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**The Role of Paradoxical Leadership in Influencing
Followers to Deal with Multiple Contradictory
Demands**

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Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Management

Adam Smith Business School
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Abstract

Paradoxes have become increasingly prominent and unavoidable in contemporary organisational life. Paradox refers to the simultaneous existence of contradictory yet interdependent elements that persist over time. Rather than problems to be solved, paradoxes represent tensions that need to be managed. Therefore, practising paradoxical leadership is necessary for leaders, especially future leaders, as it may unlock benefits for their followers. Paradoxical leadership refers to a leadership approach that embraces and effectively manages tensions, contradictions, and uncertainties within the workplace.

There is extensive research on paradox and paradoxical leadership. However, how organisational leaders navigate and manage paradoxes by employing paradoxical leadership and influencing followers to deal with them has been overlooked. This research addresses this gap by analysing the role of paradoxical leadership in influencing followers to navigate paradoxes. Accordingly, the main research question guiding this thesis is: *What are the global applications of paradox theory through paradoxical leadership?* To analyse this question, this research addressed two sub-research questions: *How do leaders and followers make sense of and navigate paradoxes in their work?* This is qualitative research. To analyse paradoxical leadership, I drew on paradox theory and conducted 35 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with managers and team members from four multinational clothing companies in Bangladesh.

The findings of this research reveal several perceived sources of paradoxes within organisational settings. Additionally, this research identifies that Bangladeshi organisational culture plays a role in creating paradoxes. In exploring how leaders and followers navigate paradoxes, the research identifies several ways to manage these paradoxes. Furthermore, the research analyses the impact of paradoxical leadership on leaders themselves, revealing both enabling and constraining effects. This research offers both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it advances paradox theory by clarifying the lexicon through which paradoxes are addressed and uncovering the dynamic, cyclical processes by which paradoxes are navigated. It extends the literature by incorporating perspectives from the Global South, highlighting the influence of culture and paradoxes—an area often overlooked in existing studies. Practically, this research provides actionable insights for leaders, followers, and organisations. It underscores the importance of practising paradoxical leadership and fostering a culture of open communication to support leaders and followers in navigating paradoxes. By viewing paradoxes as opportunities rather than obstacles, organisations can enhance innovation, adaptability, and resilience.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this thesis is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Printed Name: Tasfia Mazid

Signature: *Tasfia Mazid*

List of Abbreviations

Abbreviations	Meaning
CIT	Critical Incident Techniques
GLOBE	Global Leadership and Organisational Behaviour Effectiveness
HR	Human Resources
MNCs	Multinational Companies
RMG	Ready-made Garments
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
VUCA	Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview of the Research

Organisations operate in environments that are becoming increasingly uncertain and unstable (Bunders and De Moor, 2023). Factors such as globalisation, technological advancement, incremental and radical innovations, rapid organisational change, and intensified contradictory demands contribute to this uncertainty and instability. To navigate such environments, organisations require the capability to be innovative and effective at the same time (Papachroni and Heracleous, 2020), resulting in tensions. Tensions are knotted across all the processes and systems of organisations (Hahn and Knight, 2021; Pearce et al., 2019). These tensions may be individually purposeful or logical; however, when they occur simultaneously, they give rise to irreconcilable elements, leading to inconsistency and contradiction (Lewis, 2000). These tensions, inconsistencies and contradictions are known as paradoxes (Schad et al., 2019). For managing these multiple paradoxes emerging from uninterpretable and ambiguous situations, paradoxical leadership might be useful (Stewart et al., 2019; Fiorito et al., 2023). Paradoxical leadership is pertinent to manage paradoxes in organisations in constructive ways (Smith et al., 2017). It allows organisations to thrive in the face of ambiguity and encourages a more holistic and adaptive approach to leadership. Scholars advocate for paradox theory as a provocative lens for responding to questions regarding the nature of the paradox and how to manage it (Andriopolous et al., 2014; Smith and Lewis, 2012). Paradox theory represents tensions as contradictory demands that are also persistent and interrelated and that actors should acknowledge, engage with, and manage, rather than attempt to resolve them (Cunha and Putnam, 2019). As a result, paradox theory is uniquely well placed to help understand and manage these tensions generated from such a misbalance (Smith and Tracey, 2016; Lewis, 2000; Cameron, 1986).

Paradoxical leadership is needed because paradoxical leaders can manage ambiguity and unravel paradoxes, and they encourage followers to actively search for and manage paradoxes (Cunha and Putnam, 2019; Fairhurst et al., 2016; Stewart et al., 2019). Additionally, paradoxical leaders provide guidance and assistance to followers in dealing with paradoxes, leading to greater adaptability and efficiency (Sparr et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2021). Paradoxical leadership refers to a dynamic approach in which leaders simultaneously adopt behaviours that are contradictory yet interdependent and complement each other (Putnam, Fairhurst and Banghart, 2016; Pearce et al., 2019). Leaders' opposing behaviours

can be demonstrated as directive versus participative behaviour and empowering versus controlling followers. Paradoxical leadership approach enables leaders to balance organisation's structural demands—such as maintaining hierarchy, enforcing rules, and ensuring efficiency—while also addressing the unique individual needs of both them and their followers (Chen et al., 2021). These individual needs might include fostering personal growth, encouraging autonomy and creativity, or providing flexibility in the work schedule. Scholars argue that paradoxical leadership suggests leaders do not adopt a single leadership style; instead, they simultaneously adopt two opposing yet interdependent styles—such as formal and shared leadership—to navigate a broad range of paradoxes (Stewart et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2021; Li et al., 2018; Zhang and Han, 2019). Contemporary leadership studies have identified paradoxical leadership as a way to deal with organisations' tensions, contradiction, plurality and uncertainty (Hahn and Knight, 2021; Schad et al., 2019; Smith and Tracey, 2016; Waldman et al., 2019). Paradoxical leadership is often regarded as an effective way of recognising the multidimensional paradoxes embedded in organisational tensions while positively influencing the organisation (Lewis, 2000; Lewis, Andriopoulos and Smith, 2014; Volk, Waldman and Barnes, 2023; Zhang et al., 2015).

Therefore, adopting paradox theory as a theoretical lens is beneficial for understanding multidimensional paradoxes and paradoxical leadership (Lewis and Smith, 2014; Cunha and Putnam, 2019). While paradoxical leadership has received considerable scholarly attention (Volk et al., 2023; Karhu and Ritala, 2018; Yang et al., 2021; Sparr et al., 2022; Waldman et al., 2019), there is still little understanding of how leaders simultaneously navigate multiple intricate and interconnected paradoxes and influence followers to deal with the contradictory demands that my research aims to investigate.

1.2 Research Objectives

I aim to explore the role of paradoxical leadership in influencing followers to deal with paradoxes in their organisational work. My research focuses on paradoxes and paradoxical leadership, with a specific focus on multinational clothing companies operating in the Global South (Bangladesh). The objective is to advance understanding of how paradoxical leadership enables leaders, followers, and organisations to engage effectively with competing demands by integrating paradox theory with empirical insights drawn from leaders' and followers' lived experiences of paradoxes in the workplace.

As mentioned in the previous section, paradoxical leadership involves leaders who have the ability to manage and integrate demands that are opposing yet interrelated and complementary. This leadership approach is increasingly recognised as a critical competency in today's dynamic and unpredictable organisational environments. Leaders who adopt this approach navigate paradoxes such as maintaining stability while driving innovation, enforcing discipline while fostering creativity, or pursuing short-term results while keeping long-term goals in sight. This research seeks to investigate how such leadership influences leaders and followers to deal with paradoxes, which are persistent and interdependent contradictions.

The context of the Global South, and specifically Bangladesh, presents a unique and compelling setting for this research. People in the Global South, including those in Bangladesh, generally experience heightened levels of precarity and systemic vulnerability due to factors such as economic instability, limited access to social safety nets, and exposure to environmental and political uncertainties. They constantly navigate competing demands, for instance, balancing tradition with modernisation, managing short-term survival alongside long-term development, and negotiating dependence on global systems versus the pursuit of local autonomy, often without stable institutional or material support. These conditions may intensify the experience of paradox or make individuals especially susceptible to its effects. Consequently, individuals in these regions may be particularly sensitive to paradoxes, offering rich insights into how such paradoxes are navigated in contexts shaped by constraint and resilience. Multinational companies operating in these regions are not exempt from these dynamics. These companies also face a myriad of challenges, including economic and political volatility, regulatory ambiguity, and pronounced cultural diversity. The latter presents both opportunities and managerial difficulties. These challenges often manifest as paradoxes that require a nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of leadership approaches. By focusing on Bangladesh in the Global South, this research aims to uncover insights relevant to the specific context while enriching the wider discussion on paradoxes, paradox theory, and paradoxical leadership. In doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the impact of leadership beyond Western-centric perspectives.

This research aims to achieve three key objectives. First, it investigates how leaders and followers make sense of paradoxes in their organisational work. To do so, it seeks to identify the perceived sources of paradox emergence, analysing the underlying factors that contribute to the coexistence of contradictory yet interdependent demands within organisations.

Understanding these perceived sources provides insight into how leaders and followers interpret and respond to paradoxes in their organisational activities. Second, this research analyses how these paradoxes are navigated and managed in organisational activities, exploring different ways and behaviours leaders and followers adopt to balance competing demands effectively. Third, this research explores the practical applications of paradox theory through paradoxical leadership in organisational contexts. By addressing these objectives, this research offers a deeper understanding of the concepts of paradoxes and paradoxical leadership, shedding light on the broader implications in different settings worldwide.

Ultimately, this research aims to advance both the theoretical and practical understanding of paradoxical leadership by providing empirical evidence and contextual insights that can inform both academic scholarship and organisational practice. By highlighting the role of paradoxical leadership in addressing the unique challenges faced by organisations in the Global South, this research intends to offer valuable guidance for leaders and followers striving to enhance organisational effectiveness and resilience in uncertain and dynamic environments.

1.3 Research Questions

Building on the research objectives outlined earlier, this research intends to explore the following research questions for both theoretical and empirical understanding:

What are the world applications of paradox theory through paradoxical leadership?

- 1) How do leaders and followers make sense of paradoxes in their work?
- 2) How do leaders and followers navigate paradoxes?

This research aims to analyse the role of paradoxical leadership through the lens of paradox theory. Therefore, at the heart of the research question driving the study is the need to understand how the concepts of paradox theory is applied by leaders and followers in the Global South (Bangladesh) to address and manage organisational challenges and tensions. To address the research question in more depth, it is further broken down into two sub-research questions. The first sub-question aims to analyse how leaders and followers make sense of paradoxes in their work. Analysing this is essential for identifying the potential sources of paradoxes and how paradoxes manifest in the activities of organisations. If leaders

and followers cannot recognise or comprehend paradoxes or paradoxical situations they are in, they cannot manage paradoxes efficiently. This leads to the second sub-question, which investigates how leaders and followers navigate paradoxes in their organisational work. It analyses different ways of managing paradoxes. The focus of the second sub-question is also to analyse the impact of paradoxical leadership on leaders, as leaders influence followers to actively search for and deal with paradoxes. By analysing these two sub-questions, I aim to explore the role of paradoxical leadership in influencing followers to deal with paradoxes in their organisational work, which is the main research question.

1.4 Intended Contribution

The research contribution of my research is fourfold, both theoretically and practically.

Firstly, my research enriches the foundation of paradox theory by generating distinct insights into the more cyclical dynamic responses to paradoxes, which is one of the key theoretical contributions of my research. Paradox theory explains paradoxical tensions and ways of dealing with these tensions (Cunha and Putnam, 2019; Smith et al., 2017; Smith and Lewis, 2012). According to Smith and Lewis (2011), paradoxes refer to demands that appear contradictory yet are inherently connected and interdependent, creating ongoing tensions that do not resolve but instead persist over time.

Paradoxical scholars have searched for and identified different approaches for handling paradoxes (Cunha and Putnam, 2019; Smith et al., 2017; Jarzabkowski and Lê, 2017; Lewis, 2000; Smith et al., 2012; Vince and Broussine, 1996). The traditional approach to dealing with tensions is “trade-offs” (Vince and Broussine, 1996). The trade-offs approach posits that tensions can be resolved by trading off one tension in favour of another. Recent studies, however, have questioned the trade-off approach, showing that organisations usually prioritise financial goals when forced to make a choice, indicating that this trade-off approach often leads to profit maximisation (San Cristóbal et al., 2018; Ozanne et al., 2016; Schneider, Bullinger and Brandl, 2018; Van der Byl and Slawinski, 2015; Hahn et al., 2015; Jarzabkowski and Lê, 2017). Furthermore, scholars have suggested that paradoxes can be managed by an “either-or” approach (Stynen and Semeijn, 2023; Zhang et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2017; Andriopoulos and Gotsi, 2017; Papachroni et al., 2015). The “either-or” approach refers to making explicit choices between seemingly competing demands, such as centralised-decentralised, autonomy-control, global-local, and exploration-exploitation

(Putnam et al., 2016; Smith, Gonin and Besharov, 2013; Pearce et al., 2019; Miron-Spektor et al., 2011; Tracy, 2004; Pinto, 2019; Bunders and De Moor, 2023). The either-or approach to the paradox is also problematic because it encompasses a diverse array of responses. Indeed, Chen (2002) and Smith et al. (2010) argue that the either-or approach is ineffective and detrimental in dealing with the challenges of ambiguous and multifaceted contexts and advocate for paradox theory as an integrated approach (Cunha and Putnam, 2019). Paradox theory provides a dynamic framework by supporting contradictory forces while also harnessing the continuous tension between them, enabling the system to endure and evolve over time (Schad et al., 2016).

My approach to paradoxes involves embracing both sides of the tension, avoiding trade-offs, and leveraging the synergy that emerges when navigating paradoxes with existing knowledge maps, which have been approached in “trade-offs” and “either-or” ways ineffectively. Simultaneously, my research enriches and renews the stock of paradox theory by addressing the lack of conceptual and theoretical coherence in research, adopting a paradox perspective. Paradox theory is the crossways between institutionalising existing knowledge and exploring new terrains of knowledge (Yang et al., 2021; Karhu and Ritala, 2018; Smith et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2015). According to Cunha and Putnam (2019), existing knowledge maps are incomplete, and to a broader extent, there is a presence of *terra incognita*.

Secondly, while research on paradox has expanded dramatically, there is still a lack of conceptual clarity in this area (Smith and Lewis, 2011; Hahn and Knight, 2021), and my research intends to clarify the lexicon used in association with paradoxes. To be more explicit, the diverse terms used to depict paradoxes, such as “tensions,” “contradictions,” “dialectic,” “dilemma,” “pluralities,” and “dichotomy,” suggest that there is some confusion or lack of clarity about what exactly constitutes a paradox. This diversity in language reflects the ambiguity of understanding the nature and characteristics of paradoxes. Additionally, many organisational actors do not use the term “paradox” when dealing with competing demands that have irreconcilable elements. For example, ambidexterity scholars look into the underlying tensions associated with innovation and advocate simultaneous exploration and exploitation by organisations and their leaders and followers (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009; Papachroni et al., 2015; Tian and Christensen, 2020; Rosing, Frese and Bausch, 2011; O’Reilly and Tushman, 2013). Organisational identity scholars have seen paradoxes differently. According to them, hybrid identity organisations incorporate

several inconsistent identity types, and they investigate techniques for attending to conflicting identities at the same time (Smith and Lewis, 2011; Fiol, Pratt, and O'Connor, 2009; Pratt and Foreman, 2000). Furthermore, there is an ontological argument over whether paradoxical tensions are inherent features of a system (Cameron and Quinn, 1988; Smith and Berg, 1987) or social creations arising from actors' cognition and rhetoric (Schad, Lewis and Smith, 2019; Jarzabkowski and Lê, 2017; Poole and Van de Ven, 1989; Putnam, 2015; Luscher, Lewis and Ingram, 2006). Such disparity in ontology disrupts the coherence of the literature and impact the choice of strategies for handling paradoxes, either by embracing or resolving them (Hahn and Knight, 2021). Therefore, greater conceptual clarity may open the door to more constructive and challenging debate across paradox contexts, which my research generates.

Thirdly, and perhaps more meaningfully, the approach I take to the research on paradoxical leadership is by emphasising the paradoxical leaders' intrapersonal consequences, specifically their behaviour, attitude and task performance, across both Eastern and Western cultural contexts. While existing studies have predominantly explored how paradoxical leadership influences followers (Ren and Yang, 2021; Chen et al., 2021; Smith, Binns, and Tushman, 2010; Zhang et al., 2024), relatively little attention has been given to the effects on leaders themselves. By addressing this gap, my research aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how engaging in paradoxical leadership behaviours impact leaders. Leaders' cognitive resources (i.e., experience, intelligence, competence, and task-relevant knowledge) and intrapersonal skills (i.e., self-confidence and self-efficacy) may be taxed by behaving paradoxically, leading to psychological stress and influencing leaders' attitudes and behaviours (Yang et al., 2021; Batool et al., 2023; Volk et al., 2023; Yin, 2022; Xue et al., 2020; Ren and Yang, 2021). In understanding paradoxical leaders' attitudes and behaviours, culture is an essential factor (Peng and Nisbett, 1999; Smith et al., 2017). Cultural distinctions between East and West give rise to differing perspectives on paradox. Leaders from Eastern cultures approach paradoxes differently than leaders from Western cultures (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). Therefore, exploring paradoxical leaders' behaviour and attitudes from the viewpoints of both Eastern and Western cultures is pertinent.

1.5 Outline of the Research

Aligning with the research objectives discussed earlier, the following chapters of my thesis are structured as follows.

Chapter Two presents the literature review that has informed this thesis. This chapter delineates and develops a review of the relevant literature focused on paradoxes and paradoxical leadership. It reviews the main concepts, theories, and extant studies on problems, paradoxes, leadership, and paradoxical leadership through the lens of paradox theory. Additionally, it presents an overview of the complexity and hybridity needed to understand paradoxes and their construction. While portraying these concepts, theories, and previous studies, the gaps in the literature addressed by this thesis are also identified. The chapter concludes by discussing the role of paradoxical leadership in influencing followers to deal with multiple contradictory demands. Overall, this chapter summarises the main points of the literature review and outlines how my research addresses the identified gaps by extending existing knowledge.

Chapter Three provides a comprehensive explanation of the research approach adopted in this thesis. It begins with a discussion of the research's philosophical orientation—including the ontological, epistemological, and axiological standpoints. The chapter then outlines the research design, which adopts an inductive approach and uses qualitative data collected through interviews. This is followed by a detailed discussion of the techniques and procedures employed for data collection, including industry selection, gaining access, participant selection, and the use of semi-structured interviews as the data collection method. An in-depth explanation of the data analysis procedures used to interpret the findings is then provided. The chapter also addresses the ethical considerations observed throughout the research process. It concludes by demonstrating the research's trustworthiness through adherence to the four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Chapter Four presents the findings concerning the research questions of this research. It highlights the two main themes: “making sense of paradox” and “navigating paradox” emerging from the data. Under “making sense of paradox,” there are two sub-themes: “perceived sources of paradox” and “paradoxical reflexivity: insights from the global south.” Under the theme “navigating paradox,” the sub-themes are “managing paradox” and “impact”. Additionally, the impact is shown in two ways: paradoxical leadership's enabling

impact on leaders and paradoxical leadership's constraining impact on leaders. It focuses on a thematic analysis of the participant interviews, with the findings cross-verified through triangulation with data from additional interviews.

Chapter Five discusses the findings presented in the previous chapter by evaluating them in relation to existing literature on paradox, paradox theory, and paradoxical leadership. It compares these findings with prior studies, highlighting key similarities, differences, and novel contributions. This chapter also articulates the major insights drawn from the empirical findings and discusses the theoretical and practical contributions of this research.

Chapter Six concludes the thesis by summarising the overall thesis. This chapter also acknowledges the limitations faced throughout the research and proposes avenues for future research.

2. Literature Review

Chapter Overview

This chapter presents a comprehensive analysis of the literature that underlies and supports this research. As outlined in the previous chapter, this research explores the role of paradoxical leadership in influencing followers to navigate paradoxes in their organisational work. Accordingly, this literature review analyses key concepts, theoretical frameworks, and prior studies on paradox theory and paradoxical leadership, beginning with discussions on problems, paradoxes, complexity, and hybridity.

The chapter outlines the core theoretical foundations of this research and the empirical approaches used to investigate them. It highlights the gaps in the existing literature that this study aims to address. It starts by defining problems and paradoxes, explaining how paradoxes emerge from tensions, inconsistencies, and conflicts, and considering the roles that complexity and hybridity play in giving rise to these paradoxes.

This chapter then shifts focus to leadership, exploring different leadership styles and the development of those leadership styles over time. It subsequently discusses paradoxical leadership as a contextual factor in managing organisational paradoxes. This section reviews the definitions and concepts of paradoxical leadership found in the existing literature and their development over time. Finally, it analyses the role of paradoxical leadership in influencing followers to navigate multiple contradictory and interrelated paradoxes simultaneously.

2.1 Paradoxes Through Paradox Theory

2.1.1 Problems in Organisations

According to Grint (2010), problems can be classified into three types, considering the different natures of problems rooted in certainty and uncertainty. These problems are Tame, Wicked and Critical Problems (Rittel and Webber, 1973; Grint, 2005). Tame Problems might be complicated, but can be resolved through unilinear activities (Grint, 2010). Unilinear activities are those activities that involve a predetermined sequence of stages, where the stages usually develop from the primary to the advanced level (Grint, 2005). So, Tame problems are repetitive and occur when the degree of uncertainty is limited. Leaders find it

easy to solve Tame Problems, as they are required to follow the appropriate processes guided by the standard operating procedure (SOP) (Grint, 2010). Afterwards, when the problem becomes 'more complex rather than just complicated', it is known as the Wicked Problem, which is related to Rittel and Webber's (1973) typology (Grint, 2010). It is impossible to remove Wicked Problems from the environment, solve them, and return them without causing harm to the environment. Leaders face difficulties managing and controlling these problems because they tend to be intractable and do not have an apparent link between the cause and effect of these problems (Grint, 2007). Then, a Critical Problem entails a limited amount of time for decision-making and action, such as a 'crisis'. The nature of a Critical Problem is presented as self-evident. In a situation with a Critical Problem, a leader needs to have the ability to address the problem and the decisiveness of decision-making. In these types of problems, leaders play authoritarian roles, where they give command to their followers in the organisational activities (Howieson and Kahn, 2002; Heifetz, 1994).

Rogers et al. (2012) classify problems slightly differently from Grint (2010). They distinguish between simple, complex, and wicked problems. Simple problems are characterised by a well-defined problem and a straightforward solution. Complex problems, while often sharing a recognisable core problem, present a range of possible solutions. The third type, known as Wicked problems, however, is unique because there is no common consensus on either the nature of the problem or the best way to solve it. As a result, different people may have varying perspectives on both what the problem entails and how it should be addressed, as Turner and Baker (2019) note that each wicked problem is distinct in its context and structure. According to Churchman, wicked problems are a category of challenges that are poorly defined, involve ambiguous or conflicting information, include numerous stakeholders with differing values (such as decision-makers and clients), and lead to perplexing consequences for the entire system (McCall and Burge, 2016). Xiang (2013) further identifies key characteristics of wicked problems, including indeterminacy in defining the problem, the absence of a definitive solution, inherent insolubility, irreversible consequences, and unique individual characteristics. As wicked problems do not have a clearly defined problem statement, they often lack a clear solution and, in many cases, may be unsolvable. Wicked problems possess irreversible characteristics due to their complexity, which exacerbates the complications arising from ever-changing variables (Turner and Baker, 2019).

Wicked problems' wickedness is an inherent aspect of many human challenges, including environmental sustainability, management of resources, climate change on a global scale, urban growth and development, stem cell research and its application, and counter-terrorism efforts (Xiang, 2013; Reinecke and Ansari, 2016). Traditional linear approaches to addressing wicked problems often result in incomplete analyses and create a misleading impression that the issues have been resolved (Xiang, 2013; Turner and Baker, 2019). As a result, addressing wicked problems with these traditional linear approaches leads to frustration and dissatisfaction in the processes of decision-making, strategy development, and executing plans (Head and Alford, 2015). Turner and Baker (2019) describe such efforts as "trying to tame the untameable", with Xiang (2013) asserting that the shortcomings stem from the intellectual foundations and skill sets of these traditional linear approaches (p. 1). The difficulty with using linear approaches to address wicked problems arises because these problems resist structured and sequential solutions, and these linear approaches are better suited to scenarios governed by systems theory (Xiang, 2013). Instead, scholars advocate for greater awareness, acceptance, and the development of innovative strategies to address wicked problems (Xiang, 2013; Turner and Baker, 2019; Head and Alford, 2015). As an alternative to the linear systems model, Xiang (2013) proposes an adaptive, participatory, and transdisciplinary approach. Additional strategies for addressing wicked problems include collaborative techniques centred on social learning. Rather than relying on rigid, systems-based structures, such approaches recognise that effective learning emerges through the interplay of opposing forces — such as stability and change, agreement and disagreement, or individual and collective interests. According to Rogers et al. (2012), social learning is most effective when it functions from ongoing, self-organising interactions in which stakeholders simultaneously collaborate, communicate, and influence one another's thinking and actions (p. 16).

Therefore, the problem is subjective rather than objective; the type of problem determines what is already known and what should be done to solve or mitigate the problem (Grint, 2010). Thus, philosophers (from East and West) argue that the nature and category of problems create paradoxes for leaders (Chen, 2002; Smith et al., 2017).

2.1.2 Defining Paradoxes

Understanding the nature of paradoxes holds considerable importance for organisations. Historically, paradoxes have held many conceptual meanings in philosophy and psychology.

Traditional philosophers (from the ancient Greeks to Existentialists) have seen human existence as inherently paradoxical, as human life is grounded in tensions between self and other, good and bad, and life and death (Hampden-Turner, 1981; Schneider, 1990; Lewis, 2000). In contrast, traditional Eastern philosophers such as Lao Tzu and Confucius view the world as a paradox, as they perceive the world as a mystical weave of interconnected contradictions (Chen, 2002; Li, 2012, 2014). The Tao Te Ching, for instance, begins with a cyclical and perplexing statement: “The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao” (Duyvendak, 1954). This notion of paradox finds its best representation in Taoist philosophy (the ubiquitous yin-yang symbol holds its roots in Taoism), which emphasises the interdependence, fluidity, and naturalness of opposites (such as light-dark, masculine-feminine, life-death, gravity is the root of lightness, stillness is the master of agitation) (Liu and An, 2021; Duyvendak, 1954). Meanwhile, traditional Western philosophers like Aristotle and Hegel describe paradoxes as problems that are illogical and unsolvable, often framed as double binds (Smith et al., 2017).

Moving on to the view of psychology, psychologists emphasise the cognitive dimensions of paradox to explore how tensions affect mental well-being and spark creativity (Rothenberg, 1979; Bateson, 1972), as well as to support humans in confronting their inner conflicts through paradoxical therapy (Harris, 1996; Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch, 1974; Lewis, 2000). Both traditional philosophers and psychologists have long stressed that paradoxes arise from contradictions that are multifaceted, interwoven, and often irrational. In management studies, the paradox is conceptualised by scholars such as Ford and Backoff (1988) as a “thing” that emerges when individuals, through reflection or interaction, identify opposing forces in close proximity (p. 89). While the paradox has deep historical roots, it has become increasingly prominent as modern businesses operate in faster-paced, globalised, and more dynamic environments. Organisational culture also contributes to generating paradoxes, particularly as organisations transition from a steady, predictable structure to those defined by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA), reflecting the broader conditions organisations now face (Antonacopoulou, 2018; Lawrence, 2013). As organisational boundaries evolve and give rise to complex global networks, organisations are required to balance competing demands: maintaining global consistency while adapting to local needs and offering high-quality products at competitive prices (Schad, Lewis, and Smith, 2019). In today’s fast-changing organisational environment, the pressure to balance short-term profits with long-term strategies often seems irreconcilable, creating tension. Environmental ambiguity further complicates situations involving diverse

stakeholders and interest groups with conflicting but equally legitimate demands, leading to difficult decision-making (Antonacopoulou, 2018). Organisations then integrate distinct institutional logics and numerous organisational identities, giving rise to paradoxical tensions (Zhang, Waldman, Han, and Li, 2015). Top-level leaders continuously struggle with persistent strategic paradoxes, leading to a constant tug-of-war dynamic (Waldman and Bowen, 2016). Meanwhile, mid-level leaders and followers experience these tensions and related ambiguities in their everyday tasks, socio-emotional relationships, and personal identities (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2014).

As paradoxical dynamics become more prevalent in modern businesses, researchers are progressively delving into the nature, techniques, and consequences of paradoxes (Cunha and Putnam, 2019; Smith and Tracey, 2016; Hahn and Knight, 2021; Lewis, Andriopoulos and Smith, 2014; Pearce et al., 2019). Some researchers focus on defining paradox, constructing its theoretical foundations, and exploring its interconnections to develop a paradox theory (Putnam, Fairhurst and Banghart, 2016; Farjoun, 2017; Luscher, Lewis and Ingram, 2006; Schad et al., 2016; Smith, 2014), while different scholars investigate how paradoxical relationships are relevant to specific contexts (Hahn et al., 2014). Meanwhile, some scholars employ paradoxes as a conceptual tool to develop new theoretical insights (Dameron and Torset, 2014). Defining paradox, Schad, Lewis, and Smith (2016) state that “paradox is a persistent contradiction between interdependent elements” (p. 6), noting that these elements are simultaneously opposing and distinct. The aspects of these elements are intertwined in a web of perpetual mutuality, informing and defining one another. Lewis (2000) claims that these elements “seem logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously” (p. 760). Holtman (2011) explains paradox as “a statement that seems contradictory but is nevertheless true” (p. 395). In a similar vein, Miron-Spektor, Gino, and Argote (2011) and Farjoun (2010) describe paradox as the elements of tension, where the elements are inconsistent, contradictory yet synergistic, interdependent, and mutually constitutive. Smith and Lewis (2011) pinpoint contradiction, interdependence, and persistence as the three foundational pillars of paradox. According to Poole and Van de Ven (1989), the paradox is a source of conceptual challenges, highlighting the tensions, oppositions, and contradictions within theories. Furthermore, Lewis and Smith (2014) conceptualise paradox as a meta-theory, offering a versatile set of core principles and structures applicable across diverse events, contexts, and theoretical frameworks. Paradox, when viewed as a meta-theory, provides a valuable analytical perspective in management research, enabling greater insights into organisational tensions, their structures, and their

dynamic interrelationships while complementing existing theories and theoretical approaches.

There is a lack of coherence in the definitions of paradox across the literature (Pearce et al., 2019; Schad et al., 2016; Fairhurst et al., 2016; Lewis, Andriopoulos and Smith, 2014). Scholars frequently use the term “paradox” to describe a broad spectrum of organisational phenomena, such as contradictory and perplexing circumstances, disputes, and tough decisions, as well as the concurrent persistence of opposites (Cunha and Putnam, 2019). Consequently, the boundaries of the paradox concept remain unstable, shaped by the specific aims of the scholars employing the construct (Jarzabkowski and Lê, 2017). The term “paradox” is often applied in ways that overlap with, but remain distinct from, related concepts such as tensions, conflicts, contradictions, dialectics, dualisms, dilemmas, dichotomies, and pluralities (Hahn and Knight, 2021). This conceptual looseness turns paradox into a broad and often ambiguous category, where multiple ideas blend, creating a multi-layered and intertwined yet sometimes confusing construct. Distinguishing between these overlapping constructs proves difficult, as the concept of paradox has increasingly evolved into an *umbrella concept* encompassing the full spectrum of organisational tensions and conflicts within organisations (Putnam et al., 2016). The umbrella concept functions as a single label that integrates a wide variety of phenomena (Hirsch and Levin, 1999), similar to how organisational performance has primarily replaced the broader notion of organisational effectiveness. This concept may risk either collapsing due to losing clarity or changing through challenges to its credibility. A further ontological debate is whether paradoxical tensions are social constructs resulting from actors’ cognition and rhetoric (Karhu and Ritala, 2020; Jarzabkowski and Lê, 2017; Putnam et al., 2016; Raisch and Birkinshaw, 2008; Poole and Van de Ven, 1989) or whether they are inherent elements of a system (Farjoun, 2017; Cameron and Quinn, 1988; Smith and Berg, 1987). This conceptual ambiguity (Cunha and Putnam, 2019) and ontological disparity (Hahn and Knight, 2021) need to be addressed in order to advance theory development, which my research aims to analyse.

2.1.3 The Characteristics and Constructions of Paradoxes

The concept of paradox is defined by two key characteristics: contradiction and interdependence. These characteristics determine the boundaries of paradox, refining its focus while broadening its scope and linking this field of study to other related literature

(Lewis and Smith, 2014). At its core, paradox arises from contradictions, which emerge when opposing forces create a tug-of-war dynamic, each pulling in different directions. Cameron and Quinn (1988) claim that the defining feature of a paradox is the simultaneous presence of contradictory elements, which often appear to be mutually exclusive. This contradictory relationship is well illustrated by the yin-yang symbol (shown in Figure 2.1) from Taoism, where black and white coexist in a dynamic contrast (Liu and An, 2021). Contradictions inherently possess two opposing sides, yet these sides are also interdependent and self-defining, often giving rise to dilemmas (Pearce et al., 2019; Schad et al., 2016; Fairhurst and Putnam, 2014) that cannot be resolved, transcended, or eliminated. Such interdependent contradictory elements are referred to as dialectics (Hargrave and Van de Ven, 2017; Karhu and Ritala, 2020; Putnam et al., 2016). Both dialectics and dilemmas work as antecedents for tensions, which in turn give rise to paradoxes. Paradoxes usually emerge when one side is favoured over the other.

Another core characteristic of paradox is interdependence. The concept of interdependence emphasises the inseparable connections that exist between opposing elements. The varying levels of interconnectedness between opposing forces are described as intertwined, yet distinct. Cameron (1986) suggests that the paradox consists of elements that are contradictory and mutually exclusive yet coexist and function simultaneously (p. 545). Although these elements can be identified separately, their simultaneous presence reinforces a more profound sense of unity, enhancing effectiveness and sparking creativity (Papachroni, Heracleous and Paroutis, 2015; Farjoun, 2017; Li, 2014; Poole and Van de Ven, 1989; Lewis, 2000). In Taoism, the yin-yang symbol (as shown in Figure 2.1) illustrates this synergy through the interlocking black and white sections, which, though separate, merge to create a unified whole. Within this yin-yang concept, no clear boundary exists between yin (black) and yang (white); a speck of yin resides within yang, and a speck of yang resides within yin (Fang, 2012). These opposing elements are mutually constituted or ontologically inseparable. Since these elements are part of the same continuum, they define each other and cannot be completely separated (Li, 2012, 2014). The dynamic equilibrium of yin and yang reflects the organic and inherent nature of reality, where opposing forces complement one another (Li, 2012, 2014; Liu and An, 2021). Lewis (2000) describes these elements as ‘two sides of the same coin’ (p. 761). The black and white dots within their opposing shades in the yin-yang symbol further highlight this mutual interdependence.



Figure 2.1: Image of Yin-Yang Symbol

The yin (black), represented by the dark swirl, is associated with feminine forces (such as the moon and water), darkness, shadows, softness, intuition, the trough of a wave, and yielding in the universe. In contrast, the yang (white), depicted by the light swirl, is linked to masculine forces (such as the sun, light, and fire), passion, growth, assertiveness, hardness, rational thought and brightness (Duyvendak 1954; Liu and An, 2021). Although the S-shaped line divides the circle into two halves, the black and white sections remain profoundly interconnected and interwoven. This dynamic relationship is further emphasised by the small dot of black within the white and vice versa, symbolising the interdependent and fluid nature of yin and yang (An, He and Chen, 2018).

Analysing the essence of paradox as both contradictory and interdependent components helps establish its boundaries and connects it to related concepts, such as dialectics and dualities (Putnam et al., 2016). Like paradox literature, studies on dialectics and dualities explore interdependent contradictions, though their primary focus and emphasis differ. From the dialectical perspective, contradictory elements are seen as a thesis and its corresponding antithesis (Koryak et al., 2018; Hargrave and Van de Ven, 2017; Schad et al., 2016). According to Putnam (2015), the literature on dialectics describes how these elements interact, with an emphasis on power dynamics, transformation, and conflict. Farjoun (2002) further analyses this interaction between these elements and argues that these interactions produce, maintain, and transform organisational arrangements. Over time, these shifts may culminate in a synthesis, which is a synergistic resolution of alternatives. However, paradox scholars part ways with the dialectical tradition when this synthesis eliminates the underlying tension. In the dialectical approach, each synthesis is always followed by a new antithesis, thus perpetuating the cycle. In the paradox, however, the tension persists. Yet, dialectics can exhibit paradoxical traits when a new synthesis upholds the connection between the original

thesis and antithesis (Putnam, Fairhurst and Banghart, 2016; Langley and Sloan, 2011; Schad et al., 2016; Farjoun, 2017; Clegg et al., 2002). For example, leaders may discover a way to address the demands of an established product while pursuing innovation, such as developing new products that enhance rather than supplant existing markets and technologies (March, 1991; Zhang et al., 2016). Even in the midst of such synergies, tensions persist, reinforcing the paradox of exploration and exploitation (Rosing and Zacher, 2016; Putnam, Fairhurst, and Banghart, 2016; Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009).

Additionally, the concept of dualities emphasises the interdependence of contradictory elements. Dualities highlight how seemingly opposing elements are not just in conflict but are also deeply connected and reliant on each other. Scholars argue that this interplay between contradictory elements is mutually generated and intertwined ontologically (Smith and Graetz, 2006). As these elements are interdependent, mutually generated, and ontologically intertwined, it becomes challenging to define one without reference to the other. Their meanings are so closely linked that understanding one requires an understanding of its counterpart. This perspective explores relationships such as discourse and materiality, change and stability, and, more broadly, the symbolic and material worlds (Putnam, 2015; Farjoun, 2010). Scholars focusing on dualities place a strong emphasis on relationships that are constantly changing, processual, and dynamic (Farjoun, 2002, 2010, 2017; Smith et al., 2017; Ford and Backoff, 1988). Similar to paradox scholars, they emphasise the interplay between alternatives (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Graetz and Smith, 2008; Putnam, Fairhurst and Banghart, 2016). However, the difference duality scholars make from paradox scholars is that they give less emphasis to comprehending inconsistencies, conflicts, and contradictions (Putnam et al., 2016; Ford and Backoff, 1988).

Scholars have addressed paradoxes at both macro and micro levels (Schad, Lewis, and Smith, 2016). Macro-level studies focus on paradoxes at the field and organisational levels, while micro-level research explores paradoxes at the individual and group levels. Schad and colleagues (2016) have referred to macro-level paradoxes as encompassing competition and cooperation (Gnyawali, Madhavan and Bengtsson, 2016; Chen, 2008; Stadler and Van Wassenhove, 2016; Raza-Ullah, Bengtsson, and Kock, 2014), change and stability (Farjoun, 2010; Audia, Locke, and Smith, 2000), exploitation and exploration (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009; Raisch and Birkinshaw, 2008), or purpose and profits (Smith, Gonin, and Besharov, 2013; Jay, 2013). Additionally, at the micro level, Schad and colleagues (2016) identify paradoxes such as performance and learning (Zhang et al., 2021; Li, She and Yang,

2018; Van Der Vegt and Bunderson, 2005), usefulness and novelty (Shao, Nijstad and Täuber, 2019; Sparr, 2018; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018), and self-focus and other-focus (Smith and Tracey, 2016; Zhang et al., 2015). Field-level paradoxes arise in broad contexts, for instance, how national culture influences the approaches used to discern distinctions or pinpoint specific paradoxes in inter-firm relationships, like the tension between competition and collaboration (Raza-Ullah, Bengtsson and Kock, 2014; Gnyawali, Madhavan and Bengtsson, 2016; Chen, 2008; Stadtler and Van Wassenhove, 2016). At the organisational level, strategic paradoxes emerge from the need to balance competing demands. For example, ambidextrous organisations face paradoxes when managing both exploration and exploitation (Papachroni, Heracleous and Paroutis, 2015; Koryak et al., 2018; O'Reilly and Tushman, 2013; Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009). These conflicts manifest themselves in various organisational capabilities, including identity and routines. At the individual level, paradoxes occur because different individuals have distinct abilities and views to recognise and integrate contradictions (Jarzabkowski and Lê, 2017). Leadership skills at this level involve navigating tensions between coordinating or overseeing tasks, driving innovation or negotiating new projects, balancing participative and directive styles, and treating team members consistently while nurturing their unique qualities (Zhang et al., 2012; Lüscher and Lewis, 2008). Leaders and followers also navigate workplace conflicts, such as tensions between passion and profit, change and stability, or learning and performance (Andriopoulos and Gotsi, 2017; Schad et al., 2016; Li, She and Yang, 2018; Denis et al., 2001). In groups, paradoxes can stem from interpersonal interaction among group members, with tensions emerging in areas such as team innovation (Li, She and Yang, 2018; Miron-Spektor et al., 2011; Padula and Dagnino, 2007).

Moreover, the perception of paradox is strengthened by increasing environmental dynamics and uncertainty, making paradoxical insights relevant across various contexts. As Cameron and Quinn (1988) observe, paradoxes are particularly evident in times of instability. Smith and Lewis (2011) argue that organisational paradoxes usually stay latent but become salient during times of resource scarcity, plurality, and change in its environment (Schad et al., 2016). Plurality reflects a multiplicity of viewpoints and arises when multiple stakeholders with differing needs and perspectives create competing demands (Denis, Langley, and Sergi, 2012). These diverse stakeholders bring conflicting expectations, which can lead to strategic conflicts. Addressing these opposing perspectives and conflicting expectations leaves leaders feeling stretched in opposing directions (Smith, Gonin, and Besharov, 2013). Change, meanwhile, necessitates shaping a future that differs from the present, resulting in

tension between existing practices and emerging possibilities (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009). Leaders are torn between the need to optimise current capabilities and the desire to explore new opportunities (Papachroni, Heracleous and Paroutis, 2015; O'Reilly and Tushman, 2008). Lastly, resource scarcity challenges leaders' ability to fulfil numerous goals, heightening their awareness of the conflicts between competing demands (Schad, Lewis and Smith, 2019; Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009). Therefore, environmental conditions such as resource scarcity, change, and plurality act as forces that amplify paradox, increasing the need for organisations to engage with and manage these tensions. Paradox provides a more realistic perspective when considered as an inherent aspect of organisations and a valuable instigator of innovation and creative energies, emphasising the persistent need to embrace it to enhance the effectiveness of organisations (Miron-Spektor, Gino and Argote, 2011; Cameron, 1986; Lewis, 2000).

The traditional approach to dealing with tensions was "trade-offs" (Hahn et al., 2010; Vince and Broussine, 1996). To explain trade-offs, Smith et al. (2017) and Smith and Lewis (2011) mention that this approach involves resolving tensions by prioritising one side of the tension over the other. However, contemporary scholars are increasingly adopting a paradoxical approach, recognising competing demands and exploring ways to engage with tensions that are multi-layered, intertwined, and often difficult-to-resolve (Schad, Lewis, and Smith, 2019). Putnam et al. (2016) suggest that to respond effectively to paradoxes, leaders are required to engage with both opposing elements and uncover their integrative and generative potential. The key objective of managing paradoxical tensions is to achieve a balance between these competing demands, as fully resolving or eliminating them is unfeasible. This equilibrium, however, is perpetually unsettled by factors such as the emergence of new organisational forms (Battilana and Lee, 2014), limited resources (Smith, 2014), limited agency among actors (Berti and Simpson, 2021), and a plurality of opinions (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014). Despite growing interest in paradox theory, little is known about how to balance these contradictory, interdependent, and persistent processes. Furthermore, much of the current paradox research focuses on tensions within organisations (Pearce et al., 2019; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Jarzabkowski and Lê, 2017; Smith et al., 2017; Farjoun, 2010; O'Reilly and Tushman, 2013; Waldman et al., 2019), leaving considerable uncertainty about whether and how balance can be achieved in the face of broader societal challenges. Therefore, further exploration of these multiplicities of paradoxes in organisational phenomena could prove highly beneficial.

2.2 Paradox Theory – A Conceptual Lens to Understanding Paradoxes

Paradoxes stimulate inquiry and uncertainty, prompting both academics and professionals to take a moment to contemplate (Andriopolous et al., 2014). To effectively comprehend and apply this perspective to organisational tensions, embracing “paradox theory” is relevant (Pearce et al., 2019; Smith and Tracey, 2016; Andriopoulos and Gotsi, 2017; Ozanne et al., 2016). Paradox theory is a framework for understanding and managing the inherent contradictions and tensions within the organisation through a dynamic equilibrium model of organising. It explains how cyclical responses to paradoxical tensions can foster sustainability, ensuring optimal performance in the present while paving the way for future success (Smith and Lewis, 2011, p. 381). It posits that tensions are an inherent feature of organisational life, and that achieving long-term sustainability requires simultaneously addressing contradictory yet interrelated demands (Smith and Tracey, 2016).

The concept of paradox is grounded in the ontologies of dualism and dynamism (Farjoun, 2010, 2017; Cunha and Putnam, 2019). Dualism refers to the notion that two opposing elements can coexist and together form a unified whole (Farjoun, 2017; Cunha and Putnam, 2019). Within the context of paradox theory, dualism suggests that contradictions within an organisation (such as stability versus change or competition versus collaboration) are not merely conflicting forces but are interdependent and can create a balanced, integrated system when managed effectively. Dynamism involves the concept of continuous change and adaptation (Farjoun, 2010, 2017; Cunha and Putnam, 2019). Paradox theory posits that organisations are in a constant state of evolution and must navigate ongoing tensions and contradictions. Dynamism underscores the necessity for organisations to be flexible and responsive, continuously adjusting their strategies and practices to maintain equilibrium and achieve sustainable success. By combining these ontologies, paradox theory provides a framework for understanding how organisations can manage conflicting demands and tensions in a way that promotes both immediate performance and long-term sustainability.

Scholars advocate paradox theory as a provocative perspective for tackling key questions about the nature of paradox and its management (Cunha and Putnam, 2019; Smith et al., 2017; Ozanne et al., 2016; Hahn and Knight, 2021; Lewis and Smith, 2014; Huq, Reay and Chreim, 2017; Fairhurst et al., 2016; Lewis, 2000). Paradox theory illustrates how paradoxical tensions and their management interact in a continuous and cyclical process,

reflecting the persistent and dynamic nature of organisational paradoxes (Jarzabkowski, Lê and Van de Ven, 2013; Cunha and Putnam, 2019). This virtuous cyclical process of paradox theory unleashes human potential by encouraging performance and creativity, fostering resilience and flexibility, which ultimately enables sustainability (Huq, Reay and Chreim, 2017; Smith et al., 2017). Paradox theory also provides clarity, stimulates debate, and encourages further research into organisational paradoxes (Andriopoulos and Gotsi, 2017; Lüscher and Lewis, 2008; Fairhurst et al., 2016). There has been a surge in interest in paradox and related concepts, such as tensions, conflicts, contradictions, dilemmas, dialectics, and dualities, due to the inherently paradoxical nature of contemporary organisations (Putnam et al., 2016). Globalisation, intense competition, evolving social expectations, and rapid innovation have rendered organisational environments increasingly uncertain and dynamic, fuelling this paradoxical trend. Thus, scholars continue to reinforce paradox theory within organisational studies (Schad et al., 2016).

Paradox theory provides a valuable perspective for achieving organisational success and long-term sustainability. It highlights the tensions that emerge when elements that are both contradictory and interconnected are considered simultaneously. Paradox theory suggests that these tensions cannot be readily resolved and should instead be embraced as persistent paradoxes. This theory argues that by acknowledging these paradoxical tensions and responding effectively, organisations may attain a “dynamic equilibrium” that supports their objectives while fostering long-term sustainability. Smith and Lewis (2011) describe paradox theory as a framework of dynamic equilibrium, where accepting and engaging with paradoxes encourages the exploration of new opportunities, informs the iterative and fluctuating application of management strategies, and establishes practical certainties that facilitate learning and enhance engagement with competing demands.

Paradoxical tensions have been categorised into four key areas: belonging, performing, organising, and learning, representing essential organisational elements and activities (Smith and Lewis, 2011). Building on these four areas, Smith and Lewis (2011) develop a dynamic equilibrium model of organising to address these paradoxical tensions by synthesising insights from Lüscher and Lewis (2008) and Lewis (2000). They further argue that these categories align with Quinn’s (1988) competing values framework, which includes learning-adhocracy, belonging-clan, organising-hierarchy, and performance-market, which emerged from initial paradox studies. These studies underscore the depth and breadth of paradox

theory. In my research, I explore each category in turn to understand paradoxical tensions through the lens of the paradox theory.

Belonging tensions surface when individuals within an organisation seek both personal expression and collective affiliation (Smith and Lewis, 2011). As organisations become more global and dynamic, these contradictory demands intensify, making it challenging for individuals to balance their personal expression with their need to belong to the collective group. According to Luscher, Lewis, and Ingram (2006), belonging tensions become apparent as individuals endeavour to define themselves within the ever-changing groups of an organisation. Plurality and ambiguity are the driving forces for belonging tensions, as individuals and groups strive for both uniformity and uniqueness (Cuganesan, 2017). This means that while individuals want to express their unique identities, they also strive to fit in and be part of the larger organisational community. These identity-related tensions can influence various aspects of organisational life, including roles, membership, values, and overall culture. Wright, Nyberg, and Grant (2012) observe these tensions among corporate managers, who face challenges in reconciling their personal identities with their organisational roles, thereby affecting their sense of belonging within the organisation.

Performing tensions focus on the plurality of stakeholders within organisational settings. These performing tensions stem from the diverse and sometimes conflicting expectations of multiple stakeholders while balancing short-term performance with long-term sustainability, leading to competing goals and strategies (Smith and Lewis, 2011). For example, an individual might experience performing tensions when trying to maximise profit while also fulfilling social responsibilities. This can create a paradox, as focusing too much on one aspect might undermine the other. Additionally, these tensions are evident in how organisational performance is assessed (Lewis, 2000). In organisations, financial performance indicators are typically well-defined and quantifiable, whereas social and environmental performance indicators tend to be more subjective, often lacking precision and complicating their evaluation. Delmas and Blass (2010) highlight these differences in performance measurement approaches. Ozanne and colleagues (2016) also observe that while financial performance metrics generally follow a clear, well-defined, and structured approach, environmental indicators are more variable and inconsistent due to a lack of standardisation.

Organising tensions arise from the structural and procedural aspects of managing an organisation. In multifaceted organisational contexts, these tensions emerge due to conflicting organisational models, operational and decision-making processes, managerial practices, and structural arrangements designed to achieve specific goals (Ambituuni, Azizsafaei and Keegan, 2021; Smith and Lewis, 2011). For instance, organising tensions often become apparent when organisations attempt to balance collaboration with control, flexibility with efficiency, and centralisation with decentralisation. Unlike belonging and performing tensions, which occur at the micro level, organising tensions operate at the macro level and tend to intensify during periods of organisational change or restructuring (Sparr, 2018; Ozanne et al., 2016; Jarzabkowski, Le and Van de Ven, 2013; Langley and Sloan, 2011; Koryak et al., 2018; Farjoun, 2010; Lüscher and Lewis, 2008). Within organisations, these tensions create conflicts across various areas, such as relational versus transactional marketing, strategic planning versus improvisation, mass versus personalised communication, and global versus local strategies (O'Driscoll, 2008). Considering the dynamic nature of organisations, Andriopoulos and Lewis (2009) also identify three innovation-related paradoxes faced by highly innovative companies: balancing loose and tight customer connections, aligning creativity with profitability in strategic goals, and managing the interplay between passion and discipline in personal motivation. Similarly, Smith, Gonin, and Besharov (2013) argue that organisational practices may become inconsistent due to the pursuit of multiple, sometimes conflicting, goals.

Learning tensions occur when an organisation's beliefs and assumptions fail to adapt to changing environments (Lewis, 2000). Relying too heavily on core competencies may limit innovation and cause organisations to overlook emerging opportunities as these existing competencies become outdated (March, 1991). These tensions arise from the clash of differing time horizons, as organisations pursue long-term growth while simultaneously requiring short-term stability and predictability (Smith, Gonin, and Besharov, 2013). In particular, learning tensions are evident when organisations strive to maintain efficient operations by exploiting existing knowledge and capabilities for short-term stability while simultaneously fostering innovation and adaptability by exploring new opportunities and adapting to changing environments for long-term growth. In the context of creative industries, DeFillippi (2009) explores this sort of tension faced by individuals and discusses that individuals involved in creative endeavours face challenges in mastering both the creation of original content and the use of consumer-generated material for promotional purposes.

Considering these four categories of tensions and employing paradox theory, Smith and Lewis (2011) develop a dynamic equilibrium model of organising that accommodates conflicting forces while leveraging their inherent tension to enable both organisational survival and continuous improvement. They also indicate that organisational paradoxes typically remain unnoticed. Organisational paradoxes become noticeable when triggered by external conditions, such as scarcity of resources, fast and instant change, and plurality, which bring their contradictory essence to the forefront, making them apparent to those within the organisation (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2014). Resource scarcity refers to limitations imposed by restricted resources, including time, workforce, and finances. Plurality refers to situations where there is uncertainty or a lack of clarity about what the organisation's goals are and what strategies are required to achieve those goals. It highlights the ambiguity and intricacy that can arise when multiple, potentially conflicting objectives and approaches exist within an organisation. Additionally, plurality denotes diverse perspectives in contexts where power is diffused among multiple stakeholders (Smith and Lewis, 2011). Change involves alterations in external conditions that compel the organisation to adapt and adjust, often bringing to light the tension between achieving short-term priorities and fostering long-term organisational growth.

Paradox theory posits that long-term success depends on continuously addressing multiple demands through a dynamic balance between splitting and synthesis rather than prioritising or making trade-offs (O'Reilly and Tushman, 2013; Ozanne et al., 2016; Jarzabkowski, Le and Van de Ven, 2013; Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009). Splitting involves tackling each paradoxical element independently to emphasise its unique significance, enabling the organisation to develop strategies for the short term that target the most pressing or advantageous aspects of the paradox (Poole and Van de Ven, 1989; Farjoun, 2010). Synthesis, by contrast, involves a cyclical repetition of this splitting process, with priorities shifting in each cycle (Jarzabkowski, Le and Van de Ven, 2013). This process leads to a dynamic balance, marked by intentional shifts between options, ensuring all elements receive simultaneous attention as conditions change (Ozanne et al., 2016). Therefore, paradox theory suggests that this dynamic balance equips organisations to manage competing demands to varying extents over time. This approach sparks a cyclical process of tension and resolution, enabling the organisation to respond flexibly to shifting and conflicting demands, ultimately promoting long-term success and sustainability (Smith and Lewis, 2011).

Paradox theory has had an influential impact on ambidexterity theory (Rosing and Zacher, 2016; Papachroni, Heracleous, and Paroutis, 2015). Ambidexterity theory addresses the contradiction between exploration and exploitation, which is driven by limited resources and expressed through opposing organisational capabilities. The theory proposes addressing these tensions by employing strategies of either spatial or temporal separation (Duncan, 1976; March, 1991). Exploitation focuses on enhancing refinement, boosting efficiency, and implementing selected approaches, whereas exploration embraces searching, diversifying, experimenting, and fostering innovation (March, 1991). According to Andriopoulos and Lewis (2009), exploration and exploitation are situated at opposite ends of a spectrum, which makes them distinct, highlighting the importance of balancing them for optimal organisational performance. In the pursuit of this balance, tensions inevitably arise due to their inherent differences and opposite learning approaches (Papachroni, Heracleous, and Paroutis, 2015). Building on this concept, ambidexterity scholars propose spatial or temporal separation as practical strategies for managing these tensions (Papachroni, Heracleous, and Paroutis, 2015; March, 1991; O'Reilly and Tushman, 2008). Temporal separation means focusing on one aspect of the paradox at a given time and shifting to the other later. In contrast, spatial separation entails assigning one organisational unit to prioritise one aspect and another unit to focus on the opposing aspect (Zhang et al., 2016). However, within a hierarchical structure, these separation approaches might oversimplify solutions, diminishing the creative and innovative opportunities that arise from tackling both aspects of paradoxes. Rather than striving to resolve or eliminate paradoxes, scholars suggest preserving them as open-ended, encouraging an exploration of the interrelationship between their opposing elements (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009; Papachroni, Heracleous, and Paroutis, 2015; O'Reilly and Tushman, 2008).

Paradox theory provides a valuable lens beyond the concepts of spatial and temporal separation (Papachroni, Heracleous, and Paroutis, 2015; O'Reilly and Tushman, 2013; Ozanne et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2017; Farjoun, 2010; Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009). It analyses the interaction between opposing elements within a duality, suggesting that these elements can be mutually supportive and interconnected in a dynamic manner as time progresses (Chen, 2002). Treating them as part of duality rather than as rigidly opposed (dualism), paradox theory maintains the possibility of integration (Chen, 2002; Lewis, 2000). It suggests that synthesising these elements or transcending them through reframing is possible, encouraging organisational processes that support both aspects of the paradox

(Jarzabkowski, Le and Van de Ven, 2013). In this way, paradox theory expands the range of conceptual approaches for addressing organisational paradoxes by providing a holistic perspective across different contexts and levels of analysis and offering alternatives to separation approaches. It also proposes ways to manage paradoxes by moving beyond the separation approaches, transforming fixed dualities into adaptable polarities (Papachroni, Heracleous, and Paroutis, 2015). Therefore, paradox theory serves as a useful framework for understanding paradox and the multi-layered, interrelated nature of organisational dynamics, such as balancing innovation with efficiency or stability with change, by viewing these elements as interdependent and evolving poles within a duality, rather than as opposing forces (Farjoun, 2010, 2017; Smith et al., 2017; Chen, 2002).

While paradox theory holds relevance for real-world contexts, less effort has been devoted to understanding organisational phenomena in the context of responding to paradoxes (Miron-Spektor, Gino and Argote, 2011). Cunha and Putnam (2019) argue that understanding these organisational phenomena is crucial for developing practical strategies to navigate paradoxes, as paradoxes are tied to specific contexts, being locally defined, historically embedded, and time-sensitive (Putnam, Fairhurst and Banghart, 2016). Attempting to establish universal best practices for addressing paradoxes could undermine the authentic core of paradoxes, as such practices often reduce their sophisticated dynamics to overly simplistic forms (Cunha and Putnam, 2019). Instead, the investigation of practical implementations through reflective engagement within the course of action proves more effective (Pearce et al., 2019). Thus, my research focuses on understanding organisational phenomena and how organisations navigate paradoxes while preserving their inherent richness and developing practical responses that align with their dynamic nature.

2.3 Organisational Complexity and Hybridity Creating Paradoxes

While exploring paradoxes, researchers transcend simplistic and binary perspectives, recognising and understanding the complexity, hybridity, ambiguity, and diversity found within organisational life (Christensen and Lægreid, 2011; San Cristóbal et al., 2018; Tian and Christensen, 2020). In recent times, the complexity and hybridity of organisations have increased, as organisations endeavour to address multiple and sometimes opposing concepts, structures, considerations, needs, and cultural components simultaneously (Christensen and Lægreid, 2011). From the standpoint of organisational management, scholars identify complexity and hybridity are one of the key contributors to organisational paradoxes (Smith

and Lewis, 2011). Complexity arises from interactions between a system's various components, including both the system's dynamics and human influences (Dekker et al., 2011; McDaniel and Driebe, 2001). Hybridity, meanwhile, refers to the coexistence of contradictions or inconsistencies in an organisation's structural and cultural features (Christensen and Lægreid, 2011). To understand organisational phenomena, it is essential to analyse complexity and hybridity through the lens of paradox theory.

Complexity is understood as the degree of differentiation among the various components that form an organisation (Dooley, 2002). This can often be measured by the array of professional specialisations present within the organisation. While analysing the complexity's fundamental concept, Luhmann (1995) explains that a system of interconnected elements is considered complex when the limitations in their capacity to connect prevent every element from being linked to every other element at all times. This complexity entails the need to make choices, which introduces contingency, and contingency involves risk (p. 25). Scholars observe that organisations encounter complexities arising from system behaviour, human behaviour, and ambiguity (San Cristóbal et al., 2018; Daryani and Amini, 2016). Usually, these complexities stem from one or more of these three categories (Dooley, 2002). Indicators of organisational complexity include authority, structural differentiation, technologies, products, personnel attributes, and locus of control (Dooley, 2002).

In formal organisations, complexity can be seen in three types: structural complexity, cultural complexity, and environmental complexity (Christensen and Lægreid, 2011). According to organisation theory, structural complexity is differentiated between two dimensions, i.e., horizontal and vertical specialisation (Anderson, 1999; Daft, 1992). These dimensions encompass both intra-organisational and inter-organisational aspects (Egeberg, 2003; Gulick, 1937). Vertical intra-organisational specialisation explains the extent to which formal authority is spread across the hierarchy's levels. Vertical inter-organisational specialisation indicates that the organisation can have different subordinate units, each with varying types of autonomy. Thus, vertical specialisation is pronounced when control and power are divided across different hierarchical levels and leaders, whereas integration suggests weak vertical specialisation (Christensen, 2011). Horizontal intra-organisational specialisation pertains to internal differentiation, where the organisation is divided into several subunits and departments based on processes, objectives, client or customer base, and geographic location (Gulick, 1937). Horizontal inter-organisational specialisation, by

contrast, focuses on specialisation among organisations at the same hierarchical level (Christensen and Lægreid, 2011). Strong specialisation in both dimensions indicates strong fragmentation and proliferation, whereas low specialisation reflects an integrated system. Regardless, the complication increases in this whole process of structural design (Gulick, 1937).

The second type of complexity, cultural complexity, is more difficult to grasp compared to structural complexity (Christensen, 2011). In theory, the formation of shared cultures within organisations could reduce complexity, particularly when culture acts as the ‘institutional glue’ that unifies the organisation or plays a crucial role in its development (March and Olsen, 1989). However, cultural development itself is complex, as it reflects a wide range of informal rules and values, even when a culture may be common and widely accepted by individuals (March and Olsen, 1976). Cultural complexity can also emerge when an organisation transitions from cultural homogeneity to accommodating diverse subcultures as a form of cultural diversity (Christensen and Lægreid, 2011). These subcultures form as a result of cultural reformation from different cultural norms, requiring organisational leaders to address various considerations (Dorfman et al., 2012). Therefore, cultural complexity persists, despite the fact that there are major cultural similarities and cultural diversity (Krasner, 1988). Cultural complexity becomes strong when there is a coexistence of diverse informal norms and values within organisations (Dorfman et al., 2012; March and Olsen, 1989). Conversely, cultural integration and homogeneity indicate weak cultural complexity, where a shared purpose and collective identity prevail among organisational members deeply committed to the organisation’s core norms and values (March and Olsen, 1989; Krasner, 1988; Kaufman, 1960; Selznick, 1957).

The third type of complexity is environmental complexity (Meyer and Rowan, 1977), which encompasses two distinct parts: the institutional environment and the technical environment. The technical environment focuses primarily on efficiency, production, and communication within an organisation (March and Olsen, 1989). External determinism is often strong in this context, requiring organisations to adapt to environmental demands (Olsen, 1992). Organisations often operate in a diversified and potentially volatile technological environment, which heightens internal complexity (Scott and Davies, 2006). Organisational complexities increase with growing external pressures in both scale and complexity. Another contributing factor to technical environment complexity is the challenge of balancing autonomy and control (Tian and Christensen, 2020). Leaders are required to manage

relationships with various individuals and entities within the technical environment, which can be challenging to harmonise (Christensen, 2011).

The second part of environmental complexity is the institutional environment. Unlike the technical environment, the institutional environment is less instrumental and instead focuses on assumptions regarding organisational structure, internal culture, demographics, and recruitment policies (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Institutional complexity increases by reforming myths tied to the cognitive pillar, encouraging organisations to become isomorphic (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Scott, 2007; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Myths emerge within the institutional environment and rapidly diffuse across organisational populations. These populations engage in “window dressing”, crafting an image of the organisation that enhances its legitimacy (Brunsson, 1989; Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996). The cognitive pillar, which underpins legitimacy, is a key driver of institutionalisation (Scott, 2007). Sahlin-Anderson (2001) argues that certain organisations deliberately create and disseminate myths, establishing them as “institutional standards” or “prescriptions” within specific domains. Through processes of partial copying, editing, and translation, these institutional standards are occasionally utilised in ways that contradict other beliefs or practices (Røvik, 2002). As a result, organisational complexity increases as institutions replicate and integrate a range of institutional standards (Christensen and Lægreid, 2011).

Following complexity, hybridity is another form that creates paradoxes for organisational leaders and followers. Thornton and Ocasio (2008) describe hybridity as the existence of different institutional logics that may compete with or even contradict each other. Their definition is rooted in the institutional logic framework developed by Friedland and Alford (1991), where institutional logics mean exploring the interrelationships between individuals, groups, organisations, and society. Christensen and Lægreid (2011) associate hybridity with inconsistencies in an organisation’s structural and cultural characteristics. Hybrid organisations are multipurpose entities that integrate multiple tasks, values, and organisational forms within a single framework (March, 1991). To simplify the understanding, hybrid organisations integrate different components, operational strategies, value structures, and operational logics—such as profit generation and social impact—drawing from various societal sectors, including public, private, and voluntary domains (Christensen and Lægreid, 2011). Hybridity arises through mechanisms such as the combination of autonomy and control, diverse professional cultures, and varying organisational principles (Tian and Christensen, 2020). These elements form composite

arrangements that weave together partially opposing concerns, leading to complex, unstable trade-offs and persistent tensions (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008). While hybridity introduces tensions and trade-offs, it also fosters innovation and adaptability (Brunsson and Olsen, 1993), with March (1991) arguing that organisational stability and efficiency hinge on balancing innovation with the flexible use of existing strengths. A lack of innovation stifles competition, whereas excessive innovation undermines profitability (Brunsson and Olsen, 1993). Thus, a balance between innovation and flexibility is essential.

Hybridity can be aided by cultural complexity by introducing diverse subcultures with differing informal norms and values that may be difficult to reconcile, yet they remain linked through common cultural elements. Additionally, conflicting notions of cultural appropriateness within organisations can contribute to hybridity (Christensen and Lægreid, 2011), as leaders may hold differing cultural norms and values, particularly when navigating the balance between control and autonomy (Dorfman et al., 2012).

Complexity and hybridity provide leaders with robust hierarchical authority, as they leverage the organisational structures as tools for achieving objectives (Egeberg, 2003). However, sometimes, complexity and hybridity can appear rigid or even somewhat haphazard, granting leaders considerable discretionary power rather than clear guidance (Christensen and Lægreid, 2011). In such contexts, leaders exert significant influence over decision-making processes, relying on rational calculations and means-ends reasoning to navigate organisational challenges (March and Olsen, 1989; Krasner, 1988; Selznick, 1957). Additionally, complexity suggests that leaders are open to flexibility, which can, in turn, increase hybridity and create potential tensions (Smith and Tracey, 2016). Complexity might indicate a loosely structured organisation (March and Olsen, 1976). Leaders may utilise myths and symbols to navigate the tension between control and autonomy, implying that control is prioritised for certain groups while autonomy resonates with others. Similarly, organisations may pursue both control and autonomy simultaneously, with some segments emphasising control and others focusing on autonomy (Christensen and Lægreid, 2011; Brunsson, 1989; Cyert and March, 1963). When organisations incorporate multiple reform elements that blend control and autonomy measures, this can give rise to both complexity and hybridity (Røvik, 2002). Furthermore, hybridity can emerge as a pragmatic response to reforms, where countries, sectors, and organisations selectively adopt institutional standards from diverse organisational fields, integrating them in a “patchwork” manner (Christensen and Lægreid, 2011).

Regulatory pressures from the technical environment may influence both the institutional environment and an organisation's internal culture. Intense regulatory pressure can lead to an increased use of reform symbols, enhancing the likelihood of successful reform implementation while also shaping internal culture (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996, 2001). As a result, the challenge of balancing control and autonomy remains constant, though its nature may vary, contributing to hybridity.

Complexity can influence organisations in both advantageous and detrimental ways. On the negative side, complexity can make understanding and controlling the system more difficult, as new characteristics emerge that are not inherent to any individual component of the system (Vidal and Marle, 2008). Organisational heterogeneity can fuel such complexity within organisations (Christensen and Lægreid, 2011; March, 1991), particularly when multiple institutional interests and power struggles among leaders further contribute to this complexity (Vidal and Marle, 2008). This might result in a phased approach to objectives and partial resolutions of conflicts, where control is prioritised at certain times to appease specific stakeholders, while autonomy is emphasised at others to satisfy different groups, often without a cohesive strategy (Christensen and Lægreid, 2011; Cyert and March, 1963). However, complexity can also be beneficial, as it can lead to unforeseen developments that would not have been predicted solely by understanding individual components and their interactions. To navigate complexity effectively, leaders need to learn to capitalise on the opportunities it presents while minimising or at least managing its adverse effects (March, 1991).

Kurtz and Snowden's (2003) Cynefin framework is helpful in understanding organisational complexity and the paradoxes resulting from it. This paradigm has its roots in the field of knowledge management and has since been applied to fields such as leadership, training and development, cultural change, conflict management, decision-making, and managing perspectives and paradoxes (Snowden and Boone, 2007). By using the Cynefin framework, leaders can interpret organisational phenomena from multiple perspectives, grasp complex concepts, and address opportunities by managing paradoxes (Snowden and Boone, 2007). The initial framework was introduced in the form of a two-by-two matrix, outlining four categories—chaotic, complicated, knowable, and known—each requiring different approaches based on cause-and-effect relationships. Later refinements by Kurtz and Snowden defined the categories as simple, complicated, complex, and chaotic (as shown in

Figure 2.2), positioned around a central state of disorder, where any of the four categories may overlap or shift. These categories align with different levels of uncertainty: simple corresponds to “known knowns”, complicated to “known unknowns”, complex to “unknown unknowns”, and chaotic to “unknowables”.

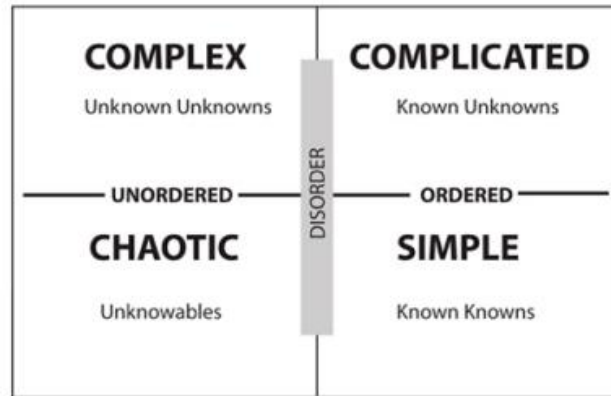


Figure 2.2: The Cynefin Framework

The simple and complicated domains are characterised by distinct cause-and-effect relationships, enabling the determination of appropriate responses through empirical analysis (Snowden and Boone, 2007). In contrast, the complex and chaotic domains lack obvious causal links, requiring decisions to be made based on incomplete information or intuition. The last domain—disorder—is used when it is unclear which of the other four domains applies. The disorder category serves to deconstruct the situation into manageable parts, which can then be assigned to the other four domains. Disorder represents a blurred boundary between states, suggesting that some complicated situations may exhibit a degree of complexity before undergoing a phase transition. The point at which this transition occurs depends on the system’s initial conditions and its unique composition. Kurtz and Snowden (2003) argue that once a state experiences a phase shift, it becomes irreducible, rendering it impossible to revert to its prior form.

The Cynefin framework, as outlined by Kurtz and Snowden (2003), is a sense-making framework that can be applied in various practical ways, including contextualisation and alternative history exercises (Kurtz and Snowden, 2003). Contextualisation involves a brainstorming activity where the framework is employed to explore multiple perspectives on a specific issue or event (Kurtz and Snowden, 2003). This exercise explores how potential solutions to particular challenges might be interpreted across the four domains (namely,

complex, chaotic, simple, and complicated). In contrast, alternative history exercises involve examining the historical trajectory of an event or entity, pinpointing critical moments of change and exploring the timing and reasons behind these transitions within the established framework (Kurtz and Snowden, 2003).

The Cynefin framework, shown in Figure 2.2, visually represents how different domains can function both independently and interdependently, contingent upon the context. Kurtz and Snowden (2003) suggest that when employing this sensemaking tool, a shift from the complicated domain to the complex domain may be necessary to contextualise issues within social systems and tackle complex and so-called wicked problems (Turner and Baker, 2019).

In addition to Kurtz's and Snowden's (2003) Cynefin framework, March (1994) focuses on how individuals perceive and address complex problems, suggesting that people approach complex problems and make decisions in diverse ways, identifying six distinct approaches. Firstly, individuals may break decisions into smaller components and tackle them sequentially. Secondly, they may disregard secondary and tertiary aspects, which are the less critical aspects of the decision, enabling individuals to focus solely on primary factors. Thirdly, individuals may rely on prior knowledge and experience to identify solutions, reducing the need to develop entirely new approaches. Fourthly, instead of optimising every aspect of a situation, they may select solutions that adequately meet requirements with minimal effort. Fifthly, individuals often make assumptions about missing information rather than actively verifying or challenging their assumptions. Lastly, they use storytelling and narratives to share insights about complex situations that are more accessible and comprehensible than other methods (Dooley, 2002; March, 1994). Through these approaches, individuals can oversee problems and accordingly find solutions to the problems.

2.3.1 Antecedents of complexity and hybridity in organisations

The complexity and hybridity of organisations stem fundamentally from people and their diverse perspectives (Schein, 1980). According to Schein (1980), individuals vary widely in terms of age, gender, experiences, cultures, and backgrounds, as well as in their views, desires, and beliefs. Diversity prevails even within groups that appear homogeneous, such as those sharing the same professional background or having similar professional qualifications (March and Olsen, 1976, 1989). Hence, complexity cannot be overlooked. It

can be said that organisations are complex at their core because the individuals composing them are inherently complex (Anderson, 1999). This viewpoint encourages us to recognise that all organisations are complex, irrespective of their internal diversity, rather than categorising them as more or less so (Dooley, 2002). Beyond these evident interpersonal differences, Schein (1980) highlights that individuals often fulfil multiple roles, wearing different “hats” within an organisation and adapting to various responsibilities as needed. Job function is one of many factors that distinguish individuals and shape organisational dynamics (Dooley, 2002). Individuals are often “matrixed” across functions and roles, adapting to different expectations as needed (March and Olsen, 1989). Even when roles conflict, most individuals can successfully align with the norms and beliefs associated with each role at the appropriate time. Usually, individuals manage role conflicts as part of their professional growth and development (Dooley, 2002). Thus, it is crucial to acknowledge that different people are driven by different motivations at different times. This leads to the fluctuation of individuals' drives and preferences over time, posing challenges for leaders. As a result, complexity and hybridity are apparent because of human nature (Egeberg, 2003). Therefore, understanding organisational complexity and hybridity through the lens of paradox theory provides valuable insights into organisational dynamics, recognising their inherent paradoxes and exploring strategies to address these paradoxes.

2.4 Leadership

The term “leadership” has been in use only since the 1700s (Stogdill, 1974). The word “leadership” comes from the word “lead”, which is derived from the Old English word *lædan*, meaning “to show the way” (Gill, 2011, p. 8). However, systematic research on leadership did not begin until the twentieth century (Bass, 1985). Robbins and Judge (2015) describe leadership as the capacity to influence and change a group towards achieving objectives. With each passing day, the concept and understanding of leadership evolve. Nowadays, leaders are actively connected with their teams, projects, businesses, and overall systems to help their organisations flourish. According to Grint (2005), the more leadership is studied, the more complex it appears. This is clear when looking at the diversity of leadership research. Despite the significant focus on leadership research, it is somewhat surprising that no consensus on definitions of leadership and leaders has been found. Stogdill (1974) asserts that leadership is so widely debated that its definitions are nearly as numerous as the people who have attempted to articulate them (p.7). For instance, Grint (2005) analyses classic leadership literature and identifies four traditional perspectives on

leadership: as a person, a position, a process, and an outcome. Similarly, Western (2013, 2007) questions whether leadership is primarily about individuals, groups, or processes, highlighting a core challenge in defining and understanding leadership. Bolden (2012) advances the thought in the field of leadership research and categorises leadership into three dimensions: leadership as a characteristic of a leader, as a relationship between a leader and followers, and as a socially constructed process, which is useful for understanding key leadership theories. Thus, the debate over leadership's definition remains as relevant today as it was four decades ago. Even now, leadership is widely regarded as a deeply contested concept (Bolden, 2012; Jackson and Parry, 2011).

In the early stages of leadership studies, around the turn of the 20th century, leadership was predominantly seen as a set of traits possessed by individual leaders (Yukl, 2012). A leadership style is characterised by specific attributes, traits, and behaviours leaders exhibit when engaging with their followers (Al Khajeh, 2018; Van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013). According to Mitonga-Monga and Coetzee (2012), leadership is characterised by a managerial behaviour pattern aimed at aligning organisational and personal interests while influencing followers to accomplish specific goals. Similarly, leadership style involves various ways in which a leader connects and engages with others to promote collaboration and cooperation in pursuit of a common goal (Harris et al., 2007). However, these perspectives become questionable as further research identifies a wide range of traits considered essential for effective leadership. Bolden (2012) points out that, much like the lack of consensus on leadership's definition, there is no agreement on which traits are most critical. Additionally, this perspective of leadership overlooks the influence of situational factors that emerge during leadership in practice (Jackson and Parry, 2011). Moreover, this perspective raises concerns because it tends to standardise leadership rather than embracing or promoting diversity among leaders (Western, 2013). Considering leadership as a fixed set of innate traits with which individuals are born implies doubt about the value of leadership development, as such traits would be fixed rather than acquired.

Leadership theories have started to develop from the trait theory, though behavioural and style theories have gained popularity by focusing on the individual leader's actions rather than their inherent traits. According to Bolden (2012), these theories are more concerned with how individuals behave rather than their personal characteristics. For example, theorist McGregor (1989) adopts this perspective by categorising leaders into Theory X or Theory Y, depending on their underlying assumptions about human behaviour. He argues that these

assumptions influence the leadership style each leader adopts. Although these theories move beyond leaders' individual traits, they remain heavily focused on the leader and overlook situational or contextual factors. Additionally, they tend to be rigidly dualistic, classifying leaders strictly as either Theory X or Theory Y. Moreover, studies exploring the link between different leadership styles and their outcomes have largely yielded uncertain results (Grint, 2005).

Contingency and situational theories are established to address the role of context in which leaders operate. Fiedler (1964) develops contingency theory, which seeks to align leaders with appropriate situations. This theory posits that a leader's effectiveness depends on how well their approach suits the circumstances (Northouse, 2013). Similarly, Hersey and Blanchard (1969) expand on this with situational theory, emphasising the conditions in which leadership occurs. According to this notion, different contexts require different leadership styles, and leaders are required to adapt their style to the context to be effective (Northouse, 2013). These theories represent a shift from earlier views that leadership success is unrelated to context. These theories also have significant implications for leadership development, as they suggest that leaders can be trained in diverse skills rather than relying solely on innate qualities (Bolden, 2012). However, they fail to address what leaders should do when their leadership style does not align with organisational needs and context (Northouse, 2013). Grint (2005) critiques these approaches for overlooking the influence of followers and informal leaders in the dynamics of leadership while also acknowledging that leadership is frequently centred on a single individual, which brings its own set of challenges.

Subsequently, leadership scholars identified that it is significant to recognise the relationship between a leader and their followers. This led to the development of various leadership approaches, including Transformational Leadership (Antonakis and House, 2013; Bass and Avolio, 1994; Xu and Wang, 2008), Charismatic Leadership (Conger and Kanungo, 1998; Shamir, 1992; Hunt and Conger, 1999; Bryman, 1992), Servant Leadership (Greenleaf, 1970; Bryant and Fennell, 2017), and Leader-Member Exchange Theory (Xue et al., 2020; Xu and Wang, 2008; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Graen, 1976). These theories represent a progression in the development of leadership theories by emphasising that a follower's role is vital in the enactment of a leadership role. Liao, Liu, and Loi (2010) and Kamdar and Van Dyne (2007) further advance this idea by conceptualising leadership as a socially constructed process instead of a simple leader-follower distinction, an approach known as Social

Exchange Theory. Similarly, the Distributed or Dispersed Leadership approach challenges the traditional individualistic perspective by promoting a systemic approach, where leadership is a collective responsibility shared among all individuals in a group or organisation, guiding its strategies and actions (Spillane, 2004; Gronn, 1999). This approach signifies a shared viewpoint, with different interpretations of distributed leadership, including both descriptive and normative perspectives. Bennett et al. (2003) outline three widely accepted principles in the field: leadership emerges from interactions within a group or network, leadership boundaries remain flexible, and expertise is distributed across many individuals rather than concentrated in a few.

One of the major grounds of debate among leadership scholars is whether leadership is centred on the individual leader, or on the relationship between leader and follower, or on a broader social process. Grint (2005) frames this debate by questioning whether leadership is tied to the person, the task, the outcomes, or the process. With such diverse perspectives on the nature, meaning, and locus of leadership, it remains a subjective concept, shaped by individuals' own ideas, interpretations, and expectations about leadership.

Leadership is widely regarded as a critical determinant of an organisation's success or failure (Al Khajeh, 2018; Yukl, 2008). Leaders play a vital role in shaping an organisation's vision, mission, and objectives, as well as designing policies, strategies, and methods to enhance efficiency and effectiveness (Xu and Wang, 2008). They also influence and uphold both formal and informal institutions within the workplace (Harris et al., 2007; Bass and Avolio, 1994). Formal institutions consist of written policies, codes of conduct, rules, regulations, laws, and constitutions, while informal institutions encompass social norms, informal networks, cultural values, and behavioural expectations—all of which influence the creation and application of formal institutions. Furthermore, leaders guide, inspire, and coordinate their followers to maximise their efforts towards achieving organisational objectives (Bass and Avolio, 1994).

2.5 Paradoxical Leadership

In the realm of management, leadership plays a crucial role in shaping an organisation's success (Yukl, 2008, 2012). A leader can be effective if they inspire and influence followers to perform beyond expectations, prioritising the organisation's best interests over self-interest to achieve organisational goals (Yukl, 2008; Kan and Parry, 2004). While analysing

effective leadership styles, researchers have shown that the fundamentals of leadership are universally applicable and accepted. However, cultural differences significantly impact how leadership functions are executed (Dorfman et al., 2012; House et al., 2002; House et al., 2001). These variations have contributed to the situational leadership theory (McCleskey, 2014; Hersey, Blanchard and Johnson, 2007), which considers factors such as the cultural background of leaders and followers, their interests, their environment, and organisational rules and regulations. The essence of leadership is evolving, and perceptions of leadership are characterised by numerous paradoxes (Pearce et al., 2019). The nature of leaders' roles and interactions is changing and becoming diverse, leading to many conflicting demands. Leaders need to adopt different styles to deal with these conflicting demands and to influence their followers. Leadership research continues to analyse the performance of these differing styles (Antonakis and House, 2013; Van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013).

Effective leadership relies not only on a leader's ability to influence others but also on their capacity to navigate seemingly contradictory demands, commonly referred to as paradoxes (Smith et al., 2017; Schad, Lewis, and Smith, 2019; Lewis, Andriopoulos and Smith, 2014; Kan and Parry, 2004). Leadership is particularly crucial in uncertain and ambiguous situations where paradoxes persist, requiring leaders who can adapt and drive organisational change in response to challenges arising from global competition (Pearce et al., 2019; Stewart et al., 2019; Langlely and Sloan, 2011). Organisational leaders are prompted by these paradoxes to refine their leadership approach and address multiple paradoxes to achieve enduring sustainability. Contemporary leadership research identifies paradoxical leadership as a means of addressing the complexity, uncertainty, and plurality organisations face (Cunha and Putnam, 2019; Fairhurst et al., 2016; Alfes and Langner, 2017; Stewart et al., 2019; Putnam, Fairhurst and Banghart, 2016). To raise awareness of and navigate the multidimensional paradoxes embedded in organisational tension and create a positive long-term impact, leaders often adopt a paradoxical leadership approach (Zhang et al., 2015; Lewis, 2000; Lavine, 2014).

Paradoxical leadership is a leadership approach in which leaders simultaneously embrace and manage contradictory yet interdependent demands within the workplace (Zhang et al., 2015; Smith and Lewis, 2011; Schad, Lewis, and Smith, 2019). The construct of paradoxical leadership refers to leaders who simultaneously use two mutually opposing, interdependent, and complementary behaviours to satisfy structural and individual needs (individual needs of the leader and the follower) (Chen et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2015). Scholars argue that

paradoxical leadership does not entail selecting a single leadership style; instead, it requires leaders to adopt two contrasting and interdependent styles simultaneously, such as combining formal and shared leadership, to address a range of paradoxes (Stewart et al., 2019; Alfes and Langner, 2017; Li et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2015).

Examples of paradoxical leadership can be seen in how leaders manage competing demands, such as exercising control while empowering followers, balancing immediate performance with long-term growth, promoting innovation while preserving stability, and upholding rules while fostering creativity. According to Lavine (2014), paradoxical leadership is an effective leadership style as leaders demonstrate the ability to operate in diverse ways, encompassing both soft and hard approaches, being both quick and methodical, and combining creativity with control. Lewis, Andriopoulos, and Smith (2014) highlight that paradoxical leaders address multiple demands simultaneously. For instance, they possess the capacity to promote innovation while leveraging existing business operations. They operate within well-defined formal structures that aim for control while working devotedly to encourage collaboration (Li et al., 2018; Stewart et al., 2019). To clarify the distinctiveness of paradoxical leadership, Table 2.1 presents a comparison of how leaders approach organisational challenges framed as contradiction or conflict, and paradoxes. This comparison highlights that paradoxical leadership is characterised not by resolution or adaptation alone, but by the intentional integration of opposing yet interdependent demands.

Table 2.1: Comparison of Paradoxical Leadership with Other Leadership Styles

Dimension	Leadership Facing Contradictions or Conflicts	Paradoxical Leadership
Dealing with	Contradiction/Conflict	Paradox
Core Focus	Resolves inconsistencies by choosing between competing alternatives.	Integrates and balances two interdependent yet opposing elements persist simultaneously and cannot be resolved permanently.
Underlying Mindset	<i>Either–or</i> thinking (resolution through selection).	<i>Both–and</i> thinking (accepting opposites as mutually enabling).
Typical Response	Choosing one side or suppressing the other (e.g., control <i>or</i> empowerment).	Simultaneously enacts opposing behaviours (e.g., control <i>and</i> empowerment).
Temporal Perspective	Short-term resolution — tension ends once a choice is made.	Continuous management — tensions persist and must be sustained.

Illustrative Example	Choosing to centralise authority to reduce confusion.	Balancing formal authority with empowerment; promoting innovation while maintaining stability.
Likely Outcome	Short-term clarity but long-term rigidity; suppressed issues may re-emerge.	Sustained adaptability, creativity, and resilience.
Theoretical Foundation	Traditional leadership perspectives.	Paradox theory.

Paradoxical leaders can manage ambiguity and unravel paradoxes by applying a “both-and” strategy instead of an “either-or” strategy (Zhang et al., 2015; Schad et al., 2016). Unlike traditional leadership approaches that prioritise consistency and clear-cut solutions, paradoxical leaders recognise that organisational challenges often involve tensions that are persistent and cannot be fully resolved but instead should be managed. Paradoxical leadership is therefore not merely about coping with competing demands, but about actively harnessing tensions as opportunities. Additionally, they encourage followers to actively search for and manage paradoxes. Paradoxical leaders provide guidance and assistance to followers in dealing with paradoxes, leading to greater adaptability and efficiency (Chen et al., 2021). Thus, practising paradoxical leadership helps leaders in navigating organisational paradoxes. Comprehending these multidimensional paradoxes and the essence of paradoxical leadership necessitates the adoption of paradox theory as a theoretical lens (Chen et al., 2021; Cunha and Putnam, 2019; Lewis, Andriopoulos and Smith, 2014; Farjoun, 2017; Smith and Tracey, 2016). Paradox theory offers an alternative approach to paradoxical tensions, viewing them as contradictory yet persistent and interrelated demands that actors should acknowledge, engage with, and navigate rather than resolve (Cunha and Putnam, 2019).

Paradoxical leadership has gained significant attention in recent research. Scholars explore paradoxical leadership in the context of various contradictory demands and analyse its effectiveness in different scenarios. For instance, Smith and colleagues (2012) apply paradoxical leadership to social entrepreneurship. Similarly, Smith et al. (2012) develop a paradoxical leadership framework intended to help social entrepreneurs navigate the contradictory yet interdependent requirements of commercial and social objectives. In contrast, Smith (2014) links paradoxical leadership to innovation and introduces the concept of dynamic decision-making, which enables leaders to manage tensions related to innovation by balancing exploration, exploitation, and their integration. Smith, Binns, and Tushman

(2010) emphasise the importance of addressing strategic paradoxes simultaneously, focusing on complex business models. Cunha and Putnam (2019) and Zhang et al. (2015) examine paradoxical leadership in the context of long-term sustainability and identify key traits of paradoxical leaders in managing organisational paradoxes. Given the growing uncertainty of modern challenges, paradoxical leadership appears to offer valuable insights for current and future leaders in understanding and responding to a range of tensions in increasingly integrative and adaptive ways.

Scholars have provided various definitions and perspectives on paradoxical leadership, along with examples of how leaders can apply a paradoxical lens to their leadership styles, demonstrating its relevance across different leadership contexts (Stewart et al., 2019; Li et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2012, 2015; Alfes and Langner, 2017). According to Smith and Tracey (2016), paradoxical leadership represents a synergistic approach to organisational contradictions. O'Reilly and Tushman (2008, 2013) associate paradoxical leadership with ambidexterity, suggesting that paradoxical leaders simultaneously explore and exploit tensions arising from organisational changes between the past and the future. This dual focus enables leaders to drive both innovation and efficiency, contributing to sustainable organisational performance (Zhang et al., 2012). Supporting O'Reilly and Tushman's (2008) perspective, Andriopoulos and Lewis (2009) emphasise that leaders with a paradoxical style adopt integrated approaches that create synergies between exploitation and exploration. Similarly, March (1991) argues that balancing innovation with existing expertise is essential for organisational success. These examples illustrate the versatility of paradoxical leadership and paradox theory, highlighting their potential applicability to a wide range of organisational phenomena and management challenges. Thus, viewing paradoxical leadership through the lens of paradox theory can enhance theoretical debates and introduce new perspectives in well-established fields of study (Cunha and Putnam, 2019; Smith and Tracey, 2016; Volk, Waldman and Barnes, 2023; Lewis, Andriopoulos and Smith, 2014; Ozanne et al., 2016).

Organisational leaders require a guiding framework to explore and manage paradoxical tensions in order to engage with paradoxical leadership (Cameron and Quinn, 1988). Simply defining the characteristics of paradoxical leadership is insufficient. To address organisational paradoxes, researchers propose strategies to manage conflicting demands, such as balancing the empowerment of followers with retaining authority or reconciling gradual change with more transformative shifts. Leaders recognise that sometimes they need

to incentivise followers with rewards to drive high performance and steer them towards organisational objectives (transactional leadership) whilst also inspiring trust and respect to motivate followers to surpass expectations and place organisational interests above their own (transformational leadership) (Dashuai and Bin, 2020; Hahn et al., 2014; Van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013). Similarly, leaders are expected to provide clear direction, establish key priorities, and maintain control over decision-making (agentic leadership), while simultaneously considering followers' needs, offering flexibility, and fostering empowerment (communal leadership) (Lorinkova, Pearsall and Sims, 2013). Furthermore, leaders may adopt a situational leadership approach when tensions escalate significantly (Pearce et al., 2019). Situational and contingency theories suggest that leaders can explicitly choose between opposing strategies, such as adopting a participative or directive approach, based on the context (Zhang et al., 2015). Within organisational contexts, Western scholars have traditionally framed this as an "either-or" approach ("A" or "B"), treating A and B as distinct and potentially contradictory choices (Smith and Lewis, 2011). Their perspective on handling paradoxes suggests that leaders must choose between competing demands, as attempts to blend or reconcile these contradictions may prove elusive (Smith et al., 2017; Lewis and Smith, 2014). This raises the question of how leaders decide to prioritise one behavioural approach over another. To address this, Smith and Lewis (2011) argue that leaders can statically align their behaviours with specific situational demands to enhance effectiveness. However, there remains a limited understanding of how leaders can assess and adapt their behaviours to suit particular circumstances.

Eastern scholars offer a distinct perspective on the nature of paradoxes and managing paradoxes compared to Western scholars. Eastern philosophy posits that opposing forces are inherent in all universal phenomena (Chen, 2008). It further claims that contradictions are naturally integrated within societies and organisations (Li, 1998; Chen, 2002). All things, such as problems and challenges, are seen as interconnected, with opposites coexisting in harmony and interdependence, forming a dynamic, ever-evolving whole. Taoist philosophy, for example, can enrich our understanding of paradoxes and the responses of leaders confronting them. In Taoism, the world is perceived as holistic, dialectical, and dynamic, where all universal phenomena emerge from the interplay of two opposing yet complementary forces—Yin (feminine) and Yang (masculine) (Fang, 2012, p. 31). These forces operate on a global and integrative scale, continuously shaping universal phenomena and driving perpetual transformation (Fang, 2010). Taoism proposes that, despite the apparent opposition, negation, and separation between paradoxical dualities, these elements

are interconnected and complementary, together creating a balanced entirety (Chen, 2008; Li, 1998). Zhang et al. (2015) further argue that paradoxical contradictions often obscure the fact that opposing forces exist simultaneously and holistically (p. 540). Crucially, space and time weaken the apparent contradictions between dualities while reinforcing their complementary nature. Rather than existing in absolute opposition, dualities are part of a broader system, functioning interdependently. Thus, Eastern scholars advocate an approach to workplace tensions that involves embracing, integrating, and transcending apparent opposites (Zhang et al., 2015; Chen, 2002, 2008). They describe this as a ‘both-and’ approach, where two opposing elements (both “A” and “B”) coexist and interact rather than being treated as mutually exclusive (Zhang et al., 2015). Despite the differences between Eastern and Western perspectives, both acknowledge the relevance of paradox theory in organisational contexts (Liu and An, 2021; Smith et al., 2017; Jarzabkowski, Lê and Van de Ven, 2013; Lüscher and Lewis, 2008; Smith and Tracey, 2016). Paradox theory converges on the “both-and” approach as the most effective way to manage paradoxes (Cunha and Putnam, 2019). In organisational settings, an “either-or” strategy may enhance short-term benefits, but for sustained, long-term effectiveness, a “both-and” approach—advocated by paradox theory—is deemed essential (Waldman et al., 2019; Smith and Lewis, 2011; Zhang et al., 2015; Cunha and Putnam, 2019). However, most leadership theories fail to explore whether or how blending contrasting leadership styles impacts followers (Hahn et al., 2014; Lorinkova, Pearsall, and Sims, 2013). Instead, much of the leadership literature focuses on choosing between transactional and transformational leadership, situational leadership, or agentic and communal leadership, along with the conditions under which each approach is most suitable (Smith et al., 2017). Paradox theory, in contrast, suggests that purposefully integrating seemingly opposing elements can produce more favourable outcomes than applying these elements in isolation, without integrating them with their opposites (Smith and Lewis, 2011).

Paradoxical leadership style incorporates leaders’ impacts while working through the paradoxes between organisational exploration and exploitation across spatial and temporal contexts (March, 1991; Papachroni, Heracleous, and Paroutis, 2015; Smith et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2015; Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009; Poole and Van de Ven, 1989). These spatial and temporal contexts allow differing paradigms to exist simultaneously (Schad et al., 2016). A holistic approach to thinking, rooted in Taoist philosophy, serves as a foundation for paradoxical leadership behaviour. This holistic perspective assumes that all elements, even conflicting demands, are interconnected (Zhang et al., 2015). Leaders who

adopt this holistic mindset navigate paradoxes by recognising contradictions, incorporating them into a broader context, and identifying opportunities for balanced coexistence (Zhang et al., 2015). However, some scholars reject the idea that contradictions are inherently holistic, arguing that the separation of time and space reinforces an “either-or” approach, where the two sides of a paradox remain distinct (Zhang et al., 2015; Vince and Broussine, 1996). In contrast, others claim that contradictions are inherently holistic, advocating a “both-and” approach, which incorporates opposing viewpoints over time to drive continuous improvement (Smith et al., 2017; Lewis, Andriopoulos and Smith, 2014; Chen, 2002; Farjoun, 2010; Poole and Van de Ven, 1989). Paradox theory proposes a shift in leadership styles and mindsets from an “either-or” to a “both-and” approach to enhance organisational performance (O’Reilly and Tushman, 2013; O’Driscoll, 2008). According to this dynamic framework of paradox theory, paradoxical leadership seeks to balance opposing forces, leveraging the persistent tension between them to ensure the system’s survival and growth (Schad, Lewis and Smith, 2019; Dashuai and Bin, 2020; Smith and Lewis, 2011). The behaviours of paradoxical leaders influence how followers adapt to shifting work roles amid evolving circumstances and demands. Paradoxical leaders who embrace contradictions holistically, viewing coexisting possibilities as opportunities, demonstrate openness, a willingness to learn, and adaptability when facing external challenges. This, in turn, creates a structured yet flexible environment for their followers (Smith et al., 2012). They integrate organisational priorities with the needs of followers when addressing paradoxes in people management (Chen et al., 2021). Consequently, followers of paradoxical leaders tend to be more proactive, efficient, and adaptable. This differs from a dialectical approach, where leaders change the nature of the tension through their creative synthesis of the opposing poles that ultimately allow for both aspects of the paradox to be satisfied (Fairhurst et al., 2016; Cunha and Putnam, 2019; Chen et al., 2021; O’Driscoll, 2008; Schad et al., 2019). Therefore, the effectiveness of paradoxical leadership depends on how leaders influence followers to adopt a “both-and” rather than an “either-or” mindset when confronting multiple contradictions, thereby bringing paradox theory to life (Chen et al., 2021).

Paradoxical leadership enhances leaders’ task performance by managing paradoxes effectively (She et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2021; Li, She and Yang, 2018). Smith and Lewis (2012), utilising paradox theory, identify four key skills: cognitive complexity, confidence, conflict management, and communication for effective management of paradoxes. The first skill is cognitive complexity, which allows paradoxical leaders to navigate contradictions, uncover new possibilities, and reshape established ways of thinking (Smith and Lewis,

2012). Leaders who explore the dynamics of contradictory tensions can carefully identify new relationships and connections, ultimately improving task performance (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld, 1999). According to Smith and Lewis (2012), confidence is the second skill that paradoxical leaders require. Confidence allows paradoxical leaders to perceive setbacks as learning opportunities, embrace conflicting goals, and confront challenges with resilience, thereby increasing the likelihood of enhanced task performance. In addition, paradoxical leaders excel at managing conflicts and making sound decisions (Eisenhardt, Kahwajy and LJ III, 1997). Rather than reacting passively to paradoxes, they adopt creative approaches, deliberately balancing competing demands to encourage both themselves and their followers to challenge existing assumptions and pursue innovative solutions (Lüscher and Lewis, 2008). Finally, communication is an essential skill for leaders, particularly paradoxical leaders. Leaders can motivate and inspire followers to embrace paradoxes by clearly conveying the vision behind conflicting demands (Smith and Tushman, 2005). Through this, paradoxical leaders can explain their reasoning and justify their decisions, enhancing their ability to manage paradoxes effectively (Smith and Lewis, 2012). Thus, effective communication can enhance task performance for both paradoxical leaders and followers. Smith and Lewis (2012) emphasise that these four skills are not valuable on their own; they also complement and strengthen one another. For instance, leaders with confidence encourage risk-taking, communicate effectively, and manage conflicts. Likewise, cognitive complexity generates creative responses to paradoxes while uncovering new insights, paving the way for improved communication and greater confidence. While each skill contributes to paradox management individually, their combination significantly strengthens the effectiveness of paradoxical leadership (Smith and Lewis, 2012; Lewis, Andriopoulos and Smith, 2014). However, despite their importance, the impact of paradoxical leadership on task performance, particularly for leaders exhibiting these skills, remains underexplored. Therefore, my research aims to investigate how paradoxical leaders' task performance is influenced by these four skills.

Furthermore, the paradoxical leadership approach explores the behavioural efforts of leaders, with culture playing a significant role in shaping leadership behaviour. Leaders' culture (i.e. personal and national), rooted in their values, strongly influences their actions and behaviours (Kenny and Fraser, 2012). This culture reflects the interplay of everything with which they are connected (Byrne and Bradley, 2007). Leadership behaviour and style are shaped by factors such as society's implicit and explicit contributions, the effects of power, status, and persuasion, as well as the enduring nature of intrinsic values, local

viewpoints, and spiritual beliefs (Kenny and Fraser, 2012). These factors act as transformative forces beyond the leaders' control (George et al., 2016). Thus, leadership perspectives and styles are inherently unique, reflecting individual understanding, beliefs, fundamental principles, viewpoints, and expertise (Fitzgerald, 2003; Antonakis and House, 2013). The cross-cultural perspective also suggests that individuals' working knowledge and behaviour are influenced by their cultural background (House, Javidan, and Dorfman, 2001; Byrne and Bradley, 2007), whereas the universal perspective emphasises leadership traits and styles, arguing that cultural differences can be transcended by these leadership qualities (Dorfman et al., 2012; House et al., 2002). Moreover, the GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organisational Behaviour Effectiveness) study explores how regional and organisational cultures influence leadership traits and styles (Dorfman et al., 2012). This study emphasises the relationship between leadership, organisational practices (including both structure and processes), and culture. However, in cross-cultural settings, paradoxical leadership is increasingly valued as it enables leaders to integrate diverse leadership styles with their cultural background and knowledge to drive organisational success (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). Therefore, understanding the role of culture in different organisational practices is essential. Although paradoxical leadership has received considerable scholarly attention (Pearce et al., 2019; Putnam, Fairhurst and Banghart, 2016; Chen et al., 2021; Cunha and Putnam, 2019; Smith and Lewis, 2011; O'Reilly and Tushman, 2013; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013), there is limited understanding of how leaders simultaneously manage multiple, contradictory, yet interrelated paradoxes and influence followers in handling contradictory demands. Additionally, the connection between culture and paradoxical leadership remains insufficiently explored. My research aims to bridge these gaps.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presents a thorough review of the literature associated with this research, establishing a strong foundation for analysing the role of paradoxical leadership in enabling leaders and followers to navigate organisational paradoxes. It explores the theoretical foundations, key concepts, and empirical studies related to paradox, paradox theory, and paradoxical leadership. By outlining the dynamic nature of paradoxes, their origins in tensions and contradictions, and the role of paradoxical leadership in addressing these challenges, this chapter situates the present study within the broader scholarly discourse.

The chapter begins by exploring problems and paradoxes, distinguishing between conventional problem-solving approaches and the inherent tensions that define paradoxes. Subsequently, paradox theory is discussed as a theoretical lens for analysing paradox and paradoxical leadership. Following this, the chapter considers the roles of complexity and hybridity in generating paradoxical situations for leaders and followers within organisations. The focus then shifts to leadership, tracing the evolution of different leadership styles and their relevance in managing organisational challenges. This analysis transitions into an in-depth examination of paradoxical leadership, positioning it as a key contextual factor in addressing organisational paradoxes. By reviewing existing definitions and conceptualisations of paradoxical leadership, the chapter highlights its adaptive and integrative nature. Paradoxical leadership emerges not only as a response to tensions but as a proactive strategy that embraces contradictions, fostering the coexistence of opposing forces. This perspective aligns with a holistic mindset, in which leaders recognise and integrate contradictions into broader organisational frameworks, unlocking opportunities for innovation and resilience.

The chapter also identifies gaps in the existing literature that this research seeks to address. While paradox, paradox theory, and paradoxical leadership have gained increasing attention, empirical studies on their practical implications remain limited. Much of the literature focuses on theoretical frameworks and conceptual discussions, with fewer studies examining how paradoxical leadership is implemented in practice and how it influences follower behaviour in real-world organisational settings. This gap is particularly pronounced in complex and hybrid organisational contexts, where traditional leadership models may be insufficient. Another key gap concerns the role of contextual factors in shaping paradoxical leadership. While some studies acknowledge that paradoxes manifest differently across industries and cultural settings, little research explores how these contextual differences influence leadership strategies. Furthermore, there is a lack of consensus in the literature regarding the ontological nature of paradoxical tensions—whether they are inherent aspects of systems or socially constructed through cognition and rhetoric. This conceptual ambiguity limits the coherence of existing research and affects the development of strategies for managing paradoxes. By addressing these gaps, this research aims to contribute both to academic discourse on paradoxical leadership and to practical insights for leaders navigating the paradoxes of organisational life.

3. Research Approach

Chapter Overview

The previous chapter provided a comprehensive review of the literature on paradox, paradox theory, complexity, hybridity, leadership, and paradoxical leadership, along with an identification of the research gaps in these fields. This chapter outlines the research approach in relation to the research questions, followed by a detailed description of the specific procedures employed. It begins by presenting the research's ontological, epistemological, and axiological positions. The rationale for choosing a qualitative approach is then provided, along with an explanation of the fieldwork activities, encompassing the selection of participants, methods of data collection, and the tools used for data analysis. Then, it addresses the ethical considerations taken into account during the fieldwork. The chapter concludes by briefly assessing the trustworthiness of the research.

3.1 Research Overview

Ensuring methodological fit is crucial for generating reliable insights aligned with the research aim by selecting the most appropriate approach (Bryman and Bell, 2015; Morgan and Smircich, 1980; Daft, 1983). Understanding different methodological approaches requires familiarity with the philosophical debates that have shaped social research. Discussions surrounding the nature of “reality” and “knowledge” in the social world have long been contested among scholars from different eras, forming the foundation of research development. A key question in these debates is how the social world can be observed. Scholars find themselves in various groups, aligning their positions with either objectivism or subjectivism (Creswell, 2013).

In the evolution of philosophical thought, debates, critiques, and counterarguments are not only inevitable but also common across both social and natural sciences. Maintaining a balance between competing philosophical perspectives is crucial for investigating a variety of research methodologies and approaches (Bryman and Bell, 2015; Easterby-Smith et al., 2018; Ritchie et al., 2013). Therefore, articulating ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions with clarity and precision is vital for ensuring the trustworthiness and credibility of research. As Cameron and Quinn (1988, p. 13) note, “paradoxes are paradoxical”, and studying them by employing methodological approaches with varying

foundational assumptions can contribute to advancing paradox research. This section outlines my philosophical worldview, including its ontological, epistemological, and axiological positions as they pertain to this research.

3.1.1 My Ontological Position

The foundation of the social world lies in social reality and the socially constructed nature of knowledge. The meanings and interpretations of this reality emerge from individuals' perceptions, beliefs, experiences, assumptions, and actions. Philosophers continue to view the social world subjectively, offering varied interpretations. For example, Immanuel Kant (1781) argues that human understanding is the source of knowledge developed through contemplation of experience (Ritchie et al., 2013). Similarly, Wilhelm Dilthey (1860) emphasises the importance of historical and social contexts in shaping human experiences and argues that social research should focus on understanding individuals' lived experiences within their specific social and historical settings (Ritchie et al., 2013). Max Weber extends this perspective by highlighting the importance of subjective meaning in social action. Weber suggests that to understand why individuals behave in particular ways, researchers must interpret the meanings they attach to their actions—whether influenced by tradition, emotion, values, or rational goals (Cassell, Grandy and Cunliffe, 2017). Collectively, these philosophical perspectives underscore the importance of individual and contextual factors in social research, recognising that multiple interpretations and truths coexist within any social phenomenon. This view, which holds that reality and knowledge are socially constructed, is known as relativism—a key ontological stance in social science advocated by philosophers such as Kant, Dilthey, and Weber. Building on these foundations, relativist ontology asserts that knowledge is shaped by social actors and their contexts, leading to multiple truths rather than a singular objective reality. This ontological stance acknowledges that facts and phenomena are interpreted differently by various social actors, influenced by their unique contexts and experiences (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018; Cassell, Grandy and Cunliffe, 2017).

My ontological position aligns with *relativism*. My research investigates how paradoxical leadership influences followers in managing contradictory demands. A relativist ontology is well suited to this objective, as I assume that reality consists of multiple truths, which are socially constructed facts shaped by the perspectives of my participants. Therefore, understanding the phenomenon within its socio-cultural context and capturing how social actors experience it is essential to my research. Other prevailing ontological positions—

realism, internal realism, and nominalism— do not align with my research aims. Realism posits that social and physical realities exist independently of the observers' perception. Internal realism similarly regards reality as objective but asserts that it cannot be directly observed, being causally detached from the human mind and requiring empirical testing (Bryman and Bell, 2015; Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Nominalism represents the most extreme ontological position, closely aligning with relativism yet fundamentally incompatible with this research (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). It asserts that reality has no inherent existence within the social world; instead, all facts and phenomena are purely social constructions shaped by individual perceptions and experiences (Bryman and Bell, 2015; Burrell and Morgan, 2016). However, this research assumes that while social reality is shaped by individual perceptions, it is also influenced by broader structural and contextual factors, making a purely nominalist approach incompatible.

Beyond these four positions, Bhaskar (2015) develops an intriguing ontological perspective, which is critical realism that bridges the gap between realism and nominalism, offering a nuanced middle ground (Reed, 2005). It holds that reality exists independently, yet its underlying structures are contingent upon observers' experiences and perceptions (O'Mahoney and Vincent, 2014). Similar to Bhaskar (2015), O'Mahoney and Vincent (2014) also classify critical realism as an ontological position. In contrast, Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) regard it as an epistemological position because critical realism incorporates elements from both positivist direct realism (the belief that reality can be directly observed and understood) and postmodernist nominalism (the belief that reality is constructed through language and social processes). Nevertheless, with the exception of relativism, none of these ontological positions suit my research, which is oriented towards uncovering multiple realities within social phenomena that remain unknown. My objective is to investigate these unexplored phenomena through the insights provided by my participants' responses.

3.1.2 My Epistemological Position

Examining different epistemological approaches is essential for understanding and justifying one's epistemological stance. Interpretivism and positivism are the two polar opposite epistemological positions (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018; Burrell and Morgan, 2016), and my position aligns with the former. Interpretivism is closely associated with relativist (subjectivist) ontology, a philosophical standpoint commonly adopted by social scientists. Within the interpretivism paradigm, several branches emerge, including social

constructionism (occasionally referred to as weak constructionism), strong constructionism, hermeneutics, symbolic interactionism, pragmatism, feminism, and postmodernism (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). In contrast, natural sciences typically advocate positivism, which aligns with realist (objectivist) ontology and informs systems theory and scientific methods. Social science scholars interpret these epistemological approaches in diverse ways, often tied to their methodological implications. This diversity can lead to confusion and spark debate, yet it simultaneously broadens the scope for selecting a research orientation (de Gialdino, 2009).

I have opted for *interpretivism* based on the reasoning of Burrell and Morgan (2016), as it posits that individuals, as social actors, construct and experience diverse social realities within their social worlds, shaped by their distinct cultural backgrounds and circumstances. Interpretivists argue that meaning is created by individuals, necessitating a focus by social scientists on subjective rather than objective interpretations. This interpretive approach emphasises the subjective nature of reality, acknowledging that knowledge is co-constructed through interactions, contexts, and lived experiences (Ritchie et al., 2013). Thus, social science research cannot be conducted like natural science research (Crotty, 1998). A key strength of interpretivism is that it enables researchers to gain deep insights and a nuanced understanding of individuals' perceptions, values, and emotions within their social contexts (Burrell and Morgan, 2016). This approach enhances reflexivity—the integrity, values, and ethical considerations embedded in the research process (Ritchie et al., 2013; Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). As an interpretivist, my objective is to develop deeper meanings by exploring and interpreting the nuances of social realities and the individuals who shape and navigate them. Rather than seeking objective truths, I focus on understanding how social actors perceive, experience, and assign meaning to their surroundings. Through this interpretive approach, I aim to uncover nuanced interpretations that contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of social phenomena. However, interpretivism presents particular challenges. Interpretivist researchers are required to justify their assumptions and interpretations due to the approach's inherent ontological subjectivity (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2002). Moreover, researchers' personal beliefs, ethics, and values may influence research outcomes, potentially introducing biases (Ritchie et al., 2013; Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). After careful reflection, I argue that the advantages of the interpretive approach outweigh its limitations. By embracing subjectivity, this approach allows for a deeper, contextually rich understanding of social phenomena, capturing the nuances of human experiences, which is essential for my research. While the risk of bias exists, reflexivity and transparency in the

research process can help mitigate these concerns, strengthening the rigour and credibility of the findings.

Social constructionism is also relevant to my research, as it falls within the interpretivist paradigm (Habermas, 1970). Compared to strong constructionism, social constructionism is a more moderate perspective. It resonates with my research by claiming that reality emerges through social interactions among individuals who express only partial, fragmentary meanings of these realities. Understanding social context is, therefore, essential for interpreting and experiencing these realities (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018; Shotter, 1993; Berger and Luckmann, 2016; Watzlawick, 1984). However, I need to explore this perspective further to determine its compatibility with my research. Conversely, positivism is unsuitable for my research because it conceptualises the social world as an external, objective reality that exists independently of human perception, emphasising measurable and observable facts obtained through scientific methods (Bryman and Bell, 2015; Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). My research focuses on paradoxical leadership and its influence on followers, explored through my participants' knowledge, experiences, perceptions, and interpretations. Given my belief that the social context encompasses multiple realities, I dismiss the notion of value-free assumptions (Reed, 2005) that can be analysed using purely scientific methods. Therefore, a positivist approach is incompatible with my research, as it is too rigid and reductionist to capture the dynamic and contextual nature of human behaviour and social interactions. Instead, my epistemological position as an interpretivist complements my relativist ontology, an alignment that is essential for determining a suitable research methodology.

3.1.3 My Axiological Position

My axiological position informs how I acknowledge and manage the role of ethics and values—both my own and those of my participants—throughout the research process. Heron (1996) asserts that an individual's intrinsic values form an uncompromising foundation that shapes their beliefs, principles, and decisions. These values serve as the fundamental rationale or guiding principle for human actions, influencing thought processes, choices, and responses to various situations (Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2013; Reed, 2005). Recognising the inevitable role of values in research, I engage in continuous reflection to ensure transparency in how they inform my approach. This commitment strengthens the integrity of my research by demonstrating reflexivity, ethical awareness, and a dedication to

accurately representing participants' perspectives. By openly integrating these considerations, I enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of my findings.

From an axiological standpoint, my approach is *detached* concerning both my participants and the social context. Although my primary data collection method is interviews, I refrain from influencing my participants' responses. I presume I can preserve neutrality, thereby minimising my influence on the data collected. According to Saunders et al. (2019), my role aligns with an "*observer-as-participant*", indicating that I only observe my participants and social phenomena without engaging in their responses. While I may be present at events or activities relevant to my research, my involvement is limited to that of a spectator, a role referred to as "moderate participation" (Spradley, 2016). I have chosen semi-structured interviews, so the "observer-as-participant" role is appropriate. I can ensure transparency by clearly communicating my identity, research aims, and objectives to all involved parties. This approach helps me maintain focus by identifying and interpreting key insights while avoiding emotional involvement in the participants' experiences. By sustaining this degree of detachment, I aim to minimise potential biases throughout the research process.

3.2 Research Design

This section provides a detailed discussion of the research design in alignment with my ontological and epistemological assumptions to ensure the rigour and credibility of my research.

Using qualitative semi-structured interviews, an inductive approach is well-suited to my research as it prioritises detailed exploration (Bryman and Bell, 2015; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2002). This qualitative research approach focuses on participants' perspectives, interpretations, beliefs, values, and knowledge, offering a comprehensive view of their behaviours and reactions in varied contexts (Mason, 2017; Bryman and Bell, 2015; Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, 2013). It thoroughly examines individuals' narratives to explore different facets of a phenomenon (Creswell and Poth, 2016). This approach aligns with my research aim, as I seek to understand paradoxical leadership by investigating how leaders and followers perceive, interpret, and manage paradoxes in real-world scenarios. Additionally, paradoxes can be context-dependent, varying across organisational settings and situations. This qualitative research approach is particularly useful in this regard, as it captures the nuanced experiences and perspectives of both leaders and followers. Since

paradoxical leadership is a relatively new area of study, this approach can generate insights that advance our understanding of paradoxes and paradoxical leadership.

This research considers interviews as the primary data collection method, as interviews offer the flexibility to ask probing questions relevant to the research and structure the sequence of inquiries as needed. This data collection method allows me to better grasp interviewees' viewpoints by receiving rich and thorough responses. For this reason, I regard my interviewees as participants rather than mere respondents, as they actively engage in the research process. They contribute through their responses and by offering insights, interpretations, and feedback that help shape the research. As a researcher, I can pursue their reactions to specific issues by exploring their views, beliefs, experiences, and motivations (Bryman, 2001). This distinction reflects the more interactive and interpretive nature of qualitative research. In contrast, interviewees are viewed as respondents in structured interviews, where responses are fixed with no scope for follow-up questions (Bryman, 2001).

I chose semi-structured interviews among various interview types because they facilitate data collection with a clear research focus from the outset (Blaxter et al., 1996; Silverman, 2013). Semi-structured interviews offer a harmonious balance between structure and flexibility. This type of interview enables me to utilise a predetermined set of questions whilst also allowing for adaptation, deeper probing, and the exploration of new themes that may emerge during the conversation. This approach ensures consistency across interviews yet remains adaptable to the unique responses of each participant (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Moreover, semi-structured interviews foster a conversational style that helps build rapport and elicit rich, in-depth insights into participants' experiences and perspectives (Brinkmann, 2014; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). This adaptability is particularly useful for exploring challenging topics, such as paradoxical leadership, where unexpected issues may emerge (Bryman and Bell, 2015; Creswell and Poth, 2016). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews give me the opportunity to ask further questions to clarify or expand on participants' answers. This enables me to engage participants to gain deeper insights into emerging topics, ensuring that subtle nuances are captured and that the data reflect the participants' subjective realities (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Silverman, 2013).

During the interviews, I use critical incident techniques (CIT), encouraging participants to recall and describe specific incidents from their experience, yielding rich, detailed data that can uncover common patterns and rare occurrences that might not be observed otherwise

(Bryman and Bell, 2015). This method enhances the depth of analysis and contributes to achieving my research objectives. Conversely, structured interviews impose rigidity on the interviewer due to their fixed format and standardised approach (Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, 2013). Moreover, my axiological position as a non-participant observer enables me to analyse and interpret participants' behaviours and attitudes, offering a continuous and comprehensive understanding of their experiences (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). From an interpretivist standpoint, such methods are essential for capturing the depth and richness of social phenomena. Researchers within this paradigm, including myself, regard them as crucial for providing a precise and meaningful representation of social reality (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2002; Blumberg et al., 2011). Therefore, inductive reasoning employing qualitative semi-structured interviews is appropriate for my research.

My research adopts a case study approach (Anderson, 2013; Yin, 2013, 2018), focusing on multinational clothing companies operating in Bangladesh. I have purposively selected four companies representing both Eastern and Western cultures. Among various industries, I chose multinational clothing companies in Bangladesh because Bangladesh is the third largest garment exporter in the global apparel market (World Trade Organization, 2023, p.80), and these multinational clothing companies contribute significantly to Bangladesh's economy. As reported by McKinsey and Company, the ready-made garment (RMG) industry, which includes many multinational companies, accounts for 84% of Bangladesh's exports (Berg et al., 2021). In these companies, there is a need to understand how different leadership styles influence productivity, follower satisfaction, and organisational culture. Therefore, I want to explore how leaders and followers working in multinational clothing companies effectively tailor paradoxical leadership to enhance leadership practices within the unique Bangladeshi context.

I have conducted 35 semi-structured interviews (20 managers and 15 team members). My participants are *managers* who lead their followers and teams in specific departments, and the *team members* in the organisation. It is essential to comprehend the perspectives of managers and team members to understand the role of paradoxical leadership. That is why I consider managers and team members as my participants. In my thesis, participants are categorised according to their organisational roles and their analytical categories within the study (see Appendix 4). *Managers* refer to participants who hold formal managerial positions and are responsible for supervising team members and overseeing teams in specific departments. As such, they occupy *managerial roles*. *Team members*, on the other hand,

refer to participants in *non-managerial positions* who report to a manager and are primarily responsible for carrying out tasks and supporting departmental functions without formal leadership responsibilities. For the purpose of this thesis, these two groups of participants are referred to as *leaders* and *followers*, respectively. *Managers are referred as leaders* due to their managerial roles and their responsibility for guiding team members, whereas *team members are referred as followers*, representing those who are in non-managerial positions and are influenced by, and respond to, their managers. Throughout this thesis, the term “*employees*” is used to refer collectively to both managers and team members. In analytical terms, “employees” encompasses both leaders and followers, ensuring that the perspectives of these organisational members are considered in relation to paradoxical leadership. This distinction ensures clarity between participants’ organisational positions (manager and team member) and their analytical categories (leader and follower) throughout the thesis.

Participants are selected using purposive sampling, based on their work experience and competencies, to ensure the research objectives are met and the research questions are effectively addressed (Bryman and Bell, 2015; Anderson, 2013). I have leveraged my networks to reach out to my participants. Due to my previous role in Human Resources, I have established connections in this industry. I have contacted my participants through telephone, Facebook, and LinkedIn. Each interview takes approximately 1 to 1.5 hours, depending on the rapport with the interviewees, the richness of the discussion, and the contextual intricacies they talked about. The interview guideline is prepared by structuring the main topics that need to be covered to address the research questions. Two sets of interview guides are prepared to address managers and team members in the organisation (see Appendix 1). Interviews are audio-recorded with the participant’s permission, following the ethical guidelines of the University of Glasgow.

3.3 Data Analysis

This section presents the data analysis process by outlining the data translation and transcription process, followed by a detail description of the thematic analysis employed in this research.

The data analysis process begins with data translation and transcription. My interview guides—both for managers and team members—are in English, as my participants understand and speak English. Therefore, translating the interview guides into Bengali is not

necessary for my research. However, I am aware that, although my participants are comfortable with English, they may not be able to respond fluently. Therefore, the interviews are conducted in a mix of English and Bengali to ensure they can express their thoughts comfortably. For example, a participant's response may include English and Bengali within the same sentence. I do not insist on English-only responses, as this could create a language barrier and hinder their ability to articulate their thoughts. This approach helps me capture their spontaneous answers more accurately.

After collecting the data, I use software for transcription. I test different software for accuracy but encounter challenges because the software struggles to transcribe responses that mix languages (in my case, the mix of Bengali and English). I find Cockatoo slightly better among the options, providing approximately 40% accuracy. However, this is insufficient, as the interviews are my primary and only source of information. As a result, I resort to manual transcription and translation. I use Cockatoo's transcriptions as a starting point for my own transcription process. I then listen to each recording and transcribe accordingly. While transcribing, I simultaneously translate any Bengali data into English where necessary. This process of single translation helps me preserve the original meaning while ensuring natural phrasing (Sutrisno, Nguyen and Tangen, 2014). Afterwards, I listen to each recording again to compare the single-translated transcriptions with the original recordings. Since I transcribe and translate simultaneously using a single translation process, there is a risk of losing nuances and subtle meanings, as the translation relies heavily on my skills and interpretation. In this regard, comparing the single-translated transcriptions with the original recordings helps identify shifts in meaning or inconsistencies and ensures accuracy. This appears to be a viable method for accurately transcribing and translating my interviews. Although this manual transcription and translation process is extremely time-consuming and exhausting, it ensures the most accurate and authentic representation of the interview responses in English.

Afterwards, I analyse the data using thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), and use NVivo (version 14) to assist with coding and organising themes, due to my familiarity with the software. Thematic analysis facilitates me in identifying, analysing, and interpreting themes within the collected data through semi-structured interviews, offering a comprehensive and detailed account of the phenomena under study (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This approach is flexible yet rigorous and well-suited for my research. It compares the analytical framework utilised in the research with the

emergent themes that arise from the open-ended nature of the interview questions. The recursive nature of thematic analysis enables me to shift forwards and backwards across different stages of the analysis, refining codes and themes as my understanding of the data evolves.

The thematic approach is known as a systematic process for developing an inductive theory (Glaser and Strauss, 2017; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This approach involves continuous interrogation of the collected data. It follows a structured sequence for theory generation or development. This involves gathering data, coding it, making comparisons, and organising it into categories. It also includes sampling theoretically, developing a core category, and ultimately generating or developing a theory. As I use thematic analysis, my data analysis begins alongside data collection and is followed by the coding process. In this coding process, I use NVivo (version 14) to organise my themes by dragging codes from one group to another. It is a unified workspace where I can efficiently arrange and analyse the entire dataset. It helps me ensure my analysis's conceptual clarity and thoroughness (Jackson and Bazeley, 2019, p.105).

Ongoing coding and data comparison facilitate the categorisation of codes. Given its emphasis on continuous comparison, this approach is referred to as the constant comparison method. Coding, a key element of thematic analysis, is crucial for interpreting data and is widely employed by inductive researchers (Miles et al., 2013). Finally, interrelated categories derived from constant comparison led to the development of a theoretical statement.

To ensure a rigorous and systematic approach to data analysis, I follow Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis. This method provides a clear and flexible structure for engaging with the data, allowing for both inductive theme development and iterative refinement through constant comparison. The following section outlines how each phase is applied in the context of this research, demonstrating the analytical journey from data familiarisation to the construction of a theoretical statement.

The data analysis process begins with familiarisation, during which I repeatedly read the interview transcripts and listen to the audio recordings to engage closely with the data. During this phase, I extract relevant data segments and create reflective notes and memos in NVivo to capture initial impressions and identify potential points of interest.

Following data extraction, I undertake first-order coding through line-by-line analysis in NVivo. This involves identifying meaningful units of data that relate to paradoxes, paradoxical leadership behaviours, and the experiences of leaders and followers. I assign short, descriptive labels that remain close to participants' language, reflecting an inductive orientation. NVivo's coding functions facilitate systematic organisation and comparison of codes across transcripts.

Next, I proceed to second-order coding, during which I begin to interpret and group the first-order codes into broader conceptual categories. This second-order coding step moves the analysis from descriptive coding towards more abstract, interpretive dimensions that capture underlying patterns across participants' account.

The subsequent phase is searching for themes. At this point, I develop sub-themes by grouping related second-order codes into coherent clusters that reflect recurring ideas and relationships within the data. These sub-themes are refined through constant comparison and recursive engagement with the data, ensuring they accurately represent participants' accounts. I merge, split, or discard sub-themes where appropriate to enhance clarity and distinctiveness. Sub-themes are then clustered into main themes that are directly linked to the research questions.

The phase of defining and naming themes (both sub-themes and main themes) involve specifying each theme's scope, boundaries, and relevance to the research questions. I write detailed descriptions of each theme, supported by illustrative quotes from participants, to explain how they contribute to understanding paradoxes, paradoxical leadership, and how leaders and followers make sense of and navigate these paradoxes.

Finally, I integrate the themes into the broader thesis narrative. This involves interpreting the findings in relation to existing literature on paradox theory and paradoxical leadership, moving from descriptive accounts to theoretical insights. Throughout the analysis, I apply the constant comparison method, revisiting earlier phases to refine codes and themes as my understanding evolves. NVivo supports this iterative process by tracking coding decisions and maintaining an audit trail, thereby enhancing the transparency and rigour of the analysis (Jackson and Bazeley, 2019).

The systematic application of thematic analysis, structured around data extraction, first-order coding, second-order coding, and the development of sub-themes and main themes, and guided by the constant comparison method (Glaser and Strauss, 2017; Strauss and Corbin, 1998), enables a nuanced understanding of how leaders and followers experience, make sense of, and navigate paradoxes in organisational work. It also illuminates how paradoxical leadership shapes these processes. The emergent themes ultimately form the basis of a theoretical statement on how paradoxical leadership influences leaders' and followers' sensemaking and navigation of paradoxes.

To illustrate the data analysis process, Appendix 5 presents a table showing how participant quotes are systematically coded—from initial data extracts, through first- and second-order coding, to the development of sub-themes and overarching themes.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are essential to any research as they ensure the standards of conduct that govern researchers' behaviour, particularly concerning the rights of participants and those affected by the study (Reed, 2005). Primary research involving fieldwork presents more significant challenges and uncertainties than studies based on secondary sources, archival materials, or statistical analysis. Therefore, ethical considerations are essential for social science research involving human participants. This section discusses the ethical considerations related to data collection, with a particular focus on conducting interviews. Diener and Crandall (1978) also identify four key ethical concerns: lack of informed consent, deception, invasion of privacy, and potential harm to participants. These issues are carefully addressed in my research and are discussed in this section.

I have prioritised adherence to ethical guidelines to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, which is in line with the Data Protection Act (2018). I have followed the ethical guidelines established by the University of Glasgow and the College of Social Science ethics committee to conduct this research before data collection.

Before conducting the interviews, the Participant Information and Consent Form are provided to those who agreed to participate in my research. These forms are prepared following the University's ethical guidelines (see Appendix 2 for the Participant Information Form and Appendix 3 for the Consent Form). I have emailed these documents to my

participants two days before the interview to give them sufficient time to read them. Additionally, I have provided hard copies before the interview in case they want to review them again. To prevent deception, participants have received precise information about the research's purpose and scope. Explicit permission is obtained to record the interviews. Before starting the interview, participants are reminded that their participation is voluntary, and they can withdraw at any time. This process respects their autonomy and upholds their right to make informed decisions about their involvement. A thorough briefing and debriefing are conducted, and informed consent is obtained. Regarding audio recording, each participant is notified of the start and end.

Confidentiality and privacy are also important. Participants often disclose personal experiences and information. Thus, the identities of participants, their organisations, and the collected data remain strictly confidential. All this information is anonymised and de-identified, ensuring that participants' information cannot be linked to their responses. The interviews are conducted in friendly, open environments such as coffee shops and public libraries to encourage participants to express their views freely. Participants schedule the interviews at their convenience. I chose interview locations outside the office premises, as participants might feel uncomfortable speaking there, risk being seen by colleagues, or struggle to find time during regular office hours. Every effort is made to ensure that participants experience no psychological or physical harm. Furthermore, cultural, gender and ethnic sensitivities are carefully considered.

3.5 Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research

The evaluation of trustworthiness and rigour in qualitative research has been the subject of extensive debate within the research methods literature, reflecting a diversity of opinions on their definitions and the approaches used to establish them (Stahl and King, 2020; Creswell and Poth, 2016; Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2002; Shenton, 2003). This ongoing debate is rooted in the fundamental differences between qualitative and quantitative research paradigms, particularly in the criteria used to assess the credibility and rigour of findings. In quantitative research, validity and reliability are the primary indicators of rigour. In contrast, qualitative research adopts alternative standards, emphasising trustworthiness while addressing similar underlying concerns. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) explain, ensuring trustworthiness and rigour in qualitative research involves “the researcher verifying the accuracy of findings through specific techniques” and “maintaining consistency in the

researcher's approach across various researchers and studies" (p. 199). To address these concerns within a qualitative framework, the concept of trustworthiness, as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), is widely accepted. It offers an alternative to the conventional criteria of validity and reliability. This concept of trustworthiness comprises four dimensions. These are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, each corresponding to internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity in conventional research terms (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Stahl and King, 2020; Creswell and Poth, 2016). In this research, I have adhered to these four dimensions to ensure the consistency and trustworthiness of the study.

To enhance credibility, I have employed data triangulation (Yin, 2018; Creswell and Poth, 2016; Yazan, 2015) by including both managers and team members as participants. The participants are from various departments across four multinational clothing companies in Bangladesh. Through interviews, I have received information from one participant and cross-checked it against the information obtained from other participants to ensure data consistency and dependability. This is how I have carried out the triangulation process.

Purposive sampling and data saturation are used to ensure transferability (Mason, 2010, 2017). Four multinational clothing companies operating in Bangladesh are deliberately selected to represent Eastern and Western cultures. Participants are also chosen purposively based on their work experience and competencies to ensure alignment with the research objectives and effectively address the research questions. Furthermore, I have maintained data saturation while collecting data, ensuring the comprehensiveness of the data and the applicability of findings to similar contexts (Mason, 2010; Robinson, 2013; Francis et al., 2009). Data collection continued until no new themes or information emerged, resulting in 35 interviews.

I have ensured dependability by clearly describing the research design, data collection procedures, and analysis methods. This transparency and systematic approach strengthen the consistency and overall trustworthiness of the research process. Additionally, I have employed inter-rater reliability using the percentage agreement method to ensure consistency in my research findings across different researchers (O'Connor and Joffe, 2020; McDonald, Schoenebeck and Forte, 2019). The average inter-rater reliability is 81%, based on two researchers independently coding the same interview transcripts—one achieving 81% agreement and the other 80%. This confirms that my coding process is consistent with

that of other researchers. An average inter-rater reliability of 81% can be regarded as substantial agreement, based on the standard suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), although a universally agreed-upon standard for what constitutes acceptable reliability in the percentage agreement method does not exist (O'Connor and Joffe, 2020). Moreover, all interviews, NVivo files, and other documents used in data analysis have been recorded and securely stored. All files, including interview recordings and transcriptions, are deleted from the transcription software Cockatoo. Hard copies are converted into electronic formats, and the original paper documents are destroyed using shredding devices. In accordance with the University of Glasgow's data management regulations, all electronic data is stored in password-protected OneDrive folders provided by the University. However, in line with the confidentiality agreements made with participants, documents containing raw data cannot be disclosed or shared with third parties.

I reflect on my interpretations, discuss my assumptions with my supervisors, and review the research findings to ensure confirmability. Additionally, I have presented initial ideas and findings at conferences, where feedback from fellow PhD researchers and experienced academics has helped me refine and clarify my assumptions and interpretations.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presents the research approach utilised in this study. It underscores the importance of aligning the philosophical worldview with methodological choices to ensure trustworthy and meaningful answers to the research questions. This research is grounded in a relativist ontology and an interpretive epistemology, reflecting a subjectivist view of social reality. It maintains a detached axiological stance and follows an inductive reasoning approach. This research collects qualitative data primarily through semi-structured interviews. A detailed account of the data collection process is provided. In total, 35 semi-structured interviews (20 managers and 15 team members) are conducted across four multinational clothing companies in Bangladesh. Thematic analysis is employed to analyse the data, with NVivo (version 14) used to organise codes and themes to address the research questions. This chapter then discusses the ethical considerations upheld throughout the research process. Finally, the research's trustworthiness is demonstrated through adherence to the four criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

4. Findings

Chapter Overview

The previous chapter provided a comprehensive overview of the research approach, encompassing the methodology adopted for fieldwork, the research design, data collection, and analysis. This chapter focuses on addressing the research questions. My main research question is: What are the world applications of paradox theory through paradoxical leadership? To investigate this research question more thoroughly, it is divided into two sub-research questions, specifically: How do leaders and followers make sense of, and navigate, paradox? The chapter begins by analysing the first sub-question, focusing on the perceived sources of paradox, followed by insights from the Global South. This research considers the Global South perspective because paradoxes often arise from the specific contexts. Additionally, people in the Global South typically experience higher levels of precarity and vulnerability, which may make them especially susceptible to the effects of paradox. By exploring the unique dynamics of the Global South, such as local conditions, cultures, values, and challenges, this research can uncover how these factors contribute to the formation and experience of paradoxes. Incorporating this perspective provides a distinctive and valuable lens for exploring and understanding paradoxes in their contextual richness. The chapter then turns to the second sub-question by analysing how leaders and followers manage paradox and the impact of practising paradoxical leadership on leaders. In this regard, this chapter provides a detailed narration of the data collection through semi-structured interviews.

4.1 Making sense of paradox

4.1.1 Perceived sources of paradox

The data from both leaders and followers seem to indicate several perceived sources that contribute to the paradox. Exploring these perceived sources is essential to understanding the situations in which paradoxes arise. Considering the perspectives of both leaders and followers provide insights from leadership and operational viewpoints, highlighting how their roles, responsibilities, and experiences shape their understanding of the paradoxes they face.

Managing different stakeholders' expectations

In organisations, both leaders and followers need to satisfy the expectations of diverse stakeholders, and paradoxes are arguably inherent in managing stakeholders. Stakeholders can include anyone who has an interest in the organisation's activities, such as leaders, followers, customers, suppliers, investors, regulators, and even the community (Freeman, 2010; Donaldson and Preston, 1995). These stakeholders may have conflicting interests or priorities, leading to paradoxical situations where satisfying one's expectations may come at the expense of another's. This becomes apparent when participant-1 expresses,

“We organise and celebrate major events like “International Women’s Day” and “Let’s Break Through the Glass Ceiling” to promote women’s empowerment. These events are widely broadcast on television, newspapers, and social media. These are proud moments for us. However, when it comes to recruitment in the factory, the factory managers do not hire female candidates. Let me share an incident with you. During a factory recruitment, I was one of the interviewers from the HR department, alongside two other factory managers, one of whom was the hiring manager. I noticed they rejected female candidates solely because of their gender, even when they performed well in the interviews. One of them explicitly told me, “Women are not suitable for factory jobs. They are troublemakers because they always run after their children and families.” From my observations, most factory managers seem to share this view. I literally need to fight with the factory managers to hire female candidates if any female candidate qualifies in the interview process. The weird part is that these managers give speeches at the events mentioned earlier, claiming they encourage women to join their teams. They espouse equality but act in a different way. They cannot say they are unaware of the Equality Act and Anti-discrimination policies. Our office premises, including factory offices, are filled with posters promoting women’s empowerment and career support, which are impossible to overlook. Additionally, our company website regularly updates these policies, and employees must pass an online test on equality and anti-discrimination policies every two years. The HR team and department heads also hold quarterly meetings to evaluate our progress on equality and diversity within the organisation. Despite these efforts, we can see the disparity between what is espoused and practised.”

This quote reveals paradoxes on two levels. At the meso level, the organisation creates paradoxes by promoting women's empowerment and equality while simultaneously allowing gender discrimination practices. At the micro level, leaders within the factory setting espouse equality values but reject female candidates solely based on their gender, even when they perform well in interviews. The organisation publicly promotes women's empowerment through major events, which suggests a commitment to gender equality. However, leaders working within the factory of the same organisation are not hiring female candidates, contradicting the organisation's public stance. This contradiction between public advocacy for women's empowerment and internal gender discrimination practices is paradoxical. This paradox is heightened by the fact that the same factory-based leaders who reject female candidates also give speeches promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. Their actions directly contradict their public statements, exposing a gap between rhetoric and reality. These contradictory behaviours presumably suggest that the public rhetoric of leaders in the factory functions as a mask or a means of justifying inaction, enabling them to reject female candidates while still appearing to uphold the organisation's commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment. In this way, the rhetoric of empowerment and the practice of discrimination are intertwined, sustaining a cycle in which change is promised but never realised.

This participant seems to advocate strongly for the female candidates who have passed the interview process. This is the evidence of a commitment to equality. The use of the word "fight" in this quote does not imply physical violence but rather a state of struggle and conflict, involving intense discussions with the leaders in the factory. The participant appears to be facing resistance from these leaders when trying to hire qualified female candidates, presumably due to biases. Therefore, handling these stakeholders (leaders within the factory setting) is challenging because they have conflicting interests, leading to paradoxical situations where satisfying their requirements contributes to discriminatory practices as opposed to the organisation's public stance on women's empowerment. These stakeholders, specifically leaders within the factory setting mentioned in this quote, create paradoxes for the participant. Paradoxes can be created by both internal and external stakeholders. This quote shows how internal stakeholders with conflicting interests create such paradoxes. Leaders within the factory setting and the participant, who is a leader in the HR department, are both internal stakeholders. Internal stakeholders include those directly involved in the organisation's operations, such as leaders, followers, and shareholders. External

stakeholders, by contrast, operate outside the organisation and encompass customers, suppliers, regulatory authorities, and the wider community (Freeman, 2010; Donaldson and Preston, 1995).

Understanding different stakeholders' expectations and predicting their intentions can create paradoxes for leaders and followers within the organisation. These expectations and intentions can often conflict with each other. Predicting stakeholder intentions can also be challenging because stakeholders' priorities can change over time in response to factors such as market dynamics, personal circumstances, or changes in organisational leadership. Moreover, stakeholders can take advantage of others for their benefit. Therefore, the situation can be paradoxical for leaders and followers who are responsible for understanding and managing these diverse and often conflicting expectations and intentions. They are caught in an intricate web of trying to satisfy different stakeholders while achieving the organisation's objectives. This can lead to paradoxical situations where meeting the expectations of one stakeholder conflicts with the demands of another. These paradoxes arise because the stakeholders' conflicting demands are irreconcilable, even though each demand appears logically consistent on its own.

Participant-3 shares,

"I have team members from three generations reporting to me: the elderly, Millennials, and Generation Z. I allow flexible work arrangements for colleagues who have children or caregiver responsibilities at home. For example, one of my colleagues needs to drop their child off at school in the morning, so they choose to come to the office at 10 AM and leave at 6 PM. Our regular office hours are 9 AM to 5 PM. Another colleague needs to look after their sick father, so I allow them to work from home two days a week. Now, my colleagues from Generation Z (who have no children or caregiver responsibilities at home at this moment) have also chosen flexible work hours and sometimes work from home, seeing that I have allowed others to do the same. Therefore, I have to explain to them the reasons behind this flexibility and enforce strict rules for Generation Z, as they do not always ask for my permission."

This quote exemplifies the inherent paradox in comprehending the expectations and intentions of a diverse workforce. The participant 3 who is a leader describes a scenario in which certain followers are granted flexible work arrangements due to personal circumstances. The leader aims to support their followers, intending to maintain a harmonious and productive work environment where everyone can perform at their best. However, this flexibility is observed and adopted by other followers, specifically those from Generation Z. These followers did not obtain requisite permissions from their leader and failed to understand the underlying reasons for these flexible work arrangements. As a result, the leader then has to impose stricter regulations on Generation Z followers to preserve workplace order.

This quote highlights the paradoxical role of the leader, who simultaneously shows flexibility towards followers with children and caregiving responsibilities and enforces strict regulations on Generation Z followers to ensure a harmonious and productive work environment. Additionally, the leader grants flexibility to some followers but not to others. Even though there are clear rationales behind these decisions, this selective application of flexibility may conflict with the principles of fairness and equal treatment, as the rules and policies are intended to apply uniformly to all employees (leaders and followers) within the organisation. Generation Z followers could feel that they are not fairly treated by their leader, only because they do not have any children or caregiver responsibilities. Thus, the paradox lies in the leaders' actions, which simultaneously support and contradict the flexible work arrangements, depending on followers' expectations and intentions.

While sharing the experience of managing followers from three generations, participant 3 remarks, "People try to take a ride." This remark is an idiom that implies that stakeholders in organisations often attempt to exploit situations or benefit from others' efforts, resources, or success without contributing themselves. By using the term "people", the participant generalises this opinion, as it is common for individuals to take advantage of situations for personal gain. This quote illustrates this scenario. When the leader implements flexible work arrangements to accommodate certain followers who are in need, they may not realise that other followers could take undue advantage of this flexibility and exploit it for their benefit. This underscores that the expectations and intentions of various stakeholders can create paradoxes when these expectations and intentions are conflicting and irreconcilable yet logically consistent on their own.

Similarly, participant-9 expresses the difficulty of balancing stakeholder expectations with making an appropriate hiring decision,

“I want to hire a merchandiser to join my team. An important stakeholder is insisting that I hire their brother-in-law for that position. By seeing the CV, I can tell from my experience that the candidate does not meet our criteria. To give the benefit of the doubt and show respect to the stakeholder’s request, we (the HR team and I) interviewed the candidate. The candidate’s performance was not up to the mark. As a result, the candidate did not qualify for the interview process. So, there is no question of hiring this candidate. I have not yet conveyed this information to the stakeholder. I am sure that the stakeholder is going to be very disappointed with our decision. I am in a dilemma about how to handle this situation.”

This quote refers to a paradoxical situation in which a leader is torn between making the right hiring decision by adhering to the company’s standards and maintaining a relationship with a stakeholder who is interested in nepotism by pushing for the hiring of their relative. On one side, the leader wants to maintain professional integrity, and on the other side, they have to maintain the stakeholder relationship by resisting nepotism. The leader has the power to hire their followers based on their qualifications and suitability for the job. A leader is expected to hire the best candidate for the job to ensure the effectiveness and productivity of the team. The hiring decisions should not be made to favour anyone, and it is the responsibility of the leader to ensure that. However, an influential stakeholder insists on hiring their relative who did not qualify in the interview process. This reveals the stakeholder’s intention to utilise their influence to favour their relatives. The stakeholder’s insistence puts pressure on the leader. If the leader adheres to professional principles and rejects the unqualified candidate, they risk damaging the relationship with the stakeholder, which could have negative consequences for their work. On the other hand, if the leader hires an unqualified candidate to maintain a good relationship with the stakeholder, they compromise the integrity of the recruitment process and potentially affect the team’s performance. Thus, the leader is caught between maintaining professional integrity and managing stakeholder relationships. This situation is paradoxical for the leader because they need to make objective decisions (like hiring based on merit and maintaining professional integrity), where the stakeholder has conflicting personal or subjective interests (like putting pressure to employ a relative by utilising their influence).

Competition among host countries' offices

In multinational organisations, host countries of a specific geographical region tend to compete with each other. This competition, while ostensibly beneficial in fostering growth and innovation, can create paradoxical situations for leaders and followers and the organisation as a whole. For example, Company X is an American company. It has host offices around the globe, including Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan—countries within the South Asian region. Offices within this South Asian region tend to compete in terms of growth, innovation and bringing newness. These efforts are primarily aimed at projecting a favourable image to the head office (parent company).

A salient example of this phenomenon can be observed in the celebration of New Year's or International Women's Day. In host countries, the top management, such as the host country leader, is tasked with the responsibility of celebrating these events in a unique and innovative manner, thereby conveying a positive message to their followers. Additionally, the host country leader aims to impress the leaders at the head office. Thus, they prioritise these events to perform their best, allocating and utilising their valuable resources for these competitions. During this time, the host country offices seem to focus almost exclusively on these events. Followers in these host countries are compelled to invest significant effort into these events alongside their routine work responsibilities. Followers often prioritise these events by trading off their regular responsibilities. This appears to be an opportunity for followers to showcase their capabilities to the host country leader, who oversees all event-related activities.

To ensure the successful execution of these events, followers adhere to the instructions of the host country leader. Simultaneously, followers are expected to fulfil their daily responsibilities in accordance with the expectations of their respective leader (line manager). This dual pressure from the host country leader and their respective leader creates a paradoxical situation for followers. Moreover, the significant workload associated with event execution often prevents followers from focusing on their regular responsibilities, leading to decreased individual productivity, which, in turn, affects the organisation's overall performance. As a result, the effort to excel in these events and impress head office leaders can result in reduced organisational productivity. For this reason, while competition among regional offices fosters growth and innovation, it also generates paradoxes at the individual and organisational levels.

As participant-27 narrates their experience,

“When there is an event like New Year’s or International Women’s Day, an unspoken competition arises between South Asian countries. For instance, Bangladesh competes against India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Offices in these countries strive to make a good impression on the head office. Therefore, we emphasise these sorts of events. We aim to be the first to present something new to the head office. We have to hold up the name that “Bangladesh is doing...”. This creates unnecessary pressure and stress. I remember spending three days on a presentation slide for an International Women’s Day celebration. I had to consult with our country head (the head of the Bangladesh office) for even the smallest detail. This was incredibly time-consuming, but I was energised as I got to work directly with the country head. I could not concentrate on my regular work until the event was over. Immediately after that event, my manager, who knew I was occupied with the event work, called me and asked me about my deliverables. When I said I could not manage my workload, they told me I needed to learn multitasking. Later that month, I also received feedback from my manager stating that my monthly performance report did not meet the benchmark. They reminded me of the important tasks I had missed during the time of the event. My manager always says we must reduce stress and improve work-life balance. Is this their way of reducing stress?”

This quote alludes to the paradoxical situation experienced by the follower, highlighting a contradiction between the leader’s expectations, actions, and stated values. On the one hand, the leader encourages followers to reduce stress and improve work-life balance. On the other hand, the leader puts pressure on followers for deliverables, even when aware that the follower is under immense pressure due to event preparation, which is monitored by the country head—the top leader of that office (monitoring a presentation by a country head represents that the top management gives this event high importance). Instead of understanding the follower’s situation, the leader suggests that the follower needs to learn to multitask. The follower gets the impression that their leader does not want to understand their condition, but exacerbates it by commenting, “learn multitasking”. The situation worsens when the leader gives feedback to the follower about their underperformance during the month in which the event occurred. Not only that, but the leader also reminds the follower

of the critical tasks they missed during the event, which is even more stressful for the follower. This inconsistent and contradictory behaviour places the follower in a no-win scenario. Despite the leader's stated values about reducing stress, the actions taken lead to the opposite outcome, creating a paradox. Additionally, the organisation emphasises improving work-life balance for their employees (leaders and followers), yet their actions of creating a competitive environment during events like New Year's or International Women's Day result in increased stress and work pressure. Thus, the actions taken by the organisation and the leader create paradoxes for the followers.

This quote highlights paradoxes not only at the individual level but also at the organisational level. Host offices emphasise events to portray a good image to the head office and foster a competitive environment to drive growth and bring newness and innovation. However, the organisation, preparation, and execution of these events require significant time and utilise valuable resources. These are additional tasks assigned to followers by the host country leader, which increase the workload for the followers, as they must balance event-related responsibilities with their regular tasks. The event tasks become so overbearing that followers struggle to focus on their core duties, leading to a decline in productivity during that period. Eventually, this negatively impacts overall organisational productivity. This creates a paradoxical situation where, on one side, the top leader of the host office aims to impress the head office leaders by excelling in the competition. On the other side, organisational productivity diminishes because of the competition in these events, which paradoxically makes the company less competitive. Therefore, competition among host country offices can create paradoxes at both the individual and organisational levels.

Leaders' contradictory behaviours

Leaders' contradictory behaviour towards their followers can inadvertently contribute to the emergence of paradoxes within organisations. These paradoxes often arise from contradictory demands within the context of an intense managerial relationship. For example, a leader may encourage followers to provide constructive feedback but react negatively when such feedback is given. This can create a paradoxical situation where followers are unsure of how to respond. Another example is that leaders are often encouraged to be transparent with their followers to build trust and foster open communication. However, there are times when strategic discretion is necessary to protect

sensitive information or to prevent unnecessary panic. The need to balance openness with confidentiality can thus create another paradox. As a participant shares

“My manager always encourages me to give them constructive feedback. So, I have given them constructive feedback about an issue. After that, my manager starts to act differently. They remain agitated with me. They do not want to listen to the problems I face in the office. If anything goes wrong, they scold me. I think that they do not like that I have given them constructive feedback.” (Participant-16)

This quote suggests how a leader’s contradictory behaviour can create a paradox for the follower. On the one hand, the leader encourages constructive feedback, which suggests they are open to criticism and willing to improve. On the other hand, when they receive the feedback, their behaviour changes negatively towards the follower who provided the feedback. They become agitated, unresponsive to the follower’s concerns, and quick to blame the follower when things go wrong. This behaviour directly contradicts the stated encouragement for constructive feedback. So, while the leader verbally encourages feedback (implying openness and a desire for improvement), their actions upon receiving feedback reflect the opposite (defensiveness and resentment). This contradiction between *what the leader claims to value* and *what they actually do* makes the situation paradoxical for the follower, who is trying to follow the leader’s stated preferences but faces negative consequences for doing so. Thus, the leader’s behaviour in this quote — a simultaneous display of openness and defensiveness — illustrates the contradictory and irreconcilable elements of a paradox.

Participant-29 also reflects,

“I am very transparent with my team members because I believe transparency builds trust, and trust can conquer any challenges. I inform them of all the potential difficulties I foresee and share my expectations with them. This approach seems to be working well with my team, and my team members seem very happy. However, I received feedback from my manager that I lack strategic control, and I need to learn how to hold back critical information.”

Can one be transparent and discreet at the same time? This quote illustrates the paradox between being open and transparent with followers and the need to exercise discretion and maintain strategic control. The participant values transparency and believes that it builds trust within their followers, which can help overcome any challenges. They practise this by sharing all foreseeable difficulties and expectations with their followers. This approach seems to be effective, as indicated by the happiness of the followers. Despite the positive impact on the followers, the leader to whom the participant reports perceives a downside to this approach. According to this senior leader, the participant—who is also a leader with their own followers—lacks strategic control because they are being transparent with their followers and sharing critical information, which, in the senior leader’s view, compromises strategic control. Additionally, the senior leader suggests that the participant needs to learn how to withhold critical information.

This quote exemplifies a paradox in leadership where two seemingly contradictory approaches — transparency and discretion — both have merit but also pose challenges when trying to balance them. Both are important in different contexts. Transparency can build trust and help followers in navigating challenges, as observed in this quote. However, there may be situations where withholding certain information is necessary for strategic reasons or to prevent unnecessary worry or confusion. Here, the participant’s personal values and approach to follower management conflict with higher-level expectations of strategic discretion. This creates a tension between maintaining an open, trust-based team environment and fulfilling the broader organisational need for controlled information dissemination. As a result, a paradox arises from the conflict between the value of transparency and the need for discretion and strategic control.

Participant-12 adds,

“My manager always pushes me to think creatively and give innovative ideas. They say that change is constant, and we have to adapt to change. It seems like a great speech, by the way. However, they cannot let go of control. They do not share all the required information and data for the task assigned to me. How can I complete my task properly if I receive only 30% of the information, for instance? Also, my manager wants me to follow their instructions. I have no freedom and flexibility at my work.”

The paradox elucidated in the given quote pertains to the conflicting expectations set by the leader. On the one hand, the leader encourages creative thinking and innovation, acknowledging that change is constant. This suggests a flexible and open work environment. However, on the other hand, the leader retains control, does not share all necessary information, and expects adherence to their instructions. This implies a more rigid and controlled work environment. While the leader gives an inspiring speech about creativity and adaptability, their actions contradict the message by not providing the necessary support or freedom. The follower's use of "great speech" likely implies that while the words sound good, they are not matched by the leader's behaviour, making the compliment insincere. It appears that the follower uses this phrase to express frustration and irony.

The contradiction between promoting creativity and innovation while maintaining strict control and limiting information creates a paradoxical situation. The follower is expected to think creatively and adapt to change, but they do not have access to full information and are not given the freedom to deviate from strict instructions. As a result, the follower cannot fully exercise their creativity and innovation. This indeed forms a paradoxical situation.

Consequences of paradoxical perceptions

Data suggests that perception can be paradoxical when it involves contradictory views or experiences that coexist, creating an irreconcilable situation. Different individuals have different perceptions, and that is obvious because our perceptions are influenced by many things, like culture, personal biases, unique experiences, beliefs, and how we feel. Paradoxes emerge from this subjectivity of perception. This is evident when participant-32 shares,

"In my view, I am certain that I can manage all situations. If you ask my manager the same question, they probably have a different view and might say that I take a lot of time or that I handle situations very quickly. My manager is equally certain about their view. We both think we are right, even though our views are opposite. So, there is no benchmark. It is all about how individuals see things."

This quote highlights the subjectivity of perception, which gives rise to emerging paradoxes. The participant is certain they can manage all situations effectively, reflecting their self-perception and confidence in their abilities. However, they acknowledge that their leader

might have a different perspective, possibly thinking that the participant either takes too much time or handles situations too quickly. This creates a clash between the participant's self-perception and their leader's view. Additionally, the participant's statement—"there is no benchmark. It is all about how individuals see things."—suggests that there is no objective standard for evaluating their performance. It all depends on individual perceptions, which can vary widely and even contradict each other. As a consequence, it can be said that both views (the participant's and their leader's) are equally valid, yet they are conflicting and exist simultaneously. This makes it impossible to reconcile these two conflicting views without an objective standard, thus creating a paradox. The paradox lies in the fact that, without a benchmark, subjective evaluations of the same thing (i.e., performance) can be both valid and irreconcilable at the same time. This is how the subjective nature of perception may create paradoxes for both followers and their leaders.

Paradoxes can emerge when our subjective experiences clash with objective reality. We build our version of reality based on how we interpret things. Different individuals may perceive the same object or event in completely different ways, leading to a wide range of interpretations and understandings. This diversity of perspectives can help individuals gain deeper insights and develop a more nuanced understanding of situations. Learning often occurs in these contexts, making them a common part of everyday life. However, a paradox arises when we feel bemused, befuddled, and perplexed, unable to reconcile what we perceive with what we think we know. This clash between perception and reality creates a paradox, which prevents learning. As a result, the individual becomes perplexed and unable to move forward or adapt their understanding.

Participant-8 reflects on their leadership approach:

"I like to empower my team members. I let them work in their own ways. I believe in the phrase "learn from your own mistakes". My focus is solely on the final output—if it meets expectations, I do not concern myself with the details of the process. It is up to them to plan and complete the tasks as they see fit. However, I handhold them if I see they are not performing well or if I notice that they are not yet ready to handle challenging situations. In such cases, I become fully involved in their work to facilitate improvement. I take daily work updates and provide input. This handholding technique is for their development and to protect them from making mistakes."

This quote hints at participant 8 as a paradoxical leader because they empower their followers by granting autonomy but withdraw that autonomy and become fully involved when they perceive that the followers are either underperforming or not ready to handle challenging tasks independently. Data suggests that the leader prefers to empower their followers, giving them autonomy, allowing them to take responsibility for their work, and making decisions. They only focus on ensuring that the final output meets expectations and prefer not to involve themselves in the process of achieving it. As a result, followers enjoy the freedom to complete tasks in their own way. The leader believes that followers can make mistakes and learn from them. This approach reflects the leader's intention to foster development among their followers. Simultaneously, the leader takes away that autonomy if the followers struggle to perform or are unable to manage challenging situations. They perceive that the followers are not yet ready to handle work-related difficulties independently. Then, they become fully involved in helping the followers achieve the expected outcome. The leader steps in, supervises closely by taking daily updates, and provides more direct guidance. This indicates a high level of engagement in their followers' work. According to the leader, handholding followers not only aids in their development but also protects them from making mistakes.

The paradox in this situation arises from the conflict between the leader's belief in allowing mistakes as a learning opportunity and their practice of handholding. On the one hand, the leader professes to believe in *learning from your mistakes*, which implies giving followers the freedom to make and learn from errors. On the other hand, the leader intervenes *through handholding* when they perceive that followers are not performing well and are unable to manage challenging situations. They view handholding as a technique to support followers by developing them and protecting them from making mistakes. However, while this practice may offer support, it also hinders the development of their maturity. Thus, this handholding approach conflicts with their belief in allowing mistakes as a learning opportunity. As a result, the leader's paradoxical perception leads to seemingly conflicting behaviours — encouraging independence through mistakes while simultaneously providing direct support to avoid those mistakes—that coexist despite being irreconcilable.

Meanwhile, participant-31 (who is a team member of participant 8) expresses:

“My manager does not like me and lacks confidence in me, so they micromanage me. I have noticed that they give freedom and flexibility to some of my peers. This is so confusing. I guess they are the favourites of my manager. However, I do not have autonomy in my work. I have to report my daily work to them every morning and afternoon. They tell me what to do and what not to do. I feel like a school kid, and my manager is my teacher. The more they micromanage me, the less capable I feel—and the less capable I feel, the more they micromanage me. Now, I feel shaky and less confident about sharing my ideas.”

The data from participant 31 suggests a contrasting perspective from participant 8. Participant 31 perceives that the leader (participant 8) does not like or trust them, thus micromanages them. They feel that their leader is overly controlling in their work. They do not have enough autonomy. They have to report their daily activities and follow strict instructions, which feels restrictive. Participant 31 also observed that some of their fellow followers are given more freedom and flexibility. This inconsistent behaviour of the leader confuses the participant, leading them to believe that these fellow followers are the leader's favourites. Participant 31 used a metaphor to explain their feeling: “I feel like a school kid, and my manager is my teacher”. This metaphor conveys that participant 31 does not appreciate their leader's micromanaging approach, in which they are being told what to do. This approach diminishes the participant's sense of capability and confidence. This lack of confidence leads to more micromanagement, creating a vicious cycle. As a result, the constant oversight makes the participant feel shaky and less confident about sharing their ideas, which eventually makes them less productive.

In this quote, the paradox lies in the unintended consequence of micromanagement. The participant's leader micromanages them, possibly with the intent to improve their performance (from the leader's perspective). However, this effort to support the participant worsens the very conditions that prompted the micromanagement in the first place. The leader's micromanaging activities undermine the participant's autonomy and confidence, making them feel less capable. This reduced capability then leads to even more micromanagement, creating a vicious cycle where the intended solution (micromanagement) exacerbates the problem (lack of capability). As a result, the participant feels discouraged, as they are treated like a school child rather than a trusted professional (from the participant's perspective). This discouragement further diminishes their willingness to share ideas and

take initiative. Thus, the paradox is that the leader's micromanagement, intended to ensure performance, hinders the participant's ability to perform well.

In the above quotes from participant 8 (the leader of participant 31) and participant 31, the paradox arises from the paradoxical perceptions between the leader's intention to support their followers by handholding who are not performing or are unable to handle challenging situations and how the follower perceives this support as micromanagement and conveys dissatisfaction. In both quotes, paradoxically, the follower receives support that prevents them from developing maturity and performing well. On the one side, the leader thinks they are fulfilling their responsibility by handholding non-performing followers, which they perceive as positive. On the other side, the follower perceives this handholding as micromanagement. The follower feels that the leader does not like them and thus micromanages by not providing any empowerment and controlling their tasks, which the follower views negatively. It appears from the data that the same actions (*handholding* by providing support) are interpreted differently depending on the participants' perspective, leading to divergent interpretations and understandings. Both perceptions feel valid to the participants, even though they contradict each other. This highlights the subjective nature of perception and its role in creating paradoxes.

Perception is puzzling as it explores the mysterious side of our senses. An identical event can evoke a positive response in one person and a negative reaction in another. Due to the subjectivity of perception, it is natural for perceptions to conflict either within an individual or among different individuals. Conflicting perceptions may leave us feeling confused and unable to align our observations with our understanding of reality. This is where paradox arises. Therefore, it can be said that paradoxical perceptions can lead to paradoxes.

Competing goals and priorities

Organisations often have competing goals and priorities, creating paradoxes among leaders and followers. In the VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) environment, organisations often face competing goals and priorities. These competing goals and priorities can lead to paradoxes among the organisation's stakeholders, particularly between leaders and followers.

Participant-11 shares their experience,

“Last year, we developed a three-year roadmap as part of our strategic plan, utilising 100% of our resources. At the time, we thought that nothing could be better than this roadmap. However, this year, the roadmap has completely changed because of changing organisational priorities to remain competitive in the market. We are required to add more value. This has been happening for the last three years. Interestingly, I do not know what I am trying to achieve. The cycle of constant value addition and continuous improvisation seems never-ending. I wish I could have some steadiness at work.”

The quote reveals a paradox that stems from the tension between the need for continuous change and the desire for stability. On the one hand, organisations are engaged in a constant cycle of change to remain competitive in the market. On the other hand, these frequent changes in strategic plans can undermine leaders’ and followers’ sense of stability. Organisations frequently change their strategic plans to gain a competitive advantage, requiring leaders and followers to continually improve and add value to their work. The participant who is a leader seems to be working without a clear understanding of what they are ultimately trying to achieve, as the data suggests. As a result, a sense of vagueness and unpredictability emerges among leaders and followers, leading to feelings of instability. This is evident in the data when the participant states, “The cycle of constant value addition and continuous improvisation seems never-ending.” Therefore, this dichotomy – the simultaneous pursuit of changes, which creates uncertainty, and the desire for stability at work – makes the situation paradoxical for leaders and followers as they want to balance these conflicting demands.

In a similar vein, participant-30 conveys,

“Our leaders set clear, long-term goals to provide direction and focus for their teams. However, after four months, the goals are reviewed for various reasons. It could be due to an economic crisis, or perhaps the organisation believes they can achieve the goal because they have capable resources, or it could be the opposite. Whatever the reason, it is common practice for organisations to change their goals frequently to deal with uncertainty. Organisations cannot always stick to their initial goals. This is why long-term planning seems unnecessary now. I do not think about my objectives because

they do not seem to matter. Whatever I do today, my manager might say tomorrow that “it is not required now, things have changed”.”

In this quote, the paradox resides in the simultaneous and conflicting demands of stability (setting clear, long-term goals) and instability (constantly revising those goals). As data suggests, this participant, who is a follower, asserts that their leader set clear, long-term goals to provide direction and focus, which implies stability and predictability. However, these goals are frequently reviewed and revised due to unforeseen changes in the external environment, such as economic crises or shifting organisational resources, which introduce instability and unpredictability. This creates a conflicting situation where leaders and followers are expected to work towards goals that may soon become irrelevant, fostering a feeling of pointlessness in long-term planning and decision-making. This participant seems to confidently declare that, due to frequent changes, long-term planning is deemed unnecessary, which contradicts the initial assertion of setting long-term goals. Therefore, a goal cannot be both long-term (implying it is fixed for a long duration) and subject to frequent changes. This contradiction makes the statement paradoxical.

4.1.2 Paradoxical Reflexivity: Insights from the Global South

Data suggests that the emergence of paradoxes is often rooted in the specific context of a country. This research adopts a Global South perspective to explore and understand these paradoxes. In many Global South countries, particularly Bangladesh, cultural influences significantly shape workplace dynamics and appear to contribute to the creation of paradoxes for both leaders and followers. Accordingly, this section focuses on examining paradoxes that arise from the Bangladeshi context.

Pressure to conform

Data from the interviews suggest that both leaders and followers experience pressure to conform in organisations in Bangladesh. This pressure may create paradoxes for these leaders and followers in their everyday work. As a leader says

“It is expected in our organisation that we never say “no” to any task. I do it with my manager. My manager does it to their manager. Saying “yes” is like a culture. But the reality is that we cannot feasibly complete all the tasks we

agree to undertake. There is a part of us that yearns to say “no”, to set realistic expectations, but we find ourselves unable to break free from the “yes” culture. Yet, the more we say “yes”, the more we find ourselves wanting to say “no”. We say “yes” to every task, but we could not deliver - this discrepancy creates tension. In this process, we unnecessarily waste time and efficiency. To some extent, we lose our face value as we commit but cannot fulfil our commitments.” (Participant-4)

This quote alludes to a paradoxical situation arising from the work culture in organisations in Bangladesh, where there is a prevailing expectation to always say “yes” to tasks. However, the reality is that not all tasks can be feasibly completed. In this “saying yes” work culture, leaders and followers find themselves under pressure to comply, even when it leads to overcommitting or undertaking tasks beyond their realistic capacity. Despite a growing desire among leaders and followers to say “no” and set more realistic expectations, the prevailing “yes” culture makes it difficult to express this. Their desire to say “no” increases with every “yes”. The more they say “yes”, the more they feel overwhelmed and unable to deliver on their commitments. This leads to wasted time and reduced efficiency, adding layers of tension to the work of leaders and followers. As leaders and followers commit to tasks they cannot fulfil, they may lose credibility and face value, further complicating the situation.

It appears from this quote that the “saying yes” work culture in Bangladeshi organisations is likely intended to create a positive impression on the leader to whom the participant 4 reports, by fostering harmony, productivity and efficiency. However, the same work culture paradoxically leads to wasted time, effort, and resources, as tasks are often left incomplete or poorly executed due to overcommitment. As a consequence, followers’ inability to fulfil their commitments results in inefficiency and a loss of trust, ultimately undermining the very “face value” they sought to maintain by agreeing in the first place. Thus, this work culture creates a paradox for both leaders and followers, as the intended outcomes of the “yes” culture are contradicted by its actual consequences.

Echoing this sentiment, a follower expresses their experience.

“My manager asks me about the task and whether I can do it. Sounds nice, right? Generally, we can say “I can, or I cannot”. But in our work culture,

we cannot utter the word – “I cannot” to our manager. As a result, I say “I can”, even though I know that I cannot complete the task. Later on, when I fail to complete the task, my manager asks, “Why did you take on this task if you could not do it?” Once, I said “no” to my manager. I said, “I do not think I can do this task.” Their response was not positive towards me. Then, I understood that I should not say “no” to my manager, even if I have the option to decline. Weird, right? (Laughs out loud). (Participant-5)

This quote highlights a paradox in that, while the leader ostensibly gives the follower the choice to respond with “I can” or “I cannot,” the “saying yes” work culture effectively removes the latter as a viable option. This is evident when participant 5 sarcastically says they cannot utter “I cannot”. The follower may be aware that they cannot complete the task, yet they say they can do so to their leader, perhaps because they know it is expected. The leader later questions why they have accepted the task if they could not complete it. Although the follower seems to have the choice to accept or decline the task, the “saying yes” work culture compels them to accept. They are not expected to say “no”, as evidenced by the participant’s experience, where they inform receiving a negative reaction after declining a task. Participant 5’s loud laughter in this context represents sarcasm, possibly reflecting a sense of contradiction or confusion. Therefore, this “yes” work culture creates paradoxes, where the follower is asked to do the task and given options to accept or deny, but the follower knows they cannot exercise the options in reality.

These quotes illustrate a specific Bangladeshi work culture with a powerful expectation for followers to say “yes” always or must agree to tasks assigned to them, which creates paradoxes for leaders and followers. Data suggests that the practice of saying “yes” is ingrained from followers to leaders and upward within the organisational hierarchy. Followers always say “yes” to all assigned tasks, possibly to appear cooperative, dedicated, and hardworking to their leader, though they sometimes desire to say “no”. This expectation creates pressure to conform, making it difficult for followers to refuse tasks. Consequently, they may take on more than they can realistically handle, leading to overcommitment. Overcommitment often results in a decrease in the quality of work, as followers spread themselves too thin across multiple tasks. This inefficiency leads to wasted time, resources, and effort, ultimately reducing productivity. This undermines the trust between followers and their leaders—the very trust they intended to build by saying “yes” in the first place.

This situation creates paradoxes for both leaders and followers. Followers are caught between the cultural expectation to always say “yes” and the practical need to sometimes say “no”. On the one hand, followers are expected to meet these cultural expectations and wish to be seen as cooperative and committed by their leaders. On the other hand, followers sometimes desire to say “no or I cannot” to complete the tasks they have committed to. They struggle with the need to balance these two conflicting demands. They want to meet expectations and conform to the cultural norm, but they also need to consider their capacity and the practicality of their workload.

Leaders’ behaviour

The actions of leaders can sometimes be overbearing, which can create paradoxes for their followers, as one of the participants shared an incident involving a series of events.

“My manager transferred me to Chattogram without informing me. I said I could not go because my child was only four months old. After many meetings, he said okay, but insisted that I go to Narayanganj instead. Then, I told him that it was not logical for me to travel 3-6 hours daily. After 2-3 days of heated discussions, he told me to resign. I was given a three-month notice period, and I resigned. My manager put me in a situation where I had to choose between my family and my job. Choosing family means losing the job, while choosing the job jeopardises my responsibilities toward my infant. It was such a horrible time for me!” (Participant-10)

This quote illustrates a paradoxical situation where the follower is torn between two equally essential priorities: their family and their job. Both are vital aspects of a person’s life, yet the demands of one often come at the expense of the other, creating an inherent conflict that is irreconcilable. Due to the leaders’s unilateral decision-making and inconsiderate actions in the workplace, the follower finds themselves in paradoxical situations. This quote represents how the leader’s behaviour and actions can create such paradoxes for their followers. The participant’s leader does not address the needs and concerns of followers. The leader shows no intention of understanding the follower’s situation, such as having a four-month-old child and their need to stay with their family. As a result, the leader transferred the follower to a different district, first to Chattogram and then to Narayanganj. The leader did not consider the effectiveness of this decision, given that the daily commute time from Dhaka to

Narayanganj is 3-6 hours even without traffic jams. Dhaka, Chattogram and Narayanganj are the districts of Bangladesh. The leader's decision to transfer the follower without prior notice or discussion indicates a lack of transparency and respect for the follower's circumstances. It also appears to be irrational because the leader overlooks the impact of daily commuting time, leading to wasted time and effort. The follower's resistance to the transfer, evidenced by a series of heated discussions with the leader, indicates their unwillingness to resign. However, they were forced to resign in response to these unfavourable conditions.

The paradox stems from the illusion of choice in an impossible situation, where every decision leads to undesirable outcomes. Choosing family over the job seemed like the right decision at the time. However, this choice led to a worse situation (being jobless), which undermined the original intent of making a better decision for the family. Essentially, the decision that appeared to be the best option ended up causing more harm, creating a paradox where the intended positive outcome was not achieved.

Another participant from a different organisation describes a similar situation.

"We have flexible work hours. My office time is 8.30 am - 6 pm. My manager comes to the office around 11.30 am and leaves at 8.30 pm. They want me to work till 8.30 pm because they stay at the office until then. My manager gives me calls after office hours. Once, they spammed me at 1.40 am. Can you believe it! On weekends, they call us for team lunches. I have told them many times about my preferred work hours, but they do not take this into consideration. Now, I am faced with a choice: either forget that I have a personal life to continue this job or start looking for another job. I realise now why people say, "We do not leave companies. We leave managers"."
(Participant-20)

This quote suggests a paradox where a company promotes flexibility and presumably values its employees (both leaders and followers), but the leader does not care about company values by disregarding the follower's preferred work hours and personal time. The leader tells the follower to work after office hours, calls them whenever the leader wants, and organises team lunches on weekends, which directly conflicts with the emphasis on flexibility of work. The phrase "he/she spammed me at 1.40 am" conveys that the leader

possibly sent the follower a large volume of messages or communications at 1.40 am. It implies an invasion of non-working time with excessive messages. When the participant says, “Once, he/she spammed me at 1.40 am. Can you believe it!” expresses the participant’s astonishment at the leader’s activities. The leader’s expectations and actions result in a work environment that is far from flexible. It highlights the follower’s struggle to maintain a healthy work-life balance, where the boundaries between working hours and personal time are blurred. As a result, the follower is dissatisfied and burned out because of the overbearing activities of the leader. It creates a situation where the follower feels they have no choice but to leave the job. The participant shows their frustration by saying, “We do not leave companies. We leave managers”, which underscores the idea that people often quit their jobs not because of the job itself but because of poor management and lack of respect from their leaders.

Data from the above quotes suggests that leaders with traditional management styles are often found in the Bangladesh offices of multinational clothing companies. Although these companies are diverse and emphasise more collaborative and inclusive management styles, traditional Bangladeshi leaders tend to be authoritative. They uphold authoritative practices in the workplace, asserting their right to ‘rule’ over their followers. These leaders wield significant power and control, making all the decisions and expecting followers to obey their instructions without question. This traditional management style can sometimes lead to overbearing actions. As a result, followers experience an imbalance between their work and personal lives, creating paradoxes.

In organisations in Bangladesh, leaders seem to act or behave the way they want when there is an absence of stringent enforcement or oversight of organisational rules and regulations. This unchecked freedom can sometimes lead to unprofessional conduct. Such behaviour from leaders can create a paradox for their followers. Followers, caught in this paradox, find themselves grappling with the challenge of seeking respectful interaction while navigating the power dynamics inherent in the workplace hierarchy. For example, participant-35 reflects on:

“My manager shouts at us if they are upset or disturbed. Our company has a code of conduct, yet they still behave this way. They are the head of the department, so they are exercising their power.”

This quote exhibits a situation of power imbalance and potential misuse of authority in a workplace—the leader’s action of shouting when upset or disturbed is unprofessional and inappropriate. Despite the existence of a company code of conduct, which presumably discourages such behaviour, the leader continues to act inappropriately. It appears from the data that in Bangladesh offices, while there are established rules and regulations in place, there is a lack of strict enforcement or monitoring of these rules. This could be due to various reasons, such as a lack of accountability or a culture of leniency. As a result of this lack of strict monitoring, leaders in these offices have a lot of discretion in their actions and behaviour. They can choose to follow the rules as strictly or as loosely as they wish. This could potentially lead to inconsistencies in management styles and practices across different offices or even within the same office. Leaders may not feel accountable for their actions. This lack of accountability can lead to unprofessional and inappropriate behaviour, such as shouting when upset or disturbed, since there are no immediate consequences. The leader, being the head of the department, is exercising their power in a way that contradicts the code of conduct. As a leader and department head, they are not following the code of conduct, which could be seen as an abuse of power or authority.

This situation is paradoxical because it presents a contradiction between the expected behaviour (as outlined in the code of conduct, which presumably discourages or prohibits inappropriate behaviours such as shouting) and the leader’s actual behaviour (the leader shouting). This situation also creates a conflict with organisational values. The leader is expected to provide support and constructive feedback, yet in reality, the leader is exhibiting aggression and hostility. Furthermore, the fact that the leader is the department’s head and is exercising their power in a way that contradicts the code of conduct adds another layer to the paradox.

Similarly, participant-31 comments,

“My manager is an Indian expatriate. They never motivate me. In fact, they give me bamboo in the morning and in the afternoon (laughing loudly). They are very introverted, but they expect me to be an extrovert. They are not able to get out of their comfort zone. But they want me to do something which is beyond my comfort zone. Under them, eleven team members left their jobs because they used to give troubles to everyone differently.”

This quote illustrates a situation where an expatriate working in Bangladesh is giving a hard time to the followers. The leader is an introverted individual who prefers to stay within their comfort zone. While the leader cannot act differently from their true selves, they pressure the followers to act as extroverts and to work beyond their comfort zones. The leader does not take the time to understand the followers' selfhood or motivate them to understand why being extroverted and stepping out of their comfort zones are necessary for their jobs. The leader does not care to understand that it might be challenging for the followers to act contrary to their own selfhood. This situation arises due to a lack of strict monitoring of leader's actions and the absence of consequences for their actions. In this quote, the participant uses the word "bamboo", a metaphor to describe a situation where a leader puts excessive pressure on the followers at work. In Bangladesh, followers in the offices casually use this term to express their situation when they have a hard time with their leader. The phrase "in the morning and the afternoon" signifies that this pressure is constant.

This quote suggests a paradox emerging from the contradictory behaviour and expectations of the leader. The leader's actions and expectations are inconsistent with their own behaviour and the lack of accountability, making the situation paradoxical. The leader, who is described as an introvert and prefers to stay in their comfort zone, is pressuring their followers to act as extroverts and step out of their comfort zones. This is paradoxical because the leader expects behaviour from their followers that they themselves are not demonstrating. The leader does not make an effort to understand the followers' selfhood or explain why certain behaviours are necessary for their jobs. Yet, they expect the followers to act contrary to their own selfhood. This lack of understanding and empathy, coupled with high expectations, creates a paradoxical situation for the follower. Furthermore, their leadership style, rather than fostering growth or productivity, ends up alienating followers, as evidenced by the eleven followers who left their jobs. This reflects a paradox where the leader's actions, intended to enforce productivity or compliance, instead lead to disruption and turnover.

Followers encounter this paradoxical situation due to the leader's behaviour and actions, even though the leader imposes high expectations and pressure on them. This occurs because there is no strict monitoring of the leader's behaviour or consequences for their actions. This lack of accountability in a leadership role creates paradoxes for followers.

Low tolerance of mistakes and fear of losing a job

Organisations that emphasise high performance often encourage innovation and risk-taking. However, this can lead to paradoxes if leaders and followers in these organisations are expected to make no mistakes. The paradox lies in the expectation of high performance and innovation coupled with a low or zero tolerance for mistakes and failures. As an interviewee narrates

“In our work culture, we are not allowed to fail. If employees fail to meet their yearly target, they receive an immediate warning. Employees risk losing their jobs if they do not improve within a year. Any mistakes I make at work are noted by my manager and recorded in my annual performance appraisal. This means that my annual performance review can be negatively impacted by any mistakes I make. Along with that, I am expected to bring newness and take risks. This is required if I want to be a “Performer” at my annual performance appraisal. I constantly worry about these issues, feeling that I cannot afford to make any mistakes and must meet my yearly target no matter what to safeguard my job. Simultaneously, I have to bring new ideas. How can I be innovative if I constantly worry about making mistakes?” (Participant 29)

From the above quote, it is apparent that Bangladesh’s offices of multinational clothing companies place a high emphasis on performance and innovation. Since the work culture in Bangladesh is performance-driven, there is likely a low or zero tolerance for errors in the workplace, as the participant states, “we are not allowed to fail”. Leaders and followers are constantly pressured to perform flawlessly and meet their yearly targets. Mistakes and failures are not viewed kindly. Any mistakes are noted and can negatively impact the annual performance review of both leaders and followers. At the same time, all employees—whether in leadership or follower roles—are expected to bring forward new ideas and take risks to be considered “Performers”, which inherently involves the possibility of making mistakes. Therefore, the paradox lies in the conflicting demands, where both leaders and followers are required to be innovative and take risks, but the fear of making mistakes and the pressure to meet targets stifle their ability to be creative. This creates a paradox where the essential conditions needed for innovation are undermined by the fear of making mistakes and failing.

Highlighting the need for an innovative work culture, the participant 24 comments,

“Top management is constantly eager to evolve. That’s why my manager always asks for innovation. ‘What is new? What is next?’ - these are their burning questions. However, I wonder how I can be innovative if I am always preoccupied with securing my job.”

This quote exhibits a work culture where there is a strong emphasis on innovation and evolution. Top management, meaning leaders in the highest organisational positions, is always looking for new ideas and advancements, hence the questions, ‘What is new? What is next?’ However, the follower feels that their ability to innovate is hindered by their preoccupied mind with job security. In a work culture where job security is constantly threatened, followers are reluctant to take the necessary risks for innovation. They focus more on not making mistakes and meeting immediate expectations to secure their job rather than exploring new ideas or pushing boundaries. The paradox in this quote lies in the conflict between the demand for innovation and the fear of job loss. Innovation requires taking risks, experimenting, and sometimes failing in order to learn and improve. The fear of job loss can stifle the creativity and risk-taking necessary for innovation and growth. While the leaders intend to foster innovation, the pressure and fear they instil in their followers could potentially stifle the innovation they seek.

While narrating about the work culture of multinational clothing companies in Bangladesh, another interviewee informs

“I always have to exceed performance expectations or risk being flushed out of the system. I need to be perfect to avoid losing my job, yet the constant fear of losing it makes it even harder to perform well.” (Participant-15)

Likewise, this quote exhibits a performance-driven work culture in Bangladesh with a low tolerance for mistakes. It depicts a work environment where leaders and followers are expected to exceed their performance expectations consistently. It appears that merely meeting performance expectations is not enough in this work environment. The phrase “risk being flushed out of the system” reflects a cut-throat work culture in which mistakes are not seen as opportunities for learning but as something to be avoided at all costs. Not exceeding expectations could lead to one’s job being at risk. Leaders and followers are constantly

pressured to be perfect and exceed performance expectations, which creates a constant fear of failure. This fear, in turn, makes it even harder to perform well. As a result, leaders and followers find themselves in a paradoxical situation where the relentless drive to meet high standards hampers their ability to achieve them.

In light of this, it can be inferred that the performance-driven work culture in Bangladesh creates paradoxes for both leaders and followers by allowing a contradiction between the expectation of high performance and the fear of failure. A high-performing environment can drive leaders and followers to push their limits, potentially leading to high levels of productivity and achievement. While the organisation expects high performance, the fear of failure it instils in its leaders and followers could possibly hinder their performance. Thus, the work culture that aims to foster high performance might inadvertently create conditions that hinder it.

Lack of autonomy

Both leaders and followers within an organisation often face a paradox between autonomy and control. Leaders empower their followers, which means they grant them the freedom to think, act, and make decisions independently. This is often done with the intention of fostering innovation, creativity, and job satisfaction. At the same time, leaders impose controls such as budget constraints, limited decision-making authority, and strict adherence to organisational guidelines and standards. These controls can limit the very autonomy that was granted for the purpose of innovation and creativity. The paradox lies in the simultaneous existence of autonomy and control. While autonomy is meant to encourage creativity and innovation, the imposed controls can potentially inhibit the very creativity that leaders aim to foster. This tension between control and autonomy, freedom and constraint, is what makes this a paradox. As participant 5 shares

“As we are a high-end fashion company, top management from our German office wants top-notch fashion designs from my team in Bangladesh. To fulfil this requirement, I need to recruit talented candidates from the market. However, I received a salary budget from the German office that did not even meet the market benchmark. My German manager told me that I could make the hiring decision. How can I hire highly skilled employees with such a low budget? High skills typically command a higher salary. This is absurd.”

This quote refers to a paradoxical situation in which top leaders from the German office expect dynamic performance from their counterparts in Bangladesh team, implying an expectation of highly capable followers. However, the salary budget provided by these German leaders is not sufficient to recruit such capable individuals from the market. This creates a paradoxical situation because leaders in Bangladesh are fully empowered in the recruitment process, yet they are being controlled by budget set by the German office. As a result, Bangladeshi leaders find themselves in a paradoxical situation, as they are formally empowered but practically constrained by financial limitations imposed by the German leaders.

A similar situation is signalled by participant 2.

“For team bonding, it is necessary that we sometimes go out of the office environment. It helps the team members to understand each other’s strengths and weaknesses. We are then able to optimise those as a team. So, I thought I would organise quarterly team lunches and a yearly picnic. I have given this proposal to my manager. My manager informed me that, according to company policy and safety regulations, we are not permitted to hold office events or activities outside the office premises. My manager tells me that I am empowered with my team. At the same time, I cannot have the liberty to plan something for my team.” (Participant-2)

In this quote, participant 2 is empowered as a leader and has the authority to make decisions and take initiatives for the benefit of their followers. However, at the same time, they are not given the liberty to arrange activities that promote bonding among followers and between leaders and followers outside the office due to company policy and safety regulations. This creates a situation where they are given power (empowerment) but also have restrictions on how they can use that power (control), which is a form of the paradox of empowerment and control.

Meanwhile, participant-19 reveals,

“My manager always encourages me to think out of the box. When I think of something innovative and interesting, they say I need to think out of the box by following guidelines (laughing).”

In this quote, participant 19 is encouraged to “think out of the box”, which generally means to think creatively and unconventionally. However, when they come up with innovative and interesting ideas, they are told to follow guidelines. This is a contradiction because the nature of thinking outside the box is to go beyond established norms and guidelines. This creates a paradox for participant 19 as they need to be innovative and creative within the guidelines and standards of the organisation, which is a contradictory demand from their leader. Participant 19 laughs while making this statement, as they are aware of the contradiction and that their leader wants to give them trouble.

Data suggests that multinational organisations often have rigid hierarchies and centralised decision-making, where power and control are concentrated among top-level leaders. These organisations usually follow a top-down approach where decisions are made by a selected few and then passed down through the ranks. In such organisations, leaders and followers in host countries, such as Bangladesh, tend to have little to no autonomy or freedom in decision-making. They often feel constrained by these top-down directives. Their role becomes more about implementing decisions made by others rather than being involved in the decision-making process itself. This lack of autonomy can lead to a paradoxical situation. Both leaders and followers are expected to show initiative, be proactive, and take ownership of their work. These are generally seen as positive traits that can drive innovation and efficiency. However, these same leaders and followers are subject to strict oversight and control. Their actions and decisions must align with the directives issued from above. This can limit their ability to take initiative or be proactive, as they must always operate within the confines of these directives. This paradox can lead to frustration and disengagement among leaders and followers. They may feel that they are being asked to be innovative and proactive but are not given the freedom or autonomy necessary.

Fear of departmental change

The global nature of multinational clothing companies can create paradoxical situations for leaders and followers in host countries. Sudden and unexpected changes are common occurrences in such companies, such as the closure of entire department or internal transfers.

These changes can be attributed to a myriad of external factors, including economic recessions, intense competition within the apparel industry, disruptions to the supply chain arising from natural disasters or unstable political conditions, escalating material costs, shifts in consumer behaviour, and alterations in Bangladeshi laws or regulations. When multinational companies face any of these issues, they usually bring changes to the host country companies. These changes place local leaders and followers in a paradox, as they navigate the tension between their desire for a stable job and a comfortable work environment and the unpredictable and volatile nature of their workplace conditions.

As a participant shares their concern and says

“Previously, we have seen that the whole quality control department in the Dhaka office was shut down. You never know when my department will shut down. That is why I remain vigilant and keep my eyes open for better opportunities, even though the constant vigilance makes it harder to focus on my current job.” (Participant-34)

This quote highlights a paradox, as participant 34’s efforts to prevent job loss by remaining vigilant and searching for new job opportunities diminish their attention and effort towards their current job, thereby undermining their present performance at work. This decline in performance could potentially lead to the same outcome (job loss) that they are working so hard to prevent.

Participant 34 reflects on a past event where the whole quality control department in the Dhaka office was shut down, highlighting that job stability cannot be taken for granted in their workplace (Dhaka is the capital of Bangladesh). Data suggests that leaders and followers, especially those in host countries working for multinational clothing companies, experience job instability and discomfort due to organisational restructuring, departmental shutdowns, or abrupt transfers to other departments. These organisational changes are often necessary for the company’s survival and growth in the global market. Irrespective of the underlying cause, these changes directly impact leaders and followers in host countries. Since Bangladesh is one of the host countries for many of the multinational clothing companies, local leaders and followers (Bangladeshi) working in multinational clothing companies often grapple with the fear of job loss. This fear usually creates a sense of insecurity that prompts them to remain vigilant and actively search for opportunities

elsewhere to mitigate the risk of sudden unemployment. As a result, their attention and effort become divided between their current job responsibilities and securing their future, leading to reduced performance. Therefore, the paradox arises because the actions leaders and followers take to safeguard their job (vigilance and job searching) simultaneously undermines their present performance, which could lead to the very outcome they are trying to avoid (job loss).

Participant-28 shares,

“I just came to the office, and my manager called me to have a meeting. I thought it may be due to some work. However, my manager informed me that I had been transferred to another department, reporting to Mr X, with immediate effect. I felt astonished. I was becoming comfortable in my work and feeling relaxed. Then, suddenly, a total change in my role and work made me feel completely unsettled and insecure. But strangely, in this moment of complete insecurity, I have never felt more certain about my abilities.”

This quote is paradoxical because, while the participant feels insecure about the department transfer, this insecurity leads to a realisation of their ability to adapt, eventually giving them a sense of certainty about themselves.

In the case of participant 28, they were suddenly informed by their leader about an internal transfer with immediate effect. Data suggests that it is a common scenario for followers in the host country not to be notified in advance about internal changes, such as departmental transfer. The top-level leaders from both the head office and the host country office tend to keep these changes under wraps until the last moment. As a result, these changes often come as a surprise to the directly impacted followers. While an internal transfer can often be seen as an opportunity for career growth, the sudden announcement of such news, even when positive, can bring about significant upheaval in the follower's work life. For instance, participant 28 was comfortable and relaxed in their role, which indicates a sense of stability. However, the sudden transfer to another department caused a complete shift in their work environment, making them feel unsettled and insecure. In addition, the lack of prior indication from their leader and the immediate implementation of the transfer disrupted the participant's sense of stability and trust, replacing it with surprise and potential uncertainty about the future. At the same time, the participant paradoxically feels a deep sense of clarity

or confidence about their abilities. This could imply that, in the face of uncertainty, they are discovering a newfound resilience or self-assurance they did not realise they had. Therefore, the paradox lies in the participant's experience of feeling unsettled by unexpected changes, which in turn leads to a simultaneous feeling of profound certainty in their ability to adapt and succeed in new circumstances.

These quotes refer to a paradoxical situation for local leaders and followers because they are torn between the desire for job stability and a relaxed work environment, and the unpredictable and uncertain reality of their job environment. Leaders and followers desire stability and growth when they commit to a job and invest their time and effort into it. They want to be efficient in their role, which is not possible if the role changes frequently. When they witness instability within the company, such as the shutdown of the whole quality control department, or encounter changes in their job without prior communication from their respective leader, it creates distrust, uncertainty and fear about the future. This uncertainty often prompts leaders and followers to actively seek other opportunities, despite being currently employed. As a result, they find themselves in a paradoxical situation, as they are caught in a conflict between their desire for job stability and a calm work environment and the unpredictable, uncertain nature of their actual work environment.

4.2 Navigating paradox

4.2.1 Managing paradox

Data from both leaders and followers seem to reveal various methods for managing paradoxes, highlighting practices employed at different levels of the organisation. Leaders, for instance, suggest ways at the managerial or leadership levels that balance competing demands, while followers indicate ways that assist them at the operational level. Together, these insights suggest ways for managing paradoxes that are useful at both the operational, managerial, and leadership levels.

Paradoxical thinking

Data suggests that leaders and followers could navigate paradox if they think paradoxically.

"In my early career, I used to avoid or try to run from uncertainties. From my experience, I have learned that I cannot escape uncertainties. Therefore, I

now acknowledge and try to manage them because solving uncertainties can feel like bashing my head against a wall. My approach is to be super flexible and able to integrate different strategies. For example, five to six years ago, companies focused solely on profit. Now, the focus has shifted. Companies not only seek profit but also aim to achieve high scores in employee satisfaction. Employee satisfaction has become a vital factor for companies. As a leader, I am required to be both result-oriented and employee-oriented. I have to fulfil my short-term operational targets while also ensuring employee satisfaction to achieve the company's long-term goals. Therefore, I remain flexible and ready to adapt to whatever is required to manage these contradictory demands.” (Participant-17)

In this quote, participant 17 exhibits paradoxical thinking in their leadership role by balancing short-term goals (through short-term operational targets and profit) and long-term goals (through followers' satisfaction). The participant illustrates themselves as a paradoxical leader because they acknowledge that uncertainties and competing demands are unavoidable. Thus, they accept the need to address and adapt to these uncertainties and demands. The leader appears to be flexible as they change their leadership approaches to meet competing demands. For example, companies used to focus solely on profit but now emphasise both profit and followers' satisfaction. This means that the leader needs to focus on immediate results while also ensuring a sustainable work environment that nurtures followers' well-being and development. To manage these opposing demands, the leader integrates both result-oriented (short-term operational targets and profit) and follower-oriented (long-term goals like followers' satisfaction) approaches simultaneously. The flexibility and integration of leadership approaches to handle contradictory demands indicate the leader's paradoxical thinking.

Another participant shows paradoxical thinking by maintaining a disciplined approach while embracing change and innovations. The participant shares,

“I like being disciplined. I try to ensure that all processes, from sourcing materials to delivering finished products, are properly planned and implemented in accordance with the established plan. However, I am open to experimenting with new materials, such as eco-friendly fabrics, and adopting innovative production techniques to stay ahead of the competition. For

instance, I have included a new supplier in our list who provides recycled materials. I know that this adds a layer of challenge and tension to my work, but I see these challenges and tensions as new possibilities. Therefore, I adjust the production schedule to accommodate the learning curve associated with these new materials and processes. I have also created a feedback loop to continuously improve the sustainable line based on customer responses and market trends.” (Participant-3)

This quote represents a leader’s paradoxical thinking in their work, where they maintain a disciplined supply chain while embracing sustainable innovation. Discipline and innovation are two seemingly contradictory approaches that the leader integrates to stay ahead in the dynamic market environment. Data suggests that the leader prefers being disciplined, ensuring that every step in the production process is well-planned and executed according to the plan. This reflects a structured, predictable approach to operations, where consistency is prioritised. On the contrary, the leader is open to exploring new materials and innovative production techniques, such as incorporating eco-friendly fabrics and working with new suppliers. This introduces uncertainty and ambiguity into their work, which could potentially disrupt the disciplined approach they prefer. However, they view this uncertainty and ambiguity as opportunities to unlock new possibilities and innovate within their production line. Thus, the leader adjusts the production schedule to accommodate the challenges associated with learning and implementing new materials and techniques. The leader wants to ensure continuous improvement for sustainability by creating a feedback loop. Therefore, this quote indicates the paradoxical thinking of the leader who maintains a balance between stability (structured discipline) and change (innovation) needed to respond to dynamic market trends.

Encouraging open communication

Data indicates that having open communication helps leaders and followers to express their ideas, perspectives and concerns freely, which allows different viewpoints to manage paradox. It encourages a free flow of information, feedback, and dialogue between leaders and followers, without fear of judgment or negative consequences. One participant shares their experience of how open communication helps them to manage a paradoxical situation.

“I have a buddy-type relationship with my team members. I have established an environment where they can share anything with me. This helps me to manage high-stakes situations where we deal with contradictory demands. Let me share an example. In a team meeting, I told my team that we have to ensure the quality of our work while maintaining the project deadline. Both quality and deadline are non-negotiable for us. My team seemed very enthusiastic, but I observed some ambiguity in their facial expressions. I understood that they were feeling confused about how to integrate quality and speed, as they are often conflicting.

Then, I suggested that we have a working lunch to discuss the project. During lunch, I asked for their perspectives on how we could work on both quality and speed. They surprised me as each of them had written down their ideas. They shared their ideas, and we listened to everyone. We discussed all the ideas and their potential pros and cons. We also talked about the resources we would need to maintain high quality and how we could divide our work, given our short project timeline. My team members do not feel bad if one person’s idea is chosen over another’s. They have a sense of harmony and understand that it is teamwork. We follow that “We all win if our team wins.”

(Participant-11)

This quote suggests that participant 11 is a paradoxical leader, as they recognise that quality and speed are opposing demands in their work, alongside the challenge of meeting both high-quality standards and tight deadlines. To manage these opposing demands, the leader engages the followers actively rather than simply giving directives. The leader emphasises open communication, collaboration among followers, and collective problem-solving to handle conflicting goals. In doing so, the leader not only manages paradoxes but also involves their followers in learning to navigate them. By fostering an environment where followers feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and concerns, the leader gains a more comprehensive understanding. Followers also feel included, as their ideas and opinions are acknowledged and valued. Participant 11, as a paradoxical leader, has established a healthy, collaborative work culture where individual contributions are appreciated as part of a larger collective effort. Therefore, this quote demonstrates how open communication empowers a leader and their followers to handle paradoxical situations creatively while remaining aligned with broader organisational goals.

Another participant expresses their feelings about being able to openly communicate with their leader to handle tasks that are paradoxical.

“I have to deal with dynamic situations at work. My job requires me to explore new opportunities while exploiting existing ones. (Uff) It is crazy. The way we are operating now, we are utilising our resources effectively and generating good cash flow. However, if we consider organic cotton, we could focus on the company’s sustainable growth. I know I am talking about a huge change, investment and risk. Maybe I am crazy, but I shared this idea with my manager without worrying that they might judge me. That is the best part of my job—I can share all my crazy ideas with my manager without fear of judgment. My manager always welcomes new ideas and thoughts. And guess what? My manager appreciated my idea and shared it with top management, giving me credit. We are working on organic cotton as a separate line of products.”
(Participant-22)

This quote illustrates a paradoxical situation where open communication between the leader and followers foster the followers’ creativity and innovation, even while fulfilling regular expectations at work. According to participant 22, their work involves paradoxes as they are required to maintain the company’s regular expectations, such as exploiting existing opportunities and generating good cash flow, while simultaneously exploring new opportunities for the company’s future growth. Dealing with these paradoxes seems overwhelming to the participant, but they are confident they can openly communicate with their leader and share ideas without fear of judgment. Open communication with the leader encourages creativity and initiative without fear of negative repercussions. This helps the follower to deal with paradoxes by fulfilling regular duties while also thinking innovatively, like proposing the use of organic cotton for sustainable growth. The leader not only welcomes the follower’s idea about organic cotton but also shares it with top-level leaders, giving proper credit. This shows that the leader empowers their followers and rewards their contributions, promoting motivation and trust. The top-level leaders appreciate new avenues like organic cotton, representing a shift toward sustainable business practices. This underscores the company’s openness to change and growth, even if it involves risk and investment. Therefore, the quote indicates that paradoxical situations, such as balancing short-term exploitation with long-term exploration, can be managed by encouraging open communication between a leader and their followers.

One of the leaders (participant 15) also emphasises the relevance of open communication, particularly while managing paradoxes and comments:

“Open communication is where dialogue and debate happen. These dialogues and debates are healthy discussions. As a manager, I believe in taking a step back and accepting constructive criticism. If my team members have something to say, I definitely listen to them. If it is logical, why not give it a chance? I might be wrong—who knows? Sometimes, team members share brilliant thoughts that give me a new dimension to think about. Honestly, open communication opens doors for creative ideas and unconventional approaches, which is what we need to manage our tensions and conflicting situations. When our situation is not simple, how can the solution be simple? (gently smiling).” (Participant-15)

This quote represents how open communication fosters a collaborative environment where creativity and problem-solving flourish, which is required when managing multifaceted and contradictory tensions. According to participant 15, open communication fosters dialogue and debate, which are essential for healthy discussions. As a leader, the participant expresses a willingness to take a step back and listen to constructive criticism and the followers’ input, acknowledging that they might be wrong and that the followers’ ideas could be better or offer new insights. By listening and being open to conversation, the participant allows diverse perspectives and innovative ideas. They accept that irreconcilable situations often require nuanced solutions and unconventional approaches. Therefore, open communication seems to be a beneficial way to navigate irreconcilable situations, as it invites creative ideas and healthy discussions.

Demonstrating paradoxical leadership

Paradoxical leaders can demonstrate and share their practical experiences of managing paradoxes with their followers. This may help followers understand the paradoxes inherent in their work and identify their own unique ways to manage them.

“In Research and Development, I handle a few projects independently, which requires me to be creative. I experiment with different ideas, though not all

experiments succeed, and some have negative effects. Nevertheless, I take ownership of my tasks, whether the outcomes are good or bad. At the same time, I manage seven employees who report to me. I assign each of them one project to work on independently and another where all seven collaborate as a team. I oversee their tasks and regularly collaborate with them, providing feedback and input on their performance in both independent and team projects. They incorporate this feedback into their work without losing their personal creative vision. This is how I balance my individual goals with my leadership responsibilities.

After completing the projects, I explain my strategies and share my experiences with them. I want them to learn how to balance seemingly contradictory goals, such as individual and team objectives, which may appear conflicting but are both essential for productivity at work. From my experiences, they can compare, contrast, and develop their skills, though I advise them not to follow my footsteps exactly.” (Participant-8)

The quote illustrates two points. Firstly, participant 8 is a paradoxical leader, as they balance individual creativity with collaboration among followers. Individual creativity often requires autonomy, while collaboration among followers requires coordination and compromise. The participant takes ownership of their tasks and outcomes, acknowledging both successes and failures, which indicates accountability for their individual tasks. However, they also lead a group of followers, which implies shared responsibility for collective success. The participant regularly provides feedback and input to their followers and guides them in their tasks. At the same time, the participant encourages followers to maintain their personal creative vision, rather than simply following in the participant’s footsteps. This shows that, on the one hand, the participant offers guidance, while on the other, they foster independence—an example of paradoxical leadership. Thus, the quote exemplifies how a paradoxical leader manages the tension between individual and collective responsibilities, ensuring both are addressed in a way that fosters productivity and creativity at work.

Secondly, the participant, as a paradoxical leader, demonstrates to their followers how to manage paradoxes, such as balancing individual responsibilities with collective goals and finding a balance between following instructions and fostering innovation. They explain their strategies and share personal experiences because they want their followers to actively

seek out and manage paradoxes in their work. This approach promotes growth and development by allowing followers to compare and contrast different strategies.

In a similar vein, participant 1 shares how they balance transparency and confidentiality in their work and encourage their followers to get involved in tasks that have conflicting demands.

“My work involves being transparent to build trust while respecting confidentiality to protect both the organisation and individuals. Confusing, right? In HR, I deal with sensitive and confidential information and matters. For example, employees’ personal information, information related to employees’ health, family matters, terminations, or any changes in the company that have not yet been made public. I must maintain strict confidentiality with this type of information. However, I need to be transparent when communicating company policies, procedures, and decisions to employees. I need to ensure that employees understand the policies, procedures, and their rights within the company. Therefore, I have to communicate as clearly and precisely as possible. This is how I balance confidentiality and transparency to build trust. It may sound easy, but in reality, it’s very challenging. I must be extremely careful about what information to share, how much to share, and with whom. I also tell my team members about the necessity of maintaining both confidentiality and transparency. Since there are no set guidelines for this, I share my experiences and examples to give them some insight. My team members sometimes shadow me to observe how I handle confidential cases. Additionally, I guide and involve them in communicating policies to other stakeholders. This is how I help my team members learn to manage tasks that are sensitive, challenging, and contradictory.” (Participant-1)

This quote highlights a paradoxical situation in which the leader balances the tension between two seemingly conflicting responsibilities in their role: maintaining confidentiality and being transparent. Both are crucial in Human Resources (HR), yet they often pull in opposite directions. The participant has to protect sensitive information about leaders, followers, and organisational changes, ensuring privacy and discretion. At the same time, they are responsible for being open and clear when communicating policies, procedures, and

decisions to build trust across all levels of the organisation, including other leaders and followers. The paradox arises because confidentiality often requires withholding information, while transparency involves openly sharing it. This balancing act is challenging, as the participant carefully decides what and how much information to reveal, when, and to whom. The participant needs to navigate these conflicting demands effectively to build trust and maintain integrity within the organisation.

The quote also indicates that participant 1, as a paradoxical leader, actively encourages, guides, and involves their followers in navigating paradoxical situations. The leader is not only practising paradoxical leadership in their work but also demonstrating it to their followers. They acknowledge that there are no set guidelines for handling these types of paradoxical situations. That is why the leader shares their experiences and examples to provide insight. Additionally, the leader uses shadowing to involve followers in handling challenging situations where both secrecy and openness are necessary. The leader also guides and supports their followers, recognising the difficulties inherent in managing paradoxes.

Thus, this quote exhibits not only the leader's ability to manage paradoxes by balancing confidentiality and transparency but also their efforts to engage and support followers in handling their own paradoxical challenges.

Communicating skilfully

Data indicates that through skilled communication, leaders and followers can navigate conflicting demands and work together to find ways that embrace both sides of a paradox. Skilful communication ensures that messages are not only sent and received but also understood as intended in a clear, concise, and respectful manner.

“This year, I received a lower budget from top management compared to last year. Now, I have to create a cost-efficient plan. While my fellow managers are considering cutting employee development for this year, I believe it is important and do not want to eliminate it entirely. Therefore, I called a meeting with my team to clearly communicate my situation. I made them understand the reality and my intentions. We had a productive discussion where we listened to each other's points. Afterwards, I found a middle ground

where I could maintain the budget without compromising employee development. I plan for in-house training sessions, utilising the company's resources and expertise. This way, I can be cost-effective while ensuring employee development.” (Participant-26)

This quote illustrates a paradoxical situation between budget constraints and followers' development, where a leader (participant 26) manages the paradox through skilled communication with their followers. The leader has received a reduced budget from top-level leaders compared to the previous year. Despite these budget constraints, the leader values follower development and does not want to cut it entirely, unlike some of their colleagues. This creates a paradoxical situation for the leader. On one side, the leader has to cut costs due to a lower budget, which suggests limiting or eliminating non-essential expenses, such as follower development. On the other side, they recognise that follower development contributes to followers' growth and the company's sustainability in the long run, which requires investment. To address this paradoxical situation, the leader holds a meeting where they communicate openly with their follower about the reduced budget and their intentions. By holding a productive discussion with their follower, the leader listens to different perspectives and engages in a collaborative approach to problem-solving. As a result of this discussion, the leader finds a solution that addresses both sides (which is apparently both-and thinking). By opting for in-house training sessions, they achieve cost efficiency by utilising existing resources while still prioritising follower development, navigating these opposing forces simultaneously. Therefore, data suggests that skilful communication seems to be helpful in managing these conflicts by encouraging active listening, collaborative discussion, and mutual understanding.

While discussing managing paradoxes and how skilled communication helps to manage these paradoxes, participant 21 comments:

“Communication is very powerful. It has the potential to manage conflicting demands, but at the same time, it can create conflicts if not done in a skilled manner. So, I maintain careful communication with my team members, top management, and any stakeholders.” (Participant-21)

Participant-21 also shares,

“I am running one project after another. Deadlines are very critical, and I have to meet them by hook or by crook. This is essential for our company’s success. My team also works really hard to meet these deadlines. That is why I constantly maintain skilful communication with them, so that the team can deliver high-quality results and feel cared for. For example, I tell them that if anyone feels too overwhelmed, they can let me know. I find a way to ensure they can work more comfortably while still contributing to the project. If they are stuck or need additional resources to meet the deadline, I can reallocate some tasks or bring in additional support. If they need to work different hours to get this done, that is fine, as long as we are communicating and hitting our key milestones. I also inform them that I am aware the workload is intense, and I genuinely care about their well-being. I do not want anyone to sacrifice their health. If they feel too stretched, we can talk and adjust tasks.”

This quote highlights the participant’s skilled communication in managing conflicting demands in high-pressure work environments. Participant 21 exemplifies paradoxical leadership by being both result-oriented and caring. The leader manages multiple projects with tight deadlines, emphasising the necessity of meeting these deadlines for the company’s success. By saying “hook or crook”, the leader stresses their unwillingness to compromise on meeting strict deadlines and delivering high-quality results. However, the leader also cares about their followers’ well-being and is concerned about their health. These goals seem contradictory as pushing hard to meet deadlines could affect followers’ health, while prioritising well-being might impact performance or deadlines. To balance these conflicting demands, the leader constantly communicates with their followers, showing their care and concern, and acknowledges the followers’ hard work. The leader offers flexibility to followers who may feel overwhelmed, such as reallocating duties, bringing in more resources, or enabling flexible working hours. They show concern for the followers’ well-being, encouraging them to speak up if they feel too stretched and ensuring that their health is not sacrificed for work. This is how the leader uses skilled communication in managing high performance under pressure while showing concern for followers’ well-being and providing flexibility to accommodate their needs.

Developing skills for navigating paradoxes

Data suggests that leaders and followers could develop some skills that help them navigate paradoxes in their work. For example, flexibility, adaptability and openness are required to manage paradoxes.

“Dealing with conflicting demands has become a daily issue. For example, my manager expects me to be both efficient and creative. To be efficient, I work in a certain way, which does not necessarily foster creativity. I have a completely different strategy that helps enhance my creative skills. This is just one example I am sharing with you. We face these kinds of challenges all the time. The strategy I follow to increase efficiency now may not be as effective next quarter. All the tensions, uncertainties, and conflicting demands are unique. There is no one-size-fits-all strategy for handling these demands—this is what I have learned from my work experience. Flexibility and adaptability are the skills that help me deal with conflicting demands. If I am flexible, I can change my strategies and approaches. It is also okay to adjust priorities, when necessary, based on changing circumstances. Therefore, I try to be flexible and adaptive when managing tensions.” (Participant-20)

This quote implies that leaders and followers are required to have flexibility and adaptability, especially when dealing with conflicting demands. The participant highlights the challenge of balancing conflicting demands in the workplace, such as efficiency and creativity. They share how different demands require different strategies—what works for efficiency may not foster creativity, and strategies that work now may not be effective in the future. It appears from the data that there are no fixed solutions to managing these tensions, as circumstances and priorities are constantly changing. Thus, by acknowledging the unpredictable nature of work and recognising that tensions and demands are unique, flexibility and adaptability are suggested as the skills needed to handle conflicting demands.

Similarly, participant 5 remarks that flexibility and openness are required to manage paradoxes.

“I have to be open and flexible when working in a dynamic environment. The greater the challenges, the more open and flexible I need to be. Openness

allows me to explore new possibilities, consider different perspectives, and brainstorm ideas, while flexibility helps me adapt to opposing priorities. As a result, I can integrate strategies to manage the opposing yet intertwined needs of my company.” (Participant-5)

This quote from participant 5 illustrates ways—openness and flexibility—for dealing with challenging and contradictory demands in a dynamic environment. Openness allows the exploration of new possibilities and perspectives, which is required while dealing with contradictory situations. Flexibility enables the participant to adapt to competing priorities, helping them respond to changing demands. By utilising these skills, the participant can integrate ways for managing the company’s competing but interconnected needs, effectively negotiating paradoxes.

Participant-13 reflects,

“Nowadays, we are becoming comfortable with the discomforts in our work (laughs out loud). This seems to be the new trend. For example, I have individual projects where I work independently, but I also have team projects where I collaborate with cross-functional teams. Have you ever heard anyone say that it’s challenging to work both independently and in teams? No one mentions it because we have grown accustomed to these arrangements. Yet, when I think about it, these two modes of working are actually contradictory. When I am working on an independent project, I have full autonomy. I can think outside the box, showcase my creativity and innovative ideas, and schedule my work as I see fit. In contrast, when I am working on a team project, I have to collaborate with other cross-functional teams. While I can still be creative, I need to align with others, listen to them, and consider their perspectives. As a team lead, I have to schedule team meetings regularly. Coordinating everyone’s time is crazy because our calendars are packed. Still, it is essential since team meetings are crucial for aligning goals, sharing ideas, and collaborating. Collaboration plays a key role in team projects because success is collective—there’s no ‘I’ in the team. So, you can imagine how challenging it is to balance working independently and as part of a team. Nonetheless, this has become a common practice. To successfully navigate

these contradictory yet interdependent tasks, I remain flexible, adaptable, and open to managing projects. This is my go-to strategy.”

This quote reveals a paradoxical work dynamic where autonomy and collaboration coexist, even though they inherently contradict each other. Participant 13 manages two seemingly contradictory work modes: independent work and collaboration among followers. In independent projects, the leader has full control, autonomy, and flexibility. They can be creative, set their own schedule, and make decisions without needing to consult others. In collaborative projects, the leader engages with others, aligns with their schedules, listens to different perspectives, and coordinates inputs because success depends on collective efforts rather than individual autonomy. Participant 13 acknowledges that working independently and collaboratively is challenging but essential. Data suggests that working both independently and collaboratively among leaders and followers has become a common practice in modern workplaces, despite the tension between autonomy and collaboration. The participant laughs at the idea of becoming “comfortable with discomfort,” implying that leaders and followers have grown accustomed to managing these work modes, even though they pull in opposite directions. Therefore, to navigate tasks that are contradictory yet interdependent, the participant remains flexible, adaptable, and open. This strategy appears to work well in dealing with paradoxes.

In addition, participant-9 expresses,

“My manager always expects me to be 100% efficient in my work. I have to use my expertise and resources to achieve my quarterly targets. By the way, my manager monitors my quarterly targets very seriously. At the same time, they want me to develop my skills and explore new possibilities. The challenge is how to be 100% efficient while also focusing on creativity and development. I have a workable strategy - I do not opt for big changes; instead, I work on improving our ongoing processes. For example, our Human Resources department initially took one month to recruit fresh candidates, such as recent university graduates. Then, I changed it to one week, and now the process takes just three days. Similarly, I streamlined the process for new joiner orientation. This is how I balance efficiency with creativity. My manager seems satisfied. Being flexible, adaptable, and open to uncertain

circumstances helps me manage competing priorities and conflicting demands.”

This quote alludes to the follower’s experience of balancing efficiency with creativity and development at work, which are often competing priorities. The follower’s leader expects them to be highly efficient in meeting quarterly targets while also developing new skills and exploring innovative possibilities. This creates a paradox, as efficiency requires cost-effective, streamlined, and fast processes to meet quarterly targets, while creativity and development demand time and flexibility for experimentation and change. To manage these competing priorities and conflicting demands, the follower adopts a strategy of being flexible, adaptable, and open to change. They focus on making small, incremental improvements to existing processes rather than implementing large, disruptive changes. For example, they improved the recruitment process in the Human Resources department by significantly reducing the time needed to recruit candidates and streamlining the new joiner orientation process. By refining ongoing tasks, the follower successfully balances efficiency with creativity, satisfying their leader’s expectations. This indicates how flexibility, adaptability, and openness to change enable both leaders and followers to navigate competing priorities and conflicting demands in their work, thereby balancing both efficiency and innovation goals.

Based on the data, participants indicate that specific skills—particularly flexibility, adaptability, and openness—help them navigate paradoxes. While these skills are acknowledged as essential for managing paradoxes, there is no explicit indication from participants about how they can be developed. However, it appears that previously suggested ways, such as having paradoxical thinking, encouraging open communication, and demonstrating paradoxical leadership, could be potential ways to develop these skills. For example, having paradoxical thinking might involve seeking diverse experiences or learning how to balance competing demands. This approach could enable both leaders and followers to adjust to conflicting and irreconcilable demands, thereby enhancing their flexibility and adaptability. Similarly, open communication promotes a free flow of information, feedback, and dialogue between leaders and followers without fear of judgment or negative consequences. By engaging in such open exchanges, both leaders and followers could learn from how others manage paradoxes, share their own ideas and experiences, and identify ways that work best for them—ultimately fostering openness. Lastly, leaders who demonstrate paradoxical leadership to followers can serve as role models, showing followers

how they navigate paradoxes effectively by applying these skills. Observing leaders could provide followers with valuable opportunities to learn from their leaders and adapt these practices to their own approaches. In these ways, followers could gradually develop their flexibility, adaptability, and openness to better manage the paradoxes they encounter at work. Thus, the ways suggested in this section could not only help followers manage paradoxes but also assist in developing the skills essential for effectively navigating them.

4.2.2 Impact

Data suggests that the impact of paradoxical leadership, whether enabling or constraining, depends on how leaders acknowledge it and their responses to it. Thus, this section identifies the impact on leaders who engage in paradoxical leadership. It includes the enabling impact on leaders in managing paradoxes within their organisation. Additionally, this section uncovers the potential constraining impact associated with leaders who practise paradoxical leadership. By leveraging the strengths and weaknesses of both sides of a paradox, leaders can become more effective.

Enabling Impact of Paradoxical Leadership on Leaders

Paradoxical leadership can have enabling impact on leaders, as it allows leaders to embrace and manage seemingly contradictory behaviours simultaneously rather than choosing one extreme over the other. While interviewing, most leaders have indicated the advantages they experience through paradoxical leadership. By understanding these benefits, leaders are better positioned to encourage their followers to recognise, accept, and navigate paradoxes in their roles.

Paradoxical leaders think of tensions, inconsistencies and contradictions as learning opportunities

Paradoxical leadership imposes a cognitive load on leaders as they manage tensions, inconsistencies, and contradictions. Leaders who embrace paradoxical leadership view these challenges as opportunities for learning and development. Paradoxical leaders show a willingness to acknowledge, understand and manage the tensions, inconsistencies, and contradictions pervasive within the workplace. They regard these tensions, inconsistencies, and contradictions as commonplace occurrences and strive to maintain an optimistic outlook.

Participant-6 expresses,

“Tensions, inconsistencies, and contradictions at the workplace- I feel these are unavoidable. Tension adds variation to life. Otherwise, life becomes boring. Quitting is never recommended because it is not a solution. It is always recommended to face it, manage it, and maintain it.”

Participant 10 also says,

“Dealing with uncertainties and tensions at work is a usual thing for me, and that is why I learnt to deal with them. I always try to see the brightest side, regardless of the stress level. I try to convert my tensions or stress into positives. I try to be optimistic.”

The participants acknowledge the inevitability of uncertainty, tensions, inconsistencies, and contradictions in the workplace, as reflected in these quotes. They uphold a positive and optimistic perspective, saying that “tensions add variety to life” and “see the brightest side”, no matter how high the stress level is. When referring to tensions, the participants denote challenges that arise from workplace inconsistencies and competing demands. Given the unavoidable nature of paradoxes in the form of uncertainty, tensions, inconsistencies, and contradictions, the participants advise confronting and managing these paradoxes rather than avoiding or quitting.

Additionally, managing paradoxes promotes leadership development both personally and professionally. Thus, leaders perceive them as avenues for growth and enrichment. This is evident in the quotes from participant 8, 10, 12 and 16.

“Frequent exposure to uncertainties and contradictions at work has taught me how to handle them efficiently. I tell myself that facing tensions and demanding situations contributes to my professional maturity.” (Participant 10)

This quote indicates the participant’s acceptance of uncertainties and contradictions as inherent aspects of their work. The participant believes that facing tensions and demanding

situations contributes to their professional maturity. They view the regular experience of dealing with these challenges not as burdens, but as opportunities for personal and professional development. This perspective is paradoxical because the participant accepts uncertainties and contradictions as part of their work, which, while fostering long-term professional growth, can also cause stress and immediate discomfort.

In a similar vein, participant 12 mentions,

“I take uncertainties, inconsistencies, and contradictions as a platform to grow because I learn something new from them. Over time, I continue to grow as a person and as a leader. I have fun when I face challenges.”

Like participant 10, participant 12 has a positive attitude toward uncertainties, inconsistencies, and contradictions in their work environment. They see these challenges as a platform to learn new things, which ultimately contributes to their development as both a person and a leader. Thus, the participant expresses having fun when facing challenges.

Participant 8 also states,

“The struggle with uncertainties and competing demands is to learn something new. That is how I improve every day.”

This quote reflects the participant’s mindset that views the struggle associated with uncertainties and competing demands as opportunities for growth and learning. It suggests that by navigating such demanding situations, one can continuously improve. Therefore, the participant sees the struggle not as a setback, but as a valuable part of their personal and professional development, emphasising the importance of learning something new every day.

Participant 16 conveys,

“I learn a lot from uncertainties and challenging situations. The more I go through uncertainty, the more I develop problem-solving skills. Thus, I gain valuable experience. While I may not encounter the same situation in the future, I am likely to face similar challenges. I grow as a manager by utilising

these skills to guide my team members. Learning from positive and negative experiences, I have become a resilient leader and person. Tensions become easier to manage with experience.”

This quote illustrates that paradoxical leaders develop their ability to transform stress into positive energy to deal with the paradoxes because they have observed that they can extract benefits while managing tensions and uncertainties at work, which fosters their personal growth. They can learn different things, enhance their skills, broaden their perspectives, and acquire valuable experiences in the process of managing tensions and challenging situations. It helped them to develop themselves and their leadership abilities for their followers. The process of acknowledging paradoxes and managing those contributes to their professional maturity. As a result, paradoxical leaders recognise the advantages of handling paradoxes in their roles. They find enjoyment in this process because they understand that it contributes to their personal and professional development.

Furthermore, paradoxical leaders view tensions and contradictions as fuel for driving forward. Uncertain situations offer abundant avenues for discussion. Leaders confronting inconsistencies and contradictions cultivate heightened agility, adaptability, resilience, and receptiveness to change. They consider the uniqueness of each challenging situation, thereby demonstrating adaptability to evolving circumstances. As a participant comments,

“Uncertain situations provide ample topics for discussion. Contradictions and inconsistencies are thought-provoking for me, fuelling my drive. For instance, I left one of my jobs because I was becoming too comfortable with it. I do not appreciate steadiness. Tensions and contradictions lead to stress, which I view as beneficial, as it compels me to think differently.” (Participant 23)

This quote shows a participant’s perspective on the role of contradictions, tensions, and inconsistencies in their professional life. The participant views these challenges not as obstacles but as necessary components that drive their intellectual engagement and motivation. They find value in stress and discomfort, seeing these experiences as catalysts for creative thinking and growth. The participant prefers environments that challenge them rather than those that offer comfort and stability.

The participant's positive attitude towards what is often considered negative (stress and tension) highlights a paradoxical mindset where discomfort is embraced as a source of inspiration and progress. The participant is rejecting what is typically desired by most people - stability and comfort. Instead, they are favouring what is often avoided - contradiction and stress. This unconventional perspective is what creates the paradox.

Similarly, participant-2 says,

“Uncertain situations and competing demands make me more agile, flexible, resilient, and open to change. In demanding situations, I cannot go by the leadership book. I cannot follow established practices or precedents solely because every problem or challenge is unique. Thus, I am adaptable to whatever changes arise. I have to forge my own path based on the circumstances in front of me.”

This quote alludes to a leader's approach to dealing with uncertainty and competing demands in their work. It appears that the participant embraces these situations because these make them agile, flexible, and resilient, adapting to the unique challenges they face. They emphasise that traditional leadership practices and established precedents are not always applicable in demanding and unpredictable situations. The leader is required to be open to change and to create their own solutions based on the specific circumstances rather than relying on a one-size-fits-all approach. The paradox is inherent in the tension between established leadership practices and the need to deviate from them in response to unique, challenging situations.

Paradoxical leaders anticipate

Paradoxical leaders can use two mutually opposing, interdependent, and complementary behaviours. Participant-14 says,

“I strictly adhere to project deadlines and communicate this expectation clearly to my team at the beginning of any project. I consistently empower my team members. Establishing clear alignment minimises the time, energy, and back-and-forth involved in decision-making.”

This quote implies a leader's paradoxical behaviour, where the leader combines two seemingly opposing behaviours—control and autonomy—in a complementary way. The participant gives autonomy to their followers through empowerment while simultaneously exercising control by enforcing strict deadlines and work outcomes. By communicating expectations at the beginning of a project, the leader establishes a framework within which the followers can perform. Within this framework, followers are empowered to make decisions and take ownership of their work, which minimises iterative decision-making processes and the need for constant supervision. Thus, the paradox is the leader's ability to be both authoritative (by setting deadlines) and empowering (by enabling autonomy), showing that two opposite behaviours may coexist and complement one another to improve decision-making.

Paradoxical leaders can also alter their perception of tasks. Paradoxical leadership encourages leaders to think and understand all the possible aspects of a challenging situation. This approach prompts leaders to extend their cognitive horizons and broaden their understanding beyond conventional limits. Hence, they can make informed decisions when dealing with competing demands by exploring diverse perspectives, leading to robust implementations. As participant 8 says,

“I have identified that there are no set rules for dealing with competing demands. It is as if there are multiple paths to choose from - East, West, North, South - each seemingly correct and yet all potentially incorrect. It puts me into a new dilemma. It adds a layer of challenge to decision-making. But I think that is what makes the process enjoyable. Moreover, considering all possible perspectives during implementation enhances the robustness of my approach.”

This quote illustrates how paradoxical leaders can alter their perceptions of the role. Challenges pose a new dilemma for leaders because there are no clear guidelines on how to manage them. Leaders are required to consider all possible approaches to demanding situations. Metaphorically, participant 8 mentions the four cardinal directions (East, West, North, and South) to convey their approach to considering all possibilities. As leaders broaden their perspective to understand multifaceted situations more comprehensively, they also alter their perception of their role. As a result, paradoxical leaders derive satisfaction

from addressing and managing challenging situations. Participant-11 also expresses satisfaction by saying,

“I enjoy the craziness in my role. It keeps me rolling.”

Along with that, paradoxical leaders cognitively manage jobs by thinking about their jobs as a collective whole as opposed to a separate task. They see their job as working for their followers.

“I know that my job leads me towards contradiction, tension, and stress. But I get inspired when I think that my team members look up to me. They are counting on me. I portray to them that my job is my responsibility. If I want to get the rose, then I have to accept the thorns. If I do my job efficiently, my team members do the same.” (Participant-13)

This quote suggests that paradoxical leaders consider their job not just as an individual task or responsibility but as part of a larger whole. Paradoxical leaders confront contradiction, tension, and stress in their work. Still, they view their role as working for the benefit of their followers. They portray a strong sense of responsibility and commitment towards supporting and serving their followers. They influence their followers to take challenging jobs if followers want to progress in their careers. Participant 13 metaphorically uses the words rose and thorns. In their quote, a rose means progress in a career or being successful, and thorns represent the challenges and obstacles in the path of success.

In this case, participant 13 acknowledges that their job leads to contradiction, tension, and stress, which are typically viewed as negative aspects. However, they find inspiration and motivation in these challenges because of their responsibility towards their followers, which is a positive aspect. They accept the difficulties (“the thorns”) as part of achieving their goals (“the rose”). This juxtaposition of accepting and even being motivated by the stressful aspects of a job for the benefit of their followers is what makes the situation paradoxical.

Moreover, paradoxical leader can manage uncertainties, as participant-3 reflects,

“My work is full of surprises, or I would say shocks. (smiling) That’s why I think beyond my job responsibilities. I maintain good relationships with

government officials at the airport, which helps me receive their assistance whenever I need special support for our business. This approach saves time and hassle. However, I am very proud of our company's core values of non-reliance on external help."

This quote is paradoxical because the leader values the company's core principle of non-reliance on external help yet simultaneously relies on external support from airport officials to manage the uncertainties of work. This contradiction between the leader's actions and the company's core values creates the paradox. In this quote, the participant manages uncertainties by anticipating and proactively addressing them. They maintain good relationships with external stakeholders (for instance, airport officials) to receive assistance when needed, which saves time and hassle. The participant goes beyond the scope of their job requirements to foster these relationships, aiming to deal with uncertainties (as the participant mentions dealing with surprises and shocks). This quote indicates that paradoxical leaders exhibit the capacity to leverage their cognitive abilities to interact with and maintain stakeholder relationships. In this way, paradoxical leaders can manage uncertainty and ambiguity at work.

Paradoxical leaders at managing their behaviours, thoughts and emotional responses

The data suggests that paradoxical leaders manage uncertain situations at work. It appears that managing these uncertainties helps paradoxical leaders develop the ability to regulate their behaviours, thoughts, and emotional responses in a productive manner. As a result, paradoxical leadership can positively influence individuals' intrinsic motivation and thinking, which subsequently impact their work attitudes and behaviours.

For example, participant 3 reflects on the impact of conflicting demands and tension at work:

"I often observe that the top management loses their temper due to conflicting demands and tensions at work, leading them to shout and scream at employees. I feel frustrated, and thus, I try to remain calm with my team members, even amidst competing pressures and tensions."

This quote illustrates a paradoxical situation where a leader (participant 3), who is the mid-level leader in a hierarchy, serves as a buffer from paradox. The leader experiences and observes negative behaviour from top-level leaders — such as shouting and losing temper due to conflicting demands and tensions at work — yet chooses to respond differently (remaining calm) when managing their own followers. The leader is caught between two conflicting behaviours: the negative reactions they witness from top-level leaders and their personal commitment to not replicate this behaviour with their followers. This negative behaviour from top-level leaders creates a paradox for the mid-level leader. The mid-level leader serves as a buffer from paradox because they absorb the hit from top-level leaders and protect their followers from that hit. They not only protect their followers but also manage them with positive behaviour. The paradox lies in the leader's effort: acting as a buffer while maintaining calmness and composure with their followers despite being in an environment where emotional outbursts are common. It appears that the leader is actively choosing to manage their followers in a way that differs from the behaviour they observe in top-level leaders, which highlights their ability to manage internal conflicts in a productive manner.

Meanwhile, participant-7 reflects,

“I am getting tougher by dealing with competing and contradictory demands. Tougher in the sense that I am not being reactive. For example, I focus on maintaining the project timeline. But my stakeholders do not want to keep a timeline. So, I do not react by sending a strong email, rather, I positively give them the message to maintain the timeline.”

This quote alludes to a leader's growth in resilience and emotional control when dealing with competing and contradictory demands. The participant associates becoming “tougher” with not being reactive. It seems that the participant views toughness as the ability to stay calm and avoid reacting impulsively. Thus, they choose to react positively and constructively rather than sending strong or confrontational communication, even when faced with resistance from stakeholders who do not prioritise the project timeline. This creates a paradox where toughness is expressed through calmness and positivity, rather than through traditional assertive means.

Paradoxical leaders arguably can manage their emotional responses, showing an ability to regulate and control their emotions and behaviours. For example,

“As a leader, I experience stress from managing contradictory expectations and tensions. But I do not let that stress impact the business or the team. I manage it by taking personal time to unwind. For example, I watch movies or hang out with my friends. I make sure that I do not release stress in my workplace and with my team members. I need to have control over my behaviour. My technique is to take a quick break. I detached myself from work for a very short time, like I take a break for an early lunch or a coffee. I am sorted when I return from my lunch or tea break.” (Participant 12)

This quote highlights the paradoxical leader’s ability to manage their emotional responses when the situation is uncertain and laden with competing demands. It seems that the leader is intent on handling stress in a way that does not negatively impact their followers or business. To achieve this, the leader consciously makes an effort to separate themselves from any professional interactions when they feel overly stressed. Simultaneously, the leader emphasises having control over their own emotions and behaviours. This involves recognising moments to step back and address their emotional fluctuations, such as knowing when to pause and recalibrate. By taking proactive steps, such as taking short breaks, watching movies, or socialising with friends, the leader effectively mitigates stress and maintains control over their behaviour.

In addition,

“When I know I need to think, I go out of the office for 30 minutes. Sometimes, I go to the terrace of the office and drink a cup of tea or coffee. I keep myself out of the office for 30 minutes. In these 30 minutes, I think deeply about what I should do and what the consequences might be. Thirty minutes of alone time is necessary for me to think. Sometimes, I stay after office hours. I know this is not ideal. But I need a quiet time.” (Participant 5)

This quote suggests the necessity of taking a break from the work environment to navigate paradoxical situations, as it seems to help in regulating and controlling the emotional responses of paradoxical leaders. Taking a break allows for deep reflection and critical thinking about one’s actions and their potential consequences. The participant recognises that stepping away from the immediate pressures of the office—whether by taking a short

break or staying after hours—provides the quiet time needed for focused thinking and effective decision-making. Although the participant acknowledges that staying after hours is not ideal, they appreciate the solitude it offers for deep contemplation and problem-solving.

In quotes from participants 12 and 5, it appears that the participants adopt the same approach in different ways. Their ways involve allowing themselves time to sleep on the matter, indicating a deliberate effort to manage the situation with patience and thoughtfulness. The participants acknowledge the requirements of practising restraint in uncertain situations.

Furthermore, participant-8 expresses,

“Knowing the unknown excites me and, at the same time, bothers me. To solve this puzzle, I need to refrain from myself. To do that, I give time to the unknown. I sleep on it. Trust me, not reacting in an anxious situation is hard.”

This quote reflects the participant’s leadership ability to manage their emotional responses and thinking when handling paradoxical situations. The participant expresses a duality in their feelings toward the unknown: they are both excited and troubled by it. This indicates a paradoxical experience where the unknown is simultaneously intriguing and unsettling. To manage this paradox, the participant practises restraint and patience, suggesting that they consciously choose not to react immediately to anxiety-provoking situations. Instead, they take time to let things unfold, allowing for deeper reflection. As the participant notes, “I sleep on it”, which shows this approach. The participant’s acknowledgement of the difficulty in not reacting impulsively in anxious situations highlights the challenge of maintaining composure and self-control in uncertain circumstances.

Finally,

“Whatever a stakeholder says something in a meeting, which is wrong, I do not have any control over this. My instant reaction is to deal with it, but not right away. I do not say anything during or after that meeting. Maybe two to three days later, I sit with them and reflect on it.” (Participant 19)

This quote suggests the paradoxical leader's preference for thoughtful reflection over impulsive action while handling conflicts in a professional setting. The participant acknowledges that they do not have control over what others say, even when a stakeholder says something incorrect. When something happens that is beyond their control and cannot be accepted, instead of immediately reacting or confronting the issue now, the participant chooses to manage their response in a more measured way. The participant waits a few days before addressing the issue. By delaying their reaction, they give themselves time to think carefully about the situation and plan their response, likely in a calm and constructive manner. Thus, paradoxical leaders seem to manage a mixed emotional response when encountering uncertainty or unexpected situations.

Constraining Impact of Paradoxical Leadership on Leaders

Paradoxical leadership can also have constraining impact on leaders, as managing seemingly contradictory behaviours often involves dealing with irreconcilable elements, which can potentially place significant pressure on leaders.

Psychological stress emerging from paradoxical leadership

Paradoxical leaders actively seek challenges that involve tensions, contradictions, and inconsistencies. This pursuit likely demands that they use their psychological, cognitive, and emotional resources, which induce pressure on leaders and potentially lead to psychological stress. As participant-10 shares,

“In my first organisation, I struggled to manage the tensions and mood of my manager. I felt trapped with no apparent alternatives, and I thought leaving the job would give me freedom. As a result, I resigned impulsively, without considering that I had no job lined up and had not handed over my work to my team members. You can imagine how frustrated I was at that time.”

This quote reveals how organisational tensions and uncertainties can create paradoxes that lead to psychological and emotional stress for paradoxical leaders. Participant 10, who is a mid-level leader, struggles to manage the conflicting demands and mood swings of the leader they report to, resulting in a stressful and overwhelming environment. The individual felt stuck, with no apparent solutions or alternatives to improve their situation. The sense of

being trapped and lacking options illustrates the participant's emotional distress and feelings of powerlessness. In response to these challenges, the participant resigns impulsively without considering future consequences, such as not having another job lined up. This hasty exit, without a proper handover of responsibilities, indicates frustration and a desire for immediate relief from the stressful environment, even at the cost of future uncertainty. Overall, the quote reflects on the organisational tensions and the unpredictable and unreasonable behaviours of leaders, which can arguably contribute to burnout by creating conflicting demands and expectations that are difficult to navigate. As a consequence, this leads to psychological and emotional stress.

The paradox in this quote lies in the conflict between the participant's intentions and their actions. The participant's desire to escape from an untenable situation led to a decision that potentially worsened their circumstances due to a lack of preparation and foresight. They sought relief from a stressful situation (the tensions with their leader) by resigning. However, this action was taken without considering the practical consequences (not having a new job secured), which can lead to a different kind of entrapment—financial instability or uncertainty. The contradiction between the need for immediate relief and the potential creation of a new form of future constraint highlights the paradoxical nature of the situation.

While reflecting on paradoxical leadership and the continuous arrival of conflicting demands, participant 3 comments on the impact, saying,

“I deal with one challenging situation, and I feel “Okay, it is done.” After some time, I sense that another conflicting demand is on its way. Sometimes, I do not feel interested in working further because of the persistent contradictions at work. The effort I would give, I stop giving immediately. I lose focus.” (Participant 3)

This quote illustrates how persistent and extreme challenges at work can lead to feelings of burnout, decreased motivation, and reduced focus. Participant 3 says that dealing with contradictory demands is a common phenomenon in their work, and they feel overwhelmed by the continuous presence of competing pressures and challenges. The participant feels a sense of relief upon completing one demanding task, but this relief is short-lived as new challenges arise. This cycle creates a paradox where the temporary relief is overshadowed by the ongoing stress of new tensions. The participant also mentions the continuous arrival

of new challenges, which presumably makes them feel that their efforts are never enough. This leads to a lack of interest and motivation, which paradoxically reduces their ability to handle future challenges and competing demands. This relentless nature of the work environment may contribute to burnout and a diminished capacity to stay engaged and productive. This creates a paradox because the participant wants to stay focused and productive, but the overwhelming nature of the work leads to the opposite outcome: reduced productivity. Thus, this quote indicates the emotional and psychological impact of perpetual workplace contradictions and tensions on the participant's motivation and performance.

Participant-2 expresses,

“I feel stressed. The pressure of work, the need to constantly create new ideas and be innovative, and the tension about uncertain situations always keep me on my toes. Sometimes, I feel that organisations create artificial stress. Even on days when everything seems to go well, I often find myself worrying in the evening that I might have overlooked important emails or tasks. So, this stress is in my head now. It never stops.”

This quote suggests how paradoxical leadership places pressure on leaders to utilise their cognitive resources in order to thrive in a competitive market environment, resulting in psychological stress. The participant experiences ongoing stress because of the constant pressure to generate new ideas, be innovative, and navigate uncertain situations. They seem to be continuously vigilant, as indicated by their statement that they are “on their toes”. By saying “artificial stress”, they express their feeling that some of these stresses may be unnecessarily created by the organisation, possibly to foster a competitive work culture. Even on seemingly good days, the participant finds themselves worrying about potential oversights, like missed emails or tasks, which indicates a pervasive anxiety that persists regardless of actual work circumstances. The sense of unending stress suggests that the participant experiences a form of mental fatigue, where their worry becomes a constant companion, possibly affecting their overall well-being.

Furthermore, participant-15 says,

“I always have to exceed performance expectations or risk being flushed out of the system. It is unfortunate, but that is how competitive our organisation is. It was very draining for me.”

This quote reflects the paradoxical experience of a leader dealing with intense pressure and high expectations within a competitive environment. Paradoxical leaders feel compelled to surpass performance expectations by managing work pressures and uncertain situations while consistently generating new ideas and fostering innovation. They perceive these tasks as obligatory to remain competitive in the market, fearing repercussions if they fail, such as being *flushed out*, which suggests termination from the organisation. This highlights the extreme competition at work. The participant describes this pressure to perform at exceptionally high levels as *draining*, which is presumably exhausting for them.

This creates a paradox because leaders need to continually improve merely to keep their positions, leading to a never-ending race. With more success, the expectations become higher. This creates a cycle in which leaders are required to outperform their previous performance to maintain their status. This might result in burnout because the effort required to meet ever-increasing expectations becomes unsustainable. Therefore, the data suggests that paradoxical leaders are caught between the demand for continuous exceptional performance and the negative impact this pressure has on them.

Paradoxical leaders' selfhood

Leaders who practise paradoxical leadership often deny their own selfhood to manage challenging situations, uncertainty, and inconsistencies. Data suggest that while performing in a demanding role, leaders find it challenging to remain true to their own selves. As a result, the demands of managing challenging situations, uncertainty, and inconsistencies can alter the individual's personality, shaping them into a different person. Paradoxical leaders may lose touch with their true selves.

Participant-5 says,

“I have to respond aggressively to manage the conflicting demands, although I am naturally calm. Sometimes, I feel I am losing myself in meeting the work

demands. The thought of losing selfhood frustrates me, leading to feelings of being overstressed.”

This quote reflects the internal conflict and tension experienced by a leader who feels compelled to act against their natural disposition to meet the demands of their role. Participant 5 feels the need to adopt a more forceful approach to handle conflicting demands, even though it goes against their naturally calm demeanour. They acknowledge the incongruence between their typical demeanour and their current approach, expressing concern about the potential loss of their true self, which in turn intensifies their frustration and stress.

This quote illustrates a paradox in leadership, as leaders need to exhibit behaviours that may be contrary to their natural tendencies in order to manage situations that involve particularly conflicting demands and uncertainty. This balance seems to be conflicting for leaders because they have to strike a balance between staying true to their selfhood and meeting the demands of their work.

Participant 16 faces similar experiences, where they say that

“I am an introverted and methodical person. I have changed myself because most of my team members are from Generation Z. I interact with them as a friend rather than adopting a traditional manager–team member relationship, which has proven effective so far. I do not like the idea of a “manager acting like a friend”. So, my work demands that I adjust my behaviour.”

This quote indicates a paradox where the leader’s personal preferences and natural behaviours are in conflict with the leadership style they need to adopt. Participant 16 leads a group of followers where most of the followers are from Generation Z, who exhibit unpredictable behaviour at work, presenting competing priorities for the leader. Adopting a friendly “buddy-type” leadership style seems to be effective in encouraging and motivating these followers to work hard, although participant 16 is not entirely convinced by this “buddy-type” style. To manage the unpredictable work behaviour of Generation Z followers, participant 16 transitions from introversion to extroversion, recognising that a methodical and traditional approach is not effective with this group of followers. They adapt their

approach and behaviour to suit different follower dynamics, adopting a more amiable leadership style to motivate and engage their Generation Z followers.

Similarly, participant-4 expresses,

“I am an extroverted person who loves to sing and smile. However, I need to maintain rigid behaviour in order to assert authority in my office. My team members do not know my friendly nature. I often adapt my behaviour and approach to effectively manage contradictory situations and uncertainty at work. Unfortunately, “being myself” is impossible in my role.”

In this quote, participant 4, in contrast to participants 5 and 16, describes themselves as an extroverted person. Their fondness for singing and smiling nature represents them as friendly. However, they believe they need to act in a strict manner to uphold office decorum, which is the opposite of their true self. On the one hand, the participant values their extroverted and friendly nature, but on the other hand, they feel the need to conform to a more rigid and authoritative behaviour to fulfil their professional responsibilities. This creates a paradox between their natural disposition and their professional persona. As a result, the participant expresses a sense of loss over not being able to be their true self by saying, “being myself is impossible” in their role, which may lead to feelings of frustration.

In this regard, participant 25 shares:

“If leaders lose their true selves while managing work demands, they eventually become frustrated and overstressed. Then, they may quit their job or take a career break.”

This quote highlights the potential repercussions of leaders who change their behaviour and suppress their true selves in order to manage the organisational challenges and uncertainties. Such behavioural shifts can lead to frustration, excessive stress, and burnout. Data suggests that, over time, this stress might become unbearable, prompting leaders to leave their jobs or take a break from their careers.

Furthermore, a participant comments:

“If the originality of a leader is lost, then the situation and the tension areas become more and more complicated. Can a leader be confused?”

(Participant-25)

This quote implies that when leaders lose their selfhood, it triggers confusion and uncertainty. Then, the situation becomes harder for leaders to navigate. The purpose is to manage challenging situations, which seem difficult when leaders lose their sense of self.

It is evident from the data that paradoxical leaders behave in ways that differ from their own selves to accommodate the contradictions and uncertainties in the workplace. They embrace various leadership styles conducive to managing paradoxes effectively instead of adhering to a specific leadership style. It necessitates acting in a manner that diverges from their natural disposition, thus potentially leading to a loss of self.

Paradoxical leaders' physical and mental health impact

Paradoxical leadership demands the extensive use of leaders' cognitive resources, which might have detrimental effects on their health. Data suggests,

“I got promoted to a leadership role last year. My role demands working with top management, managing uncertain situations, deciding on goals for the department, and forecasting future challenges. Over the past year, I noticed that I have been sick most of the time, impacting my life in various ways. It contributes to health issues and affects mood, often leading to crankiness.”

(Participant-23)

This quote shows how the demands of working with top-level leaders, dealing with inconsistencies, deciding on goals, and anticipating future uncertainties can negatively impact the health and well-being of leaders who practise paradoxical leadership. The participant experiences frequent sickness, implying that stress may be affecting their physical health. Furthermore, the influence on mood and increasing crankiness suggests that their leadership role places quite a mental and emotional load on the participant.

Similarly, participant-14 shares,

“Work tensions and stress give me a headache and increase my blood pressure. I skip meals and develop acidity. After-effects are: I feel unwell, I neglect my family, and I am disconnected from my parents. I am angry and misbehaving. I am shouting with my kids. I experience anxiety. I miss my friends’ get-togethers. I am in this sort of situation until I solve the tension.”

This quote illustrates the physical, emotional, and societal impact that paradoxical leaders may have because of workplace conflicts and stress. As an example, stress causes the participant to experience physical health difficulties such as headaches, elevated blood pressure, and acidity. Skipping meals exacerbates these concerns, resulting in an overall sense of being ill. The stress generates anger, misbehaviour, and outbursts, especially towards their children. They also have anxiety, which affects their emotional condition. The individual neglects their family and feels cut off from their parents. They miss social events with friends, indicating a decline in social activity.

Similar to participant 14, participant 24 also highlights that paradoxical leaders may experience emotional tolls while dealing with continuous uncertainties at work, which may lead to serious health problems for leaders.

“Due to the multitude of tensions at work, I experienced physical weakness, requiring saline and glucose intake. This happened because I was fragile mentally and emotionally. Uncertain situations inherent in my work often left me puzzled. At times, I experienced emotional imbalance, as there were no clear-cut directions for handling uncertain situations. The question of what the right direction remains a dilemma, and that dilemma often turns into tension.” (Participant-24)

In this quote, participant 24 adds that the inherent uncertainties in their work frequently leave them feeling puzzled and without clear direction, contributing to emotional imbalance. Constant dilemmas about making the right decisions in uncertain situations convert into ongoing tension, exacerbating their stress levels. In this situation, the participant feels fragile mentally and emotionally, which negatively impacts their health. As a result, they require medical treatment with saline and glucose.

Likewise, participant-13 reflects on how they constantly think about managing tensions and says,

“The tension from work feels overwhelming. I cannot sleep. These tensions occupy my thoughts constantly. While I can handle multitasking, managing multiple sources of tension is challenging. When I am in tension, I become completely absorbed in finding solutions. Until the problem is resolved, I struggle to focus on anything else, including my family and personal well-being.”

This quote indicates that paradoxical leaders are absorbed with thinking and finding solutions to manage paradoxes. The situation with paradoxes can dominate the paradoxical leader's thoughts. This is evident when participant 13 says that they continuously think about those paradoxes and try to find potential solutions. They are restless until they solve those paradoxes. Consequently, they struggle to sleep properly and could feel agitated. Their inability to set aside time for their families and themselves is another consequence of their preoccupied minds thinking about paradoxes.

In addition, participant-16 expresses,

“Work tension and stress made me a “quiet-quieter”. I experienced burnout because I was constantly dealing with uncertainties for which I could only speculate solutions. I worked with full energy initially, but the continuous need to manage uncertainty and devise speculative solutions took its toll.”

It appears from the data that navigating paradoxes may change a leader over time. Paradoxical leaders constantly work on navigating uncertainties and, therefore, often speculate about solutions since they are not certain about them. This can impact paradoxical leaders in the long run. For instance, participant 16 thinks that they have become quiet-quieter, which may mean they are more reserved than before. The constant speculation makes them more withdrawn and less vocal. In this regard, participant 16 admits that they give their full energy at the beginning, but the constant need to handle uncertainties and come up with speculative solutions eventually wears them down. As a result, they may experience burnout caused by prolonged stress.

Data suggests that paradoxical leaders need to live with paradoxes. For instance,

“The work stress is in my head now. It never stops. Some people use “zoning out,” which involves taking some time off. However, I do not believe this helps because it is difficult to relax or find relief when I have something on my mind. Although my company encourages taking time off, I do not think that a break provides a shield from another year of chaos.” (Participant-18)

This quote highlights that despite efforts to encourage relaxation or breaks (such as zoning out), the participant sees such tactics as worthless while they are mentally preoccupied with work. The participant expresses dissatisfaction with these stress-relieving approaches, implying that the stress is internal and ongoing. Even though the organisation encourages leaders and followers to take time off, the participant does not believe that doing so actually minimises workplace stress. This reveals paradoxical leaders’ deeper struggle with managing work-life balance while navigating paradoxes.

To discover ways to alleviate work related stress, participant-2 suggests,

“I engage in psychological counselling because of the stress associated with competing demands and conflicting pressures at work. I attend counselling sessions regularly. I have to write journals reflecting on why I am experiencing stress. Writing journals is beneficial for alleviating some of the stresses. However, it’s essential to allocate time for these activities. Therefore, making time for self-care is crucial.”

Participant 14 also confirms from their experience and observation,

“When employees cannot handle stress, they give up and leave the organisation.”

These quotes imply that paradoxical leaders turn to psychiatric counselling to cope with and manage the stress brought on by the competing demands and conflicting pressures of their work. When they find themselves unable to cope with this stress, they may ultimately decide to resign from the organisation.

Paradoxical leadership's effects on leaders' intrapersonal skills

Data suggests that engaging in paradoxical behaviour imposes pressure and cognitive load on leaders. If paradoxical leaders cannot manage this psychological stress in the long run, it may cause adverse effects on leaders' intrapersonal skills in terms of self-control, self-confidence, and self-efficacy. Participant-7 expresses,

"My stress level is high when I deal with uncertainty and inconsistency at work. I cannot handle this vagueness in my work. I sometimes feel blank. A couple of times, I have screamed at my team members suddenly, which I know is extremely bad. Then, I went to the washroom and cried."

This quote informs that leaders face dysfunctional stress when they cannot deal with paradoxes at work. Because of the dysfunctional stress, leaders lose self-control, which may impact their work behaviours and attitudes. For example, participant 7 experiences stress due to uncertainty and inconsistency at work. This stress resulted in a loss of self-control, causing them to scream at their followers. Participant 7 knows that screaming at work is neither expected nor accepted behaviour. That is why they go through an outburst of crying in the washroom. Here, crying appears as an expression of the leader's feelings of anger, frustration, and guilt regarding their actions. Thus, paradoxical leadership may cause dysfunctional stress, resulting in losing self-control. Losing self-control might have an adverse impact on the leader's work behaviour (such as screaming at their followers) and attitude (like having an outburst of crying).

Meanwhile, participant-25 says,

"The pattern of my work has put me in a situation where I now have to choose between my family and work. I am unable to balance my personal and professional life, and as a result, I am losing confidence. I am now unhappy at home and experiencing burnout at the office."

This quote exhibits the struggle of paradoxical leaders who find themselves in a position where they need to choose between family and work. Choosing one side over the other is likely to lead to unfavourable outcomes. Participant 25's work involves managing paradoxes, placing them in a position where they need to choose between their work and

family responsibilities, which proves to be an impossible task. Both family and work are essential for maintaining a healthy life, each exerting its own influence. As a result, the leader is experiencing a loss of self-confidence and emotional stress, manifesting as unhappiness at home and burnout at work, as indicated in the quote.

Participant 19 shares a contrasting perspective to participant 25 and explains,

“I used to finish one task and then start another. However, when I took on a new leadership role, I learned that none of the tasks would ever truly be finished. I have to keep all the tasks in my head simultaneously and consider both sides of the coin if I want to make concrete decisions. Additionally, I may not be able to solve all the challenges. Therefore, I simply try to deal with the situations as they arise. I believe this approach is working well for me.”

This quote suggests that when a paradoxical leader acknowledges and accepts the inherent nature of paradoxes, it becomes easier for them to manage these contradictions. Participant 19 shows a positive attitude to understand and accept the challenges and uncertainty inherent in their work environment, recognising that these factors are now commonplace. Instead of attempting to solve every challenge or uncertainty, they focus on managing them effectively. Additionally, they emphasise the importance of considering both sides of the coin to make a concrete decision when confronting uncertainty. It may appear that leaders gain confidence and restore self-efficacy when leaders believe that they have the ability to handle paradoxes at work and that they can manage the stress associated with paradoxes.

Based on the insights gleaned from these quotes, when a leader tries to prioritise one paradox over another, it can lead to confusion and heightened psychological stress. This stress may negatively affect the leader’s intrapersonal skills, such as self-control, self-confidence, and self-efficacy. Consequently, the leader’s ability to balance personal and professional life and achieve desired organisational outcomes may be compromised.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provides a detailed narration of the data collection through 35 in-depth semi-structured interviews with leaders and followers in four multinational clothing companies operating in Bangladesh. The findings are organised under two main themes: “making sense

of paradox” and “navigating paradox”, addressing the two sub-questions: how do leaders and followers make sense of, and navigate, paradox? in order to explore the main research question: What are the world applications of paradox theory through paradoxical leadership?

Within the theme “making sense of paradox”, the analysis explores the perceived sources of paradox from both leaders’ and followers’ perspectives. It also explores insights from the Global South, as paradoxes often emerge from specific contextual factors, and people in this region are generally more exposed to paradoxes due to the heightened precarity and vulnerability they face. By addressing the unique dynamics of the Global South (Bangladesh), my research highlights how these factors contribute to the formation of paradoxes.

In analysing the theme of “navigating paradox”, the chapter outlines various ways of managing paradoxes, which could be advantageous for practising paradoxical leadership. In addition to that, it analyses the impact of paradoxical leadership on leaders, concentrating solely on their experiences. The analysis addresses both the enabling and constraining effects of paradoxical leadership. Recognising these effects can support leaders in making more informed decisions and in helping their followers navigate paradoxes more effectively.

Table 4.1 below is a summary of the findings discussed in this chapter.

Table 4.1 Summary of my research findings:

Main themes based on research questions	Sub-themes	Second-Order Codes	Summary points from first-order coding
Making sense of paradox	Perceived sources of paradox	Managing different stakeholders' expectations	-Stakeholders' conflicting interests. -Stakeholders' intention to take undue advantage. -The exploitation of power or position by stakeholders to fulfil their interests.
		Competition among host countries' offices	- Multinational companies create competition among their host country offices through various events.
		Leaders' contradictory behaviours	-Seek constructive feedback and respond inappropriately when receiving it. - Maintain openness while ensuring confidentiality. - Balance transparency with discretion. -Retain control while encouraging creative thinking.
		Consequences of paradoxical perceptions	-The subjectivity of individuals' perception. -The clash between individuals' subjective experiences and objective reality.

		Competing goals and priorities	- Organisations change their goals on a quarterly basis.
	Paradoxical Reflexivity: Insights from the Global South	Pressure to conform	-Bangladeshi organisations' having "yes" culture.
		Leaders' behaviour	-Leaders' overbearing behaviours towards followers. -Leaders with traditional management styles uphold authoritative practices. -Leaders act or behave the way they want.
		Low tolerance of mistakes and fear of losing a job	-A high performance work culture in Bangladesh with a low tolerance for mistakes. -The management's intention is to foster innovation with no mistakes and fear of losing jobs.
		Lack of autonomy	-Head offices provide restricted autonomy to host countries' offices.
		Fear of departmental change	-The closure of entire departments -Internal transfers of followers
Navigating paradox	Managing paradox	Paradoxical thinking	-Maintain a disciplined supply chain while embracing sustainable innovation.
		Encouraging open communication	-Help leaders and followers to express their ideas, perspectives and concerns freely. -Allow different viewpoints to manage paradox.

		Demonstrating paradoxical leadership	-Share their practical experiences of managing paradoxes with their followers. - Demonstrate how leaders and followers balance individual responsibilities with collective goals, and navigate the tension between following instructions and fostering innovation
		Communicating skilfully	-Encourages active listening, collaborative discussion, and mutual understanding. -Essential in managing conflicting demands in high-pressure work environments.
		Developing skills for navigating paradoxes	Skills such as flexibility, adaptability and openness
	Impact		
	Enabling Impact of Paradoxical Leadership on Leaders	Paradoxical leaders think of tensions, inconsistencies and contradictions as learning opportunities	-Uphold a positive and optimistic perspective about uncertainty, tensions, inconsistencies, and contradictions in the workplace. -Promote leadership development both personally and professionally. -Develop the ability to transform stress into positive energy. -View tensions as fuel for driving forward.

		Paradoxical leaders anticipate	-Combine two seemingly opposing behaviours in a complementary way. -Can alter their perception of tasks. -Cognitively manage jobs by thinking about the job as a collective whole as opposed to a separate task.
		Paradoxical leaders at managing their behaviours, thoughts and emotional responses	-Show an ability to regulate and control their emotion and behaviours. -Strategies to manage emotions, such as taking breaks and delaying responses. -Prefer thoughtful reflection over impulsive action.
	Constraining Impact of Paradoxical Leadership on Leaders	Psychological stress emerging from paradoxical leadership	-Paradoxical leadership places pressure on leaders to utilise their cognitive resources. -Intense pressure to perform without mistakes and innovate new ideas.
		Paradoxical leaders' selfhood	-Paradoxical leaders' personal preferences and natural behaviours are in conflict with the leadership style they need to adopt.

		Paradoxical leaders' physical and mental health impact	-Stress causes physical health difficulties such as headaches, elevated blood pressure, and acidity. -Anxiety, feeling puzzled, working without a clear direction, and neglecting family and social activities - contribute to emotional imbalance. -Prolonged stress may cause burnout.
		Paradoxical leadership's effects on leaders' intrapersonal skills	-Paradoxical leaders' self-control, self-confidence, and self-efficacy may be adversely affected.

5. Discussion

Chapter Overview

The previous chapter analyses the interviews, organising the findings under two main themes: “making sense of paradox” and “navigating paradox”. This chapter brings together the overall findings drawn from the findings presented in the previous chapter, reflects on the literature of paradoxical leadership and paradox theory as a theoretical lens, and highlights my research’s contributions within the framework of a coherent body of knowledge.

In this research, I explore paradoxical leadership through the lens of paradox theory by asking: What are the world applications of paradox theory through paradoxical leadership? To explore this main research question, my research delved into two sub-questions: (a) how do leaders and followers make sense of paradoxes in their work? and (b) how do leaders and followers navigate paradoxes simultaneously? My findings led me to answer these two sub-questions of my main research question.

In this chapter, section 5.1 discusses the findings concerning the first research question guiding this research: how do leaders and followers make sense of paradox in their work? Hence, it presents the perceived sources of paradox for both leaders and followers, and the insights from the Global South highlight perspectives and experiences in regions like Asia, which often face unique developmental, cultural, and institutional challenges.

Then, section 5.2 explores the findings concerning the second research question: how do leaders and followers navigate paradoxes simultaneously? It presents different ways to manage paradoxes, which are helpful for both leaders and followers. In these ways, leaders can practise paradoxical leadership and influence followers to accept paradoxes in their work. They can also assist followers in managing these paradoxes by guiding them in different ways, which my research identifies. Afterwards, this section explains the impact of paradoxical leadership on leaders, which considers both the enabling and constraining effects. This impact section focuses exclusively on leaders, as their understanding of the impact can enable them to guide their followers more effectively.

5.1. How do leaders and followers make sense of paradoxes in their work?

Once leaders and followers can make sense of paradoxes in their work, they can find ways to respond, navigate, and reconcile these conflicting demands. Scholars also have suggested that leaders and followers should have the ability to recognise the paradoxes within their organisational environment (Aramovich and Blankenship, 2020; Waldman and Bowen, 2016; Clegg, Cuhna, and Cuhna, 2002). Although much research explores paradoxes generally, how paradoxes manifest in the organisational context is still an empirical question. There is a limited understanding of how leaders and followers recognise that they are in a paradoxical situation and what such a situation might entail or look like. No studies have yet identified the practical forms and evidence of paradoxes in day-to-day work while managing ambiguities. Thus, this section first discusses the perceived sources of paradox and then analyses paradoxical reflexivity through insights from the Global South.

From the data, one key finding is that paradoxes can emerge while dealing with different stakeholders (both internal and external) in the organisational context. This is because different stakeholders have different expectations and perceptions, which are often contradictory and conflicting. This finding aligns with Smith's and Lewis's (2011) assertion that paradoxes can "stem from the plurality of stakeholders" (p. 384). This aspect of paradox is referred to as *performing paradox*, one of the four fundamental organisational paradoxes in the literature on paradox theory (Smith and Lewis, 2011). In a similar vein, Molecke et al. (2023) and Pinto (2019) further explain that leaders and followers face paradoxes when different stakeholders have conflicting demands. For Jaeck et al. (2023), too, stakeholder-based tensions are central to the challenges of managing paradoxes in multifaceted organisational environments. Different stakeholders have diverse and sometimes contradictory views and perceptions of organisational goals. Indeed, most of the participants interviewed shared that stakeholder interests, self-interest, and collective goals lead to paradoxes that challenge consistent organisational alignment and initiatives. This may come across as unsurprising, as early scholars also acknowledged that multiple stakeholders impose competing strategic demands on leaders and followers (Donaldson and Preston, 1995; Freeman, 1994; Goodpaster, 1991). These early scholars point out that leaders and followers encounter irreconcilable situations when dealing with different stakeholders due to their differing expectations and conflicting interests. However, they do not explicitly refer to these situations as paradoxes. This is where my research contributes by shedding light on

the paradoxical situations leaders and followers encounter when managing the demands of multiple stakeholders with conflicting interests and expectations. This finding of my research not only identifies “different stakeholders” as a source of paradoxes but also explains why they create paradoxes. It is clear from the empirical findings of my research and previous studies that different stakeholders’ distinct interests and expectations are why stakeholders create paradoxes.

My findings also suggest *how* stakeholders might create paradoxes at both the meso and micro levels in organisational activities. For instance, my data shows stakeholders having conflicting interests (i.e. factory-based leaders not recruiting female candidates in interviews purely because of their gender, while the organisation publicly promotes women’s empowerment and factory-based leaders also claim to value equality), creating paradoxes at both the organisational and individual levels. Schneider et al. (2018) and Lim et al. (2017) also echo that leaders and followers face paradoxical tensions caused by conflicting stakeholder demands, with a particular focus on leaders and followers. However, my research findings extend existing understandings by showing how stakeholders’ conflicting interests generate paradoxes across different levels of organisations.

Moreover, empirical evidence shown in this thesis revealed that stakeholders sometimes exploit their dynamics (such as their power or position) to fulfil their interests at the expense of others. This creates a paradoxical situation for leaders and followers because they cannot deny the stakeholders because of their power dynamics and cannot accept their demands, which is generally not ethical or appropriate. This reminds of Nikiforakis’s and colleagues’ (2014) argument that powerful stakeholders exploit their power to coerce leaders and followers for personal gain, where leaders and followers are aware of the exploitation but have limited ability to respond due to the hierarchical power imbalance. However, Nikiforakis’s and colleagues’ (2014) study does not necessarily incorporate a paradoxical viewpoint or address that stakeholders’ power exploitation is the underlying reason for leaders and followers being in paradoxical situations. No existing research identifies *stakeholders’ power dynamics* as paradox creators for leaders and followers. Thus, this is a unique finding, contributing to the understanding of paradox sources.

Another finding from my research reveals that in multinational clothing companies, host countries within a specific geographical region often compete, creating paradoxes for their leaders and followers. Many participants reported that host country offices in the South

Asian region, including Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, and Pakistan, compete in event celebrations, growth, innovation, and the introduction of new trends. Host country offices view this competition as a matter of their reputation and want to come first in this competition. It appears from the participants' interviews that higher officials from head offices in these multinational companies (MNCs) are instigating this competition in non-obvious ways. For instance, head office higher officials do not directly encourage competition among host country offices in the South Asian region, but they make global announcements with pictures if any host country office celebrates any event nicely. This sort of global announcement from higher officials at head offices is seen as a form of recognition and acknowledgement of performance by the host country offices, thus intensifying the competition among them. Scholars also found that multinational organisations instigate competition among their subunits or host companies or subsidiaries, using formal hierarchical tools to foster competition (Mierzejewska, 2022; Lagerström et al., 2021; Becker-Ritterspach and Dörrenbächer, 2011). Lagerström et al. (2021) and Mierzejewska (2022) further explore the formal hierarchical tools that drive these competitions, which include the distribution of resources, positioning within the system and gaining attention from head offices, and the projects and assignments received by the host countries or subsidiaries. Insights from my interviews align with these studies (Lagerström et al., 2021; Mierzejewska, 2022) as competition among host country offices in the South Asian region arises from the desire to gain head offices' attention and secure top positioning.

This organised competition, driven by head offices, creates both cooperative and competitive behaviours (Fiorito et al., 2023; Mierzejewska, 2022; Lagerström et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2021), leading to paradoxical situations for the host countries' leaders and followers. This relationship of competition and cooperation is commonly termed as *coopetition* (Gnyawali, Madhavan and Bengtsson, M., 2016; Padula and Dagnino, 2007; Gnyawali and Park, 2011; Bengtsson and Kock, 2000). Chen (2008) claims that *competition* and *cooperation* represent some of the most prominent paradoxical phenomena within organisations, advocating for a more comprehensive perspective on these concepts (p.290). Leaders and followers are caught between conflicting demands or priorities from coopetition (simultaneous competition and cooperation), forcing them to navigate paradoxes (Fiorito et al., 2023). My empirical findings concur. Findings show that host countries' leaders and followers from South Asian regions are required to put in extra effort beyond their regular responsibilities to remain cooperative. They need to fulfil their daily duties according to the expectations of the leader they report to, while also following directives from top-level leaders (the country

head of the host country) when cooperation is needed in the competition. They are expected to excel, as the reputation of their country office with headquarters is at stake. This dual pressure to be simultaneously cooperative and competitive, coming from both top-level leaders and the immediate leaders to whom they report, creates a paradoxical situation for leaders and followers as they face work-life imbalance due to extra workload. Pressure from high workload amplifies paradoxes (in the form of tensions, conflicts or competing demands) for leaders and followers (Shao et al., 2019; Wahid and Hyams-Ssekasi, 2018). However, these leaders, specifically top-level leaders and the immediate leaders to whom they report, promote work-life balance. These dualities (simultaneous competition and cooperation) and conflicting demands (top-level and immediate leaders promote work-life balance, while also putting pressure to take on extra work) become sources of paradox for leaders and followers. This clarifies why Fiorito et al. (2023), Gnyawali et al. (2016) and Stadtler and Van Wassenhove (2016) focus on how “coopetition” creates paradoxes for leaders and followers.

Many participants (both leaders and followers) shared that frequent changes in organisational goals and priorities generate paradoxes for them. Organisations frequently change their goals to adapt to their uncertain, volatile, and dynamic external environment. Organisations make these changes to remain competitive in the market. Thus, followers need to follow what their leaders say. These findings of my research are indirectly linked to the dualities inherent in *coopetition* (the simultaneous competition and cooperation) (Chen et al., 2021). My findings show that organisations revise their goals every quarter. With changing goals, leaders and followers adjust all their targets and tasks. Changes in goals can create different expectations, processes, and perspectives, which can either spark innovation or cause confusion (Shao et al., 2019). The latter happens because competing demands and goals are not integrated. Workload increases as leaders and followers do the same task differently to fulfil the revised goals. As a result, they feel uncertain and unstable in their organisation. Therefore, constant fluctuation in goals is a factor in the emergence of paradoxes. There is a substantial body of literature on organisational change, where paradox surfaces as a prominent theme (Fiorito et al., 2023; Cameron, 2008; Lewis, 2000; Lüscher et al., 2006; Tracy, 2004; Van de Ven and Poole, 1988; Sparr et al., 2022). These works explain how organisational change creates tensions, leading to paradoxical situations for leaders and followers. These scholars have considered external factors (i.e., macro factors such as change in environment or economy) when analysing organisational change. For example, Tracy (2004) explores how organisational contradictions and frequent changes create tensions for leaders and followers, leading them to experience paradoxical situations

where they must meet competing demands, creating stress and ambiguity. Lüscher et al. (2006) examine the social construction of organisational paradoxes, noting how frequent changes increase challenges and ambiguity for leaders and followers. However, a lack of literature highlights that organisations make internal changes to cope with external changes, such as frequent changes in organisational goals and priorities (i.e., micro factors). This is what my research focuses on, and identifies that these changing goals and priorities often lead leaders and followers to struggle with uncertainty, thereby creating paradoxes for them.

While interviewing followers, it became apparent that leaders could themselves be a potential source of paradoxes for followers. This finding is intriguing because it challenges the general assumption that leaders primarily help followers manage paradoxes. Indeed, my research reveals that leaders can, in fact, contribute to the creation of paradoxes. Empirical evidence shows that leaders sometimes exhibit contradictory behaviours towards their followers, which can unintentionally foster paradoxes within organisations. For instance, a leader might invite constructive feedback from followers yet respond defensively when it is offered. This behaviour creates a paradox, leaving followers uncertain about whether or how they should share their insights. Similarly, leaders are typically encouraged to maintain transparency with their teams to cultivate trust and encourage open dialogue, while at the same time, certain situations require strategic discretion to safeguard sensitive information or prevent undue concern. The need to balance openness with confidentiality creates yet another organisational paradox. Leaders may not only exhibit contradictory behaviour towards their followers but also hold conflicting expectations of them. For instance, they might demand creativity and innovation while insisting that all company rules be strictly followed. This dual demand—fostering innovation as well as control—introduces contradictory objectives, giving way to paradoxical tensions in the process. There is some research that addresses the leader's paradox. For instance, this covers how leaders can enhance creativity through paradoxical leadership, such as promoting creativity under workload pressures (Yang et al., 2021; Shao et al., 2019), how leaders' seemingly contradictory behaviours—such as encouraging both exploration and exploitation—create ambidextrous demands on teams, impacting innovation and performance (Zhang et al., 2024; Sparr et al., 2022; Yi, Mao and Wang, 2019; Li et al., 2018), how leaders consider dualities in operational and strategic actions, which often entail contradictory objectives (Putnam et al., 2016; Karhu and Ritala, 2020). However, no research has been identified that illustrates that leaders can contribute to creating paradoxes for their followers. This is where my research findings make a unique contribution.

Alongside perceived sources of paradoxes, my findings also relate to paradoxical reflexivity, particularly in the Global South context. Indeed, the emergence of paradoxes can be rooted in specific contexts that shape how individuals experience them. In many countries in the Global South, particularly within Asian contexts like Bangladesh, cultural influences significantly shape workplace dynamics. The unique Bangladeshi context appears to contribute to creating paradoxical situations for its leaders and followers. These insights bring attention to paradoxes that may be less visible or different in the Global North. There is very little research on culture and paradoxes (Farmer et al., 2024; Keller, Loewenstein and Yan, 2017; Osland and Osland, 2005; Keller et al., 2018). A notable exception is Farmer's (Farmer et al., 2024) examination of how cultural tightness—characterised by rigid norms and low tolerance for deviance—impacts innovative behaviours in Southern European workplaces. Leaders and followers from 'tight' cultures experience a paradox: they are encouraged to innovate yet feel constrained by cultural expectations that discourage deviation from norms, creating tensions in global work environments. Keller et al. (2018) also discuss how national culture influences leaders' and followers' experiences of paradoxical tensions, particularly in China (East Asia) and the United States (North America). They show that leaders and followers from cultures with a high tolerance for contradictions (such as China) are better equipped to handle paradoxical demands with less tension, whereas those from cultures with lower tolerance (such as the United States) may struggle more to navigate these conflicts (Keller et al., 2018). Osland and Osland's (2005) exploration of expatriates in foreign cultures (Latin America and West Africa) also highlights how increased cultural involvement often leads to paradoxical experiences, where expatriates adapt to the local culture while maintaining their own cultural values. The balance between two different cultures creates a challenging paradox as leaders and followers strive to navigate competing cultural demands. Still now, limited research considers cultural aspects in analysing paradoxes, with none explicitly addressing the Global South. Therefore, this section is a unique contribution to this research, as it discusses sources of paradoxes from the Bangladeshi context.

My data suggests that organisations in Bangladesh often uphold a "yes" culture, which creates paradoxes for its leaders and followers. Participants, leaders and followers, shared their experiences with this "yes" culture. This cultural norm involves an implicit expectation that leaders and followers should agree to tasks and requests from their respective leaders, even when it results in overcommitment or exceeds their practical capacity. The "yes"

culture within Bangladeshi organisations creates paradoxical challenges for leaders and followers. This paradox arises from the dual expectations to comply with cultural norms and the need to manage workload realistically. Indeed, Jahan et al. (2022) analyse the Bangladeshi work culture in general (paradoxes or paradoxical situations are not considered) and highlight that a strong organisational culture influences the commitment of leaders and followers in Bangladesh, which aligns behaviours with hierarchical expectations. This alignment is motivated mainly by the cultural emphasis on loyalty and harmony within traditional Bangladeshi organisations, where declining a request may be seen as disrespectful or uncooperative. My data indicates that while this “yes” culture is rooted in demonstrating respect and willingness, it often leads to paradoxical situations where leaders and followers are caught between meeting the demands of those they report to and managing their workload realistically. On the one hand, both leaders and followers are driven to say “yes” to demonstrate loyalty and commitment to their organisation, thereby upholding the cooperative culture valued by top-level leaders. On the other hand, they may wish to say “no” to avoid overcommitting and to manage their existing workload effectively. This dual pressure creates a state of paradox, where leaders and followers strive to align with organisational expectations while grappling with practical workload limitations. Leaders play a critical role in either reinforcing or alleviating the “yes” culture within organisations. According to Haque and colleagues (2019), the former happens as Bangladeshi leaders expect their followers to demonstrate unwavering commitment. Followers may feel compelled to agree with requests from their leaders to avoid potential repercussions or negative evaluations in such a situation. This expectation creates a paradoxical dynamic in which both leaders and followers are evaluated based on their willingness to comply with those above them—even when such compliance may lead to an unmanageable workload—while also being expected to work in close coordination within a cohesive leader–follower relationship. This finding offers a unique perspective on Bangladeshi work culture of saying “yes”, highlighting how it generates paradoxes for leaders and followers. Future research could investigate whether similarities exist in other South Asian contexts and how they differ from those in the Global North.

Additionally, this research shows traditional and bureaucratic management styles to be predominant in many multinational clothing companies operating in Bangladesh, giving rise to paradoxes. Bangladeshi leaders, particularly in industries like textiles, commonly employ a bureaucratic and authoritarian leadership style (Rahman, 2018; Haque et al., 2019) despite the diverse culture of multinational companies. Local leaders who adhere to these styles

often exercise significant authority over their followers, fostering a workplace dynamic where hierarchical control and deference to authority are prioritised. This bureaucratic style perpetuates a top-down approach, where leaders maintain control and expect followers to follow instructions without question. They have a traditional belief that they have *the right to rule* their followers. This may be explained by the Bangladeshi organisational culture being shaped by hierarchical, bureaucratic principles, where authority is rarely questioned, and decisions are made with minimal input from followers (Mohammad et al., 2017; Jamil, 2002; Amin, Ali and Alam, 2018). In such environments, followers feel pressure to agree with their leaders' decisions, even if these decisions conflict with their values or capabilities. This creates paradoxes for followers, who face conflicting demands to both comply with strict leadership control and contribute creatively within a collaborative environment, specifically in multinational settings where diversity of thought is valued. Leaders and followers are expected to contribute ideas and collaborate on engagements, which are essential for innovation and growth, but are constrained by rigid protocols, limiting their capacity to innovate or express concerns freely. As before, this finding also highlights how the traditional and bureaucratic leadership styles in Bangladesh create paradoxes for followers. This is still an unexplored area in the research of paradoxes and paradoxical leadership; thus, my research presents a unique contribution.

Nearly all interviewees conveyed experiencing paradoxes arising from the low tolerance for mistakes in their work and a persistent fear of job loss. They shared that the Bangladeshi offices of multinational clothing companies where they work are marked by a high-performance culture where success is strictly defined by meeting or exceeding annual targets. For example, Hasan and colleagues (2022) found that within the Bangladeshi clothing or ready-made garments (RMG) sector, there is intense pressure on leaders and followers to maintain productivity, efficiency, and quality standards due to the industry's global competitiveness. Wahid and Hyams-Ssekasi (2018) similarly highlighted the use of high-performance work systems in multinational companies operating in Bangladesh, observing that such systems contribute to the intense work pressure experienced by leaders and followers. My data shows that this high-performance culture places a heavy emphasis on flawless execution, where any deviation from expected outcomes can result in negative consequences, such as poor performance reviews or losing jobs. Leaders and followers are encouraged to continuously strive for excellence, often pushing themselves beyond their limits in the pursuit of organisational goals. In such a culture, mistakes and failures are not perceived as learning opportunities but as detrimental missteps that could harm an

individual's career prospects. Steinisch and colleagues (2013) and Amin, Ali and Alam (2018) observed that Bangladeshi clothing companies place emphasis on stringent demands and have a low tolerance for errors. In agreement with these scholars' observations, my research findings highlight that leaders and followers feel compelled to hide their mistakes or take on more tasks than they can realistically manage, all the while aiming to maintain the appearance of flawless performance. This fear of failure fosters a work culture where leaders and followers are reluctant to report issues, seek assistance, or take calculated risks despite the company's expectations for innovation and productivity. The paradox becomes evident as leaders and followers navigate conflicting demands: on the one hand, they are encouraged to innovate and drive growth; on the other hand, the repercussions of any failure create a significant barrier to open experimentation. Additionally, the intolerance for mistakes in these companies curtails leaders' and followers' willingness to experiment and take risks, ultimately hindering creativity and long-term development. This paradox is particularly problematic in multinational settings, where head offices encourage innovation as a core value. Besides, the enforcement of strict performance standards by local top-level leaders indirectly discourages both leaders and followers from taking the necessary risks for meaningful innovation. Vomberg and colleagues (2020) argue that for innovation to thrive, leaders and followers must feel empowered to make mistakes without fear of punishment, a principle that is frequently absent in Bangladeshi multinational companies, as evident in my findings. This finding is unique to my research as it uncovers how high-performance work culture contributes to paradoxes, a connection not previously established in the literature.

Many interviewees shared that, in certain instances, decisions made by the head offices of multinational clothing companies limited their autonomy, resulting in a paradoxical situation. This finding is particularly pronounced among leaders compared to followers. My data exhibits that multinational clothing companies operate within a multilayered hierarchical structure that simultaneously empowers and constrains leaders and followers, especially leaders, at regional or host-country offices. MNCs typically follow a centralised structure that consolidates decision-making authority at the top level, leaving host countries with limited autonomy. The role of leaders in host country offices becomes more about implementing decisions made by head office authorities rather than participating in the decision-making process itself. Liu et al. (2023) and Manolopoulos (2006) argue that autonomy within host country offices is often constrained by head offices. Supporting these scholars' arguments, data from my research findings reveal that in Bangladeshi offices of multinational clothing companies, leaders have nominal control over daily operations but

remain bound by budgetary constraints and policies established by the head offices. For instance, these leader interviewees are expected to exercise complete autonomy over recruitment and managing leader-follower interactions yet must operate within tight recruitment budgets and are barred from planning leader–follower relationship-building activities outside the office due to corporate policies. Aligned with my findings, Pereira et al. (2020) and Chatzopoulou et al. (2021) illustrate that while some authority is devolved to host countries, strategic decision-making typically remains in the hands of the parent company, limiting the scope of local initiatives and causing leaders and followers to feel constrained. This combination of empowerment and constraint creates paradoxes for leaders, where they are encouraged to be proactive yet are limited by strict head offices’ policies and budgetary constraints. This scenario mirrors the experience of Bangladeshi leaders, who are urged to take ownership of their tasks yet operate under conditions that limit independent decision-making. This is how the multilayered hierarchical structure of MNCs creates paradoxes for host country leaders, particularly Bangladeshi leaders. While scholars have researched the multilayered hierarchical structure of MNCs, they have not identified this as a potential source for creating paradoxes among host country leaders. My research findings shed light on this overlooked aspect, focusing on Bangladeshi leaders working in MNCs. Future research could explore similar dynamics in offices across other Asian countries in the Global South.

5.2. How do leaders and followers navigate paradoxes?

So far, we have discussed the perceived sources of paradoxes, explaining how these paradoxes can emerge from specific contexts (i.e., Bangladesh, an Asian country in the Global South). The next question is how to manage them. This is the focus of this section, specifically addressing my second research question: How do leaders and followers manage paradoxes in their work? Here, I divide the discussion into two parts: first, I explain how paradoxes can be managed, exploring different ways to respond to and navigate them; secondly, I analyse the impact of practising paradoxical leadership, analysing its enabling and constraining effects. The impact section aims to understand the effects of paradoxical leadership, which may assist leaders and followers in managing paradoxes more effectively.

While investigating how individuals respond to and navigate paradoxes, my research provides empirical evidence suggesting that paradoxical thinking is important for managing paradoxes. Most participants mentioned that if leaders and followers have paradoxical

thinking, they acknowledge the paradoxes and accept those. Afterwards, they can think about ways to manage those paradoxes. Researchers also agree with my findings and suggest that leaders and followers can manage paradoxes by adopting paradoxical thinking (Liu, Xu and Zhang, 2020; Pan, 2021; van Assen and Caniëls, 2022; Yin, J., 2022). van Assen and Caniëls (2022) and Yin (2022) recognise that individuals with a paradox mindset can identify, tolerate, and embrace contradictory elements. The extent to which leaders and followers experience difficulties with paradoxes or manage them is influenced mainly by their level of paradox mindset (Shao et al., 2019; Sparr, 2018). There are several studies analysing paradox mindset within the innovation context that aim to uncover the specific paradoxes leaders might face and investigate how paradoxical leadership influence the innovative behaviour of both individual followers and follower groups (Volk et al., 2023; Karhu and Ritala, 2018, 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). Little research investigates the pathways through which both leaders' and followers' paradox mindset may contribute to their innovative work behaviour (Calabretta, Gemser and Wijnberg, 2017; Koryak et al., 2018). While researchers concentrate on paradox mindset, my data also indicates that leaders and followers feel the need to have paradoxical thinking.

Paradoxical thinking appears to be a practical approach to navigating paradoxes. It is a cognitive skill used to recognise and make sense of paradoxes in specific situations where contradictions arise. Leaders may not always need to think paradoxically. It can be situational and activated as required. Paradoxical thinking does not reflect the overall outlook of a leader or follower, but rather their ability to approach flexibly with contradictory and opposing ideas when needed. This contrasts with a *paradox mindset*, which is a stable tendency to embrace contradictions in general. Nonetheless, both concepts are useful in helping leaders and followers as they navigate irreconcilable and competing demands. Additionally, most of the researchers analyse paradoxical mindset based on the context of creativity and innovation (Yang et al., 2021; van Assen and Caniëls, 2022; Liu et al., 2020; Koryak et al., 2018; Calabretta, Gemser and Wijnberg, 2017; Shao et al., 2019). However, my findings focus on the experience of leaders and followers working in multinational clothing organisations in Bangladesh. This context has a cross-cultural integration (a blend of South Asian and home-country cultures within multinational organisations). That is why my research evidence indicates a situational cognitive approach, which is *paradoxical thinking* to navigate organisational paradoxes.

My research participants also talked about open communication as another way of managing paradoxes by facilitating understanding, reducing ambiguity, and enabling collaborative problem-solving across competing demands. Leaders' and followers' creativity and innovation thrive in environments where leaders encourage openness in managing paradoxes. This may be because paradoxes are not always apparent or fixed phenomena. Instead, they come to light as people discuss, interpret, and interact with one another in the organisational context (Francis and Keegan, 2020). Through open communication, these tensions and contradictions become more apparent and relevant as they are continuously shaped by the perspectives and relationships of the individuals involved (Putnam et al., 2016). Open communication carries a risk, as it can leave paradoxes "open" without immediate resolution (Beech et al., 2004). However, it also encourages leaders and followers to address paradoxes constructively rather than avoiding them. Francis and Keegan (2020) analyse how open communication engages leaders and followers in paradoxical settings, particularly when balancing high-performance demands with well-being needs. My data also agree with Francis's and Keegan's (2020) research, as they show that open communication allows leaders and followers to share their ideas, perspectives, and concerns openly, facilitating diverse viewpoints in navigating paradoxes. It promotes an unrestricted exchange of information, feedback, and dialogue between leaders and followers, fostering a supportive culture free from fear of judgment or negative repercussions. According to Li and colleagues (2020), it encourages leaders and followers to adopt unconventional approaches, reflecting the competing demands of their roles. My findings support this perspective, where both leaders and followers indicate that open communication helps them adopt unconventional approaches to manage paradoxes. This is a potentially important finding, especially considering the role of leaders in encouraging "open and honest communication" among followers who are facing the competing demands of enhancing service quality while reducing costs (Warhurst, 2013, p. 50). Thus, Routhieaux (2015) suggests that "the only way to get followers to understand the leader's multifaceted set of role requirements is through open communication. These conversations are critical in navigating the leader's paradox". (p.253).

The findings indicate that to navigate paradoxes effectively, not only is open communication required, but it also has to be skilfully executed. Skilful communication ensures that messages are conveyed and interpreted accurately, fostering clarity, conciseness, and mutual respect. Skilful communication is potentially an important finding of my research, as paradoxical tensions either foster or restrict both leader and follower participation in

decision-making, depending on whether leaders—such as top-level leaders favour monologic or dialogic modes of communication in response to current tensions (Kahn and Heaphy, 2014; Putnam et al., 2016, p. 121). In the case of the latter, leaders play a crucial role as facilitators, enabling skilful communication around exploring paradoxes, addressing events, issues and tensions, and developing ways of managing these (Francis and Keegan, 2020). In agreement with this argument, my findings inform that interviewees (in particular, leaders) maintain skilful communication with their followers, top-level leaders, and stakeholders to manage paradoxes. They further highlight that communication can lead to conflicts if not handled skilfully, which clarifies why Korstjens and colleagues (2021) stress that while communicating, professionals require the skill of deciding when, how, and how much “talk works” and “work beyond words” (p.151). Jarzabkowski and Lê (2017) observe that humour (as a form of communication) enables individuals to shape their understanding of paradox socially and, through interactions with others, to develop possible responses to the various small instances of paradox they encounter in their daily work. While these studies emphasise the importance of effective communication skills, they do not explicitly address how communication can be made effective. They all support the need for skilful communication in managing paradoxes and discuss this point comprehensively in their work. However, leaders and followers require practical guidance on how to operationalise skilful communication, which my research findings illustrate.

The data shows that among various skills, flexibility, adaptability, and openness are important skills for managing paradoxes. These skills enable leaders and followers to navigate paradoxes by balancing competing demands, managing uncertainty, and fostering innovation. According to Lewis et al. (2014), leaders who are flexible and adaptive in their approaches can effectively balance competing goals, such as short-term gains versus long-term sustainability. My data indicates that adaptability complements flexibility by enabling leaders and followers to adjust their behaviour in response to new challenges. Leaders and followers with adaptive skills are better prepared to handle paradoxes. Smith and Lewis (2012) particularly focus on leaders and argue that adaptability allows them to interpret and respond to evolving demands, which is essential for managing the inherent contradictions within organisations. By framing flexibility and adaptability as key skills, organisations, along with leaders and followers, can better manage paradoxes between autonomy and control, promoting resilience in response to dynamic work environments (Putnam et al., 2014; Ambituuni, Azizsafaei and Keegan, 2021; Cañibano, 2019). Van Gool et al. (2022) agree with this argument and add resilience. They find that flexibility and resilience are

closely linked, and that flexibility, resilience and adaptation are essential in high-pressure situations where rapid responses are required. Openness to diverse perspectives and new ideas is equally important in managing paradoxes, as it encourages acceptance of competing viewpoints. Openness fosters an inclusive environment where individuals are more willing to engage with contrasting opinions, promoting a constructive approach to paradoxes (Francis and Keegan, 2020). Shukla et al. (2019) explore how leaders and followers experience paradoxical demands and how these skills help them navigate paradoxes in challenging organisational environments. Therefore, my research findings, supported by previous studies, highlight that openness, flexibility and adaptability are important considerations for managing competing demands and strategic decision-making in uncertain contexts.

All leader interviewees claim that demonstrating paradoxical practices can be a way to develop followers for the paradoxes inherent in their work. Paradoxical leaders embrace contradictory demands and integrate them effectively. If paradoxical leaders demonstrate their techniques for managing paradoxes, followers could get the idea and navigate similar paradoxes in their work. For instance, based on my research findings, how leaders handle the paradox between transparency and confidentiality or innovation and efficiency—provides concrete examples for followers. By demonstrating and sharing their experiences in managing paradoxes, these leaders serve as role models for followers. Through interviews with leaders and followers, my finding shows that followers observe and learn from their leaders' techniques, helping them identify their own strategies to handle contradictory demands. In line with my findings, Knight and Paroutis (2017) suggest that when leaders actively interpret and discuss paradoxes with followers, it enhances the followers' understanding of competing demands, such as the need for both collaboration and competition within the same organisational unit and encourages them to find balanced approaches that suit their specific roles. Yin (2022) also found that paradoxical leaders who openly display their approach to handling paradoxes foster paradoxical thinking among followers. Additionally, my data shows that paradoxical leaders encourage followers to identify their unique, personalised approaches to managing paradoxes. Most prior studies focus on leaders' development, with few indicating that leaders actively encourage their followers to develop personalised and potentially unconventional approaches to managing paradoxes in their roles (Li et al., 2020). Arguably, no research specifically addresses paradoxical leadership from the perspective of followers. My research finding is unique from this perspective. Through empirical data analysis, my research suggests that leaders'

demonstration and sharing of their experiences can be an effective technique for influencing and upskilling followers for paradoxical practices. Future research could explore additional techniques to help followers develop their own strategies for navigating paradoxes.

Having discussed the different ways in which paradoxes are managed, I now turn to the impact of practising paradoxical leadership on leaders, and I consider both its enabling and constraining impact. Data indicates that, within organisational settings, leaders and followers are still in the process of identifying paradoxes in their work and learning how to manage them effectively. Therefore, this section concerning the impact of paradoxical leadership primarily focuses on leaders (the managers interviewed in this research), based on the premise that leaders who are adept at navigating paradoxes can positively influence their followers to do the same. Most research on paradoxical leadership focuses on the overall impact of paradoxical leadership (Rescalvo-Martin et al., 2021; Schneider, Bullinger and Brandl, 2018; Ishaq et al., 2021; Ren and Yang, 2021). While very limited research explores the effects of paradoxical leadership on followers (Chen et al., 2021; Ren and Yang, 2021; Zhang et al., 2024), such research is not entirely non-existent. To my knowledge, how paradoxical leadership affects leaders themselves remains unexplored in the existing literature. This is where my research findings make a significant contribution.

Considering the enabling impact of paradoxical leadership on leaders, empirical evidence from my research indicates that paradoxical leaders have unconventional outlooks on understanding paradoxes, as they frequently display paradoxical thinking. For example, my data shows that they embrace *discomfort as a source of progress*. These leaders tend to reject the desire for stability and comfort for challenges and uncertainty (avoided by many). This tendency is evident from the interviews, as many leaders repeatedly shared such perspectives. This unconventional outlook by the leaders is at the heart of the paradoxical leadership. My data also reveal that these leaders view traditional leadership practices and established norms as unsuitable for challenging and unpredictable situations. This justifies their need to remain open to change, crafting unique solutions tailored to specific circumstances rather than relying on a *one-size-fits-all* approach. The “*both-and*” approach of paradox theory supports this empirical evidence of my thesis. According to leadership scholars, conventional leadership contingency theory suggests that leaders need to make a clear choice between the two options using the “*either-or*” approach, such as opting for control over empowerment (Waldman and Bowen, 2016; Li, She, and Yang, 2018). However, Chen and colleagues (2021) offer a contrasting perspective, arguing that the

“either-or” approach may only be effective in the short term. This could be because, in the long run, a “both-and” approach seems more suitable. My data aligns with the perspective of Chen and colleagues (2021). Based on my finding, when leaders are required to manage paradoxes such as balancing control with empowerment, efficiency with flexibility, and individualism with collectivism, they adopt a “both-and” approach. This approach enables leaders to find a middle ground that integrates both sides of the paradox, resulting in balanced solutions that satisfy all stakeholders. In this way, my research incorporates valuable insights by showing how paradoxical leaders’ unconventional outlook enables them to navigate and manage paradoxes.

Additionally, according to my data, paradoxical leaders seem to view the ongoing experience of managing paradoxes not as a burden, but as an opportunity for personal and professional growth. This finding is supported by Backhaus and colleagues (2022), who argue that paradoxical leadership contributes to personal and organisational growth by enhancing job satisfaction and engagement. Backhaus’s and colleagues’ (2022) study focuses on followers and highlights how paradoxical leaders can positively influence followers by constructively framing paradoxes. My finding aligns with Backhaus’s and colleagues’ (2022) study in the sense that paradoxical leadership contributes to leaders’ personal growth. While professional growth and organisational growth are interlinked—since professional growth contributes to organisational success and a growing organisation often fosters individual development—they focus on different levels of development within the workplace. Professional growth concerns the development of individual leaders and followers, which is the focus of this research, whereas organisational growth relates to the advancement and success of the company as a whole. My data shows that paradoxical leaders see paradoxes as a driving force. Few leader participants think of paradoxes as *fuel* because they gain new insights, strengthen their skills, expand their perspectives, and acquire valuable experiences in the process of managing paradoxes. For instance, they can develop their skills in agility, flexibility, resilience, adaptability and receptiveness to change. Therefore, paradoxical leaders develop their ability to transform stress into positive energy when navigating paradoxes because they have realised that they can gain benefits from managing tensions and contradictions at work, contributing to their personal growth. No research has identified or supported the finding that paradoxical leaders transform stress into constructive energy, making this a unique finding of my research. However, some have shown that practising paradoxical leadership can help develop skills such as resilience, flexibility, agility, and adaptability. For example, Chen et al. (2021) find that leaders who engage in paradoxical

practices demonstrate higher resilience, flexibility, and job performance (Zhang et al., 2021), showcasing their ability to handle competing demands. Similarly, Forbes (2023) argues that paradoxical leaders can balance *contrasting qualities*, such as firmness and flexibility, grit and empathy. The process of dealing with paradoxes not only advances their personal growth but also strengthens their professional maturity. Ultimately, paradoxical leaders come to appreciate and even enjoy the advantages that arise from engaging with paradoxes in their roles, which my research investigates.

Another enabling impact of paradoxical leadership is that leaders develop their ability to anticipate, which helps them manage uncertainty and ambiguity at work. An important question is how they cultivate this anticipatory skill. According to my data, paradoxical leaders can shift their perception of tasks, which helps them anticipate probable tensions. Paradoxical leaders consider all possible aspects of tasks and uncertain situations, prompting leaders to expand their cognitive horizons and deepen their understanding beyond conventional limits. This could be because paradoxical leadership possesses paradoxical thinking, as discussed earlier in this section. Paradoxical studies support this evidence of having paradoxical thinking (Yin, 2022; Sparr, 2018; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Waldman et al., 2019). However, my research goes a step further by identifying the benefits of having paradoxical thinking. One of the benefits appears to be the ability to shift leaders' perception of tasks. The question then arises: how do paradoxical leaders shift their perceptions of tasks? My data shows that leaders with paradoxical thinking often approach uncertainties and competing demands *by questioning entrenched assumptions*. For instance, one leader participant stated that they consider “East, West, North, and South” to address any uncertainties and competing demands. Another leader reveals that they evaluate both positive viewpoints from some followers and opposing viewpoints from others. By considering all perspectives—both positive and negative—these paradoxical leaders gain deeper insights into potential paradoxes and strategies for effective responses. Having these broader perspectives helps paradoxical leaders anticipate probable paradoxical situations. This approach proves particularly useful when dealing with competing demands, as highlighted by the leader participants. Such evidence from my finding illustrates that paradoxical leaders employ a “both-and” approach to reconcile opposites, which allows for integrative solutions instead of viewing decisions as “either-or”. Extant paradoxical scholars also agree with my argument that the “both-and” approach is used by paradoxical leaders instead of “either-or” (van Assen and Caniëls, 2022; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2023; Backhaus et al., 2022). My research finding not only shows that paradoxical leaders

employ a “both-and” approach, as suggested by existing paradox literature, but also explains how they apply this approach in practice, which makes my finding unique.

According to my research findings, paradoxical leaders exhibit a unique ability to regulate their behaviours, thoughts, and emotional responses to address paradoxes, which is one of the important enabling effects of paradoxical leadership. They manage their behaviours by dynamically adjusting their actions to suit the situation. For instance, my data suggests that they exhibit opposing but complementary behaviours, such as being authoritative yet empathetic, and directive yet participative. While they may possess a preferred leadership style, they remain adaptable, modifying their style as circumstances demand. They work as the buffer between followers and top-level leaders, balancing both sides while maintaining a cohesive and harmonious work environment. Supporting my findings, scholars agree that paradoxical leaders maintain balance, flexibility, and adaptability while embracing contradictions (Volk, Waldman and Barnes, 2023; Stynen and Semeijn, 2023; Batool et al., 2023). Additionally, data from my research makes it clear that paradoxical leaders emphasise having control over their own emotional responses and thoughts. As a controlling mechanism, they seem to separate themselves from any professional interactions when necessary, stepping back to address emotional fluctuations. Data indicates that interviewees engage in activities such as taking short breaks, watching movies, or socialising with friends. They deliberately extract themselves from the office environment to create time for pause and recalibration. Another reason for this withdrawal from the professional setting may be their conscious effort to manage their emotional responses and shield their followers from the effects of their stress and heightened pressure. Some leader interviewees mention that they seem to prefer thoughtful reflection over impulsive action when addressing irreconcilable elements in their work. To do this, their strategy seems to involve delaying their response, taking time to reflect and plan constructive, thoughtful responses. Meanwhile, they appear to give themselves time to process situations calmly and strategically, which seems to be their way of managing mixed emotional responses. My finding aligns with Fürstenberg et al.’s (2024) research, which examined paradoxical leaders’ effectiveness based on followers’ cognitive flexibility and self-regulation. However, Fürstenberg and colleagues (2024) focused exclusively on followers and did not explore how self-regulation can be achieved. This is where my research makes a unique contribution by identifying how paradoxical leaders regulate their behaviours, thoughts, and emotional responses.

Following the analysis of the enabling impact of paradoxical leadership, this section shifts focus to the constraining impact of paradoxical leadership on leaders. The findings of my research reveal that practising paradoxical leadership imposes cognitive, psychological, and emotional pressures on leaders, potentially leading to psychological strain. Other researchers agree with the premise that practising paradoxical leadership requires cognitive ability and behavioural integration (Lee et al., 2023; Zhang and Han, 2019; She et al., 2020). These qualities enable leaders to perceive paradoxes not as binary choices but as interconnected dynamics by adopting “both-and” strategies (Smith, Lewis, and Tushman, 2016). Nevertheless, my data reveals that this level of cognitive engagement and emotional regulation for managing multiple paradoxes simultaneously taxes leaders’ mental resources. Indeed, extant research shows leaders with high cognitive ability can handle these increased cognitive loads (Zheng et al., 2020; Zhang and Han, 2019). In contrast, those who lack cognitive ability potentially suffer from increased cognitive loads, which contribute to decision fatigue, mental exhaustion and psychological strain (Zhang et al., 2022; Bashir, 2021). By being unable to handle the increased cognitive loads, leaders find their intrapersonal skills diminishing, including self-control, self-confidence, and self-efficacy. In my research, this point is made evident by an interviewee who recalls their experience of suddenly screaming at their followers in the office and at their children at home, followed by an outburst of crying in the washroom. They also face double-bind situations (Julmi, 2021), where they are forced to choose between two mutually exclusive alternatives (for instance, choosing between family and job), with no possibility of deferring the decision or considering a third alternative. As such, leaders find themselves continuously shifting between unviable options (such as quitting their jobs) and/or feeling trapped. Their self-confidence and self-efficacy gradually decrease. Such circumstances leave little scope for effectively managing paradoxes when constrained by an inherent “neither/nor” logic (Julmi, 2021; Putnam et al., 2016). This heightened psychological strain may negatively impact leaders’ effectiveness and overall well-being (Batool et al., 2023; Julmi, 2021).

Additionally, my data indicates that the fluidity of selfhood in paradoxical leadership might have challenging effects on leaders. Leaders are required to have flexibility and fluidity in their approach so that they can adapt to any situation and manage paradoxes. For example, some (leader) participants claim they would not show their true selves in their workplace. Instead, they alter their actions and behaviours as needed to navigate and resolve paradoxes. Participants further state that their real selfhood is not essential in the workplace. Instead, what matters appeared to be their ability to address the paradoxes inherent in their roles. For

instance, a participant mentions being naturally extroverted. Still, they would adopt a reserved and introverted demeanour in their leadership role because this is how they could manage the paradoxes. However, this participant does not consistently adopt the same behavioural adjustments. This is because the same participant notes the need to adjust their approach and style again in a different way, depending on the specific demands of their work. In a nutshell, the participant appears to adapt their behaviour to the paradoxes they encountered. In light of these findings, it can be said that leaders practising paradoxical leadership exhibit flexibility and fluidity in their selfhood because they continuously alter their selfhood depending on the paradoxes. This alteration becomes an ongoing process for the leaders as “there is no endgame in dealing with the leaders’ paradox” (Routhieaux, 2015, p.254). To the best of my knowledge, no existing studies on paradoxical leadership have explored or analysed this perspective—namely, that paradoxical leaders exhibit *flexibility and fluidity in their selfhood*. This is where my research contributes, offering a new perspective on the paradoxical leadership literature.

While this flexibility and fluidity in leaders’ selfhood may be effective in the short term in building a collaborative, positive and productive workforce, it can lead to challenges over time, which is evident from my research findings. A few participants share that they feel confused and frustrated as they struggle to reconcile their shifting approaches with their core values and sense of self. They perceive a misalignment between their selfhood and their continual behavioural adaptations. Moreover, some comment that this confusion and frustration lead to feelings of instability, self-doubt, and inauthenticity. Leadership scholars, particularly those studying paradoxical leadership, have emphasised and valued the importance of flexibility in leadership styles and approaches (Lee et al., 2023; Baron et al., 2018; Zhang and Han, 2019; Yang et al., 2021). Few researchers connect intra-role conflict with paradoxical leadership and research on identity ambiguity (Karhu and Ritala, 2018, 2020; Routhieaux, 2015). Intra-role conflict is the “conflict derived from differential expectations regarding one particular role” (Routhieaux, 2015, p.253). These extant studies focus on overall organisations (meso level) and how leaders take differential roles and balance their approaches while dealing with different stakeholders (Yang et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2023; Qu et al., 2022). However, the impact on leaders if leaders become flexible and fluid and constantly change their leadership approaches to fulfil the needs of competing demands- has not yet been researched. Therefore, my research provides a unique contribution by highlighting that while flexibility and fluidity in leadership style are essential

for paradoxical leadership and may appear beneficial in the short term, they could pose significant challenges for leaders in the long term.

Moreover, my data show that leaders experience adverse effects on their physical and mental health due to the constant use of their cognitive, psychological, and emotional resources to manage paradoxes. Leader interviewees inform that they stress about work all the time, even when everything is running smoothly. They struggle to balance family and work, and their social lives are negatively affected. For example, many of my research participants mention experiencing frequent health issues such as headaches, elevated blood pressure, and acidity. They also mention difficulties in sleeping, feelings of agitation, and behavioural changes such as crankiness, anger, and outbursts. The persistent stress leaves them restless as they find no solution to their problems. This often leads to anxiety and depression, prompting some to seek counselling. Thus, my empirical evidence suggests that paradoxical leadership places a mental and emotional burden on leaders, which affects their physical health and, over time, could lead to burnout. These findings are in line with some recent research, which broadly explores the undesirable outcomes of paradoxical leadership (Fürstenberg, Booth and Alfes, 2024; Stylen and Semeijn, 2023; Bashir, 2021; Yin, J., 2022; Julmi, 2021). For example, according to Qu et al. (2022) and Schad et al. (2016), paradoxical leadership could be damaging as it may induce cognitive dissonance, often accompanied by increased anxiety and counterproductive defences. Similarly, Julmi (2021) explains that paradoxical leaders encounter double-bind situations, leading to feelings of distress, powerlessness, and helplessness, which contribute to the development of psychopathological symptoms such as stress, anxiety, and behavioural disorders (p.644). Some researchers suggest that paradoxical leadership may lead to stress, anxiety and psychological distress (Batool et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2021), interpersonal conflict and job insecurity (Bashir, 2021; Mahmud et al., 2021), although they have not provided specific reasons to support their argument. To my knowledge, no research has found a direct link between paradoxical leadership and burnout when leaders are unable to manage paradoxes. Therefore, this finding from my research is unique, highlighting the risk of burnout in the long term if leaders continuously face paradoxes without being able to manage them.

5.3.1 Theoretical Contribution

There is a lack of conceptual clarity when it comes to addressing paradox in the extant literature. My research provides valuable insights by clarifying the lexicon used in association with paradoxes. Scholars have used different terms to describe paradoxes, such as “tension”, “contradictions”, “inconsistencies”, “conflicts”, “dialectic”, “dilemma”, “pluralities”, and “dichotomy” (Putnam, Fairhurst and Banghart, 2016; Cunha and Putnam, 2019; Lewis, Andriopoulos and Smith, 2014; Pearce et al., 2019; Schad et al., 2016; Farjoun, 2017; Smith and Tracey, 2016). This diversity in terminology has made the paradox literature more convoluted and ambiguous, and, at times, confusing. This confusion raises the question of how a paradox is distinct from these terms. How do these terms contribute to generating paradoxes? For instance, when tensions, inconsistencies and contradictions can become paradoxes, how can contradictions and/or conflicts give rise to paradoxical situations, how can one determine whether a situation represents a paradox, a mere contradiction, or a conflict? My research is helpful as I have shown evidence of paradoxes emerging from various situations and perspectives. It further explains how tensions, contradictions, conflicts, and uncertainties create paradoxes for organisational actors (organisational actors are leaders and followers in this research). For example, my findings provide evidence of how participants are confronted with contradictory, inconsistent, and competing demands in organisations, which eventually make the situations paradoxical for them. Paradoxical leadership may become easier to understand when these findings are considered as examples and connected to the concept of paradox in existing literature. This is how my research clarifies the lexicon associated with paradoxes and explains how terms such as tensions, conflicts, inconsistencies, and contradictions contribute to their emergence.

Then, there is an ongoing ontological debate about organisational paradoxes (Schad, Lewis, and Smith, 2019; Hahn and Knight, 2021; Cunha and Putnam, 2019). Researchers have taken varied stances on whether organisational paradoxes are built-in features of a system (Smith and Berg, 1987; Cameron and Quinn, 1988) or socially constructed through actors’ cognition and rhetoric (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Schad, Lewis and Smith, 2019; Putnam et al., 2016; Luscher, Lewis and Ingram, 2006; Jarzabkowski and Lê, 2017). According to Smith and Lewis (2011), paradox is *both* an inherent feature of a system and a socially created phenomenon, though they fail to offer a conceptual framework that integrates these perspectives to explain the nature of paradox. Similarly, Hahn and Knight (2021) support *both* perspectives and argue that paradoxes are not pre-existing phenomena, but rather

paradoxes are created and shaped through the actions and interpretations of organisational actors within specific sociomaterial contexts. They also suggest that paradoxes are indeterminate and possess an uncertain, probabilistic quality. While uncertainties are increasingly common in organisations and may give rise to paradoxes, empirical evidence of this research does not consistently support the idea that paradoxes are inherent features of organisational settings. Instead, my empirical analysis suggests that paradoxes and paradoxical tensions are primarily social creations arising from actors' cognition and rhetoric. To add value to this contribution, this research analyses paradoxes through insights drawn from the Global South, highlighting the significant influence of a specific country's culture in creating paradoxes. Along with that, this research identifies how cultural differences between multinational clothing companies and the Bangladeshi context initiate paradoxical situations for their leaders and followers. It offers a differentiating contribution as it explores the connection between culture and paradoxes—an area that has received limited attention in existing literature. Therefore, these contributions are essential for having greater conceptual and ontological clarity regarding paradoxes across diverse contexts.

Furthermore, this research enriches the leadership and paradox literature by focusing on the unique dynamics of the Global South. It contributes to a more nuanced understanding of leadership and paradoxes, challenging dominant Western-centric assumptions. While paradoxes and paradoxical leadership have been widely studied in Western contexts, my findings show that the Global South presents distinct conditions where paradoxes not only emerge but are experienced with greater intensity. In the Global South, particularly in Bangladesh, systemic precarity, economic instability, and cultural expectations create environments in which individuals are more vulnerable to paradox. Organisational leaders are often required to enact paradoxical leadership to manage these competing tensions under far more constrained and volatile conditions than those in Western contexts. This context-sensitive understanding highlights how leadership and paradox are experienced differently outside the Global North, offering a critical contribution to the literature by challenging dominant Western assumptions.

Moreover, this research contributes to paradox theory by offering unique insights into the cyclical and dynamic processes through which paradoxes are managed. Paradox theory focuses on understanding paradoxes as contradictory yet interconnected demands that persist over time, as well as ways for addressing paradoxical tensions (Molecke, Hahn, and Pinkse, 2024; Cunha and Putnam, 2019; Zhang et al., 2024). It provides a dynamic framework that

balances opposing forces while leveraging the tension between them, enabling them to adapt and thrive. Emphasising a “both-and” approach, it asserts that paradoxes cannot be solved but managed. Building on this foundation, my research findings enrich the understanding of paradox theory by applying paradox perspectives. This is evident from the research findings, which show that when paradoxical situations arise, leaders and followers manage the paradoxes rather than attempting to solve them. In doing so, my research identifies that paradoxical situations in organisational settings can be managed using a “both-and” strategy, which is derived from paradox theory.

5.3.2 Practical Contribution

My understanding of paradox and paradoxical leadership stems from their definitions and previous research findings related to these topics. While the concept of “paradox” has been broadly analysed in the domains of organisational theory and management studies, such knowledge alone is insufficient for managing paradoxes in organisational settings. Leaders and followers are required to recognise and understand the paradoxes in order to manage them efficiently. In this regard, this research is essential as it identifies the perceived sources of paradoxes by analysing the empirical evidence. By utilising these perceived paradox sources, leaders and followers can recognise paradoxes in their organisational settings. They can see some real examples where they can understand how paradoxical situations emerge, which is the initial step of navigating paradoxes. Moreover, my research analyses how a specific culture can create paradoxes for organisational leaders and followers. My focus has been on multinational clothing companies operating in Bangladesh, where I explore how paradoxes arise within that unique cultural context. The unique Bangladeshi culture appears to play an influential role in creating paradoxical situations for its leaders and followers. In addition to that, the differences between the cultures of multinational clothing companies and Bangladeshi cultures contribute to these paradoxical situations. Thus, it can be said that culture seems to generate paradoxes for leaders and followers. This is unsurprising, considering that the nature of paradox is inherently subjective and indeterminate.

This research provides insights into how leaders and followers manage paradoxes. While numerous studies suggest that leaders and followers need to manage paradoxes (Fürstenberg, Booth, and Alfes, 2024; Karhu and Ritala, 2020; Zhang et al., 2024), the question of how to do so remains underexplored. My research addresses this gap and, in doing so, it offers guidance to both leaders and followers. For instance, it suggests that adopting paradoxical

thinking can help leaders and followers to navigate paradoxes. Open communication also plays a vital role in managing paradoxes, enabling leaders and followers to discuss dilemmas and issues they face. Instead of stifling thought, such discussions encourage brainstorming and help them identify effective solutions. Additionally, they can develop skills, particularly flexibility, adaptability, and openness, to navigate paradoxes. These skills are identified from the responses of the participants. Along with that, leaders and followers need to communicate skilfully. Communication is challenging yet essential, as it holds the power to both generate and resolve paradoxes, thus emphasising the need for skilful communication. Another way to manage paradoxes is by *learning by seeing*. Leaders can demonstrate paradoxical leadership, providing followers with practical examples and hands-on experiences of how paradoxes can be recognised and managed. Through these ways, leaders and followers can better manage paradoxes in organisational contexts.

Finally, this research reveals the effects of paradoxical leadership on leaders, encompassing both its enabling and constraining effects. These insights can help leaders practise paradoxical leadership more consciously. By leveraging the enabling effects, leaders can enhance their paradoxical leadership behaviours. For example, paradoxical leaders excel in managing their behaviours, thoughts, and emotions. They are also adept at anticipating uncertainties, enabling them to consider potential ways to manage paradoxes. They view tensions, inconsistencies, and contradictions as opportunities for learning and development. However, leaders must also be mindful of the constraining effects of paradoxical leadership. This leadership style can place a significant burden on leaders, potentially leading to psychological strain. Such strain may have detrimental effects on their physical and mental health. If leaders cannot manage the psychological stress over time, it can negatively impact their intrapersonal skills, including self-control, self-confidence, and self-efficacy. Paradoxical leaders may lose touch with their own selves as they adjust and change their behaviour and style differently in different situations.

Chapter Summary

This chapter elucidates the key insights derived from the empirical findings of my research and examines their relationship to the literature reviewed in preceding chapters and extant studies. Employing paradox theory as a theoretical lens, my research investigates various instances of paradoxical leadership within organisational contexts.

This chapter addresses the findings related to the first sub-research question: how do leaders and followers make sense of paradox in their work? It identifies the perceived sources of paradoxes for both leaders and followers. The discussion then considers the contextual factors of paradoxical leadership, particularly in the Global South, providing new insights into regions such as Asia. The findings and discussion underscore the significant influence of cultural factors on the emergence of paradoxes. By shedding light on this perspective, my research contributes to expanding the literature on paradoxical leadership, offering new insights into the interplay between paradoxes and paradoxical leadership.

Subsequently, this chapter discusses the findings concerning the second sub-research question: how do leaders and followers navigate paradoxes simultaneously? It advances the understanding of how leaders and followers experience and respond to paradoxes, highlighting several potential ways for managing them. This reinforces the core premise of paradox theory—that contradictions are persistent and must be actively managed rather than eliminated. The discussion then explores the impact of paradoxical leadership on leaders, considering both its enabling and constraining effects. Ultimately, by exploring these two sub-research questions, my study addresses the main question: What are the real-world applications of paradox theory through paradoxical leadership?

Finally, this chapter outlines the theoretical and practical contributions that aim to bridge the gap between theoretical perspectives and the practical challenges of paradoxical leadership. The next chapter, however, concludes my research by acknowledging its limitations and suggesting directions for further research.

6. Conclusion

Chapter Overview

The previous chapter thoroughly discusses the two sub-research questions based on the empirical evidence of my research, aiming to address the main research question. This is the concluding chapter, which starts by discussing the limitations of my research. Similar to other studies, this research faces its own set of limitations. Following this, the chapter outlines directions for future research, suggesting areas that could further expand the theoretical and practical implications of paradoxical leadership. Finally, it provides an overall summary to conclude my thesis, highlighting how the findings contribute to understanding paradoxical leadership.

6.1 Research Limitations

This research aims to understand paradoxical leadership by employing paradox theory as a theoretical lens. Accordingly, it focuses on two main areas: how leaders and followers make sense of paradoxes in their work and how they manage them. To meet the aims of this research, specific methodological choices are implemented. While researching paradoxes offers valuable insights into dynamic and multifaceted organisational phenomena, it is accompanied by some inherent limitations.

An inherent limitation of researching paradoxes lies in the field itself, as paradoxes are uniquely tied to their specific contexts. The nature of paradox as a field presents its own set of challenges and constraints. Paradoxes are inherently unique, as they are highly context-dependent and may manifest differently across organisations, industries, and cultural settings. Their fluid and dynamic nature means that paradoxical tensions are often shaped by organisational actors, organisational structures, leadership styles, situational factors, and cultural norms, making them difficult to standardise or compare across different settings. This variability makes it difficult to establish universally applicable conclusions, thereby limiting the generalisability of findings beyond the specific context under investigation. As a result, paradox research often requires a nuanced, context-specific approach, making the field itself a limitation for paradoxical researchers. This inherent intricacy and uniqueness necessitate continuous exploration and adaptation of theoretical and practical approaches to ensure their relevance across diverse contexts. Therefore, it is challenging to apply findings

from one context to another. For example, my findings are deeply rooted in the specific context of multinational clothing companies operating in Bangladesh. The unique contextual factors inherent to this setting pose challenges in replicating this research or directly applying its findings to other settings, such as different participant groups, companies, industries or countries.

Another limitation concerns the role of culture in shaping paradoxes. The findings of this research suggest that culture is an important source of paradoxical tensions for leaders and followers in organisations. Culture not only creates these tensions but also influences how leaders and followers navigate and manage them. This influence becomes particularly significant in multinational organisations, where leaders and followers navigate differences between the host country's culture and the parent company's culture. These cultural dynamics shape leaders' and followers' experiences of paradoxes in ways that this research does not fully explore, as they fall beyond its scope. However, recognising this limitation highlights an important avenue for future research, particularly in understanding how cultural factors contribute to the creation and management of paradoxes in global work environments.

6.2 Future Research

This research explores multinational clothing companies operating in Bangladesh, investigating the emergence of paradoxes within the country's context. The cultural context of Bangladesh seems to contribute to the creation of paradoxical situations for leaders and followers. Multinational clothing companies also have their own corporate culture inherited from their parent companies. Empirical evidence highlights some noteworthy differences between the two cultures: one from the Bangladeshi cultural context and the other from the parent companies' culture. As a consequence of these cultural variations within a single organisation, leaders and followers face competing demands as they need to balance between these two different cultures. Therefore, it is worth analysing the connectivity of paradoxes with culture in the future. Bangladesh is considered a representative country within the South Asian region while doing this research, providing valuable insights into paradoxes from the Global South. These findings draw attention to paradoxes that may be similar, less apparent, or different in other South Asian countries and the Global North. This emphasises the necessity for further research to investigate the influence of specific cultural contexts when analysing paradoxes. For instance, a comparative study could be considered in the future to

explore these differences across cultures, thereby offering a wider understanding of how paradoxes are perceived and managed in varying cultural settings.

Additionally, I chose the clothing industry as the context for this research, as this industry is a major contributor to Bangladesh's economy and stands as the world's third-largest exporter of readymade garments (World Trade Organization, 2023). This industry's prominence, combined with its intense and highly competitive nature, makes it a relevant context for analysing the paradoxical leadership dynamics. However, the insights that emerge from this research may not be universally applicable across all industries in Bangladesh, as paradoxes may manifest differently across industries. Therefore, future research could explore paradoxical tensions in other industries in Bangladesh to assess how industry-specific factors shape the experience and management of paradoxical tensions. Such investigations could enhance our understanding of the broader applicability of paradoxical leadership across diverse business contexts.

Furthermore, this research uncovers several emergent findings that have not been thoroughly investigated, as they fell outside the scope of this research. However, these findings may provide useful perspectives for further research. For example, while analysing the constraining impact of paradoxical leadership on leaders, a few participants indicate burnout as a potential long-term consequence, especially when leaders are unable to recognise and accept paradoxes in their situations. There is no research indicating that burnout could be a long-term constraining impact of paradoxical leadership. Therefore, this finding requires further exploration to better understand the possible drawbacks associated with the paradoxical leadership approach. Moreover, this thesis focuses solely on leaders when analysing the impact of paradoxical leadership. Future studies may incorporate followers to provide a more comprehensive understanding of its overall impact.

In terms of managing paradoxes, my research identifies several ways through empirical data analysis. For instance, leaders and followers can manage paradoxes by adopting paradoxical thinking and communicating skilfully. Flexibility, adaptability, and openness are also important for navigating paradoxes. Organisations can foster an open environment where leaders and followers can discuss the paradoxes they encounter; through these discussions, they might generate ideas to manage the paradoxes. Leaders' demonstration and sharing of their experiences can be an effective technique for influencing and upskilling followers in paradoxical practices. Apart from these strategies, there may be alternative approaches to

managing paradoxes. Future research could investigate additional techniques to help leaders and followers identify their own strategies for navigating paradoxes.

6.3 Research Summary

This research analyses the role of paradoxical leadership in influencing followers to deal with paradoxes, shedding light on how leaders navigate paradoxes inherent in organisational settings. Paradoxical leadership, which requires balancing competing demands simultaneously, is increasingly essential in today's challenging and dynamic work environments. This research contributes to understanding both paradoxes and paradoxical leadership by analysing how leaders and followers make sense of and navigate these paradoxes in their organisational settings.

To analyse paradoxical leadership, I drew on paradox theory. Paradox theory represents the persistent nature of contradictions within organisations, asserting that these tensions cannot be resolved but must be managed. Traditional leadership theories often assume that tensions can be minimised or reconciled through an “either-or” approach. However, paradox theory provides a more nuanced perspective, arguing that organisational tensions—such as balancing steadiness with transformation, maintaining authority alongside autonomy, or achieving short-term goals with long-term objectives—are interdependent and can be navigated concurrently by a “both-and” approach. By employing paradox theory, this research illustrates how leaders and followers engage with competing demands and leverage them rather than seeing them as problems to be solved.

This is qualitative research, where I conduct 35 in-depth semi-structured interviews with leaders and followers in four multinational clothing companies operating in Bangladesh. This research explores the main research question: What are the global applications of paradox theory through paradoxical leadership? To analyse this main research question, this research addresses two sub-research questions: how leaders and followers make sense of and navigate paradoxes in their work. Following these sub-research questions, findings and discussion are structured. While analysing the question “How do leaders and followers make sense of paradoxes in their work?”, the research findings identify several perceived sources of paradoxes within organisational settings, such as contradictory demands from different stakeholders, competition among host countries' offices, leaders' inconsistent and contradictory behaviours towards their followers, organisations' competing goals and

priorities, and stakeholders' conflicting perceptions. In addition to these findings, another significant finding from this research is the role of cultural and contextual factors in forming paradoxes. The focus of this research on the Global South provides valuable perspectives on how paradoxes manifest in different cultural contexts, particularly in Bangladesh. For instance, the Bangladeshi "yes" organisational culture, leaders' overbearing behaviour with their followers, performance-driven work culture with low or zero tolerance for mistakes, and lack of autonomy with an expectation of innovation create paradoxes for its leaders and followers. By incorporating Bangladeshi cultural and contextual factors, this research contributes to the broader discourse on paradoxical leadership by highlighting its contextual richness.

Then, this research addresses the second research question: How do leaders and followers navigate paradoxes simultaneously? This research identifies some ways to manage paradoxes based on the empirical evidence of this research. For instance, the findings of this research suggest that leaders who embrace paradoxical thinking are better equipped to recognise and manage paradoxes. Paradoxical leaders who acknowledge and accept paradoxes rather than attempting to eliminate them demonstrate their ways and share their experiences with their followers to encourage followers to actively search for and deal with paradoxes. This research also identifies that if organisations can foster open communication, then leaders and followers are better equipped to discuss and navigate paradoxes. Skilful communication can be one of the ways of managing paradoxes. Empirical findings of this research highlight that flexibility, adaptability and openness are required skills for managing paradoxes.

In addition to exploring how leaders and followers manage paradoxes, this research also analyses the impact of paradoxical leadership on leaders. The findings suggest that paradoxical leadership has both enabling and constraining effects. On the one hand, leaders who effectively manage paradoxes foster a culture of learning, adaptability, and resilience. They create work environments where contradictions are seen as opportunities for growth rather than as obstacles. Paradoxical leaders can regulate their behaviours, thoughts, and emotional responses in a productive way. They can better anticipate uncertainty by considering the "both-and" approach. On the other hand, the constant navigation of paradoxes can create cognitive strain and emotional exhaustion. Leaders might face challenges as they act contrary to their own selfhood. The challenge of balancing competing demands can be overwhelming, especially when leaders receive conflicting expectations

from different stakeholders. Therefore, understanding these enabling and constraining effects is crucial for navigating paradoxes.

This research enriches both theoretical understanding and practical application. From a theoretical standpoint, this research contributes to paradox theory by clarifying the lexicon used to conceptualise and address paradoxes. Paradoxes can be more readily recognised through the insights provided by this research. In addition, this research analyses paradoxes through insights drawn from the Global South, emphasising how a country's culture significantly contributes to the formation of paradoxes. By exploring the intersection of culture and paradoxes—an aspect that has been largely overlooked in existing literature—this research offers a unique contribution to the field. It reinforces the relevance of paradox theory in paradoxical leadership research by demonstrating how paradoxes are embedded in organisational life. It challenges traditional leadership approaches that assume contradictions can be resolved through trade-offs and instead advocates for an approach that embraces both sides of the tension, avoids trade-offs, and leverages the tension for organisational success. By highlighting the interplay between paradoxes and paradoxical leadership, this research enriches the existing literature on paradoxical leadership and organisational paradoxes. This research further enriches paradox theory by uncovering the dynamic and cyclical processes through which paradoxes are managed.

These findings highlight that paradoxical leadership is not merely theoretical but a practical and essential leadership approach in modern organisations. From a practical perspective, this research provides actionable insights for leaders and followers seeking to navigate paradoxes in their organisations. It underscores the importance of having paradoxical thinking, which enables leaders and followers to constructively recognise and engage with contradictions. Additionally, organisations can benefit from fostering a culture of open communication that supports paradoxical thinking at all levels, encouraging leaders and followers to view tensions as opportunities for innovation rather than as barriers to progress.

Overall, this research shows that paradoxical leadership, when viewed through the lens of paradox theory, offers a powerful framework for understanding and managing contradictions in organisational settings. By embracing paradoxes rather than attempting to resolve them, leaders and followers can enhance adaptability, innovation, and resilience within their organisations. While paradoxical leadership presents challenges, it also provides opportunities for growth and transformation. As organisations continue to face increasing

contradictory demands and uncertainty, the ability to navigate paradoxes effectively remains a crucial leadership competency. Future research should continue to explore this evolving field, deepening our understanding of how leaders and followers can harness the power of paradox to drive organisational success.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Semi-Structured Interview Guides

1. Interview Guide for Managers

Name of the participant:

Gender:

Years of work experience:

Name of the Organisation:

Department:

Number of team members:

Place of the interview:

Interview date:

Script prior to interview:

I would like to thank you once again for being willing to participate in the interview for my research. As I have mentioned to you before, my research is “The Role of Paradoxical Leadership in Influencing Followers to Deal with Multiple Contradictory Demands”. This research will analyse paradoxical leadership. The influence of paradoxical leadership on leaders and followers will be explored, where leaders and followers will understand how to manage multiple contradictory demands. This research will provide insights regarding paradoxes and paradoxical leadership, which will provide practical recommendations for the future.

Our interview today will last approximately one hour. You have read the Participant Information Sheet and Privacy Notice. Also, you have completed a consent form indicating that I have your permission to audio record our conversation. Are you still ok with me recording our conversation today? ___ Yes ___ No

If yes, Thank you! Please let me know if, at any point, you want me to turn off the recorder or keep something you said off the record. If not, Thank you for letting me know. I will only take notes of our conversation. Before we begin the interview, do you have any questions? [Discuss questions] If any questions (or other questions) arise at any

point in this study, you can feel free to ask them at any time. I would be more than happy to answer your questions.

SL	Manager
1	Tell me about your role and how long you have been working here.
2	Could you describe your leadership style? Could you please give me any examples of where this works well?
3	How do you think you manage challenging organisational situations? Can you give me some examples of these challenging situations, the reasons behind these challenges, and how you have managed them?
4	In my research, I distinguish between organisational tensions and organisational contradiction. In a nutshell, organisational tensions are.... and organisational contradiction is.... Please keep this distinction in mind for the next two questions. How do you think you manage organisational tensions?
5	To what extent can you manage organisational tensions?
6	Could you think of a situation where you think you were unable to handle an organisational tension? Why do you face difficulties in handling the tension that you mentioned?
7	How do you engage and motivate your team members? Could you give me any examples?
8	How do you encourage your team members to actively search for and manage organisational tensions?
9	What is the impact of responding to organisational tensions on you?
10	In what ways do you think that organisational tensions influence your leadership styles? Does this involve training (coaching/mentoring) opportunities being available to you?
11	Are there any more issues about managing tensions that you want to share?

Before we conclude this interview, is there something about your experience in this organisation that you think influences your paradoxical leadership style that we have not yet had a chance to discuss? If yes, please get in touch with me any time after the interview. If no, Thank you so much for your time and participation.

2. Interview Guide for Team Members

Name of the participant:

Gender:

Years of work experience:

Name of the Organisation:

Department:

Place of the interview:

Interview date:

Script prior to interview:

I would like to thank you once again for being willing to participate in the interview for my research. As I have mentioned to you before, my research is “The Role of Paradoxical Leadership in Influencing Followers to Deal with Multiple Contradictory Demands”. This research will analyse paradoxical leadership. The influence of paradoxical leadership on leaders and followers will be explored, where leaders and followers will understand how to manage multiple contradictory demands. This research will provide insights regarding paradoxes and paradoxical leadership, which will provide practical recommendations for the future.

Our interview today will last approximately one hour. You have read the Participant Information Sheet and Privacy Notice. Also, you have completed a consent form indicating that I have your permission to audio record our conversation. Are you still ok with me recording our conversation today? ___Yes ___No

If yes, Thank you! Please let me know if, at any point, you want me to turn off the recorder or keep something you said off the record. If not, Thank you for letting me know. I will only take notes of our conversation. Before we begin the interview, do you have any questions? [Discuss questions] If any questions (or other questions) arise at any point in this study, you can feel free to ask them at any time. I would be more than happy to answer your questions.

SL	Team Member
1	Tell me about your role and how long you have been working.
2	How do you think you manage challenging organisational situations? Can you give me some examples of these challenging situations, the reasons behind these challenges, and how you have managed them?
3	In my research, I distinguish between organisational tensions and organisational contradiction. In a nutshell, organisational tensions are.... and organisational contradiction is.... Please keep this distinction in mind for the next two questions. How do you think you manage organisational tensions? Can you think of an example?
4	Could you think of a situation where you think you were unable to handle an organisational tension? Why do you think you faced difficulties there?
5	How does your manager engage and motivate you to actively search for and manage organisational tensions? Can you explain by giving any examples?
6	What is the impact responding to organisational tensions have on you?
7	Do you feel supported by your manager while handling organisational tensions? If the answer is yes: Can you elaborate on this, at all?
8	Are there any occasions when you felt that your manager's leadership was poor in managing organisational tensions? How did you behave in that situation? How did you handle it?
9	Can you think of any ways in which you might be able to give feedback to your manager on their leadership?
10	Are there any more issues about managing tensions at work that you might like to share?

Before we conclude this interview, is there something about your experience in this organisation that you think influences your paradoxical leadership style that we have not yet had a chance to discuss? If yes, please get in touch with me any time after the interview. If no, Thank you so much for your time and participation.

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet



Participant Information Sheet

Research Title:

The Role of Paradoxical Leadership in Influencing Followers to Deal with Multiple Contradictory Demands

Researcher:

Tasfia Mazid

Invitation to take part:

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take some time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

What is the purpose of the research?

This research is an embedded case study that aims to analyse paradoxical leadership. The influence of paradoxical leadership on leaders and followers will be explored, where leaders and followers will understand how to manage multiple contradictory demands. This research will provide insights regarding paradoxes and paradoxical leadership, which will provide practical recommendations for the future.

Who is doing this research?

This research is being undertaken by the researcher, who is a PhD student at the University of Glasgow. It is funded by the University of Glasgow.

Do I have to take part?

No, participation is entirely voluntary, and consent can be withdrawn at any point.

What will I be asked to do?

Participants will be asked questions regarding leadership. Each interview will take approx. 1 hour to 1.5 hours to complete.

Are there any direct benefits to me of taking part?

At the request of the researcher, you can gain insight into paradoxical leadership, which can be helpful for leadership development.

What are the possible disadvantages (or risks) of taking part?

It is extremely unlikely that this research will distress participants.

Can I withdraw from the research, and what will happen if I withdraw?

Yes, you have the right to withdraw at any time without prejudice to your job or well-being, and you can do so without providing a reason. If you withdraw from the research, your personal data will be deleted; however, your research data will be retained and made anonymous.

Will I receive any expenses or payments?

No.

Will my taking part or not taking part affect my career?

Participants will be guaranteed that participation will only be undertaken with their informed consent in order to mitigate the concern related to work impact. This research has no involvement with their job, line management and organisational process structure.

Who do I contact if I have any questions?

Name: Tasfia Mazid

Telephone: xxxxxxxxxxxx

Email: t.mazid.1@research.gla.ac.uk

Who do I contact if I have a complaint?

1. If you feel that you can report the complaint to the researcher, you are encouraged to do so.
2. If you feel that you would prefer to approach the issue externally, you are encouraged to inform the University of Glasgow's ethics officer.

University of Glasgow, College of Social Sciences, Lead for ethical review.

Contact in the event of any complaint regarding the conduct of the research.

Name: Dr Susan Batchelor

Address: University of Glasgow, University Avenue, Glasgow, G12 8QQ

Telephone: 0141 330 2000

Email: socsci-ethics-lead@glasgow.ac.uk

Will my records be kept confidential?

Yes. Your records will be kept confidential. Data will be managed in accordance with the Data Protection Act 2018.

Personal information. This will be held on an encrypted and password-protected file, accessible only to the researcher. This data will be destroyed upon completion of the research. You have the right to access your records at any time and to ask for them to be destroyed. Any measurements made during this research will remain confidential. The data you provide will be used as part of a PhD thesis, publication within articles and conference papers.

When this research is complete, data from this research will be de-identified to make data anonymous. It will be impossible for data in this form to be linked to you. Anonymised data from this research could be used for future ethically approved research to answer approved research questions that have not been included in this application.

Research data will always remain confidential. Research anonymous electronic data will be stored on the University One Drive during the research and on the Enlighten: Research Data and the University's research data repository for 10 years on completion of the research. A data retention schedule will be applied to the data and will be activated upon completion of the research. If the research is terminated, the records will be destroyed after 6 months.

Limitation to Confidentiality

Confidentiality may be limited and conditional – and the researcher has a duty of care to report to the relevant authority's possible harm/danger to the participant or others.

Please note that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. In such cases, the University may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.

Who has reviewed the study?

This research has been considered and approved by the College of Social Science Research Ethics Committee.

_____End of Participant Information Sheet_____

Appendix 3: Consent Form



Consent Form

Title of Project: The Role of Paradoxical Leadership in Influencing Followers to Deal with Multiple Contradictory Demands

Name of Researcher: Tasfia Mazid

Basic consent clauses, statement format

I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.

Confidentiality/anonymity clauses

I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonyms.

I acknowledge that participants will be identified by name in any publications arising from the research.

Where dependent relationship exists

I acknowledge that there will be no effect on my grades/employment arising from my participation or non-participation in this research.

Clauses relating to data usage and storage

- ♦ All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised.
- ♦ The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.
- ♦ The material will be destroyed once the project is complete.
- ♦ The material will be retained in secure storage for use in future academic research.
- ♦ The material may be used in future publications, both print and online.
- ♦ I agree to waive my copyright to any data collected as part of this project.
- ♦ I understand that other authenticated researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.
- ♦ I understand that other authenticated researchers may use my words in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.

Refer to the Privacy Notice in relation to the processing of personal data.

I acknowledge the provision of a Privacy Notice in relation to this research project.

Consent on method clause

I consent to interviews being audio-recorded.

Consent clause, agreement format

I agree to take part in this research study ☐

I do not agree to take part in this research study ☐

Name of Participant Signature

Date

Name of ResearcherTasfia Mazid...

Signature

Date

..... End of Consent Form

Appendix 4: Participants List

Participant Number	Role in Organisation	Managerial Status	Participant's Role in My Thesis
1	Manager	Managerial	Leader
2	Manager	Managerial	Leader
3	Manager	Managerial	Leader
4	Manager	Managerial	Leader
5	Team Member	Non-Managerial	Follower
6	Manager	Managerial	Leader
7	Manager	Managerial	Leader
8	Manager	Managerial	Leader
9	Manager	Managerial	Leader
10	Manager	Managerial	Leader
11	Manager	Managerial	Leader
12	Team Member	Non-Managerial	Follower
13	Manager	Managerial	Leader
14	Manager	Managerial	Leader
15	Manager	Managerial	Leader
16	Team Member	Non-Managerial	Follower
17	Team Member	Non-Managerial	Follower
18	Manager	Managerial	Leader
19	Team Member	Non-Managerial	Follower
20	Team Member	Non-Managerial	Follower
21	Manager	Managerial	Leader
22	Team Member	Non-Managerial	Follower
23	Manager	Managerial	Leader
24	Manager	Managerial	Leader
25	Manager	Managerial	Leader
26	Manager	Managerial	Leader
27	Team Member	Non-Managerial	Follower
28	Team Member	Non-Managerial	Follower
29	Manager	Managerial	Leader
30	Team Member	Non-Managerial	Follower
31	Team Member	Non-Managerial	Follower
32	Team Member	Non-Managerial	Follower
33	Team Member	Non-Managerial	Follower
34	Team Member	Non-Managerial	Follower
35	Team Member	Non-Managerial	Follower

Appendix 5: Examples of the Coding Process in Thematic Analysis:

Data Extract (Participants' Quote)	First-Order Codes	Second-Order Codes	Data themes/ Sub-themes	Main themes (aligned with research questions)
<i>"I have employees from three generations reporting to me: the elderly, Millennials, and Generation Z. I allow flexible work arrangements for colleagues who have children or caregiver responsibilities at home. For example, one of my colleagues needs to drop their child off at school in the morning, so they choose to come to the office at 10 AM and leave at 6 PM. Our regular office hours are 9 AM to 5 PM. Another colleague needs to look after their sick father, so I allow them to work from home two days a week. Now, my colleagues from Generation Z (who have no children or caregiver responsibilities at home at this moment) have also chosen flexible work hours and sometimes work from home, seeing that I have allowed others to do the same. Therefore, I have to explain to them the reasons behind this flexibility and enforce strict rules for Generation Z, as they do not always ask for my permission."</i>	Stakeholders' intention to take undue advantage	Managing different stakeholders' expectations	Perceived sources of paradox	Making sense of paradox
<i>"I want to hire a merchandiser to join my team. An important stakeholder is insisting that I hire their brother-in-law for that position. By seeing the CV, I can tell from my experience that the candidate does not meet our criteria. To give the benefit of the doubt and show respect to the stakeholder's request, we (the HR team and I) interviewed the candidate. The candidate's performance was not up to the mark. As a result, the candidate did not qualify for the interview process. So, there is no question</i>	The exploitation of power or position by stakeholders to fulfil their interests			

<i>of hiring this candidate. I have not yet conveyed this information to the stakeholder. I am sure that the stakeholder is going to be very disappointed with our decision. I am in a dilemma about how to handle this situation.”</i>				
<i>“When there is an event like New Years or International Women’s Day, an unspoken competition arises between South Asian countries. For instance, Bangladesh competes against India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Offices in these countries strive to make a good impression on the head office. Therefore, we emphasise these sorts of events. We aim to be the first to present something new to the head office. We have to hold up the name that “Bangladesh is doing...”. This creates unnecessary pressure and stress. I remember spending three days on a presentation slide for an International Women’s Day celebration. I had to consult with our country head (the head of the Bangladesh office) for even the smallest detail. This was incredibly time-consuming, but I was energised as I got to work directly with the country head. I could not concentrate on my regular work until the event was over. Immediately after that event, my manager, who knew I was occupied with the event work, called me and asked me about my deliverables. When I said I could not manage my workload, they told me I needed to learn multitasking. Later that month, I also received feedback from my manager stating that my monthly performance report did not meet the benchmark. They reminded me of the important tasks I had missed during the time of the event. My manager always says we must reduce stress and improve work-life balance. Is this their way of reducing stress?”</i>	Multinational companies create competition among their host country offices through various events	Competition among host countries’ offices		
<i>“My manager always encourages me to give them constructive feedback. So, I have given them constructive feedback about an issue. After that, my manager starts to act differently. They remain agitated with me. They do not want to listen to the problems I face in the office. If anything goes wrong, they scold me. I think that they do not like that I have given them constructive feedback.”</i>	Seek constructive feedback and respond inappropriately	Leaders’ contradictory behaviours		

	when receiving it			
<i>"I am very transparent with my team members because I believe transparency builds trust, and trust can conquer any challenges. I inform them of all the potential difficulties I foresee and share my expectations with them. This approach seems to be working well with my team, and my team members seem very happy. However, I received feedback from my manager that I lack strategic control, and I need to learn how to hold back critical information."</i>	Balance transparency with discretion			
<i>"In my view, I am certain that I can manage all situations. If you ask my manager the same question, they probably have a different view and might say that I take a lot of time or that I handle situations very quickly. My manager is equally certain about their view. We both think we are right, even though our views are opposite. So, there is no benchmark. It is all about how individuals see things."</i>	The subjectivity of individuals' perception	Consequences of paradoxical perceptions		
<i>"Our leaders set clear, long-term goals to provide direction and focus for their teams. However, after four months, the goals are reviewed for various reasons. It could be due to an economic crisis, or perhaps the organisation believes they can achieve the goal because they have capable resources, or it could be the opposite. Whatever the reason, it is common practice for organisations to change their goals frequently to deal with uncertainty. Organisations cannot always stick to their initial goals. This is why long-term planning seems unnecessary now. I do not think about my objectives because they do not seem to matter. Whatever I do today, my manager might say tomorrow that "it is not required now, things have changed".</i>	Organisations change their goals on a quarterly basis	Competing goals and priorities		
<i>"My manager asks me about the task and whether I can do it. Sounds nice, right? Generally, we can say "I can, or I cannot". But in our work culture, we cannot utter the word – "I cannot" to our manager. As a result, I say "I can", even though I know that I cannot complete the task. Later on, when I fail to complete the task, my manager asks, "Why did you take on this task</i>	Bangladeshi organisations' having "yes" culture	Pressure to conform	Paradoxical Reflexivity: Insights from the	

<i>if you could not do it?” Once, I said “no” to my manager. I said, “I do not think I can do this task.” Their response was not positive towards me. Then, I understood that I should not say “no” to my manager, even if I have the option to decline. Weird, right? (Laughs out loud).</i>			Global South	
<i>“My manager transferred me to Chattogram without informing me. I said I could not go because my child was only four months old. After many meetings, he said okay, but insisted that I go to Narayanganj instead. Then, I told him that it was not logical for me to travel 3-6 hours daily. After 2-3 days of heated discussions, he told me to resign. I was given a three-month notice period, and I resigned. My manager put me in a situation where I had to choose between my family and my job. Choosing family means losing the job, while choosing the job jeopardises my responsibilities toward my infant. It was such a horrible time for me!”</i>	Leaders’ overbearing behaviours towards followers	Leaders’ behaviour		
<i>“Top management is constantly eager to evolve. That’s why my manager always asks for innovation. ‘What is new? What is next?’ - these are their burning questions. However, I wonder how I can be innovative if I am always preoccupied with securing my job.”</i>	Innovation demands under fear of failure and job insecurity	Low tolerance of mistakes and fear of losing a job		
<i>“As we are a high-end fashion company, top management from our German office wants top-notch fashion designs from my team in Bangladesh. To fulfil this requirement, I need to recruit talented candidates from the market. However, I received a salary budget from the German office that did not even meet the market benchmark. My German manager told me that I could make the hiring decision. How can I hire highly skilled employees with such a low budget? High skills typically command a higher salary. This is absurd.”</i>	Head offices provide restricted autonomy to host countries’ offices	Lack of autonomy		
<i>“I just came to the office, and my manager called me to have a meeting. I thought it may be due to some work. However, my manager informed me that I had been transferred to another department, reporting to Mr. X, with immediate effect. I felt astonished. I was becoming comfortable in my work and feeling relaxed. Then, suddenly, a total change in my role and work made</i>	Unexpected role change (internal transfer) affecting	Fear of departmental change		

<i>me feel completely unsettled and insecure. But strangely, in this moment of complete insecurity, I have never felt more certain about my abilities.”</i>	employee stability			
<i>“I like being disciplined. I try to ensure that all processes, from sourcing materials to delivering finished products, are properly planned and implemented in accordance with the established plan. However, I am open to experimenting with new materials, such as eco-friendly fabrics, and adopting innovative production techniques to stay ahead of the competition. For instance, I have included a new supplier in our list who provides recycled materials. I know that this adds a layer of challenge and tension to my work, but I see these challenges and tensions as new possibilities. Therefore, I adjust the production schedule to accommodate the learning curve associated with these new materials and processes. I have also created a feedback loop to continuously improve the sustainable line based on customer responses and market trends.”</i>	Maintaining a disciplined supply chain while embracing sustainable innovation	Paradoxical thinking	Managing paradox	Navigating paradox
<i>“Open communication is where dialogue and debate happen. These dialogues and debates are healthy discussions. As a manager, I believe in taking a step back and accepting constructive criticism. If my team members have something to say, I definitely listen to them. If it is logical, why not give it a chance? I might be wrong—who knows? Sometimes, team members share brilliant thoughts that give me a new dimension to think about. Honestly, open communication opens doors for creative ideas and unconventional approaches, which is what we need to manage our tensions and conflicting situations. When our situation is not simple, how can the solution be simple? (gently smiling).”</i>	Welcoming diverse perspectives through open communication	Encouraging open communication		
<i>“My work involves being transparent to build trust while respecting confidentiality to protect both the organisation and individuals. Confusing, right? In HR, I deal with sensitive and confidential information and matters. For example, employees’ personal information, information related to employees’ health, family matters, terminations, or any changes in the company that have not yet been made public. I must maintain strict</i>	Balancing transparency with confidentiality	Demonstrating paradoxical leadership		

<i>confidentiality with this type of information. However, I need to be transparent when communicating company policies, procedures, and decisions to employees. I need to ensure that employees understand the policies, procedures, and their rights within the company. Therefore, I have to communicate as clearly and precisely as possible. This is how I balance confidentiality and transparency to build trust. It may sound easy, but in reality, it's very challenging. I must be extremely careful about what information to share, how much to share, and with whom. I also tell my team members about the necessity of maintaining both confidentiality and transparency. Since there are no set guidelines for this, I share my experiences and examples to give them some insight. My team members sometimes shadow me to observe how I handle confidential cases. Additionally, I guide and involve them in communicating policies to employees. This is how I help my team members learn to manage tasks that are sensitive, challenging, and contradictory."</i>				
<i>"I am running one project after another. Deadlines are very critical, and I have to meet them by hook or by crook. This is essential for our company's success. My team also works really hard to meet these deadlines. That is why I constantly maintain skilful communication with them, so that the team can deliver high-quality results and feel cared for. For example, I tell them that if anyone feels too overwhelmed, they can let me know. I find a way to ensure they can work more comfortably while still contributing to the project. If they are stuck or need additional resources to meet the deadline, I can reallocate some tasks or bring in additional support. If they need to work different hours to get this done, that is fine, as long as we are communicating and hitting our key milestones. I also inform them that I am aware the workload is intense, and I genuinely care about their well-being. I do not want anyone to sacrifice their health. If they feel too stretched, we can talk and adjust tasks."</i>	Managing deadlines by ensuring high-quality service	Communicating skilfully		
<i>"I have to be open and flexible when working in a dynamic environment. The greater the challenges, the more open and flexible I need to be."</i>	Skills such as flexibility,	Developing skills for		

<i>Openness allows me to explore new possibilities, consider different perspectives, and brainstorm ideas, while flexibility helps me adapt to opposing priorities. As a result, I can integrate strategies to manage the opposing yet intertwined needs of my company.”</i>	adaptability and openness	navigating paradoxes	
			Impact
<i>“Dealing with uncertainties and tensions at work is a usual thing for me, and that is why I learnt to deal with them. I always try to see the brightest side, regardless of the stress level. I try to convert my tensions or stress into positives. I try to be optimistic.”</i>	Positive and optimistic perspective about uncertainty and competing demands in the workplace	Paradoxical leaders think of tensions, inconsistencies and contradictions as learning opportunities	Enabling Impact of Paradoxical Leadership on Leaders
<i>“My work is full of surprises, or I would say shocks. (smiling) That’s why I think beyond my job responsibilities. I maintain good relationships with government officials at the airport, which helps me receive their assistance whenever I need special support for our business. This approach saves time and hassle. However, I am very proud of our company’s core values of non-reliance on external help.”</i>	Navigating unpredictability through personal initiative with organisational values	Paradoxical leaders anticipate	
<i>“I often observe that the top management loses their temper due to conflicting demands and tensions at work, leading them to shout and scream at employees. I feel frustrated, and thus, I try to remain calm with my team members, even amidst competing pressures and tensions.”</i>	Maintaining calm under emotional and work pressures	Paradoxical leaders at managing their behaviours, thoughts and emotional responses	
<i>“In my first organisation, I struggled to manage the tensions and mood of my manager. I felt trapped with no apparent alternatives, and I thought leaving the job would give me freedom. As a result, I resigned impulsively,</i>	Cognitive overload under	Psychological stress emerging from	Constraining Impact of Paradoxical

<i>without considering that I had no job lined up and had not handed over my work to my team members. You can imagine how frustrated I was at that time."</i>	leadership tensions	paradoxical leadership	Leadership on Leaders	
<i>"I have to respond aggressively to manage the conflicting demands, although I am naturally calm. Sometimes, I feel I am losing myself in meeting the work demands. The thought of losing selfhood frustrates me, leading to feelings of being overstressed."</i>	Conflict between natural behaviour and required leadership behaviour	Paradoxical leaders' selfhood		
<i>"Work tensions and stress give me a headache and increase my blood pressure. I skip meals and develop acidity. After-effects are: I feel unwell, I neglect my family, and I am disconnected from my parents. I am angry and misbehaving. I am shouting with my kids. I experience anxiety. I miss my friends' get-togethers. I am in this sort of situation until I solve the tension."</i>	Work stress impacting physical health and personal relationships	Paradoxical leaders' physical and mental health impact		
<i>"My stress level is high when I deal with uncertainty and inconsistency at work. I cannot handle this vagueness in my work. I sometimes feel blank. A couple of times, I have screamed at my team members suddenly, which I know is extremely bad. Then, I went to the washroom and cried."</i>	Stress and emotional overwhelm under uncertainty	Paradoxical leadership's effects on leaders' intrapersonal skills		