-RESEARCH ARTICLE-

PRACTICING IMAGINATIVE LEADERSHIP AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE OF PALESTINE UNIVERSITY: AN EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE ON ACADEMIC LEADERS

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─Abstract─

The research aimed to examine the impact of imaginative leadership on the competitive advantage of universities in Palestine. To achieve this, data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire from 200 university leaders, selected through purposive sampling. A cross-sectional research design and quantitative approach were employed. The regression analysis revealed a positive and significant influence of the dimensions of imaginative leadership—namely, flexibility and adaptation, motivation and inspiration, empowerment and delegation, and effective communication—on the competitive advantage of Palestinian universities. This study contributes to the understanding of imaginative leadership and its impact on competitive advantage within the context of Palestinian universities, marking it as a pioneering investigation. From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that university leaders should focus on fostering and applying these leadership dimensions to enhance institutional

performance and competitiveness, potentially resulting in more resilient and innovative academic environments. The study offers several recommendations, including the continued practice of imaginative leadership as a primary leadership style and the enhancement of training for employees in various roles to effectively utilize imaginative leadership.

Keywords: Imaginative Leadership, Competitive Advantage, Academic Leaders, Palestinian Universities.

INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of competitive advantage has increasingly preoccupied educational leaders in universities, presenting them with challenges such as meeting quality standards, obtaining accreditation, and securing high rankings among the world's top universities (Kemp, 2024). Consequently, competitive advantage is central to a university's performance and serves as the foundation for its success. Existing literature emphasizes that imaginative leadership is crucial for human agency, as it directs individuals toward future possibilities that necessitate present actions to enhance competitive advantage (Appadurai, 1996; Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013). This leadership style relies heavily on creative ideas, which are as vital as facts, with no clear indication that ideas are merely derived from facts (Bochner, 2009). In essence, imaginative leadership is recognized as a key factor in achieving competitive advantage, as it fosters innovation, adaptability, and strategic thinking within organizations (Bochner, 2009). By empowering teams, inspiring creativity, and enabling flexible responses to challenges, imaginative leaders generate unique ideas that enhance competitiveness (Vadeboncoeur & Vellos, 2016). Thus, imaginative leadership is considered the cornerstone of any institution, ensuring its continuity and superiority in attaining competitive advantage (Almheiri & Omar, 2022).

Despite the recognized importance of imaginative leadership for achieving competitive advantage, existing studies reveal several gaps. Much of the research has predominantly concentrated on traditional leadership styles such as transformational, transactional, and servant leadership (Hidayat et al., 2024; Permana & Kustyadji, 2024; Semuel & Siagian, 2015), often neglecting the role of imaginative leadership and its impact on competitive advantage. This emphasis on conventional leadership approaches has created a significant gap in the literature, leaving unexplored the critical ways in which imaginative leadership can foster innovation, drive strategic change, and enhance competitive advantage. The limited attention to imaginative leadership has resulted in an incomplete understanding of how this style uniquely contributes to achieving a competitive edge, particularly in dynamic and complex environments (Anggraeni et al., 2023). Moreover, existing studies have mostly focused on individual dimensions of imaginative leadership—such as creative vision, flexibility and adaptability, motivation and inspiration, empowerment and delegation, and effective commitment—in relation to competitive advantage, without adequately exploring the combined effect of these five dimensions. Consequently, this study primarily focuses on examining the impact of these five dimensions of imaginative leadership on competitive advantage.

Moreover, the existing literature presents inconsistent findings on the relationship between the dimensions of imaginative leadership and competitive advantage, particularly regarding their effectiveness on other variables (Channuwong et al., 2023; Nurwitono & Silvianita, 2023; Safari et al., 2020; Zunaidah et al., 2024). These inconsistencies highlight the need for more comprehensive studies that consider the diverse dimensions of imaginative leadership and their interaction in influencing competitive advantage. Additionally, most research in this area has been conducted in other countries, with limited focus on regions like Palestine (Channuwong et al., 2023; Nurwitono & Silvianita, 2023; Safari et al., 2020; Zunaidah et al., 2024). This geographical bias restricts our understanding of how imaginative leadership operates within different cultural and socio-economic contexts (Al-Baghdadi & AL-Khazaali, 2024). For Palestinian universities, where challenges such as political instability and resource constraints are prevalent, examining the role of imaginative leadership is particularly important (Salha & Affouneh, 2024). By harnessing imaginative leadership, these institutions could significantly improve their capacity for innovation, adaptability, and ultimately achieve sustainable competitive advantage in a challenging environment. Therefore, this study aimed to assess the impact of practicing imaginative leadership on the competitive advantage of Palestinian universities.

The primary research objective has been further subdivided into the following research questions:

1) What is the current state of imaginative leadership practices in Palestinian universities?
2) What is the level of competitive advantage in Palestinian universities?
3) Is there a statistically significant relationship between the dimensions of imaginative leadership and the achievement of competitive advantage in Palestinian universities?
4) What is the impact of imaginative leadership on achieving competitive advantage?

The study's research objective carries several implications for the current investigation. Theoretically, like other leadership models, the imaginative dimensions—namely, creative vision, flexibility and adaptability, motivation and inspiration, empowerment and delegation, and effective communication—are essential for enhancing competitive advantage. This underscores that the effectiveness of leadership in universities is significantly shaped by these specific traits, which directly contribute to organizational success. Additionally, the study's findings may provide valuable insights for officials in Palestinian universities regarding the current state of imaginative leadership practices among their academic leaders. This understanding can guide university leaders in taking appropriate actions to promote the use of this leadership style. Furthermore, the study's results could help officials in Palestinian universities assess the level of competitive advantage within their institutions, enabling them to implement strategies that enhance competitiveness and keep pace with other universities. The study is structured into four chapters: a literature review from both theoretical and empirical perspectives, research methods, data analysis and interpretation, and a discussion of the findings along with their implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Competitive Advantage

Competitive advantage is a crucial concept in the current business environment, where institutions encounter intense competition due to rapid advancements (Adama & Okeke, 2024). It generally denotes an institution's ability to devise and implement strategies that secure a superior position relative to other entities operating in similar conditions (Agustian et al., 2023). Achieving competitive advantage often involves the effective utilization of an organization's best resources, competencies, and capabilities (Ayashi & Karima, 2016). The literature identifies several dimensions that represent competitive advantage, including the promotion of competitiveness awareness, advancement in scientific research, and the development of human resource management. Among these, raising awareness about competitiveness underscores its significance in higher education institutions, particularly universities, as a fundamental element in attaining their overarching objectives (Kahupi et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2023). As educational organizations and institutions, such as universities, strive to evolve and improve amidst various life changes, they must focus on competitive advantage to maintain and enhance their standing in the field (Kahupi et al., 2021).

Moreover, the encouragement of scientific research underscores the importance for universities to focus on cutting-edge research to enhance their competitive advantage (Samdal et al., 2023). In the era of globalization, the internationalization of education, and the knowledge economy, universities worldwide must advance and compete effectively in the education market at local, regional, and global levels (Samdal et al., 2023). The emergence of global university rankings has intensified the challenge for universities to elevate the quality of their academic activities compared to their international counterparts. These rankings have driven universities to develop competitive strategies to maintain and improve their standing in higher education (Gabor, 2019). Additionally, the development of human resource management has become a crucial success factor for institutions, serving as a primary resource for achieving competitive advantage. This can be realized through the strategic and efficient investment in human resources (Armstrong, 2016). On the other hand, knowledge building and development are essential for educational institutions, as learning organizations are fundamentally involved in generating, producing, and advancing knowledge (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2021). As centres of intellectual development, universities are increasingly focusing on knowledge production, reflecting the growing global emphasis on these processes.

Imaginative Leadership

Imaginative leadership refers to the capacity to envision and create a compelling and motivating future, inspiring others to work towards achieving this vision. Leaders who embody this concept are able to view challenges positively and guide their teams towards ambitious and inspiring objectives (Cheng, 2023). By leveraging their imagination, such leaders can envision potential future scenarios for their institution or

the world and devise strategies to realize these visions (Judson & Dougherty, 2023). When leaders communicate this vision and motivate their teams to pursue it, imagination becomes a potent tool for inspiration and motivation (Judson & Dougherty, 2023). Imaginative leaders are distinguished by their ability to concretely and realistically foresee future possibilities while employing innovative ideas to drive progress. This approach involves creative problem-solving and forward-thinking to navigate challenges and achieve success in a dynamic environment (Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2007). According to the literature, imaginative leadership is characterized by a creative vision that allows leaders to anticipate future developments realistically and engage proactive and inventive individuals within the organization to realize this vision. Key dimensions of imaginative leadership discussed in the literature include creative visualization, flexibility and adaptability, motivation and inspiration, empowerment and delegation, and effective commitment, all of which are crucial for enhancing competitive advantage.

Among the key dimensions of imaginative leadership, creative visualization involves the ability to conceive and develop novel and innovative future visions, motivating others to embrace and contribute to these visions. An increase in creative visualization can lead to an enhancement in an organization's competitive advantage (Browen et al., 2024). Flexibility and adaptability represent the capacity to navigate changes and challenges with a flexible mindset, adjusting imaginative leadership strategies and approaches in response to evolving circumstances (Yau, 2011). Additionally, motivation and inspiration encompass the ability to energize a team with a forward-looking vision and goals, thereby fostering enthusiasm and commitment to their work (Sartika et al., 2023). Empowerment and delegation are critical as they provide team members with opportunities to engage in decision-making and implement creative ideas, steering them toward the achievement of established objectives (Mirkhan et al., 2024). Finally, effective commitment involves the ability to communicate clearly and build positive relationships with others, ensuring that the vision and guidance are conveyed with transparency and clarity (Mumford et al., 2002; Suryadi, 2023).

EMPIRICAL STUDIES AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

There is a notable scarcity of research focusing on imaginative leadership and its role in generating a competitive advantage within institutions, particularly universities. Judson & Dougherty, (2023) identified a positive and significant impact of imaginative leadership on competitive advantage. This study also highlighted the potential benefits of imaginative leadership in individual and collective processes, suggesting specific cognitive tools that could enhance imagination in educational leadership. Additional research has corroborated these findings, indicating that imaginative leadership positively influences competitive advantage (Abukari et al., 2024; Almheiri, 2024; Mumford et al., 2002). These studies recommend exploring similar research in other developing countries to identify potential variations in outcomes. Supporting this perspective, Ye et al. (2022) emphasized that visionary leadership enables organizations to adapt to market changes and technological advancements, thereby maintaining their relevance and competitiveness in a dynamic business environment. This aligns with Moreira et al. (2024), who found that transparent communication from leaders fosters

trust, aligns teams with institutional goals, and ensures a unified effort towards common objectives. Such internal cohesion, driven by effective communication, is crucial for sustaining a competitive advantage in the competitive higher education sector. These findings suggest that universities in Palestine should enhance their communication practices to bolster their competitive advantage.

Further analysis reveals that motivation and inspiration have a positive and significant impact on competitive advantage. This finding is supported by research conducted by Abukari et al. (2024) and Almheiri (2024), which underscores that transformational leadership—characterized by the capacity to inspire and energize teams—leads to increased employee engagement and productivity. In the context of universities, this translates to faculty and staff who are more motivated, committed to their roles, and likely to contribute to the institution's success. Leaders who effectively inspire their teams with a compelling vision instil a sense of purpose and passion, thereby driving collective efforts towards achieving strategic goals. This is closely related to findings on empowerment and delegation, where involving team members in decision-making fosters a sense of ownership and accountability. Additionally, Hafaf and Abdullah (2019) conducted a study on the role of innovative leadership in enhancing competitive advantage at Tersam Institution in Algeria. Utilizing a descriptive-analytical approach and a questionnaire, their research demonstrated a positive relationship between innovative leadership and competitive advantage. This highlights the significance of adopting innovative leadership practices to foster positive behaviours and support both innovation and competitive advantage.

Empirical studies have demonstrated that creativity is a driving force in helping organizations achieve their strategic objectives (Nasifoglu Elidemir et al., 2020). Leaders who excel in creative visualization are often able to outperform their competitors by anticipating market trends and guiding their organizations accordingly (Setyaningrum et al., 2023). Furthermore, flexibility in leadership, which involves adapting strategies to evolving circumstances, is crucial for maintaining a competitive edge (Anggraeni et al., 2023; Patasaka & Park, 2024). Leaders who display flexibility are adept at navigating challenges and uncertainties, thereby ensuring organizational resilience and sustained growth (Patasaka & Park, 2024). Additionally, motivation and inspiration are pivotal in enhancing team commitment and driving performance, which in turn affects the organization's competitive advantage (Patasaka & Park, 2024). Research has shown that leaders who effectively motivate their teams towards a shared vision foster higher levels of engagement, productivity, and innovation (Almheiri, 2024). Empowerment and delegation also play critical roles by involving team members in decision-making processes, which fosters a sense of ownership and accountability (Aithal et al., 2024; Alshaikhmubarak & Aljabr, 2023). This participatory approach has been linked to improved organizational outcomes, as it promotes the implementation of creative ideas and solutions (Aithal et al., 2024). Lastly, effective communication and commitment are essential for building trust and clarity within the team, ensuring that the vision and goals are clearly understood and pursued with transparency (Mahrinasari et al., 2024; Pahuja et al., 2024). Previous research indicates that leadership styles are critical factors in enhancing an organization's competitive advantage. Based on these findings, the study proposes the following research hypothesis,

H1: *Competitive Advantage Influence by Creative Visions.*
H2: *Competitive Advantage Influence by Flexibility and Adaptability.*
H3: *Competitive Advantage Influence by Motivation and Inspiration.*
H4: *Competitive Advantage Influence by Empowerment and Delegation.*
H5: *Competitive Advantage Influence by Effective Communication.*

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT

A review of existing literature, both Arab and international, reveals that the topic of imaginative leadership and its impact on achieving competitive advantage has not been extensively studied. While there have been investigations into the relationship between creative leadership and competitive advantage, such as those conducted by (Ghamis & Siyari, 2023) and (Yasin ,2019), and the significance of innovative leadership as addressed by Hafaf and Abdullah (2019), there remains a notable gap in understanding imaginative leadership specifically. Judson and Dougherty (2023) emphasized the importance of imagination in the context of learning and practicing imaginative leadership. The insights gained from these studies, including their focus areas, variables, and statistical methodologies, have informed the development of this study's questionnaire items, domains, and statements. Addressing these gaps, the current study aims to examine the practice of imaginative leadership and its effect on achieving competitive advantage within Palestinian universities. The variables identified to address these gaps are illustrated in Figure 1.
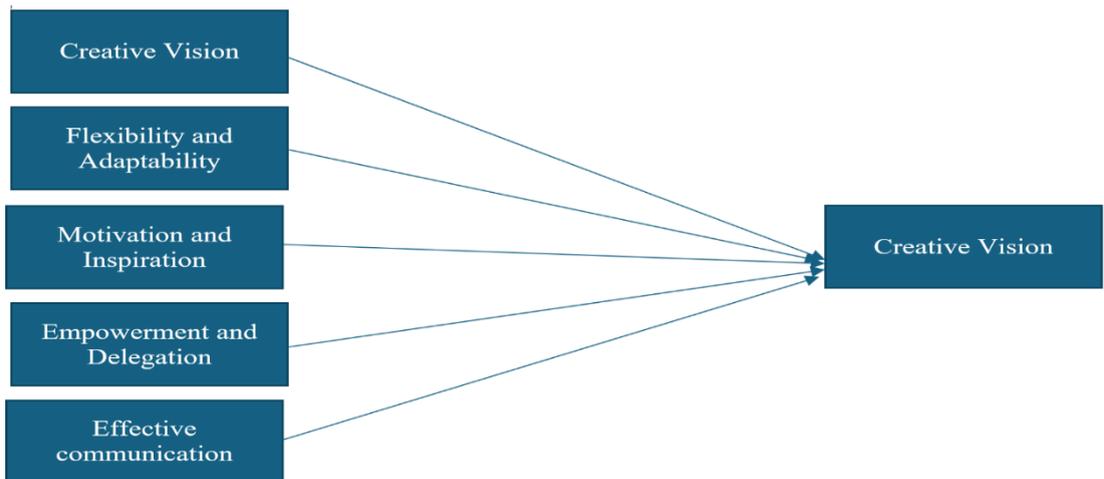
Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

METHODS

The research objective was to assess the impact of imaginative leadership on the competitive advantage of Palestinian universities. To achieve this, the researchers utilized a quantitative research approach, which is particularly effective for hypothesis testing and analyzing numerical data to discern relationships between leadership dimensions and competitive advantage. Compared to qualitative methods, quantitative

research provides greater objectivity, reliability, and generalizability, making it well-suited for studies aiming for measurable and replicable outcomes (Dehalwar & Sharma, 2024; Irwansyah & Hudayah, 2022). Additionally, a cross-sectional research design was employed, allowing data collection at a single point in time. This design offers a snapshot of the current relationships between variables, making it more efficient and less resource-intensive than longitudinal studies. It also avoids issues such as participant attrition while delivering timely insights (Chen & Laokhongthavorn, 2024; Rindfleisch et al., 2008). The study followed an explanatory approach, which is effective in identifying and understanding the underlying causes and effects of relationships between variables, thus providing deeper insights into why specific phenomena occur (Dehalwar & Sharma, 2024; Khalil et al., 2023).

Questionnaire Development

A questionnaire was developed to evaluate the practice of imaginative leadership and its impact on achieving competitive advantage from the perspective of academic leaders in Palestinian universities. The instrument comprised three sections: The first section gathered personal data, including gender, academic qualifications, academic rank, years of experience, job position, and type of university. The second section assessed the current practice of imaginative leadership, featuring five key dimensions with a total of 39 items. The third section measured the level of competitive advantage, encompassing four primary dimensions with 20 items. Participants responded to the items using a Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The questionnaire was validated by experts and experienced professionals holding Ph.D. and Master's degrees from various Palestinian universities. Feedback from these experts led to revisions, resulting in a finalized questionnaire with a total of 59 items.

Data Collection Procedure and Sampling Technique

The unit of analysis for this study was the individual, specifically targeting leaders at Palestinian universities in the West Bank. Due to the extensive size of the study population, a purposive sampling approach was employed. This sample included leaders from three distinct institutions: Al-Quds University, representing a government university; Palestine Polytechnic University, representing a public university; and Palestine Ahliya University, representing a private university.

Demographic Characteristics

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of 200 respondents from Palestinian universities, categorized according to their professional qualifications. In terms of gender, 72% of the respondents are male and 28% are female. Regarding educational qualifications, 72% hold a Master's degree, while 68% have earned a Ph.D. The academic ranks are distributed as follows: 32% are Lecturers, 52% are Assistant Professors, and 16% are Associate Professors. With respect to years of service, 82% have more than 10 years of experience, 8% have less than 5 years, and 10% have between 5 and 10 years of experience. For job positions, 52% are Deans of Faculty, 36% are Department Chairs, 8% are Vice Presidents, and 4% are Assistant Presidents. Additionally, 48% of the respondents are affiliated with public universities, 28% with

government institutions, and 24% with private universities. These demographic details are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics

Variables	Number	Percentage
Male	144	72%
Female	56	28%
Sum	200	100%
Master's	144	72%
Ph.D.	136	68%
Sum	200	100%
Lecturer	64	32%
Assistant Professor	104	52%
Associate Professor	32	16%
Professor	-	-
Sum	200	100%
Less than 5 Years	16	8%
5-10 Years	20	10%
More than 10 Years	164	82%
Sum	200	100%
Vice President	16	8%
Assistant President	8	4%
Dean of Faculty	104	52%
Department Chair	72	36%
Sum	200	100%
Private	48	24%
Public	96	48%
Government	56	28%
Sum	200	100%

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

This section presents the results of the four research questions, which are detailed below:

First Question Results

Table 2 reveals that academic leaders in Palestinian universities exhibit a very high degree of imaginative leadership, with a mean value of 4.27 and a standard deviation of 0.294. Among the various dimensions of imaginative leadership, flexibility and adaptation received the highest mean score of 4.36 (SD = 0.270), followed by creative vision at 4.28 (SD = 0.288) and motivation and inspiration at 4.28 (SD = 0.318). Effective communication had a mean score of 4.27 (SD = 0.382), while empowerment and delegation had the lowest mean score of 4.18 (SD = 0.512), though still high. All

dimensions of imaginative leadership were rated between high and very high levels. The items reflecting imaginative leadership ranged from high to very high. Notably, the item indicating flexibility in formulating strategies to enhance the university's position achieved a very high mean value of 4.56 (SD = 0.501), and the item "All employees are listened to without exception" also scored very high with a mean value of 4.56 (SD = 0.704). Conversely, the item "Employees are trained on how to achieve excellent performance" received the lowest rating, yet still high, with a mean value of 3.86 (SD = 0.571), within the empowerment and delegation dimension. These results suggest that imaginative leadership in Palestinian universities emphasizes innovation and creativity to achieve organizational goals and enhance team activation. This leadership style supports a visionary approach, promotes creativity, and fosters innovation, addressing challenges effectively. It also attracts innovative talent by encouraging creative thinking and offering growth opportunities. These findings are consistent with Judson's (2023) research, which highlighted the role of imaginative processes and cognitive tools in leadership development within educational settings. Additionally, the results corroborate the studies by (Ghamis & Siyari, 2023) and Hafaf and Abdullah (2019).

Second Question Results

Table 3 illustrates that the level of competitive advantage in Palestinian universities is rated as high, with a mean value of 4.13 and a standard deviation of 0.392. Among the dimensions of competitive advantage, the highest-rated was "Awareness of the Importance of Competitive Advantage," which received a very high mean score of 4.27 (SD = 0.431). This was followed by "Developing Human Resources" and "Knowledge Building and Development," both with mean values of 4.14 (SD = 0.476 and SD = 0.469, respectively), and "Encouraging Scientific Research" with a mean value of 4.03 (SD = 0.402). All dimensions of competitive advantage were rated between high and very high. The item with the highest rating, indicating a very high level, was "The university management promotes faculty members based on their published research in refereed and ranked scientific journals," which had a mean value of 4.38 (SD = 0.779) and fell under the dimension of encouraging scientific research. In contrast, the lowest-rated item, although still high, was "The university management assigns faculty members to conduct scientific research," with a mean value of 3.72 (SD = 0.809), also within the dimension of encouraging scientific research. These results reflect the strong belief among academic leaders in the significance of achieving a competitive advantage, especially in the context of universities facing substantial competition due to similar specializations and rapid developments. Such competition compels universities to strive for prominence and sustainability. The study's findings align with the research conducted by (Yasin ,2019)and (Ghamis & Siyari, 2023).

Table 2: Means and STDVs of the Reality of Practicing Imaginative Leadership

No	Rank	Paragraph	Mean	STDV	Level
1	1	The university possesses innovative and modern visions.	4.52	0.504	Very high
5	2	The university's visions are characterized by transparency, as they developed in collaboration with relevant individuals.	4.48	0.504	Very high
2	3	The university's visions are characterized by its ability to find solutions to complex problems.	4.24	0.591	Very high
4	4	The university's visions encompass a comprehensive analysis of events and offer detailed plans to achieve goals.	4.22	0.418	Very high
6	5	The university's visions aim to encourage participation and collaboration to achieve the common goal.	4.20	0.571	Very high
3	6	The university's visions are characterized by clarity and the ability to bring about change.	4.18	0.481	High
7	7	The university's visions are distinguished by their measurability of outcomes and the evaluation of progress toward achieving the desired goal.	4.14	0.350	High
		Creative Vision	4.28	0.288	Very high
7	1	There is flexibility in formulating strategies that enhance the university's standing.	4.56	0.501	Very high
8	2	University leaders use various leadership styles according to changes in the university environment.	4.54	0.542	Very high
2	3	The university has clear visions for enhancing its strengths.	4.46	0.542	Very high
5	4	The university takes advantage of available opportunities to keep up with surrounding changes.	4.46	0.503	Very high
1	5	There is flexibility in dealing with changes in the environment surrounding the university.	4.42	0.498	Very high
4	6	The university's visions are characterized by its ability to adapt to changing challenges.	4.34	0.592	Very high
3	7	The university has effective strategies in place to address its weaknesses.	4.08	0.488	High
6	8	Effective strategies are available to address potential threats to the university.	4.06	0.549	High
		Flexibility and Adaptability	4.36	0.279	Very high
1	1	The university encourages staff to be creative.	4.54	0.578	Very high
4	2	The university encourages communication with other institutions to achieve its goals.	4.42	0.574	Very high
7	3	The university promotes teamwork.	4.42	0.537	Very high
2	4	The university demonstrates its future vision for its employees.	4.30	0.505	Very high
3	5	The university encourages communication among its employees to achieve its goals.	4.22	0.581	Very high
8	6	The university provides opportunities for individuals to develop their performance.	4.22	0.506	Very high
6	7	The university encourages positive competition.	4.10	0.416	High

5	8	The university works on providing the necessary resources for innovators.	4.04	0.532	High
		Motivation and Inspiration	4.28	0.318	Very high
2	1	Authorities and responsibilities are defined for all employees in the university.	4.52	0.614	Very high
7	2	Employees are empowered with the necessary skills to perform their duties.	4.22	0.678	Very high
1	3	Employees participate in setting the university's goals.	4.20	0.782	Very high
4	4	There is trust among employees within the university.	4.20	0.670	Very high
5	5	Efforts of others are appreciated and recognized.	4.20	0.606	Very high
3	6	Advice and guidance are provided to employees to improve their performance.	4.14	0.782	High
6	7	Discussion forums are used to exchange ideas among employees.	4.12	0.689	High
8	8	Employees are trained on how to achieve outstanding performance.	3.86	0.571	High
		Empowerment and Delegation	4.18	0.512	High
5	1	Employees are listened to without exception.	4.56	0.704	Very high
6	2	The university encourages employees to communicate with the local community.	4.46	0.542	Very high
4	3	Employees are directed toward achieving the university's goals.	4.36	0.525	Very high
1	4	Employees are listened to professionally.	4.28	0.536	Very high
8	5	The university strives to foster a spirit of collaboration among all employees.	4.24	0.476	Very high
7	6	The university values positive relationships among employees.	4.20	0.451	Very high
2	7	The university focuses on creating positive relationships among employees.	4.12	0.558	High
3	8	The university maintains continuous communication with employees and listens to their needs.	3.36	0.637	High
		Effective Communication	4.27	0.382	Very high
		Overall Score of Imaginative Leadership Practice	4.27	0.284	Very high

Table 3: Mean and STDV of the Level of Competitive Advantage

No	Rank	Paragraph	Mean	STDV	Level
1	1	The university administration develops its services based on suggestions from employees.	4.36	0.631	Very high
2	2	The university administration encourages employees to develop a competitive strategy compared to other universities.	4.36	0.631	Very high
4	3	The university administration ensures the provision of adequate financial resources for employees to perform their duties.	4.22	0.464	Very high

3	4	The university administration verifies the feasibility of the services provided through its employees.	4.14	0.606	High
		Raising Awareness, about the Importance of Competitiveness	4.27	0.431	Very high
3	1	The university administration promotes faculty members based on their research that is published in peer-reviewed and indexed scientific journals.	4.38	0.779	Very high
4	2	The university administration provides specialized research centres for scientific production.	4.20	0.534	Very high
5	3	The university administration encourages faculty members to publish their research in distinguished international journals.	4.14	0.670	High
2	4	The university administration provides various financial resources for the research of faculty members.	3.90	0.677	High
1	5	The university administration operates according to a renewed strategy for scientific research.	3.88	0.659	High
6	6	The university administration allocates faculty members' time for scientific research.	3.72	0.809	High
		Encouraging Scientific Research	4.03	0.402	High
4	1	The university administration provides a professional system for evaluating the performance of its employees.	4.24	0.555	Very high
1	2	The university administration attracts professionally outstanding employees to work within it.	4.20	0.699	Very high
5	3	The university administration sends employees for training courses.	4.20	0.571	Very high
2	4	The university administration devises a developmental plan for the professional development of its employees.	4.18	0.595	High
3	5	The university administration establishes clear criteria for assuming leadership positions.	3.94	0.469	High
		Human Resources Development	4.14	0.476	High
1	1	The university encourages faculty members to produce and utilize knowledge.	4.34	0.478	Very high
2	2	The university works on establishing partnerships with distinguished universities to exchange knowledge.	4.32	0.471	Very high
5	3	The university ensures the protection of intellectual property rights for faculty members.	4.14	0.534	High
3	4	The university focuses on translating the results of scientific research for faculty members into practical and tangible outcomes.	4.06	0.682	High
4	5	The university encourages faculty members to register patents.	3.86	0.728	High
		Knowledge Building and Development	4.14	0.469	High
		Overall Score of Competitive Advantage	4.13	0.392	High

Third Question Results

Table 4 indicates a robust negative correlation between imaginative leadership and competitive advantage from the perspective of academic leaders in Palestinian universities. Additionally, significant relationships were found between several dimensions of imaginative leadership—namely, flexibility and adaptation, motivation and inspiration, empowerment and delegation, and effective communication—and competitive advantage within these institutions. Moreover, a significant relationship was observed between the dimension of imaginative vision and competitive advantage. These results underscore the pivotal role of imaginative leadership in attaining competitive advantage. Leaders who exhibit imaginative qualities offer a visionary perspective that fosters creativity and innovation, aligns with strategic goals, and effectively addresses challenges. Furthermore, such leaders are adept at attracting innovative talent by promoting creative thinking and providing opportunities for professional growth and development. These findings are consistent with the research conducted by (Ghamis & Siyari, 2023) and Hafaf and Abdullah (2019).

Table 4: Correlation Matrix

Variables		Raising Awareness about the Importance of Competitiveness	Encouraging Scientific Research	Human Resources Development	Knowledge Building and Development	Overall Score of Competitive Advantage
Creative Vision	Pearson Correlation	0.205	0.224	0.259	0.219	0.252
	Sig	0.152	0.119	0.069	0.127	0.077
Flexibility and Adaptability	Pearson Correlation	**0.715	**0.733	**0.737	**0.710	**0.825
	Sig	00.00	00.00	00.00	00.00	00.00
Motivation and Inspiration	Pearson Correlation	**0.837	**0.501	**0.684	**0.719	**0.764
	Sig	00.00	00.00	00.00	00.00	00.00
Empowerment and Delegation	Pearson Correlation	**0.714	**0.684	**0.802	**0.693	**0.819
	Sig	00.00	00.00	00.00	00.00	00.00
Effective Communication	Pearson Correlation	**0.801	**0.549	**0.657	**0.671	**0.754
	Sig	00.00	00.00	00.00	00.00	00.00
Overall Score of Imaginative Leadership Practice	Pearson Correlation	**0.834	**0.711	**0.814	**0.765	**0.885
	Sig	00.00	00.00	00.00	00.00	00.00

* Significant at the level of ($\alpha \leq 0.05$)

** Significant at the level of ($\alpha \leq 0.01$)

Regression Results (Research Question 4)

The regression analysis results indicate that creative vision significantly and positively affects competitive advantage, with a coefficient (b) of 0.45 and a p-value of 0.000, thereby supporting Hypothesis 1 in the context of Palestinian universities. Similarly, flexibility and adaptability show a notable positive impact on competitive advantage (β = 0.38, p = 0.000), validating Hypothesis 2. Motivation and inspiration also have a significant positive effect on competitive advantage (β = 0.42, p = 0.000), thereby confirming Hypothesis 3. Furthermore, empowerment and delegation are positively associated with competitive advantage (β = 0.50, p = 0.000), supporting Hypothesis 4. Effective communication demonstrates the strongest positive and significant influence on competitive advantage (β = 0.55, p = 0.000), affirming Hypothesis 5. Collectively, these results suggest that all the examined dimensions of leadership are critical in enhancing competitive advantage within Palestinian universities. These findings are detailed in Table 5.

Table 5: Regression Results

Relationships	β	SE	T-value	P-value	Decision
Creative Visions → Competitive Advantage	0.451	0.07	6.43	0.000	Supported
Flexibility and Adaptability → Competitive Advantage	0.383	0.06	6.38	0.000	Supported
Motivation and Inspiration → Competitive Advantage	0.424	0.08	5.25	0.000	Supported
Empowerment and Delegation → Competitive Advantage	0.541	0.09	6.01	0.000	Supported
Effective Communication → Competitive Advantage	0.552	0.07	7.86	0.000	Supported

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The research sought to assess the impact of imaginative leadership on the competitive advantage of universities in Palestine. Data were gathered from 200 faculty members, revealing that a creative vision significantly and positively influences competitive advantage. The findings suggest that an enhancement in creative vision correlates with an improvement in competitive advantage. This aligns with the work of Almheiri and Omar (2022), who contend that leaders who effectively communicate and implement a creative vision are better equipped to drive innovation and guide their organizations toward sustained success. In the realm of higher education, university leaders who articulate a clear, forward-looking vision can inspire faculty, staff, and students to innovate and pursue excellence, thereby enhancing their institutions' competitive positioning. Additionally, Ye et al. (2022) support this perspective by emphasizing that visionary leadership facilitates adaptation to market changes and technological advancements, ensuring organizational relevance and competitiveness in a continually evolving landscape. The results indicate that Palestinian universities should prioritize creative vision to enhance their competitive advantage on both national and international levels. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that flexibility and

adaptability also significantly impact competitive advantage. This relationship underscores the importance of flexibility and adaptability as crucial factors contributing to the competitive advantage of Palestinian universities. These findings are consistent with Kartika and Kaihatu (2020), who emphasize that imaginative leadership is vital for navigating dynamic environments. In the academic context, where universities face challenges such as shifting student demographics, evolving educational technologies, and changing governmental policies, leaders who exhibit flexibility and adaptability can more effectively manage these changes and sustain organizational resilience. This ability to adjust strategies not only aids universities in surviving but also in thriving within a competitive environment. Moreover, flexibility in leadership promotes a culture of continuous improvement, encouraging innovation and the adoption of new ideas, which further strengthens the institution's competitive position. Collectively, these studies reinforce the notion that Palestinian universities should focus on imaginative leadership to bolster their competitive advantage and drive economic growth.

Further results indicate that motivation and inspiration also have a positive and significant impact on competitive advantage. This finding is supported by the research of (Abukari et al., 2024; Almheiri, 2024; Marzuki & Saragih, 2023), who emphasize that transformational leadership—characterized by the ability to inspire and energize teams—leads to increased employee engagement and productivity. In the context of universities, this translates into motivated faculty and staff who demonstrate greater commitment to their work and contribute more effectively to institutional success. Leaders who inspire their teams with a compelling vision create a sense of purpose and passion that drives collective efforts toward achieving strategic goals. Additionally, the results highlight the importance of empowerment and delegation, where leaders who involve team members in decision-making processes foster a sense of ownership and accountability. This participatory approach enhances commitment and contributes to achieving competitive advantage. Moreover, effective communication also has a significant and positive impact on the competitive advantage of Palestinian universities. Effective communication between university leaders and faculty members facilitates better interactions and understanding, thereby enhancing the institution's competitive position. This finding aligns with the research of (Moreira et al., 2024; Mujiatun et al., 2023), who found that clear and transparent communication from leaders builds trust, aligns the team with institutional goals, and ensures unified efforts towards common objectives. Strong internal cohesion, fostered by effective communication, is crucial for maintaining a competitive edge in the competitive landscape of higher education. These results suggest that Palestinian universities should prioritize improving communication to strengthen their competitive advantage.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the leadership dimensions of creative vision, flexibility and adaptability, motivation and inspiration, empowerment and delegation, and effective communication are crucial for enhancing competitive advantage within Palestinian universities. Each of these dimensions plays a significant role in fostering innovation, resilience, and strategic alignment, which are essential for succeeding in the dynamic and competitive landscape of higher education. The research underscores that leadership practices emphasizing vision, adaptability, employee

engagement, empowerment, and clear communication not only drive organizational success but also position universities to excel in an increasingly challenging environment. Therefore, cultivating and prioritizing these leadership qualities is vital for ensuring the sustained competitive advantage of academic institutions. Additionally, the findings highlight the importance of focusing on leadership qualities to enhance universities' contributions to economic development. By prioritizing these dimensions, universities can improve their competitive positioning and make significant strides in advancing their economic impact.

IMPLICATIONS

The study offers valuable contributions from both theoretical and practical perspectives for Palestinian universities. Theoretically, it reinforces the significance of imaginative leadership dimensions—namely creative vision, flexibility and adaptability, motivation and inspiration, empowerment and delegation, and effective communication—in enhancing competitive advantage. This highlights that effective university leadership is profoundly influenced by these traits, which directly impact organizational success. By integrating these dimensions into existing strategic management theories in higher education, the study provides a more nuanced framework for analysing how leadership can drive institutional achievement. These insights can also serve as a foundation for future research, allowing scholars to extend the model and explore new areas within the field. Practically, the study offers actionable insights for university leaders and policymakers in Palestinian universities. It underscores the importance of developing and articulating a compelling creative vision to inspire and align the university community toward common goals. Leaders are advised to maintain flexibility and adaptability to swiftly respond to changes in the educational environment, such as technological advancements and shifting student needs. Additionally, the study highlights the necessity for leaders to actively motivate and inspire their teams, creating an environment that fosters high engagement and productivity. Empowerment and delegation are emphasized as crucial strategies for involving faculty and staff in decision-making processes, which can enhance institutional success and communication.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The study, despite its significant findings, has several limitations that could be addressed in future research. First, the study was confined to a select number of universities in Palestine, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to institutions in other countries. Future research could extend this investigation to universities in different countries to examine how these findings vary across diverse educational contexts. Additionally, the study focused solely on direct effects and did not consider potential moderating or mediating variables. Future research could explore the moderating effects to enhance the predictive relevance of the findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics involved. Lastly, the study utilized a cross-sectional research design, collecting data at a single point in time. Future research could employ a longitudinal approach to track changes over time and capture

variations in the findings. In light of these results and objectives, the researchers recommend the following:

1. Continue using imaginative leadership as a primary style to foster creativity and innovation, thereby enhancing the university's competitive advantage.
2. Enhance training for employees across job titles on the application of imaginative leadership.
3. Promote scientific research by allocating dedicated time and appropriate incentives for faculty members.
4. Foster greater collaboration among Palestinian universities across various fields to enhance educational quality.
5. Conduct additional research on imaginative leadership and its relationships with various variables.

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