specific than that of ideal HAP and judgment of excited candidates. Indeed, whereas in some studies, ideal LAP is associated with more positive ratings of calm options (e.g., Sims et al., 2014), in other studies, there is no such association (Tsai et al., 2019). These findings suggest that ideal LAP may work differently than ideal HAP in the context of social judgment and choice, but more research is clearly needed to understand how.

Practical Implications

Our findings have several practical implications. First, they can be used to increase people's awareness of why they may be drawn to certain candidates over others even when candidates' qualifications are similar. Second, the findings suggest that one reason people vary in their leadership preferences has to do with whether they view their organization as undergoing growth or decline. Third, when being considered for leadership roles, candidates might want to align their emotions with cultural values more during times of growth than decline. Finally, one implication of our findings is the intriguing possibility that cultural barriers to leadership related to emotion that disadvantage certain groups may be easier to overcome during declining conditions.

Limitations and Future Directions

While these studies are the first to demonstrate that culture, ideal affect, and organizational performance influence leader choices, they of course have several limitations. First, we matched participants' and candidates' ethnicity and gender, which may have aroused suspicions among the participants. Although ideal affect match matters more than ethnic and gender matches in the context of resource sharing (Park et al., 2017), this has not yet been demonstrated in the context of leader choice. Second, we used computer-modified photos in Studies 2 and 3, which allowed us greater experimental control but may have led to a less realistic experience. While Study 1 addresses some of these limitations by asking about participants' ideal leaders for their own organizations, more studies are needed to examine whether cultural differences in leader choice exist when participants are viewing real faces of leaders who vary in gender, race, and other demographic characteristics.

Third, while some have argued that during decline, leaders' negative expressions may matter even more than their positive and neutral expressions (see Gooty et al., 2010), we found little evidence for this prediction when participants rated their ideal leaders' qualities in Study 1. That said, in future studies, it would be interesting to include candidates who showed negative emotional expressions like anger and sadness to examine the specific situational and cultural factors that determine when people prefer leaders who show negative emotion (Madera & Smith, 2009; Tiedens, 2001).

Constraints on Generality

Last but not least, it would be important to examine whether these processes hold in the real world for various types of organizations, for circumstances that are more threatening and uncertain, and for other cultural contexts. While our results suggest that cultural differences in ideal affect matter less when organizations are undergoing decline, our decline scenarios did not differ from the growth scenarios in terms of perceived predictability (i.e., certainty). It is possible that our results would be different for larger organizations at the national level and during intense crises where the situation is more threatening to the entire society and the future is unknown (e.g., economic depression, pandemic). Indeed, in Markus et al. (2024), we observed that during the pandemic, nations and their leaders responded in ways that were *consistent* with their cultural defaults—ways of thinking, feeling, and acting—which might suggest that people would be more likely to choose leaders that matched the culture's ideal affect for more intensely threatening and uncertain situations, along the lines of terror management theory or threat rigidity theory. Both of these theoretical frameworks suggest that when faced with threatening events, individuals, groups, and organizations revert to familiar responses and resist innovation (Mazzei et al., 2025). Relatedly, it would be important to examine these processes in other cultural contexts than the ones we focus on here.

Despite these limitations, we demonstrate in three studies that cultural and organizational performance factors interact to shape emotion-based leader choices. When organizations are doing favorably, people are more likely to choose leaders whose emotional expressions match their cultural ideals, resulting in cultural differences in leader choice that are consistent with cultural differences in ideal affect. When organizations are doing poorly, however, these cultural differences in leader choice disappear, suggesting that people consider other factors when choosing a leader during times of decline.

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Received January 5, 2023
Revision received October 27, 2025
Accepted October 31, 2025 ■

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