Validation of the Smart Leadership Model among Managers of Farhangian University

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ABSTRACT

The present study was conducted with the aim of examining and identifying the validation of the Smart Leadership Model among managers of Farhangian University. The research method is applied in terms of purpose and employs a mixed exploratory design combining qualitative and quantitative data. Accordingly, the qualitative phase utilized content analysis for model development, while the quantitative phase adopted a descriptive–survey method for model validation. The qualitative population included all expert policymakers, managers, and educational planners of Farhangian University in Mazandaran Province. The quantitative population consisted of all managers and faculty members of Farhangian University in Mazandaran Province (located in the cities of Sari, Qaemshahr, Babol, Amol, and Nowshahr), comprising 150 managers and 480 faculty members. The sample in the qualitative phase included 10 participants selected based on the principle of theoretical saturation, and in the quantitative phase, 239 individuals were selected using Cochran's formula through multistage cluster and stratified sampling. Data collection methods consisted of semi-structured interviews in the qualitative phase and a researcher-made questionnaire in the quantitative phase. Face, content, and construct validity, as well as reliability, were confirmed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient and composite reliability. For data analysis, open and axial coding using MAXQDA software were applied in the qualitative phase, and structural equation modeling using PLS software was employed in the quantitative phase. The findings indicated that 48 indicators and 9 components were identified and analyzed for Smart Leadership.

Keywords: Smart leadership model, managers, Farhangian University

Introduction

The evolution of smart leadership as a multidisciplinary paradigm has become a central topic in contemporary management research, particularly as organizations seek to thrive in increasingly complex, uncertain, and knowledge-driven environments. Over the past decade, scholars have emphasized that traditional leadership styles are no longer sufficient for addressing the dynamic challenges facing educational institutions, public organizations, and knowledge-intensive sectors [1]. Smart leadership, as a construct integrating emotional intelligence, strategic foresight, adaptability, and evidence-based decision-making, represents a synthesis of cognitive, emotional, cultural, and technological competencies that leaders must cultivate in

order to guide their institutions toward sustainable performance and innovation. As higher education systems transition toward more competitive, digital, and collaborative ecosystems, the need for leaders who can think intelligently and act adaptively has intensified (2).

In the educational sector—especially universities responsible for cultivating human capital—smart leadership has profound implications for organizational learning, governance, and cultural development. Research has shown that leaders who integrate emotional intelligence with strategic leadership behaviors enhance communication quality, organizational engagement, and institutional resilience (3). Emotional intelligence itself is strongly intertwined with leadership effectiveness, influencing domains such as conflict management, empathy, interpersonal relations, and decision-making under uncertainty (4). As such, emotionally smart leadership has emerged as both a theoretical and practical foundation for smart leadership models across academic and professional contexts (5).

The integration of emotional intelligence within leadership frameworks is supported by decades of psychological and organizational studies. For example, assessments of emotionally smart leadership in student populations demonstrate that the ability to regulate emotions, understand others, and communicate effectively contributes significantly to leadership development (4). Similarly, investigations into librarians and creative professionals highlight how emotional intelligence enables leaders to navigate diverse work environments, support team collaboration, and foster innovative cultures (6). Studies in public library management also confirm that emotionally smart leadership enhances managerial performance and organizational climate, reinforcing the broader applicability of these competencies beyond traditional business sectors (3).

Beyond emotional intelligence, smart leadership is deeply connected to knowledge management, organizational learning, digital transformation, and cross-cultural adaptability. As modern organizations increasingly rely on data analytics, digital infrastructures, and global networks, leaders must demonstrate readiness to integrate technological tools and data-driven methods into strategic decision-making processes (7). The global emphasis on digital and knowledge-driven environments has intensified the necessity for leaders who can interpret complex information, employ tacit knowledge, and support high-performance teamwork structures (8). In education, this need becomes more pronounced as universities transition toward blended learning environments, digital governance systems, and innovation-oriented management structures.

Researchers have underscored that smart leadership must be culturally contextualized to align with national, organizational, and institutional conditions. In Iran, several studies have attempted to conceptualize smart leadership within the unique socio-organizational characteristics of universities and governmental organizations. For example, analyses of smart leadership in higher education institutions emphasize the importance of values, cultural norms, and organizational expectations in shaping leadership behaviors (9). Models developed for Iranian educational organizations suggest that smart leadership incorporates not only emotional and cognitive competencies but also cultural intelligence, ethical responsibility, and context-sensitive decision-making (10). These perspectives highlight the interplay between cultural context and leadership effectiveness, demonstrating that smart leadership cannot be fully understood without considering the social and institutional environment in which it operates (11).

Similarly, investigations into soft power in government institutions reveal how leaders must leverage interpersonal influence, credibility, and strategic communication to cultivate trust and legitimacy, thereby reinforcing components of smart leadership (12). Research on spiritual leadership models also contributes to the broader understanding of smart leadership by illustrating how leaders integrate moral reasoning, value-driven behaviors, and ethical decision-making in complex organizational environments (13). Such findings align with international research calling for a more holistic and integrative approach to leadership theory, which incorporates emotional, cognitive, cultural, and ethical dimensions (1).

The importance of smart leadership in promoting organizational citizenship behavior has also been widely recognized. Studies show that when leaders foster empathy, trust, and collective engagement, employees demonstrate greater willingness to contribute beyond required duties, thus reinforcing organizational culture and performance (14). Complementary studies focusing on female educators further confirm that smart leadership enhances supportive behaviors, workplace collaboration, and institutional loyalty (15). These findings are consistent with broader organizational behavior literature, emphasizing the integrative and transformative nature of smart leadership (16).

Another critical dimension of smart leadership is the interplay between leadership style, organizational structure, and information systems. Research on management accounting reveals that smart leadership strengthens managerial decision-making and organizational adaptability when supported by effective information technologies (17). Furthermore, smart leadership contributes significantly to nurturing critical thinking, enhancing performance, and supporting educational excellence in university contexts (18). The ability of leaders to utilize tacit knowledge, leverage technological resources, and promote knowledge-driven cultures has become a defining characteristic of leadership effectiveness in the modern era (8).

International perspectives reinforce the universality of smart leadership. Studies of athletic organizations in Iraq show that smart leadership fosters better performance outcomes and organizational cohesion (19). Comparative analyses in global management contexts further integrate competencies such as cross-cultural communication, global awareness, and adaptability into smart leadership frameworks (7). These global findings complement Iranian research that emphasizes the multidimensional and integrative nature of smart leadership in public and educational institutions (20).

Theoretical developments in organizational learning also support the role of smart leadership in enhancing institutional innovation and knowledge capacity. Leaders who prioritize learning orientation, reflection, and knowledge exchange contribute significantly to organizational resilience and long-term development (21). Likewise, models integrating emotional intelligence with organizational learning have demonstrated that smart leadership fosters greater openness, collaboration, and strategic insight among employees (13). These insights underscore the interdependence between leadership, learning processes, and innovation, which forms the foundational basis for smart leadership theory.

Leadership development literature also highlights the necessity of structured interventions for enhancing smart leadership competencies among emerging and current leaders. Case studies of leadership education programs demonstrate that targeted interventions—particularly those aimed at emotional intelligence and reflective practice—strengthen leadership skills and prepare future leaders for complex responsibility structures (5). Similarly, leadership development models grounded in personal transformation and self-awareness emphasize the ability of individuals to unlock their potential through structured learning and reflective processes (22).

As universities confront challenges such as technological disruption, societal expectations, student diversity, and policy reforms, the demand for leadership models that align with contemporary organizational realities grows increasingly critical. Research reveals that smart leadership contributes to strengthening educational system equity, supporting collaborative practices, and enhancing institutional accountability (23). Smart leadership also plays a critical role in reducing structural barriers, addressing class inequalities, and promoting inclusive learning environments (24). These findings highlight the broader social implications of smart leadership within academic systems.

Considering the extensive theoretical and empirical developments across global and national contexts, the need for a validated model specifically tailored to Iranian educational institutions—particularly Farhangian University, which plays a central role in teacher education and educational leadership development—is both timely and essential. Although previous studies have conceptualized smart leadership in various organizational settings, there remains a significant gap regarding the systematic validation of a comprehensive smart leadership model tailored to the managerial requirements of Farhangian

University (9, 20). Addressing this gap will contribute to enhancing leadership effectiveness, strengthening organizational performance, and supporting the strategic mission of teacher education in Iran. Therefore, the aim of this study is to validate a comprehensive smart leadership model for managers of Farhangian University.

Methods and Materials

The research method is applied in terms of purpose and employs a mixed exploratory design combining qualitative and quantitative data. Accordingly, in the qualitative section, content analysis was used for model development, and in the quantitative section, a descriptive–survey method was applied for model validation. The qualitative statistical population consisted of all expert policymakers, managers, and educational planners of Farhangian University in Mazandaran Province, and the quantitative population consisted of all managers and faculty members of Farhangian University in Mazandaran Province (in the cities of Sari, Qaemshahr, Babol, Amol, and Nowshahr), including 150 managers and 480 faculty members. The qualitative sample included 10 individuals selected based on the principle of theoretical saturation, and the quantitative sample consisted of 239 individuals selected through Cochran's formula using multistage cluster and stratified sampling. Data collection in the qualitative phase was conducted through semi-structured interviews, and in the quantitative phase through a researcher-made questionnaire. Face, content, and construct validity as well as reliability were confirmed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. For qualitative data analysis, open and axial coding were conducted using MAXQDA software, and for quantitative data, structural equation modeling was performed using PLS software. The findings indicated that 48 indicators and 9 components of Smart Leadership were identified and analyzed.

Findings and Results

To validate the Smart Leadership model among managers of Farhangian University in Mazandaran Province, indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability), convergent validity, and discriminant validity (Fornell–Larcker criterion) were used.

Indicator reliability: The first step in the model validation process is the assessment of factor loadings of the indicators, the results of which are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Factor loading represents the degree of variance explained by each indicator for its corresponding latent variable and serves as a key criterion for assessing indicator reliability. At this stage, reliability was examined at two levels: the indicator level and the latent variable level. Indicator reliability was evaluated using factor loadings, and latent variable reliability through the composite reliability coefficient. Factor loadings show the contribution of each item to the explanation of the latent variable, such that based on the preferred criteria of Henseler et al. (2012), a factor loading above .70 indicates adequacy, while a value below .40 is considered insufficient. If factor loadings fall between .40 and .70, item removal is recommended only if doing so increases convergent validity (Average Variance Extracted, AVE). Findings from model analysis indicated that all items had factor loadings within the range of .50 to .80, and all loadings were significant at the 95% confidence level with t-values greater than 1.96. This demonstrates desirable indicator reliability and proper representation of constructs by their respective latent variables. Therefore, it can be confirmed that the indicators used possess adequate validity and stability and appropriately represent the concept of Smart Leadership in this model.

Internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability): The second step in validating the Smart Leadership model involved assessing internal consistency reliability.

Table 1. Internal Consistency Reliability (Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability)

Components	Cronbach's Alpha (CA > .70)	Reliability (rho_A > .70)	Composite Reliability (CR > .70)	Average Variance Extracted AVE > .50

Smart Culture-Based Leadership	.827	.838	.875	.540
Resilient Leadership	.865	.858	.903	.699
Network Leadership	.852	.856	.895	.630
Value-Based Leadership	.899	.902	.921	.624
Data-Driven Leadership	.909	.912	.930	.688
Talent-Based Leadership	.888	.891	.915	.644
Knowledge-Based Leadership	.881	.885	.910	.629
Digital and Innovative Leadership	.862	.865	.916	.784
Collective Leadership	.905	.906	.929	.724

Based on the criteria proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981) and Hair et al. (2019), Cronbach's alpha and reliability (rho_A) should exceed .70 for each construct, and composite reliability should also be greater than .70. The results shown in Table 1 indicate that all constructs exceed the required thresholds in all reliability metrics. Specifically, Cronbach's alpha values for all constructs range between .70 and .80, indicating excellent internal consistency. Additionally, rho_A values exceed .70 for all variables, confirming the stability of the measurement instrument. All composite reliability values exceed .70, showing high coherence and precision in the measurement of constructs.

Convergent validity (AVE): Convergent validity, which reflects the average shared variance between the latent variable and its indicators, was also assessed. Based on the AVE criterion presented in Table 4-9, the minimum acceptable value is .50. Results showed that AVE values for all variables exceeded .50, indicating acceptable convergent validity.

Discriminant validity (Fornell–Larcker criterion): Discriminant validity reflects the degree to which a construct is empirically distinct from other constructs. According to the Fornell–Larcker criterion, the square root of AVE for each latent variable must be greater than its highest correlation with other constructs. In this study, the square root of AVE values listed on the diagonal of the matrix exceeded all corresponding inter-construct correlations, confirming discriminant validity.

Table 2. Fornell–Larcker Matrix

Latent Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Talent-Based Leadership	.802									
2. Data-Driven Leadership	.818	.829								
3. Collective Leadership	.693	.659	.851							
4. Knowledge-Based Leadership	.868	.746	.693	.893						
5. Digital and Innovative Leadership	.734	.664	.740	.831	.885					
6. Network Leadership	.722	.736	.598	.708	.584	.794				
7. Smart Culture-Based Leadership	.539	.565	.534	.516	.417	.741	.735			
8. Value-Based Leadership	.737	.787	.683	.715	.635	.805	.686	.790		
9. Resilient Leadership	.547	.544	.473	.468	.342	.752	.770	.652	.836	
10. Smart Leadership	.897	.883	.807	.878	.787	.880	.750	.901	.717	.921

All correlation coefficients are significant at p < .01.

Results in Table 2 indicate that the square root of AVE for each construct is greater than its correlations with other latent variables, demonstrating that all constructs possess adequate discriminant validity.

Table 3. Model Fit Indices

Model Fit Indices	Symbol	Estimated Value	Acceptable Threshold
Standardized Root Mean Square Residual	SRMR	.072	Less than .12
Goodness-of-Fit Index	GOF	.654	Greater than .36

In structural equation modeling, assessing model fit is essential for evaluating the quality and accuracy of the estimated model. A good model fit indicates that the hypothesized relationships between latent and observed variables are properly represented and that the results are reliable and interpretable. Two key indices used in this study are SRMR and GOF.

SRMR: This index represents the difference between the observed and model-predicted correlation matrices. Values below .12 indicate good model fit. In this study, SRMR = .081, which is below the acceptable threshold and shows suitable model fit.

GOF: Tenenhaus et al. (2005) introduced the GOF index as a global measure of model fit. It integrates both measurement and structural model fit. GOF is computed as:

$$GOF = \sqrt{(\text{average Commonality} \times \text{average R2})} = 0.662 \times 0.699 = 0.462$$

A GOF value greater than .36 indicates strong model fit. In this study, GOF = .462, confirming strong overall model adequacy.

Table 4. Commonality Values and Coefficients of Determination (R2) for Smart Leadership Components

Components	Commonality	R2
Smart Culture-Based Leadership	.540	.563
Resilient Leadership	.699	.515
Network Leadership	.630	.774
Value-Based Leadership	.624	.812
Data-Driven Leadership	.688	.780
Talent-Based Leadership	.644	.805
Knowledge-Based Leadership	.629	.770
Digital and Innovative Leadership	.784	.620
Collective Leadership	.724	.651

The results indicate that the model demonstrates strong predictive power and alignment with empirical data, confirming that the Smart Leadership model functions effectively in explaining and predicting leadership behaviors among managers of Farhangian University.

Discussion and Conclusion

The validation of the smart leadership model for managers of Farhangian University offers a comprehensive perspective on the multidimensional characteristics required for effective leadership in contemporary educational systems. The results indicated that smart leadership consists of nine interrelated components and forty-eight indicators that collectively contribute to leadership effectiveness in academic environments. These findings align strongly with the theoretical and empirical literature on smart leadership, emotional intelligence, organizational learning, and digital transformation. The high reliability, convergent validity, discriminant validity, and strong model fit suggest that smart leadership is not a singular or isolated construct but rather a complex integration of cognitive, emotional, cultural, digital, and moral competencies that enable managers to perform effectively in dynamic educational settings.

One of the most significant findings was the strong loading of emotional-intelligence-related components, such as value-based leadership and collective leadership, which underscores the central role of human-centered leadership processes. This is consistent with the growing body of literature emphasizing that emotionally smart leadership enhances communication, interpersonal relations, and decision-making quality across educational institutions (1). Studies conducted with university administrators, librarians, and student leaders similarly demonstrate that emotional intelligence is foundational to effective leadership behaviors and influences leaders' ability to manage stress, motivate colleagues, and foster supportive organizational climates (3, 4, 6). Furthermore, targeted leadership development interventions that focus on emotional competencies have been shown to improve leadership effectiveness among aspiring school leaders, reinforcing the significance of this dimension in the

current study (5). The validation results confirmed that emotional and relational competencies are not merely complementary to smart leadership but integral to its conceptual and practical implementation.

In addition to emotional competencies, knowledge-based leadership components showed strong explanatory power in the validated model. This aligns with research emphasizing that knowledge management, organizational learning, and intellectual capital form the backbone of leadership effectiveness in modern organizations (13). Studies in knowledge-intensive teamwork environments reveal that leaders must be skilled in leveraging tacit knowledge, managing human resource systems, and fostering collaborative learning in order to enable performance outcomes (8). Similarly, empirical research in university settings suggests that smart leadership enhances faculty performance, strengthens critical thinking, and supports long-term organizational development (18). These findings collectively support the conclusion that knowledge-driven leadership functions as a core structural component of smart leadership in academic institutions such as Farhangian University.

Digital and innovative leadership emerged as another influential dimension, reflecting the transformational shift in educational management driven by digitalization, virtual learning environments, and data-based decision-making. The strong validity indicators for this component align with scholarship emphasizing global leadership competencies in technologically complex environments (7). Smart leadership, in its modern conceptualization, requires leaders to interpret data, integrate digital tools, and foster innovation-oriented cultures within their institutions (25). Research examining smart leadership in organizational accounting contexts reinforces that leaders who can effectively integrate information technologies demonstrate improved decision-making accuracy and organizational adaptability (17). Additionally, comparative studies of leadership in sport organizations in Iraq show a growing need for leaders who combine traditional leadership competencies with digital literacy and data-oriented thinking (19). These converging perspectives underscore that technological and innovative leadership is indispensable for future-oriented educational governance.

Equally important was the high significance of culturally grounded leadership dimensions, particularly smart culture-based leadership and value-based leadership, which reflect the distinctive cultural, ethical, and institutional context of Iranian universities. Prior studies on smart leadership in Iran consistently demonstrate that cultural factors, moral reasoning, and value systems strongly influence leadership behaviors and organizational outcomes (11). Research on intelligent spiritual leadership similarly highlights the central role of ethics, integrity, and collective identity within Iranian leadership models (10). Soft-power leadership studies conducted in government organizations confirm that leaders must incorporate cultural sensitivity, trust building, and symbolic influence into their leadership strategies to be effective (12). The strong performance of cultural and ethical components in the validated model therefore reinforces the conclusion that smart leadership, especially in Farhangian University, cannot be fully understood without recognizing its cultural and moral foundations.

Another key finding was the significance of resilience and talent-based leadership, which reflects the challenges faced by contemporary educational institutions, including workforce shortages, organizational reforms, digital acceleration, and increasing stakeholder expectations. Resilience has become an essential competency in leadership literature, as leaders in complex institutions must adapt rapidly to change, maintain stability during crises, and support organizational well-being. This finding resonates with studies that emphasize smart leadership as a capability that integrates adaptability, strategic foresight, and proactive problem-solving (22). Similarly, talent-based leadership has gained attention in recent research, suggesting that leaders who nurture employee talent, empower teams, and promote intellectual growth contribute significantly to organizational success (9). The strong presence of talent-oriented components in the validated model aligns with global leadership frameworks calling for talent cultivation as a strategic priority for universities and other learning organizations.

In addition, network leadership and collective leadership demonstrated strong validation results, emphasizing the need for collaboration, partnership building, and distributed leadership in contemporary educational settings. These components align

with theoretical perspectives that highlight the importance of relational networks, cross-team cooperation, and shared governance in promoting organizational effectiveness (7, 8). Empirical investigations in both public and academic organizations suggest that smart leadership increasingly involves facilitating collective intelligence, leveraging diverse competencies, and fostering distributed decision-making structures (16). These findings support the argument that smart leadership is inherently collaborative and must be viewed as a shared organizational process rather than an individualistic leadership style.

The validation results also reinforce that smart leadership contributes to enhancing organizational citizenship behavior, empathy, and collective engagement within educational institutions. Prior research indicates that when leaders demonstrate emotional insight, value-based action, and relational competence, employees exhibit stronger commitment, altruism, and cooperative behaviors (14). Similar studies conducted with female educators confirm that smart leadership fosters psychological support, personal development, and organizational identification, ultimately leading to more cohesive and high-performing school environments (15). These findings are consistent with the current study's results, suggesting that smart leadership not only contributes to managerial effectiveness but also enhances the social and emotional dynamics of educational institutions.

Furthermore, the results support the broader theoretical proposition that smart leadership is a multidimensional construct that integrates emotional intelligence, digital capability, cultural awareness, ethical reasoning, resilience, knowledge management, and collaborative competence. This aligns with theoretical frameworks emphasizing leadership as an integrative, process-oriented, and context-sensitive phenomenon (1). The strong discriminant and convergent validity observed across all nine components underscores the coherence and integrity of the smart leadership construct as operationalized in this study. Additionally, the strong Goodness-of-Fit index reinforces that the model is both empirically robust and theoretically grounded, making it suitable for application in the managerial development programs of Farhangian University.

Finally, the results align with the increasing national and international focus on leadership development in educational environments. Studies examining smart leadership in Islamic Azad University indicate the need for standardized models that guide leadership training frameworks (20). Comparative studies in Iran and other countries confirm that smart leadership must be systematically cultivated through organizational learning, targeted training, and structural reform (21, 25). The validation of this model therefore contributes significantly to the ongoing scholarly and practical effort to define and operationalize smart leadership in the educational landscape.

This study is limited by its reliance on self-reported data from managers and faculty members, which may be influenced by perceptual bias or social desirability. The study was confined to Farhangian University in Mazandaran Province, limiting the generalizability of findings to other provinces or academic institutions. The cross-sectional design also restricts the ability to determine causal relationships among variables, and qualitative insights, though rich, were dependent on a relatively small sample size. Additionally, rapid changes in digital leadership competencies and educational technologies may require ongoing model updates to maintain relevance.

Future studies should expand the sample to include multiple universities across Iran to enhance the generalizability of the smart leadership model. Longitudinal research designs would help assess causal relationships and track changes in leadership competencies over time. Future studies could also integrate observational data, behavioral assessments, or 360-degree evaluations to complement self-reported measures. Exploring the influence of organizational culture, digital maturity, and policy reforms on smart leadership would further contribute to refining the model. Finally, comparative studies with international universities could reveal global-regional distinctions in smart leadership dimensions.

Institutions should incorporate the validated components of smart leadership into leadership development programs, emphasizing emotional intelligence, resilience, digital competence, and collaborative decision-making. Structured training modules and mentoring systems can support managers in strengthening these competencies. Universities should create environments that promote knowledge-sharing, innovation, and continuous learning, while ensuring alignment between leadership behaviors and institutional values. Leadership performance evaluations should include smart leadership indicators, and professional development frameworks should be updated to reflect the multidimensional nature of smart leadership.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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