

Leader, Follower, or Both? Unpacking Students Leadership Identity: Implications towards Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

Rozita Ibrahim*, Muhammad Fauzannaim Badrul Hisham, Zurina Mahadi & Wardah Mustafa Din
School of Liberal Studies (Pusat Pengajian Citra Universiti), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600
UKM Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

Understanding how university students see themselves as leaders or followers is crucial for designing effective leadership-development curricula. This study explores the leadership self-perceptions of undergraduate students, focusing on the factors that influence their identity perception and whether gender plays a role in this process. This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. Data were collected from 243 undergraduate students (162 female, 81 male) enrolled in a liberal education course titled 'Leadership and Interpersonal Skills' at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia during Semester 1 (2025-2026) and Semester 2 (2024-2025). Quantitative analysis included descriptive statistics and chi-square tests to examine the relationship between gender and leadership identity. Qualitative data from student self-introductions on Padlet were analysed using thematic analysis to identify key themes in the reasons behind their self-perceptions. Analysis was conducted using Excel for quantitative data and manual coding for qualitative data. The majority of students identified as "Both" a leader and a follower, followed by "Leader", and "Follower". While there was no statistically significant association between gender and the three leadership identity categories, a simplified analysis of "Leader" vs. "Non-Leader" revealed that male students were significantly more likely to identify solely as leaders compared to female students. Thematic analysis revealed five major themes: (1) the fluidity of leadership and followership, (2) the influence of past experience, (3) the value of learning and development, (4) leadership as responsibility, and (5) personal preference and comfort. Students in this study perceive leadership not as a fixed role but as a fluid and context-dependent practice. The findings suggest that leadership education should emphasize the development of both leadership and followership skills, recognizing that effective team members must be able to navigate both roles. The small but significant gender difference in leadership self-perception warrants further investigation and consideration in co-curricular program design. Institutions should create more opportunities for students to practice leadership in diverse contexts and should explicitly teach the value of followership as a complement to leadership.

Keywords: followership, higher education, leadership development, leadership education, liberal education

INTRODUCTION

Leadership development in higher education has emerged as a strategic priority for universities worldwide. As graduates enter an increasingly complex, technology-driven, and globalized workforce, higher education institutions are expected to cultivate not only disciplinary expertise but also leadership and interpersonal competencies essential for success in the 21st century (Mohamud et al. 2025). The cultivation of leadership capacity is not merely a matter of teaching managerial skills or theoretical knowledge; it is a developmental process of identity formation. Students must first perceive themselves as capable of leadership before they can effectively enact it in their personal, academic, and professional contexts.

In Malaysia, leadership education has become integral to national higher education goals. The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015–2025 (Higher Education) emphasizes the importance of developing holistic, entrepreneurial and balanced graduates equipped with leadership, ethics, and professional skills to meet future challenges (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia [MOHE], 2015; Abd Rashid et al., 2022). This agenda has driven universities such as Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) to incorporate liberal education courses,

known as *Kursus Citra Universiti*, into undergraduate programs. These courses are designed to strengthen soft skills, critical thinking, communication, and leadership capabilities through interdisciplinary and experiential learning. Within this framework, leadership identity development is viewed as a key outcome of holistic education and civic engagement (Muslim et al., 2025; Basir & Alias, 2015).

Leadership identity, however, is dynamic and context-dependent. It evolves through social interaction and reflection, as students engage in academic, co-curricular, and community experiences that challenge their assumptions about leadership and followership (Odom & Dunn, 2023). University years represent a critical period for this identity formation, as students explore new roles, experiment with influence and responsibility, and begin constructing professional identities. Understanding how students perceive themselves as leaders or as followers is essential for designing responsive leadership education programs that nurture both confidence and collaboration (Sorenson et al., 2016).

Moreover, contemporary leadership scholarship underscores the interdependence of leadership and followership rather than their opposition. Effective leaders must understand how to be effective followers, and vice versa. Emphasizing followership within leadership education promotes humility, adaptability, and mutual learning, skills that are central to collaborative problem-solving in higher education and the workplace (Sorenson et al., 2016). However, leadership curricula often prioritize leader-centric models, leaving followership underexplored (Haber-Curran & Pierre, 2023).

Gender also plays a significant role in leadership identity construction. Studies consistently show that men and women differ in their self-perceptions and preferred leadership styles, often reflecting broader societal expectations (Baiduri et al., 2023). For example, research in Middle Eastern and Asian higher education contexts found that women tend to exhibit stronger transformational leadership orientations, emphasizing mentorship and collaboration, whereas men show a preference for transactional or directive leadership behaviour (Alharthi, 2024). These gendered dynamics can influence whether students identify themselves as leaders, followers, or both, underscoring the need for inclusive leadership development that empowers both genders equally (Komives, 2012).

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates how undergraduate students at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) perceive their own leadership identities. Specifically, it explores the factors shaping these perceptions such as past experience, self-efficacy, and learning orientation and examines whether gender differences influence how students identify as leaders, followers, or both. Understanding these self-perceptions will contribute to the design of more inclusive and contextually relevant leadership education practices in Malaysian higher education, particularly within liberal education settings that aim to cultivate holistic and adaptive graduates for the 21st century.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Nature of Leadership in Higher Education

Leadership studies in higher education have evolved from traditional hierarchical models toward collaborative and distributed paradigms emphasizing shared responsibility and empowerment (Sachar, 2025). Earlier models prioritized the traits and authority of individual leaders, but contemporary approaches such as transformational and distributed leadership stress inclusivity, shared vision, and participative decision-making. Transformational leadership has been shown to enhance trust, engagement, and innovation among staff and students (Vaughn et al., 2024). Distributed leadership recognizes that leadership can emerge from any level within an organization and is essential for fostering adaptability and collective learning (Hammershaimb, 2018). This model is especially relevant in higher education, where academic and administrative responsibilities are decentralized. Research also highlights the growing importance of followership in understanding organizational effectiveness. Effective institutions depend on individuals who can fluidly transition between leading and following based on situational demands (Othman & Busari, 2024). Students who received structured followership education exhibited higher team adaptability and reflective awareness, supporting the idea that leadership identity involves mastering both roles. This emphasis on “role fluidity” reinforces the need for higher education curricula that integrate leadership and followership development holistically (Odom & Dunn, 2023; Thompson, 2020).

Gender and Leadership

Gender is a critical dimension of leadership identity that has received considerable attention in the literature. Research has consistently shown that women face unique challenges in leadership roles, including stereotypes that associate leadership with masculine traits and behaviors (Setyaningrum & Juansih, 2024). Young (2004) and Amaechi (2020) found that women managers in higher education felt compelled to adopt male gender paradigms characterized by traits such as being disciplined, evaluative, formal, and objective to be regarded as “real” managers. This finding suggests that gender stereotypes create barriers for women in leadership and may influence how women perceive themselves as leaders. However, the relationship between gender and leadership is complex and context dependent. Jacques, Vracheva, and Garger (2017) examined the effect of a leader’s gender on perceived leadership style and found that student personality traits, rather than the leader’s gender alone, influenced perceptions of transformational leadership. This suggests that while gender may play a role in leadership perceptions, it is not the only factor, and individual differences are also important.

Perriton (2022) examined Women’s Leadership Development Programs (WLDPs) and argued that these programs are unlikely to produce structural change because they are embedded in neoliberal and individualistic frameworks that place the burden of change on individual women rather than challenging systemic inequalities. This critique highlights the importance of addressing structural barriers to women’s leadership, rather than simply focusing on individual development (Madden, 2011).

In the Malaysian context, several studies have examined gender and leadership in higher education. Segovia-Perez et al. (2019) explored the impact of leadership programs on empowering female students and found that well-designed programs significantly enhanced female students’ self-confidence, leadership skills, and access to leadership opportunities. This finding suggests that targeted interventions can help to address gender disparities in leadership self-perception.

Followership as a Complement to Leadership

Modern leadership theory increasingly views followership as an active, engaged, and co-creative process essential to organizational success rather than being passive subordinates. Effective followers demonstrate critical thinking, courage, and collaboration qualities necessary for shared leadership dynamics (Baird & Benson, 2022). Sims (2025) conducted a systematic literature review and emphasized the conceptual ambiguity surrounding “followership”, calling for clearer definitions and frameworks. Sims (2025) later identified three essential followership behaviors - challenge, support, and seek guidance that underpin productive leader–follower interactions. Likewise, Jenkins and Throupe (2025) demonstrated that followership education fosters psychological safety, flexibility, and mutual respect in student teams.

This growing attention to followership call for a more integrated understanding of leadership systems, where leadership and followership are reciprocal and contextually dependent (Currie, 2014). In educational contexts, cultivating followership competence enhances collaboration, reduces team conflict, and strengthens students’ readiness for professional environments that demand adaptability and shared accountability (Gallegos et al., 2023).

Leadership Development in Malaysian Higher Education

In Malaysia, leadership development has become a key strategic priority under the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015–2025 (Higher Education), which calls for producing holistic, entrepreneurial, and balanced graduates (MOHE, 2015). Recent studies emphasize that university leadership programs must integrate experiential learning and reflective practice to develop both cognitive and interpersonal competencies (Bonesso et al., 2023).

Zainal Abidin and Abdullah (2025) investigated the Kem Bina Bakat Siswa (BAKAT) leadership camp at Universiti Putra Malaysia and found that experiential learning and peer facilitation effectively enhanced students’ confidence, teamwork, and ethical leadership. Similarly, Bashah (2025) reported that Malaysian student leaders prioritize integrity, emotional intelligence, and communication as core leadership attributes.

Institutional frameworks that promote student engagement, such as residential college programs have been shown to cultivate a culture of leadership development and community responsibility (Mustafa et al., 2025).

At Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), liberal education initiatives (*Pendidikan Citra*) explicitly aim to build 21st-century skills, including leadership, collaboration, and intercultural awareness (Muslim et al., 2025). These initiatives reinforce Malaysia's shift toward competency-based education, where leadership development is not confined to formal positions but embedded across academic and co-curricular experiences (Rocco & Priest, 2023).

Research Gap and Study Objectives

While the literature provides valuable insights into leadership styles, competencies, and development programs, there is a gap in understanding how students themselves perceive their leadership identities and the factors that influence these perceptions. Most studies focus on measuring leadership competencies or evaluating the effectiveness of leadership programs, but fewer studies have explored the subjective experience of leadership identity construction from the students' perspective. Moreover, while gender differences in leadership have been extensively studied, less is known about how gender influences students' self-perceptions as leaders, followers, or both in the Malaysian higher education context.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating the following research questions:

RQ1: How do students in a leadership course perceive their own leadership identity (leader, follower, or both)?

RQ2: Why do students perceive themselves as a leader, follower, or both; and what themes emerge from their explanations?

RQ3: Are there gender differences in leadership self-perception among students?

By answering these questions, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of leadership identity development in higher education and to provide practical insights for the design of leadership education programs.

METHOD

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to investigate the leadership self-perceptions of undergraduate students. In line with explanatory sequential design, quantitative data were collected and analysed first, followed by qualitative data collection and analysis to help explain and elaborate on the quantitative findings (Blegur et al., 2024). This design is particularly appropriate when the goal is to use qualitative data to provide context and depth to quantitative results.

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), a leading public research university in Malaysia. Participants were undergraduate students enrolled in a liberal education course titled "Leadership and Interpersonal Skills". The course is an elective open to students from all faculties and years of study, providing a diverse sample of the student population. Data were collected from two sections of the course: one section from Semester 1 (2025-2026) and one section from Semester 2 (2024-2025). A total of 243 students participated in the study. The sample consisted of 162 female students (66.7%) and 81 male students (33.3%). Students represented a range of faculties, including the Faculty of Education, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Faculty of Science and Technology, Faculty of Economics and Management, Faculty of Information Science and Technology, and Faculty of Islamic Studies.

Instruments and Measures

Data were collected through an introductory Padlet activity conducted at the beginning of the course. Students were asked to post a self-introduction that included the following elements:

1. Basic demographic information (name, year of study, faculty)
2. A statement about whether they considered themselves a leader, a follower, or both
3. An explanation of the reasons for their self-identification

Following to (Rath, 2025) the Padlet platform was chosen because it allows for asynchronous participation and provides a record of all student responses. The open-ended nature of the task allowed students to express their views in their own words, providing rich qualitative data for analysis.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis: The quantitative analysis focused on the distribution of leadership identities and the relationship between gender and leadership identity. First, each student's response was coded into one of four categories based on their self-identification: "Leader," "Follower," "Both," or "Unknown" (for responses that did not clearly indicate a leadership identity). The coding was conducted through a systematic keyword analysis of the text, looking for explicit statements such as "I consider myself a leader" or "I prefer to be a follower".

Descriptive statistics were calculated to determine the frequency and percentage of students in each leadership identity category, as well as the gender distribution. A chi-square test for independence was conducted to examine whether there was a significant association between gender and leadership identity. The chi-square test was performed using the three main categories (Leader, Follower, Both), excluding the "Unknown" category due to the small number of cases ($n=7$). Effect size was calculated using Cramér's V. A second chi-square test was conducted using a simplified binary classification of "Leader" vs. "Non-Leader" (combining Follower and Both) to provide additional insight into gender differences.

Qualitative Analysis: The qualitative analysis employed thematic analysis following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2016). The analysis proceeded as follows:

1. **Familiarization with the data:** All student responses were read multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content.
2. **Generating initial codes:** Responses were coded for key concepts related to leadership identity, including reasons for self-identification and relevant experiences. Codes were generated inductively from the data.
3. **Searching for themes:** Codes were grouped into potential themes based on patterns and commonalities across responses.
4. **Reviewing themes:** Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data and were distinct from one another.
5. **Defining and naming themes:** Each theme was clearly defined and given a descriptive name.
6. **Producing the report:** Representative quotes were selected to illustrate each theme, and the themes were interpreted in relation to the research questions and existing literature.

The analysis was conducted manually, with careful attention to preserving the meaning and context of students' statements. Both Malay and English language responses were analysed, with Malay quotes translated into English for reporting purposes.

Reliability and Validity

Several steps were taken to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings. For the quantitative analysis, the coding of leadership identity was based on explicit statements in the text, reducing the potential for subjective interpretation. For the qualitative analysis, the use of a systematic thematic analysis approach provided a clear

analytical process. Representative quotes were selected to provide evidence for each theme, allowing readers to assess the credibility of the interpretations.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. First, the data were collected from a single course at a single institution, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the self-reported nature of the data means that students' responses may be influenced by social desirability bias or by their understanding of what the instructor expected. Third, the cross-sectional design does not allow for an examination of how leadership identity develops over time. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into how students perceive their leadership identities and the factors that shape these perceptions.

FINDINGS

Quantitative Results

Overall Distribution of Leadership Identity

Of the 243 students who participated in the study, 236 (97.1%) provided clear statements about their leadership identity, while 7 (2.9%) did not clearly indicate whether they saw themselves as a leader, follower, or both. Among those who provided clear statements, 181 students (74.5%) identified as "Both" a leader and a follower, 34 students (14.0%) identified as a "Leader," and 21 students (8.6%) identified as a "Follower."

Table 1: Distribution of Leadership Identity

Leadership Identity	Frequency	Percentage
Both	181	74.5%
Leader	34	14.0%
Follower	21	8.6%
Unknown	7	2.9%
Total	243	100.0%

The finding that nearly three-quarters of students identified as "Both" is noteworthy and suggests that students have a nuanced understanding of leadership that goes beyond the traditional binary of leader versus follower. This finding aligns with contemporary theories of distributed and shared leadership, which emphasize the importance of role flexibility and situational awareness.

Gender Distribution

The sample consisted of 162 female students (66.7%) and 81 male students (33.3%). This gender distribution is consistent with the overall enrolment patterns at UKM, where female students constitute the majority of the undergraduate population.

Table 2: Gender Distribution

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Female	162	66.7%
Male	81	33.3%
Total	243	100.0%

Gender and Leadership Identity

A cross-tabulation of gender and leadership identity revealed some interesting patterns. Among female students, 79.6% identified as “Both”, 10.5% as “Leader”, and 8.6% as “Follower”. Among male students, 64.2% identified as “Both”, 21.0% as “Leader”, and 8.6% as “Follower”. Notably, male students were twice as likely as female students to identify solely as leaders (21.0% vs. 10.5%).

Table 3: Cross-tabulation of Gender and Leadership Identity

Gender	Both	Follower	Leader	Total
Female	129 (79.6%)	14 (8.6%)	17 (10.5%)	160
Male	52 (64.2%)	7 (8.6%)	17 (21.0%)	76
Total	181 (76.7%)	21 (8.9%)	34 (14.4%)	236

Note: Excludes 7 cases with unknown leadership identity.

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between gender and leadership identity. The test revealed that the relationship approached, but did not reach, conventional levels of statistical significance, $\chi^2(2, N = 236) = 5.95$, $p = .051$, Cramér’s $V = 0.16$. The effect size (Cramér’s $V = 0.16$) indicates a small effect. While the p-value of .051 is just above the conventional alpha level of .05, it suggests a trend that warrants further investigation.

Table 4: Chi-Square Test Results (Three Categories)

Statistic	Value
χ^2	5.95
df	2
p-value	.051
Cramér’s V	0.16
Effect Size	Small

To further explore the gender difference, a simplified analysis was conducted comparing students who identified as “Leader” versus “Non-Leader” (combining “Follower” and “Both”). This analysis revealed a statistically significant association between gender and leadership identity, $\chi^2(1, N = 236) = 4.85$, $p = .028$, Cramér’s $V = 0.14$. Male students were significantly more likely to identify solely as leaders compared to female students.

Table 5: Chi-Square Test Results (Leader vs. Non-Leader)

Statistic	Value
χ^2	4.85
df	1
p-value	.028
Cramér’s V	0.14

Effect Size	Small
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Table 6: Cross-tabulation of Gender and Leader vs. Non-Leader

Gender	Leader	Non-Leader	Total
Female	17 (10.5%)	143 (89.5%)	160
Male	17 (21.0%)	59 (79.0%)	76
Total	34 (14.4%)	202 (85.6%)	236

While the effect size is small, the finding that male students are twice as likely to identify solely as leaders is practically significant and suggests that gender may influence how students perceive their leadership identities.

Qualitative Results

The thematic analysis of student responses revealed five major themes that illuminate how students construct their leadership identities and the factors that influence their self-perceptions.

Theme 1: The Fluidity of Leadership and Followership

The most prominent theme that emerged from the data was the recognition that leadership and followership are not mutually exclusive roles but rather complementary and situational. Students who identified as “Both” consistently expressed the view that effective team members must be able to move fluidly between leading and following depending on the context, the task, and the strengths of team members (Gallegos et al., 2023). One student wrote:

In my view, I consider myself both a leader and a follower. I have been entrusted with leadership positions in several school organizations that required me to lead other students. At the same time, I also consider myself a follower because this allows me to gain knowledge and skills from leaders so that I can become a more responsible leader.

Another student emphasized the situational nature of leadership:

In my opinion, I like to consider myself as both a good leader and follower. I follow each different situation and I respond to what is needed from me. I like to lead projects related to my strengths, but I am also happy to follow the instructions of others who may be more suitable to be a leader.

This theme aligns with contemporary theories of distributed leadership and with the concept of “role-ing” identified by Jenkins and Throupe (2025), which emphasizes the importance of role flexibility and situational awareness in effective team functioning.

Theme 2: The Influence of Past Experience

Past experience in formal leadership roles emerged as a major factor influencing students’ leadership self-perception. Students who had held positions such as club president, prefect, or student council member frequently cited these experiences as evidence of their leadership capabilities Anjum, Kalsoom & Batool (2023). This theme was particularly prominent among students who identified as “Leader.”

One student who identified as a leader wrote:

For me, I feel I am a leader because I have successfully been the Chief Executive of the Student Council for 2 consecutive sessions and alhamdulillah, there have been many leadership awards that I have received both domestically and internationally.

However, past experience was not limited to those who identified as leaders. Many students who identified as “Both” also cited past leadership experiences but emphasized that they had learned from both leading and

following (Priest & Seemiller, 2018). This finding is consistent with (Eftenaru, 2024) who found that prior leadership experience was associated with more positive attitudes toward leadership.

Theme 3: The Value of Learning and Development

Many students, particularly those who identified as followers or both, expressed a strong desire to learn and develop their leadership skills. They viewed followership not as a passive or inferior role but as an opportunity to observe, learn from others, and prepare for future leadership responsibilities (Bunin et al., 2022). This theme reflects a growth mindset and a recognition that leadership is a skill that can be developed over time.

One student who identified as a follower wrote:

For me, I am more skilled at being a follower than a leader at this time. From my experience being a program leader for a program under my club, I found it difficult to direct my subordinates to do work, especially when unexpected things happened. I prefer to do it myself and solve it myself. But I know this is not very good for myself and the program organization. Therefore, I hope that from this course, I can learn leadership talents and become a more courageous, responsible leader who carries out tasks well.

This quote illustrates similar view from Thompson (2020), that the self-awareness and reflective capacity of students who identify as followers. Rather than viewing followership as a fixed identity, this student sees it as a current state that can be changed through learning and development.

Theme 4: Leadership as Responsibility

Students across all three identity categories frequently associated leadership with a sense of responsibility and a commitment to achieving group goals. They emphasized the importance of being accountable, ensuring that all team members contribute, and serving the needs of the organization. This theme reflects a servant leadership orientation and a recognition that leadership is not about personal power or status but about service to others.

One student wrote:

Leadership is not about being in charge. It is about taking care of those in your charge.

Another student explained:

When you become a leader, you are not given a crown, you are given the responsibility to bring out the best in others.

Theme 5: Personal Preference and Comfort

Personal preference and comfort emerged as a significant factor influencing leadership identity, particularly among students who identified as followers. This is in line with Larsson and Nielsen (2021) findings. Students in this study expressed a preference for working under the guidance of others and following established systems and procedures. They emphasized that they felt more comfortable and effective in a follower role.

One student who identified as a follower wrote:

For me, I am someone who acts as a follower because I prefer to work under someone's leadership and follow the established system and tasks. I also like to observe and learn to be a good follower based on the leadership style of each leader.

The quantitative analysis also examined whether there were gender differences in the reasons students gave for their leadership identity. The results revealed some interesting patterns. Female students were more likely to cite personal preference (67.3% vs. 54.3%), while male students were more likely to cite past experience (60.5% vs. 52.5%) and a sense of responsibility (43.2% vs. 37.0%). These differences, while not large, suggest that gender may influence how students frame and justify their leadership identities.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into how undergraduate students in a Malaysian university perceive their leadership identities and the factors that shape these perceptions. The results have important implications for leadership education and development in higher education.

The Fluidity of Leadership Identity

The most striking finding of this study is that the vast majority of students (74.5%) identified as “Both” a leader and a follower. This finding challenges the traditional binary view of leadership and suggests that students have a sophisticated understanding of leadership as a fluid and context-dependent practice. Rather than seeing themselves as either leaders or followers, most students recognize that effective team members must be able to navigate both roles depending on the situation.

This finding aligns with contemporary theories of distributed and shared leadership, which emphasize that leadership can emerge from any position within an organization and that effective organizations require individuals who can move fluidly between leading and following. It also aligns with the concept of “role-ing” identified by Jenkins and Throupe (2025), which describes a heightened state of role differentiation and consciousness in which individuals are aware of the different roles they play and can adapt their behavior accordingly.

The recognition of the fluidity of leadership and followership has important implications for leadership education. Rather than focusing exclusively on developing leadership skills, leadership development programs should also emphasize the development of followership skills. Students need to understand that being an effective follower is not a sign of weakness or passivity but rather an essential complement to leadership. Programs should teach students how to provide constructive challenge, offer support, and seek guidance, the core followership behaviors identified by Sims (2025).

The Influence of Gender on Leadership Identity

While the overall association between gender and leadership identity (using the three categories of Leader, Follower, and Both) did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance ($p = .051$), the simplified analysis comparing “Leader” vs. “Non-Leader” revealed a significant gender difference ($p = .028$). Male students were twice as likely as female students to identify solely as leaders (21.0% vs. 10.5%). This finding, while based on a small effect size (Cramér’s $V = 0.14$), is practically significant and warrants further investigation. The gender difference in leadership self-perception may reflect the influence of societal gender stereotypes that associate leadership with masculine traits and behaviors. As Young (2004) found, women in leadership roles often feel pressure to adopt more masculine leadership styles to be perceived as legitimate leaders. This pressure may lead some female students to be more cautious about identifying themselves as leaders, even when they have leadership experience and capabilities. The finding that female students were more likely to cite personal preference as a reason for their leadership identity (67.3% vs. 54.3%) may also reflect gendered socialization. Women may be socialized to be more modest and less assertive about their leadership capabilities, leading them to frame their leadership identity in terms of personal preference rather than objective qualifications.

These findings have important implications for leadership education. Educators need to be aware of the potential influence of gender stereotypes on students’ leadership self-perceptions and should work to create inclusive learning environments that empower all students to see themselves as leaders. This may involve explicitly challenging gender stereotypes, providing female students with role models and mentors, and creating opportunities for all students to practice leadership in diverse contexts. The findings from (Segovia-Perez et al., 2019) suggest that targeted leadership programs can be effective in enhancing female students’ self-confidence and leadership skills. Institutions should consider developing such programs to address gender disparities in leadership self-perception.

The Role of Experience in Shaping Leadership Identity

Past experience in formal leadership roles emerged as a major factor influencing students' leadership self-perception. This finding is consistent with Bergner et al., (2019), who found that prior leadership experience was associated with more positive attitudes toward leadership. It is also consistent with the developmental model of leadership identity proposed by Komives et al. (2009) which emphasizes the importance of practical experience in the development of leadership identity. However, it is important to note that leadership identity is not solely determined by past experience. Many students who identified as "Both" or "Follower" also had past leadership experience but emphasized that they had learned from both leading and following. This suggests by Di Pede (2024) that leadership identity is shaped not just by the quantity of leadership experience but also by the quality of that experience and by students' reflections on what they have learned.

The finding that past experience is important has practical implications for leadership development. Institutions should provide students with a variety of opportunities to practice leadership in both formal and informal settings. This may include leadership positions in student organizations, service-learning projects, peer mentoring programs, and experiential learning activities such as the BAKAT Camp described by Zainal Abidin and Abdullah (2025).

The Value of Followership and Learning Orientation

A significant finding of this study is that many students, particularly those who identified as followers or both, expressed a strong learning orientation. They viewed followership as an opportunity to observe, learn from others, and prepare for future leadership responsibilities. This finding challenges the common perception of followership as a passive or inferior role and highlights the active and developmental nature of effective followership.

The emphasis on learning and development aligns with the findings of Jenkins and Throupe (2025), who found that followership education positively influenced student team dynamics by fostering adaptability and role flexibility. It also aligns with the concept of psychological safety, which was identified as a key factor enabling students to experiment with different roles.

Leadership educators should explicitly teach the value of followership and help students understand that being an effective follower is an essential complement to leadership. This may involve incorporating followership education into leadership development programs, as Jenkins and Throupe (2025) did in their study. It may also involve creating learning environments that foster psychological safety and encourage students to experiment with different roles.

Leadership as Responsibility and Service

Students across all three identity categories frequently associated leadership with a sense of responsibility and a commitment to serving others. This finding reflects a servant leadership orientation and suggests that students understand that leadership is not about personal power or status but about service to the community. This finding is encouraging because it suggests that students have internalized positive values about leadership. However, it also raises questions about whether students fully understand the complexities and challenges of leadership. The emphasis on responsibility may reflect an idealized view of leadership that does not fully account for the difficult decisions, conflicts, and ethical dilemmas that leaders often face. Leadership education should help students develop a more nuanced understanding of leadership that includes not only the positive aspects of service and responsibility but also the challenges and complexities of leading in diverse and changing contexts (Kedemi, 2024). This may involve case studies, simulations, and reflective exercises that help students grapple with the ethical and practical challenges of leadership.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided valuable insights into how undergraduate students at a Malaysian university perceive their leadership identities. The findings reveal that students have a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of

leadership that goes beyond the traditional binary of leader versus follower. The majority of students recognize that effective team members must be able to navigate both leadership and followership roles depending on the context and the task at hand. The study also revealed a small but significant gender difference in leadership self-perception, with male students being more likely to identify solely as leaders. This finding suggests that gender stereotypes may continue to influence how students see themselves as leaders and highlights the importance of creating inclusive leadership development programs that empower all students to develop their leadership potential.

The results from the study offer several implications for university leadership curricular:

1. **Teach the leader–follower continuum.** Because most students see themselves as both leaders and followers, curricula should emphasise that leadership and followership are interdependent and situational. Activities that rotate students through leading and following—such as peer-teaching, group projects and role-play—can help them appreciate both perspectives.
2. **Build self-efficacy through experiential learning.** Students who identified as followers often cited lack of confidence. Low-risk opportunities (micro-leadership assignments, simulations) and reflective journals can allow students to practise leadership without fear of failure. Mentoring by senior students or alumni can model effective leadership and followership behaviours.
3. **Teach followership explicitly.** Followership is rarely addressed in curricula, yet research stresses that effective leaders must also be effective followers. Course modules can cover types of followership, ethical followership and constructive dissent. Readings such as Baird and Benson’s study on followership’s role in reducing team conflict can help students appreciate the value of followership.
4. **Address gendered perceptions.** Given gender differences in leadership self-perceptions and preferences, the curriculum should present diverse leadership styles and role models. Inviting leaders of different genders and cultural backgrounds can counter stereotypes and show that both men and women can engage in transformational and transactional leadership.
5. **Promote reflective practice.** Encouraging students to reflect on their leadership and followership experiences can help integrate theory with personal values. Reflection can also surface implicit biases and promote humility—a quality highlighted by many students who saw themselves as both leaders and followers.

Future research should examine leadership identity development over time using longitudinal designs, explore the intersection of gender with other dimensions of diversity, and investigate the relationship between leadership self-perception and actual leadership effectiveness. By continuing to deepen our understanding of how students construct their leadership identities, we can design more effective leadership development programs and better prepare students for the challenges of leadership in the 21st century.

In conclusion, this study highlights the importance of understanding students’ leadership self-perceptions as a foundation for effective leadership development. By recognizing the fluidity of leadership and followership, addressing gender disparities, and providing diverse opportunities for leadership practice, higher education institutions can foster the development of confident, capable, and inclusive leaders who are prepared to make positive contributions to their communities and organizations.

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