

Generational Perceptions of Leadership and Authority in Private Higher Education Institutions: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Intergenerational Dynamics in Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Zambia's private higher education expansion has catalysed unprecedented shifts in leadership structures, with younger individuals increasingly assuming roles traditionally associated with seniority and elderhood. This conceptual paper develops an integrated analytical framework for examining how generational identity, cultural expectations, and leadership behaviours intersect to shape perceptions of authority legitimacy and leadership effectiveness in private universities. Grounding the analysis in Social Identity Theory, Generational Cohort Theory, Cultural Dimensions Theory, Role Theory, and Emotional Intelligence frameworks—and enriching these with African philosophical perspectives including Ubuntu—the study proposes a unified conceptual model explicating age-leadership perception dynamics among academic and administrative staff. The framework positions manager age as the independent variable, perceived authority and leadership effectiveness as dual dependent variables, with emotional intelligence mediating these relationships while employee generational cohort and leadership style moderate them. Unlike existing Western-centric leadership models, the framework explicitly theorises age as a culturally embedded construct carrying symbolic authority value within high power-distance African societies. A qualitative multiple case study design across ten Lusaka-based private universities is proposed, employing purposive and maximum variation sampling for semi-structured interviews capturing diverse generational perspectives. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework will be complemented by rigorous trustworthiness measures including member checking, peer debriefing, and thick description. This research addresses a critical gap in African leadership scholarship by contextualising generational dynamics within Zambia's cultural setting where age traditionally equates with wisdom and decision-making authority. The study's contributions span four dimensions: theoretically, it advances a context-specific model integrating emotional intelligence as a mediating mechanism; methodologically, it demonstrates rigorous multiple case study application in African higher education research; contextually, it enriches African scholarship by centring indigenous philosophical perspectives; and practically, it offers evidence-based recommendations for leadership development, cross-generational collaboration, and inclusive governance in rapidly evolving private higher education institutions.

Keywords: Generational perceptions; Leadership authority; Higher education management; Private universities; Intergenerational dynamics; Zambia; Social Identity Theory; Cultural Dimensions; Emotional Intelligence; Ubuntu; African higher education

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary workplace presents an unprecedented phenomenon whereby multiple generations coexist and interact within organisational settings. According to the World Economic Forum (2014), 86% of experts stated that the world is experiencing a leadership crisis, with leaders inadequately prepared to manage the new multigenerational workforce. For the first time in modern organisational history, the workforce encompasses as

many as five distinct generations working alongside one another from Traditionalists and Baby Boomers to Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z each shaped by distinct values, communication styles, and career expectations (Zemke et al., 2000; Purdue Global, 2024). This demographic transformation has profound implications for leadership and authority, particularly in how different age cohorts perceive, respond to, and exercise leadership in professional environments such as higher education institutions.

By 2025, Millennials and Generation Z are projected to comprise nearly 75% of the global workforce (Ernst & Young, 2015; Purdue Global, 2024), bringing with them new definitions of success, motivation, and workplace support expectations. Generation Z alone, with its more than two billion representatives in the world population, is expected to form 30% of the global labour force by 2050 (Chomałowska et al., 2022). This issue has become critically important as Generation Z's transition to leadership positions will occur in the short term due to their rapid entry into the labour market, necessitating focus on transformations in workplaces and leadership styles (Mărginean, 2021; Lazar et al., 2023).

Higher education in Zambia has experienced remarkable expansion in recent years. According to the Higher Education Authority (HEA, 2022), the country hosts 61 universities nationwide, comprising 52 private institutions and 9 public ones. This rapid growth has placed new demands on institutional leadership, particularly within private universities concentrated in Lusaka. Concurrent with this expansion, academic staffing has increased modestly from 5,553 academic staff in 2021 to 5,597 in 2022, with over 62% now serving in private institutions (HEA, 2022). However, comprehensive data regarding the age distribution of these staff members remains unavailable, presenting a gap that complicates the assessment of generational representation among university leaders.

Unlike the traditional public university system where seniority and years of service often dictated leadership roles, private universities are increasingly appointing younger individuals to managerial and administrative positions. This shift has redefined organisational dynamics, raising important questions about how authority and legitimacy are perceived across generational lines. In a cultural context such as Zambia, where age is frequently equated with wisdom, competence, and authority—rooted in African philosophical traditions including Ubuntu, which emphasises communal respect, interconnectedness, and the wisdom of elders (Mbigi, 2005; Ncube, 2010) the rise of younger leaders in positions traditionally reserved for older professionals presents both opportunities and challenges for institutional governance.

This paper presents a conceptual framework for investigating how generational identity influences perceptions of leadership effectiveness, authority, and managerial legitimacy within Zambia's private higher education sector. It is important to clarify the paper's scope: as a conceptual contribution, the primary aim is to develop and articulate an integrated analytical framework grounded in multiple theoretical perspectives. The methodological section outlines the proposed research design through which the framework will be empirically tested in subsequent phases of the research programme, thereby providing methodological transparency while maintaining the paper's conceptual focus. The study addresses the following research questions: (1) How do employees perceive the leadership effectiveness of younger compared to older managers in private universities? (2) In what ways do generational differences influence employees' perceptions of authority and managerial legitimacy? (3) How does leadership style interact with age to shape employees' perceptions of authority? (4) What are the implications of generational perceptions for institutional culture and decision-making?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Age-Related Dynamics in Workplace Leadership

Age diversity in the workplace has increasingly been recognised as a critical factor influencing interpersonal dynamics, employee productivity, and perceptions of leadership. According to Costanza et al. (2012), generational differences significantly shape values, communication styles, and expectations from leaders. Recent research by Mahmoud et al. (2024) demonstrates that there are notable cognitive and social differences across generations that contribute to the development of dissimilar values, causing variations in mental attitudes and behaviours in technologically disrupted generationally diverse workplaces. Van Rossem (2021) asserts that data

regarding multigenerational variations in work-related factors such as work values, personal characteristics, leadership preferences, and motivation remain fragmented, warranting more empirical investigations.

Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) often value loyalty, discipline, and strong respect for hierarchical structures, while Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) tend to prioritise flexibility, inclusion, and real-time feedback, which can clash with more traditional leadership models (Twenge & Campbell, 2008). According to a 2023 Deloitte report, Gen Z and Millennials are pushing for greater flexibility, meaningful work, and mental health support, often clashing with older generations' more traditional approaches to structure and hierarchy. A Gallup study found that 60% of Millennials and Gen Z want feedback a few times per week, yet only 19% of managers actually provide it that frequently (Gallup, 2016). These generational divergences may lead to intergenerational tension within teams, but they also offer opportunities for mentorship, knowledge transfer, and workplace innovation.

Table 1: Generational Cohorts and Their Workplace Characteristics

Generation	Birth Years	Core Values	Leadership Preferences
Baby Boomers	1946–1964	Loyalty, discipline, hierarchy, hard work, stability	Traditional, structured, experience-based authority
Generation X	1965–1980	Independence, adaptability, work-life balance, scepticism	Results-driven, informal, autonomous
Millennials (Gen Y)	1981–1996	Collaboration, purpose, inclusion, technology, flexibility	Participative, transformational, feedback-oriented
Generation Z	After 1996	Digital fluency, entrepreneurship, transparency, authenticity	Transparent, rapid progression, work-life integration

Source: Adapted from Zemke et al. (2000); Twenge (2023); Deloitte (2023)

Authority Dynamics in Academic Settings

Academic institutions operate within complex authority structures that combine formal hierarchies with informal academic and intellectual power. Traditionally, authority structure in universities has been shaped by Weber's (1947) bureaucratic model, which emphasises legitimate authority derived from rank, qualifications, and institutional role. However, contemporary academic culture suggests that influence and authority are often negotiated through informal mechanisms such as academic reputation, research output, and professional networks (Foucault, 1980; Bourdieu, 1986). Recent scholarship by Jansen (2023) on South African universities highlights how governance challenges and leadership crises continue to affect higher education institutions across the continent.

This dual structure of formal administrative authority versus informal scholarly authority can lead to tensions, especially when younger or less-experienced faculty are placed in leadership positions over more senior academics. Ng and Feldman (2010) found that older leaders are generally perceived as experienced, emotionally stable, and dependable; however, they are sometimes stereotyped as resistant to technological change or lacking adaptability. Conversely, younger leaders tend to be seen as innovative, energetic, and digitally proficient, but may be viewed as inexperienced or lacking the maturity to manage complex institutional environments. In academic settings where leadership legitimacy often hinges on intellectual credentials and tenure, younger leaders frequently struggle to gain full acceptance from senior colleagues (Kezar & Eckel, 2008).

A recent systematic review on leadership crisis in African higher education in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) era found that African institutions face unprecedented challenges in embracing new leadership paradigms (Lubinga et al., 2024). UNESCO (2024) further notes that significant barriers persist in African higher education, including low enrolment rates in tertiary education, inadequate alignment between academic programmes and labour market demands, and the underrepresentation of women in academia and leadership roles. The study by

Wang et al. (2024) on generational diversity and team innovation found that generational diversity predicts both cognitive and affective conflicts, which subsequently exert opposing effects on team innovation, with shared leadership positively moderating these relationships.

Leadership Dynamics in African Higher Education

Within the African context, cultural traditions place high value on age, often linking elderhood with respect and authority (Nkomo, 2011). This cultural respect for elders is deeply embedded in African philosophical traditions, particularly the concept of Ubuntu a Southern African philosophy emphasising communal interdependence, collective responsibility, and the recognition that individual identity is constituted through relationships with others (Mbigi, 2005; Ncube, 2010). Ubuntu's assertion that "I am because we are" carries significant implications for leadership, as it positions authority within relational and communal frameworks where elders are regarded as custodians of collective wisdom and moral guidance (Khoza, 2006; Msila, 2008). In many African institutional contexts, including universities, seniority and elderhood confer not merely positional authority but moral and ontological legitimacy rooted in Ubuntu philosophy.

From postcolonial organisational perspectives, African higher education institutions exist at the intersection of inherited colonial bureaucratic structures and indigenous governance traditions (Dei, 2000; Chilisa, 2012). The tension between Western meritocratic leadership models and African age-based authority systems reflects broader postcolonial negotiations about knowledge, power, and institutional legitimacy. This intersection is particularly salient in private universities, where market-driven imperatives for innovation and efficiency may privilege younger, technologically fluent leaders, while institutional cultures retain deep commitments to age-based respect and hierarchical deference.

Nonetheless, the pressure to modernise and adopt more inclusive and meritocratic leadership models has introduced complexity in these age-based hierarchies (Moyi & Rono, 2019). Studies reveal that younger managers in African universities view their leadership roles as catalysts for institutional transformation, while older managers see themselves as custodians of tradition and academic standards (Banda & Moyo, 2018). In Zambia specifically, the rapid growth of private universities has introduced younger academic managers into roles traditionally dominated by older leaders (Muleya et al., 2024). This shift disrupts conventional expectations of authority, posing challenges to leadership cohesion and effectiveness.

Chilisa and Ntseane (2010) demonstrated that in Southern African organisational culture, older leaders are valued for moral clarity and wisdom, while younger leaders are associated with innovation but may struggle in traditional hierarchies. Van Vugt et al. (2021) analysed leadership age norms across 191 countries, showing that in high power-distance cultures, older leaders are preferred; however, private sector settings demonstrated greater flexibility, suggesting younger leaders may fare better in private universities. Research on ethical leadership and employee performance across generations (Lim, 2024; Mahmood & Ejaz, 2019) demonstrates that ethical leadership not only improves employee performance and job satisfaction but also improves organisational outcomes by promoting an ethical culture and engagement. A study of leadership perceptions among Millennials and Generation Z found that America's youngest working cohorts value leadership that is influential, results-driven, and service-minded, with leaders who are emotionally intelligent, prioritise their team's needs, and operate with transparency and consistency (Regent University, 2022).

Contextualising Generational Cohorts in the Zambian Setting

A critical consideration in applying generational cohort theory to the Zambian context is the extent to which Western generational labels developed primarily from American and European historical experiences translate meaningfully into African realities. Generational cohort theory posits that shared formative experiences during critical developmental periods shape collective values, attitudes, and behavioural orientations (Strauss & Howe, 1991). While the broad generational categories (Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, Generation Z) provide useful heuristic frames, the specific historical events shaping each cohort differ substantially across cultural contexts.

In Zambia, the generational experiences that define cohort identities are anchored in distinct national milestones. Those born between 1946 and 1964 experienced the transition from colonial rule to independence (1964), the

establishment of one-party governance under the United National Independence Party, and the early years of nation-building characterised by copper-driven economic optimism. The generation born between 1965 and 1980 came of age during the economic decline of the 1970s and 1980s, structural adjustment programmes imposed by international financial institutions, and the political transition to multiparty democracy in 1991. Zambian Millennials (1981–1996) were shaped by the democratic consolidation era, the HIV/AIDS pandemic’s devastating impact on family structures and workforce demographics, economic liberalisation, and expanding educational access. Generation Z (after 1996) has been formed by Zambia’s urbanisation boom, digital connectivity expansion, and growing private sector involvement in education and employment.

These distinct Zambian generational experiences intersect with tribal, religious, and socio-economic factors to produce complex generational identities that may not map directly onto Western generational profiles. Zambia’s 73 ethnic groups, each with nuanced traditions regarding elderhood and authority, create additional layers of complexity. Furthermore, socio-economic stratification means that generational experiences differ substantially between urban and rural populations, and between those with access to higher education and those without. This study acknowledges these contextual specificities and will employ qualitative exploration of participants’ generational self-identification alongside categorical birth-year classification, recognising that generational identity in Zambia is socially constructed through both global and locally specific formative experiences.

Gaps in the Literature

Despite increasing global interest in leadership diversity and generational dynamics, several critical gaps emerge from the reviewed literature. First, there is a lack of context-specific empirical research in Zambia, with most studies situated in Western contexts or broader regional African institutions. The cultural, organisational, and generational dynamics unique to Zambia remain under-explored, particularly given the rapid expansion of private universities. Second, existing literature rarely disaggregates employee perceptions based on generational cohort, which is critical given potential generational biases or in-group favouritism affecting leadership legitimacy. Third, many leadership studies treat age as a static demographic variable without considering psychological or emotional factors that may mediate or moderate its impact. Fourth, there is an underrepresentation of younger leaders’ challenges in academia, with limited research examining how younger leaders navigate resistance from older colleagues in environments where seniority equates with expertise and credibility. Fifth, and critically for this study, existing frameworks inadequately engage with African philosophical perspectives such as Ubuntu and postcolonial organisational theory, resulting in analytical models that may not capture the culturally embedded nature of authority and leadership in African institutional contexts. Finally, the intersection of tribal, religious, and socio-economic identities with generational cohort membership remains largely unexamined in African leadership literature, representing a significant theoretical lacuna this study seeks to address.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in multiple theoretical perspectives that collectively illuminate how social, cultural, and psychological variables influence perceptions of leadership and authority across generations. The integration of these theories provides a comprehensive analytical lens for understanding the complex interplay between age, leadership style, cultural expectations, and organisational outcomes in Zambian private universities. Rather than treating these frameworks as parallel lenses, the study synthesises them into a unified model where each theory contributes a distinct explanatory mechanism that, taken together, addresses the multi-dimensional nature of generational leadership perceptions.

Table 2: Summary of Theoretical Framework and Integration Logic

Theory	Key Proponents	Application to Study	Integration Role in Framework
Social Identity Theory	Tajfel & Turner (1986)	Explains in-group favouritism and out-group bias based on generational categorisation	Explains WHY generational cohort moderates perceptions (in-group preference mechanism)

Generational Cohort Theory	Strauss & Howe (1991)	Illuminates how shared experiences shape values and leadership expectations	Explains WHAT distinguishes generational groups and their differential expectations
Cultural Dimensions Theory	Hofstede (1980)	Contextualises high power-distance expectations linking age with authority	Explains WHERE cultural context moderates age-authority relationships
Role Theory	Kahn et al. (1964)	Addresses role conflict when younger leaders occupy positions associated with older individuals	Explains HOW age-role incongruence generates authority perception challenges
Emotional Intelligence Theory	Goleman (1995)	Examines how EI mediates age-leadership effectiveness relationships	Provides the MEDIATING mechanism linking age to leadership outcomes
Transformational Leadership Theory	Bass (1985)	Analyses leadership styles preferred by different cohorts	Explains WHICH leadership behaviours moderate age-perception relationships
Ubuntu Philosophy	Mbigi (2005); Ncube (2010)	Grounds the framework in African communal and relational authority traditions	Provides CULTURAL-PHILOSOPHICAL grounding for age-authority linkages

Source: Authors' compilation from literature review

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT), proposed by Tajfel and Turner (1986), explains how individuals categorise themselves and others into social groups based on characteristics such as age, profession, or status. These categorisations result in in-group favouritism and out-group bias, which can influence interpersonal and organisational relationships. Recent research by Wang et al. (2024) confirms that generational cohorts represent distinct social groups, each with its own unique identity and associated values, leading to in-group preferences and out-group discrimination that strongly influence perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours. In Zambian universities, where authority has historically been associated with age and seniority, SIT is instrumental in understanding how generational divisions influence perceptions of leadership. Younger employees may naturally affiliate themselves with other young colleagues and view younger managers as more relatable and progressive, while older staff may perceive leadership legitimacy as stemming from seniority and experience. Within the proposed framework, SIT provides the primary mechanism explaining why employee generational cohort moderates the relationship between manager age and perceived authority.

Emotional Intelligence as a Mediating Factor

Emotional Intelligence (EI) has emerged as a crucial factor in leadership effectiveness across generations. Goleman and Cherniss (2024) note that over 25 years of research now provides substantial evidence for the role of EI in optimal leading, with studies revealing a wide range of benefits when leaders, teams, and employees embody EI. A comprehensive hybrid literature review by Coronado-Maldonado and Benítez-Márquez (2023) examining 104 peer-reviewed articles found that emotionally intelligent leaders improve both behaviours and business results and have significant impact on work team performance. Recent research by Gerhardt et al. (2026) provides a comprehensive roadmap noting that leaders with high EI are better equipped to navigate changing and complex environments.

This study adopts a mixed conceptualisation of EI, drawing primarily from Goleman's (1995) four-domain model (self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, and relationship management) while acknowledging the distinction between ability-based EI (Mayer & Salovey, 1997), which treats emotional intelligence as a

cognitive ability measurable through performance tests, and trait-based EI (Petrides & Furnham, 2001), which conceptualises it as a constellation of emotional self-perceptions. The framework adopts Goleman's competency-based approach because it aligns most closely with the study's practical orientation toward leadership development interventions. Operationally, EI will be assessed through employee perceptions of their managers' emotional competencies, positioning the construct within the trait-based measurement tradition while maintaining conceptual alignment with Goleman's framework.

Justification for EI as primary mediator. The selection of emotional intelligence as the primary mediating variable warrants explicit justification given that other factors—including institutional culture, power distance orientation, and organisational tenure—may also mediate age-leadership relationships. EI was selected for three reasons. First, unlike structural factors such as institutional culture or power distance, EI operates at the individual behavioural level, making it directly amenable to developmental intervention through targeted training programmes. This positions the framework not merely as explanatory but as actionable. Second, EI encompasses relational competencies (empathy, social awareness, relationship management) that are theoretically central to navigating cross-generational authority dynamics in high power-distance cultures. Third, the growing empirical evidence base linking EI to leadership effectiveness across diverse cultural contexts (Coronado-Maldonado & Benítez-Márquez, 2023; Goleman & Cherniss, 2024) provides strong theoretical grounding for the mediation hypothesis. The framework acknowledges that institutional culture and organisational power distance likely operate as contextual moderators rather than mediators, and these are incorporated accordingly (see Section 4.3).

Cultural Dimensions and Ubuntu Philosophy

Hofstede's (1980) Cultural Dimensions Theory provides the macro-cultural context for the framework, particularly through the power-distance dimension, which reflects the extent to which less powerful members of organisations accept and expect unequal power distribution. Zambia is characterised as a high power-distance society where hierarchical relationships are normalised and age-based authority is culturally sanctioned. However, the framework enriches Hofstede's dimensional approach with Ubuntu philosophy, which offers a distinctly African understanding of authority as relational, communal, and morally grounded rather than merely positional or hierarchical.

Ubuntu's emphasis on interconnectedness ("I am because we are") suggests that leadership authority in African contexts derives not solely from formal position or age but from one's demonstrated commitment to communal welfare, moral integrity, and relational competence (Khoza, 2006; Msila, 2008). This perspective enriches the framework by suggesting that younger leaders who demonstrate Ubuntu values humility, communal service, and relational attentiveness may partially compensate for age-based authority deficits, while older leaders who fail to embody these values may find their age-based authority insufficient. The integration of Ubuntu philosophy addresses a limitation of Western leadership frameworks that assume individualistic constructions of authority and provides culturally grounded theoretical depth to the analysis.

Role Theory and Generational Cohort Theory

Role Theory (Kahn et al., 1964) addresses the expectations, conflicts, and ambiguities associated with social roles. Within the framework, Role Theory explains the role incongruence experienced when younger individuals occupy leadership positions culturally associated with older, more experienced professionals. This role-age mismatch generates cognitive dissonance among employees who hold age-based expectations of leadership, potentially manifesting as resistance, reduced compliance, or delegitimisation of younger leaders' authority. Generational Cohort Theory (Strauss & Howe, 1991) complements this by explaining the substantive content of generational expectations what different cohorts value in leadership thereby specifying the particular forms that role expectations and conflicts may take across generational groups.

Conceptual Model

The proposed conceptual framework (Figure 1) illustrates how age influences perceptions of leadership and authority through complex mediating and moderating mechanisms. This model represents a significant

theoretical contribution by integrating multiple theoretical perspectives into a cohesive analytical framework specifically adapted for African higher education contexts. Crucially, the framework explains what previous models do not: the culturally embedded, emotionally mediated, and generationally contingent nature of age-authority perceptions in high power-distance African organisational settings.

Core Variable Relationships

Key Construct Definitions

To ensure conceptual clarity and facilitate rigorous operationalisation, the following constructs are formally defined within this framework:

Authority Legitimacy refers to employees' acceptance of a leader's right to exercise power, make decisions, and allocate resources within the organisational context. Drawing from Weber's (1947) typology, authority legitimacy in this framework encompasses rational-legal authority (derived from formal organisational position), traditional authority (culturally sanctioned through age and seniority), and charismatic authority (earned through personal qualities and demonstrated competence). In the Zambian context, traditional authority carries particular weight due to Ubuntu-informed cultural expectations linking elderhood with moral and decisional legitimacy.

Leadership Effectiveness is defined as employees' evaluations of a leader's capacity to inspire, motivate, coordinate teams, communicate vision, resolve conflicts, and achieve institutional objectives. Unlike authority legitimacy, which concerns the right to lead, leadership effectiveness concerns the perceived quality of leadership enactment. This distinction is critical because a leader may possess formal authority without being perceived as effective, or conversely, may demonstrate effectiveness despite limited authority acceptance.

Generational Cohort is defined, for the purposes of this study, through both categorical birth-year classification and qualitative self-identification. The categorical classification follows established generational boundaries (Baby Boomers: 1946–1964; Generation X: 1965–1980; Millennials: 1981–1996; Generation Z: after 1996) while acknowledging that Zambian generational identities are shaped by locally specific formative experiences (see Section 2.4). Qualitative interviews will explore how participants self-identify generationally and what formative experiences they consider defining, enabling nuanced analysis of whether Western categorical boundaries adequately capture Zambian generational distinctions.

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is conceptualised through Goleman's (1995) competency-based framework encompassing four domains: self-awareness (recognising one's emotions and their effects), self-regulation (managing disruptive impulses and adapting to changing circumstances), social awareness or empathy (sensing others' emotions and understanding their perspectives), and relationship management (inspiring, influencing, developing others, and managing conflict). This competency-based conceptualisation is adopted because it aligns with the study's practical orientation toward developable leadership skills, distinguishing the framework from ability-based EI models (Mayer & Salovey, 1997) that treat emotional intelligence as a relatively stable cognitive capacity.

Independent Variable: Manager Age

The model positions manager age as the primary independent variable, operationalised categorically (younger leaders: below 40 years; older leaders: 40 years and above). This categorisation aligns with existing generational cohort research while accounting for Zambian cultural contexts where leadership authority expectations shift markedly around age 40. Age serves as a proxy for accumulated experience, perceived wisdom, and cultural authority—all critical factors in high power-distance societies. The framework hypothesises that manager age exerts both direct effects on perceived authority and leadership effectiveness, and indirect effects mediated through emotional intelligence competencies.

Dependent Variables: Perceived Authority and Leadership Effectiveness

The model distinguishes between two interrelated but conceptually distinct outcomes as defined above. This dual-outcome approach recognises that formal authority acceptance and perceived leadership effectiveness may diverge, particularly during leadership transitions challenging traditional norms. Authority will be assessed

through indicators of compliance, deference, and acceptance of decision-making prerogatives, while effectiveness will be evaluated through perceptions of competence, vision articulation, team cohesion, and goal attainment.

Mediating Mechanism: Emotional Intelligence

The framework positions Emotional Intelligence as a critical mediator between manager age and leadership outcomes, drawing from Goleman's (1995) four-domain model. The mediating pathway operates through two theoretical mechanisms:

Competency Compensation Mechanism: Younger leaders lacking traditional authority markers (age, seniority) can compensate through superior emotional competencies. Leaders who demonstrate high self-awareness understand how their youth affects others' perceptions and proactively address authority deficits through transparent communication. Social awareness enables younger leaders to recognise and validate older employees' cultural expectations while gradually earning legitimacy through empathetic engagement. Relationship management skills facilitate trust-building across generational divides, transforming potential age-based scepticism into respect for demonstrated interpersonal competence.

Authority Amplification Mechanism: For older leaders possessing inherent cultural authority, emotional intelligence amplifies leadership effectiveness by bridging generational expectations. Older leaders with high EI leverage their age-based authority while demonstrating adaptability to younger employees' preferences for participative decision-making and transparent communication. Self-regulation enables older leaders to manage potential resistance to technological change, while empathy allows understanding of younger employees' career aspirations and work-life balance priorities.

Moderating Variables and Interaction Effects

Employee Generational Cohort as Moderator. The framework hypothesises that the strength and direction of age-leadership perception relationships vary systematically across employee generational cohorts. Social Identity Theory predicts that Baby Boomer and Generation X employees will exhibit stronger preferences for older leaders due to in-group identification and cultural socialisation emphasising age-based authority. Conversely, Millennial and Generation Z employees may demonstrate weaker or even reversed age preferences, valuing competence, technological proficiency, and participative leadership over chronological seniority.

Leadership Style as Moderator. The framework posits that leadership behavioural patterns moderate age-perception relationships through cultural congruence mechanisms. Transformational leadership styles may attenuate negative perceptions of younger leaders by demonstrating competence through inspirational behaviours rather than relying solely on positional authority. Conversely, autocratic or highly directive styles may exacerbate age-authority mismatches, particularly when younger leaders employ hierarchical approaches culturally expected from older leaders but perceived as presumptuous from youth. Servant leadership orientations prioritising employee development and ethical stewardship can build legitimacy through demonstrated values alignment, potentially transcending age-based authority expectations—a finding consistent with Ubuntu's emphasis on communal service as a source of leadership legitimacy.

Cultural Context (Power Distance) as Contextual Moderator. While Hofstede's (1980) Cultural Dimensions Theory positions Zambia within high power-distance cultural traditions, the framework acknowledges organisational culture variation within private universities. Institutions embracing more egalitarian, merit-based cultures may exhibit weaker age-authority associations compared to institutions maintaining traditional hierarchical structures. This institutional-level moderation suggests that institutional policies, governance structures, and explicit values statements regarding leadership criteria can shape how age influences authority perceptions, offering actionable levers for organisational intervention.

Theoretical Integration and Framework Distinctiveness

The framework's theoretical contribution lies in its synthesis of social identity, cultural, role, emotional intelligence, and African philosophical perspectives into a unified model specifically calibrated for African higher education contexts. Unlike Western leadership frameworks assuming low power-distance environments

where age plays minimal roles, this model explicitly theorises age as a culturally embedded construct carrying symbolic authority value. The dual-outcome structure (authority versus effectiveness) captures nuanced distinctions often overlooked in leadership research, acknowledging that formal authority acceptance and perceived leadership effectiveness may diverge, particularly during leadership transitions challenging traditional norms.

What this framework explains that previous models do not is the intersection of three dynamics simultaneously: (a) the culturally embedded nature of age-authority linkages in African high power-distance settings, grounded in Ubuntu philosophy; (b) the emotionally mediated pathways through which age influences leadership outcomes, offering actionable intervention points; and (c) the generationally contingent nature of these relationships, recognising that perceptual dynamics differ systematically across employee cohorts. Existing models address these dimensions in isolation; the proposed framework integrates them into a unified analytical structure.

Framework Operationalisation and Measurement Implications

Empirical operationalisation of this framework requires multi-dimensional measurement strategies. Manager Age will be classified categorically (younger: <40; older: ≥40) with sensitivity analyses exploring alternative cutpoints (35, 45) to assess threshold effects. Perceived Authority will employ multi-item scales assessing legitimacy perceptions, willingness to comply with decisions, respect for positional power, and deference behaviours. Perceived Leadership Effectiveness will utilise validated scales measuring vision communication, team motivation, goal achievement, conflict resolution, and organisational citizenship encouragement. Emotional Intelligence will be assessed through employee-rated perceptions of manager EI across four domains using context-adapted instruments. Employee Generational Cohort will combine categorical birth-year classification with qualitative exploration of generational self-identification. Leadership Style will capture employee perceptions of manager behaviours categorised into transformational, transactional, servant, and autocratic dimensions. Cultural Context will assess institutional-level power distance through organisational policies, governance structures, and employee perceptions of hierarchy emphasis.

Conceptual Framework for Generational Perceptions of Leadership and Authority

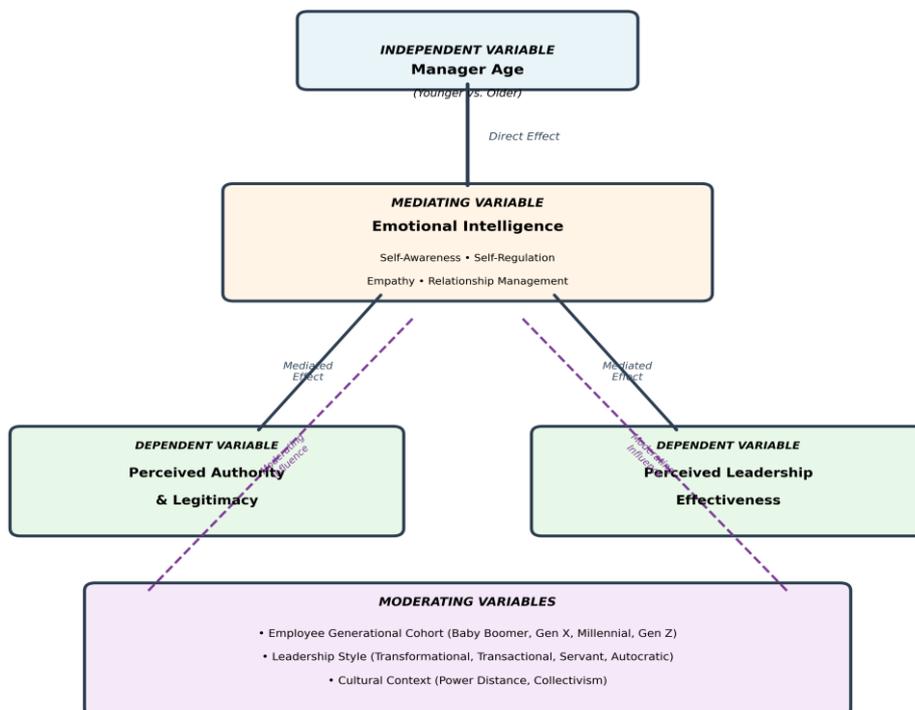


Figure 1: Integrated model showing direct, mediated, and moderated pathways

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Generational Perceptions of Leadership and Authority

Source: Authors’ conceptualisation based on theoretical framework

This framework acknowledges that leadership perceptions in Zambian private universities are not solely determined by a manager's chronological age but are filtered through complex interactions between cultural expectations (including Ubuntu-informed authority norms), individual generational identities, leadership behaviours, and emotional competencies. The model enables analysis of whether negative perceptions of younger leaders stem from genuine competency concerns or from culturally embedded biases, and whether specific leadership styles and emotional competencies can mitigate age-based prejudices.

Proposed Research Design

As noted in the introduction, this paper's primary contribution is the conceptual framework itself. The following section outlines the proposed research design through which the framework will be empirically tested, providing methodological transparency and establishing the groundwork for subsequent empirical investigation.

Research Philosophy and Design

This study is underpinned by a pragmatic research philosophy, which is particularly suited for complex social inquiries requiring multi-faceted methodological approaches (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Morgan, 2007). Pragmatism views knowledge as both objective and subjective, recognising that no single philosophical tradition is sufficient to explore the multifarious nature of human behaviour within organisational settings. The goal is to understand both the patterns of leadership perceptions across generational cohorts and the lived experiences that shape these perceptions.

The study employs a qualitative multiple case study research design, with selected private universities in Lusaka constituting individual cases through which generational perceptions of leadership and authority are examined. This design enables in-depth exploration of the phenomenon within its real-life context, enhances comparative analysis across institutions, and supports analytical generalisation (Yin, 2018). The multiple case study design was selected over alternative qualitative approaches (e.g., phenomenology, grounded theory) because the research questions require cross-institutional comparison and the framework's moderating variables (particularly institutional cultural context) necessitate case-level analysis.

Study Population and Sampling

The study population comprises academic and administrative staff employed in ten selected private universities in Lusaka. The selection of ten institutions is guided by three considerations: first, Lusaka hosts the highest concentration of private universities in Zambia (HEA, 2022), providing practical access to a critical mass of institutions; second, ten cases represent a sufficient number for cross-case analytical generalisation while remaining manageable for in-depth qualitative analysis (Yin, 2018); and third, the selection enables maximum variation across institutional characteristics including size, age of establishment, governance structure, and disciplinary focus, thereby enhancing the framework's transferability across diverse institutional contexts.

Participants include vice chancellors, registrars, deans, middle-level administrators (heads of departments and coordinators), academic staff across generational cohorts, and senior non-academic staff involved in governance and decision-making. These groups were selected because they actively participate in and interpret leadership and authority within institutional settings. The sampling strategy combines purposive sampling for senior and middle management (ensuring inclusion of key institutional decision-makers) with maximum variation sampling for academic and administrative staff. Maximum variation sampling is specifically employed to ensure representation across all generational cohorts (Baby Boomers through Generation Z), diverse disciplinary backgrounds, varying lengths of institutional tenure, and both genders, thereby enhancing analytical depth by capturing the full range of generational perspectives rather than concentrating on modal experiences.

Sample size is determined by the principle of data saturation, with approximately 25–30 participants anticipated across the selected institutions (Creswell, 2014). Following Patton's (2015) guidance on qualitative research, interviews will be conducted until information becomes repetitive and no new conceptual categories emerge.

Table 3: Sampling Strategy and Participant Categories

Participant Category	Sampling Method	Selection Criteria
Senior Leadership (Vice Chancellors, Registrars)	Purposive	Direct involvement in strategic decision-making; minimum 2 years in current role
Middle Management (Deans, HODs)	Purposive + Maximum Variation	Representation across age groups; experience in supervisory roles
Academic Staff	Maximum Variation	Diversity in generational cohorts (Baby Boomers to Gen Z); minimum 2 years employment; gender balance
Administrative Staff	Purposive	Involvement in governance; interaction with leadership across levels

Source: Authors' research design

Data Collection

Primary data will be collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing flexibility while ensuring systematic exploration of key themes related to leadership, authority, and generational perceptions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). An interview guide covers definitions of leadership and authority, experiences with institutional leadership, perceived generational differences in leadership styles, authority acceptance and resistance across generations, generational self-identification and formative experiences, and institutional culture and power relations. Each interview will last approximately 30 to 45 minutes and will be audio-recorded with participants' consent. Document analysis of institutional strategic plans, governance structures, human resources policies, and leadership appointment guidelines will complement interview data to contextualise perceptions and triangulate findings.

Data Analysis

Data will be analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework: (1) familiarisation with data through verbatim transcription and repeated reading; (2) initial coding of meaningful data segments using both deductive codes derived from the theoretical framework and inductive codes emerging from the data; (3) searching for patterns and themes across codes; (4) reviewing and refining themes against the coded extracts and entire dataset; (5) defining and naming themes with clear scope and boundaries; and (6) producing the final analytical narrative. Within-case analysis will examine generational perception patterns within each institution, followed by cross-case analysis identifying convergent and divergent themes across institutional settings. The analysis will be iterative, allowing themes to emerge inductively from the data while being informed by existing leadership and generational theories.

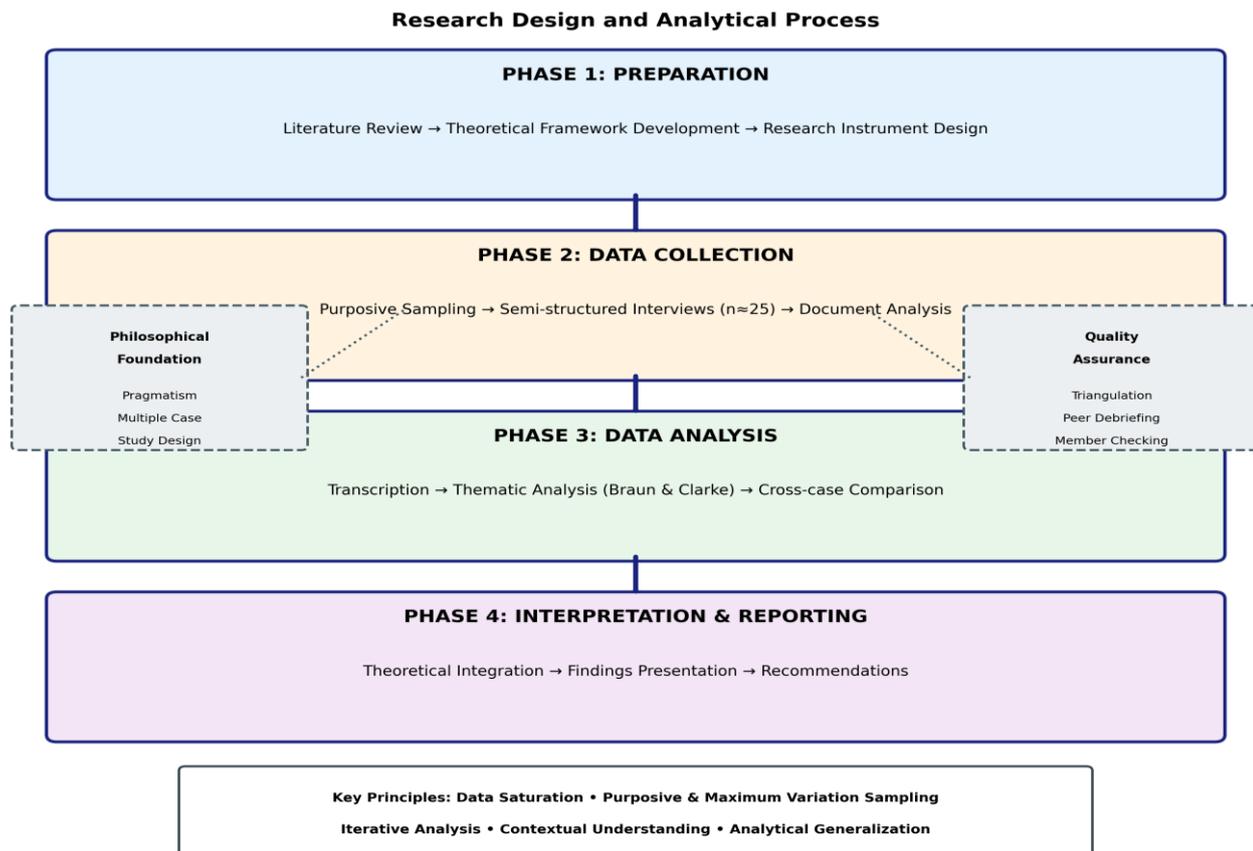


Figure 2: Sequential four-phase research methodology with embedded quality assurance

Figure 2: Research Design and Analytical Process

Source: Authors' research methodology design

Trustworthiness and Rigour

The study will employ multiple strategies to ensure trustworthiness following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework. Credibility will be established through prolonged engagement with participants and institutional contexts, triangulation of data sources (interviews and documentary analysis), and member checking whereby preliminary findings are shared with a subset of participants for verification and refinement. Transferability will be supported through thick description of the research context, participants, and analytical processes, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to other settings. Dependability will be ensured through a comprehensive audit trail documenting all methodological decisions, coding procedures, and analytical choices, supplemented by peer debriefing sessions with experienced qualitative researchers. Confirmability will be addressed through reflexive journaling documenting the researchers' positionality, assumptions, and potential biases throughout the research process.

Ethical Considerations

The study will adhere to established ethical principles for research involving human participants. Ethical clearance will be obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to data collection. Informed consent will be secured from all participants, with clear explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature, and right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Given the sensitive nature of discussions about leadership perceptions and authority dynamics, particular attention will be paid to protecting participants' anonymity and confidentiality. Institutional identities will be anonymised through pseudonyms, and individual participants will not be identifiable in published findings. Data will be stored securely with restricted access, and audio recordings will be destroyed upon completion of transcription verification. The researchers will be attentive to power dynamics during interviews, particularly when interviewing junior staff about their perceptions of senior leaders, ensuring participants feel safe to express candid views.

Expected Contributions and Implications

Based on the literature and theoretical framework, several key findings are anticipated with significant implications across four distinct contribution dimensions.

Anticipated Findings

First, older employees are expected to rate younger leaders lower on perceived authority and legitimacy, consistent with Role Theory and Cultural Dimensions Theory, revealing the persistent influence of age-based authority norms in Zambian organisational culture. Second, younger participants may favour transformational leadership while older participants may express a preference for transactional approaches, highlighting generational divergence in leadership style expectations. Third, evidence of Social Identity Theory is likely to emerge, with participants showing favour toward leaders of their own generation. Fourth, leaders perceived as emotionally intelligent, regardless of age, may receive higher legitimacy scores, suggesting a mitigating effect on age-based bias. Fifth, qualitative data may reveal that younger leaders experience implicit resistance or subtle undermining due to authority-role incongruence, manifesting through delayed implementation of directives, exclusion from informal decision-making networks, or passive-aggressive compliance behaviours.

Table 4: Expected Findings and Practical Implications

Expected Finding	Theoretical Basis	Practical Implication
Lower authority ratings for younger leaders by older employees	Role Theory; Cultural Dimensions; Ubuntu	Need for legitimacy-building strategies for younger leaders
Generational preference for similar-age leaders	Social Identity Theory	Cross-generational mentorship programmes
Transformational style preferred by younger cohorts	Generational Cohort Theory	Adaptive leadership training curricula
EI mitigates age-based perceptions	Emotional Intelligence Theory	EI development as core leadership competency
Implicit resistance to younger leadership	Authority & Legitimacy Theory	Institutional policies promoting inclusive governance

Source: Authors' projection based on theoretical framework and literature review

Theoretical Contributions

This research advances leadership scholarship by developing a context-specific theoretical framework integrating multiple theoretical perspectives to explain age-leadership dynamics in African higher education. The framework's explicit theorisation of emotional intelligence as a mediator between age and leadership outcomes represents a novel contribution, offering a mechanistic explanation for how younger leaders can overcome age-based authority deficits. By disaggregating authority perceptions from leadership effectiveness, the study challenges unidimensional conceptualisations of leadership acceptance prevalent in existing literature. The integration of Ubuntu philosophy and postcolonial organisational perspectives enriches the theoretical base beyond Western-centric models, contributing to the decolonisation of leadership theory in African scholarship. The moderating roles of employee generational cohort and leadership style provide a nuanced understanding of conditional effects, moving beyond universalistic claims about age-leadership relationships toward contingency-based theoretical models more reflective of organisational reality.

Methodological Contributions

Methodologically, the study demonstrates rigorous application of multiple case study design in African higher education research, offering guidance for future investigations of complex interpersonal and organisational phenomena. The combination of purposive and maximum variation sampling strategies across ten institutional cases provides a replicable methodological template for researchers examining generational dynamics in diverse organisational settings. The dual analytical approach—within-case and cross-case analysis—demonstrates how thematic analysis can be systematically applied to examine both institution-specific and cross-institutional patterns.

Contextual Contributions to African Scholarship

For African scholarship, the study contributes context-specific knowledge to the underexplored area of age-leadership dynamics by centring Zambian cultural realities, including Ubuntu philosophy and locally specific generational experiences. The framework's engagement with postcolonial organisational perspectives addresses the tension between inherited colonial bureaucratic structures and indigenous governance traditions, a dynamic central to understanding contemporary African institutional leadership. By developing localised definitions of generational cohorts grounded in Zambian historical milestones, the study contributes to ongoing scholarly efforts to adapt Western theoretical constructs for African contexts rather than applying them uncritically.

Practical and Policy Contributions

For institutional administrators, findings will inform evidence-based leadership development programmes emphasising emotional intelligence competencies as core curricula for aspiring leaders. Succession planning strategies can incorporate generational diversity considerations, balancing age representation in leadership teams. Policies fostering inclusive leadership cultures may include explicit competency-based promotion criteria that de-emphasise age while acknowledging cultural sensitivities, formal mentorship programmes pairing younger and older leaders for bidirectional knowledge transfer, and structural mechanisms such as cross-generational advisory committees ensuring diverse generational input in strategic decision-making.

For policymakers at bodies such as the Higher Education Authority and the Ministry of Higher Education, the research offers evidence-based recommendations for governance frameworks accommodating generational diversity in leadership appointments. Policy interventions may include development of national leadership competency frameworks for higher education that explicitly balance age-based cultural expectations with meritocratic principles; accreditation standards requiring private universities to demonstrate inclusive leadership development programmes; and funding mechanisms incentivising institutions to implement evidence-based leadership training emphasising emotional intelligence and cross-generational collaboration skills.

CONCLUSION

This conceptual paper has presented a comprehensive framework for investigating generational perceptions of leadership and authority in Zambia's private higher education sector. By integrating Social Identity Theory, Generational Cohort Theory, Cultural Dimensions Theory, Role Theory, Emotional Intelligence frameworks, and Ubuntu philosophy, the study offers a nuanced analytical lens for understanding the complex interplay between age, cultural expectations, and leadership dynamics. The proposed qualitative multiple case study design, grounded in pragmatic philosophy and supported by rigorous trustworthiness measures, establishes the methodological foundation for subsequent empirical investigation.

The framework's distinctive contribution lies in its explicit theorisation of emotional intelligence as a mediating mechanism through which age-based authority deficits can be compensated or age-based authority can be amplified. This positions EI not merely as a desirable leadership attribute but as a critical competency for navigating generational dynamics in culturally diverse organisational settings. The dual-outcome structure distinguishing perceived authority from leadership effectiveness acknowledges the complex reality that formal positional power and perceived leadership competence may diverge, particularly during periods of organisational transition challenging traditional norms.

The study's integration of African philosophical perspectives, particularly Ubuntu, addresses a significant limitation of existing Western-centric leadership models by grounding the analysis in culturally resonant theoretical traditions. The contextualisation of generational cohort theory within Zambian historical milestones and socio-cultural realities demonstrates the importance of adapting global theoretical constructs to local contexts rather than applying them uncritically.

As Zambia's private university sector continues to expand and diversify, understanding how generational identity shapes perceptions of leadership legitimacy becomes increasingly critical for institutional effectiveness, staff satisfaction, and organisational cohesion. The study's implications extend beyond Zambia's borders, offering insights applicable to other African nations experiencing similar demographic shifts in higher education leadership. The framework's emphasis on moderating variables employee generational cohort, leadership style, and cultural context provides a contingency-based approach recognising that age-leadership dynamics operate differently across diverse organisational and cultural settings.

The path forward requires balancing respect for cultural traditions, emphasising age-based authority with meritocratic principles valuing competence, innovation, and emotional intelligence—a delicate equilibrium that this research framework is designed to illuminate and facilitate. Future research should extend this framework through quantitative validation, longitudinal studies tracking generational perception shifts over time, cross-national comparative analyses across African higher education systems, and experimental evaluations of leadership development interventions informed by the framework's theoretical propositions.

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