

The Relationship Between Diverse Teams and Leadership Development Among Employees

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ABSTRACT

Workforce diversity is increasingly viewed as a strategic resource for organizations seeking to strengthen collaboration, learning, and leadership capability. This study examined the relationships of gender, age, cultural, and educational diversity with leadership development among employees of Puma Energy (Malaysia) Sdn. Bhd., Pasir Gudang, Johor. Guided by Social Identity Theory, the study employed a quantitative cross-sectional design. Data were collected from 170 employees using a structured five-point Likert-scale questionnaire and analyzed using IBM SPSS Version 29. Descriptive statistics, internal-consistency reliability, normality assessment, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression were applied. All four diversity dimensions were positively and significantly correlated with leadership development: gender diversity ($r = .733, p < .001$), age diversity ($r = .777, p < .001$), cultural diversity ($r = .810, p < .001$), and educational diversity ($r = .736, p < .001$). The regression model was statistically significant, $F(4,165) = 98.732, p < .001$, and explained 70.5% of the variance in leadership development ($R^2 = .705$; adjusted $R^2 = .698$). Cultural diversity showed the strongest unique predictive association ($\beta = .446, p < .001$), followed by age diversity ($\beta = .261, p = .005$); gender diversity ($\beta = .063, p = .456$) and educational diversity ($\beta = .130, p = .100$) were not significant unique predictors. Because the data were cross-sectional and self-reported, these findings are interpreted as associations rather than causal effects. The results suggest that multicultural interaction and intergenerational collaboration may be particularly relevant developmental experiences, while acknowledging the study's single-organization context and associated limits on generalizability.

Keywords: diverse teams; gender diversity; age diversity; cultural diversity; leadership development

INTRODUCTION

Globalization, workforce mobility, technological change, and demographic shifts have made employee diversity a normal feature of contemporary organizations. Teams increasingly combine employees who differ in gender, age, culture, educational background, professional experience, and perspectives. When effectively managed, these differences can broaden the knowledge available to teams, improve creativity and decision-making, and strengthen organizational adaptability (Roberson, 2021; Shore et al., 2023).

Leadership development has likewise moved beyond formal management training. Contemporary leadership capability includes communication, adaptability, interpersonal influence, collaborative problem-solving, cultural awareness, and the ability to work constructively across differences. Many of these competencies are developed through day-to-day work experiences, mentoring, teamwork, feedback, and exposure to colleagues with different perspectives (Northouse, 2022). Diverse teams can therefore function as an experiential environment in which employees practise and strengthen leadership-related competencies.

Despite the potential benefits, diversity does not automatically generate positive outcomes. Differences among employees can also create communication barriers, subgroup formation, interpersonal conflict, and weaker cohesion when inclusion and collaboration are not effectively supported. Prior research has also produced mixed findings regarding the effects of different diversity dimensions. Much of the literature emphasizes performance, innovation, engagement, and organizational commitment, while leadership development has received comparatively less attention as an outcome, particularly in the Malaysian energy sector. The present

study addresses this gap by examining four dimensions of team diversity—gender, age, cultural, and educational diversity—and their relationship with leadership development among employees of Puma Energy (Malaysia) Sdn. Bhd., Pasir Gudang, Johor. It further identifies which diversity dimension has the strongest unique predictive association when the four dimensions are considered simultaneously.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT) explains how individuals categorize themselves and others according to social characteristics such as gender, age, culture, and educational background. These categorizations can influence trust, communication, cooperation, and knowledge sharing. In diverse teams, perceived in-group and out-group distinctions may create barriers, but inclusive organizational practices can reduce these divisions and encourage employees to learn across social boundaries. In this study, SIT provides the theoretical basis for expecting diverse workplace interaction to shape leadership development through communication, collaboration, adaptability, and interpersonal learning.

Gender Diversity and Leadership Development

Gender-diverse teams can expose employees to different experiences, viewpoints, communication patterns, and approaches to decision-making. Such interaction may broaden perspectives and create opportunities for collaborative learning. Accordingly, the study proposed that gender diversity would be positively related to leadership development.

Age Diversity and Leadership Development

Age-diverse teams combine employees at different career stages and with different levels of organizational experience, technical knowledge, and contemporary skills. Intergenerational interaction may facilitate mentoring, knowledge transfer, adaptability, and collaborative problem-solving, all of which are relevant to leadership development.

Cultural Diversity and Leadership Development

Cultural diversity exposes employees to different values, communication styles, beliefs, and approaches to teamwork. Constructive cross-cultural interaction can strengthen cultural awareness, empathy, adaptability, communication, and the ability to coordinate across differences. These capabilities are central to leading in multinational work environments.

Educational Diversity and Leadership Development

Employees from different educational disciplines and qualification levels may contribute complementary technical knowledge and alternative approaches to analysis and problem-solving. Working across educational boundaries can encourage knowledge sharing and more comprehensive decision-making, potentially supporting leadership development. The study tested four hypotheses: gender diversity, age diversity, cultural diversity, and educational diversity were each expected to have a significant positive relationship with leadership development.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Sample

A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was used to examine associations between four dimensions of team diversity and leadership development at a single point in time. The target population comprised current employees of Puma Energy (Malaysia) Sdn. Bhd., Pasir Gudang, Johor. The study used non-probability convenience sampling because respondents were selected on the basis of accessibility and willingness to participate. Eligibility was limited to employees currently working at the Pasir Gudang organization. A total

of 170 questionnaires were distributed; all 170 were returned, screened as complete and valid, and included in the analysis, yielding a 100% response rate. The achieved sample included employees from different genders, age groups, educational qualifications, departments, and years of service. Although the sample size was adequate for the four-predictor regression model, convenience sampling does not give every employee an equal probability of selection and therefore limits population-level generalization (Sekaran & Bougie, 2020; Saunders et al., 2023; Hair et al., 2022).

Instrument and Measures

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of six sections. Section A captured demographic information (gender, age, educational level, department, and years of service). Sections B–F measured gender diversity, age diversity, cultural diversity, educational diversity, and leadership development, respectively. Each substantive construct contained five items, giving 25 scale items in total. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The operational definitions were derived from the empirical literature and focused on employees' perceptions of participation and collaboration across gender, intergenerational knowledge sharing and teamwork, cross-cultural respect and cooperation, educationally diverse knowledge sharing and problem-solving, and perceived leadership competencies developed through workplace interaction (Hair et al., 2022; Saunders et al., 2023).

Illustrative items included: 'Male and female employees receive equal opportunities to participate in work-related decisions' (gender diversity); 'Employees from different age groups work well together' (age diversity); 'Employees respect cultural differences' (cultural diversity); 'Different educational backgrounds improve problem-solving' (educational diversity); and 'Working with diverse colleagues improves my leadership skills' (leadership development). The complete questionnaire is reproduced in the thesis appendix. Internal consistency was acceptable for all five scales: gender diversity ($\alpha = .768$), age diversity ($\alpha = .742$), cultural diversity ($\alpha = .786$), educational diversity ($\alpha = .766$), and leadership development ($\alpha = .852$). These coefficients support score reliability but should not be interpreted as evidence of construct validity by themselves (Taber, 2020; Hair et al., 2022).

The thesis does not report a separate factor-analytic assessment of construct validity (for example, exploratory or confirmatory factor analysis), nor does it document a formal expert-panel content-validity procedure. Accordingly, the present manuscript does not claim that reliability alone establishes validity. Measurement validity is instead treated as a limitation: the items were conceptually aligned with operational definitions derived from prior literature and demonstrated acceptable internal consistency, but future studies should validate the measurement model using factor analysis and report convergent and discriminant validity before drawing stronger construct-level conclusions.

RESULTS

Questionnaires were administered through Google Forms and/or printed copies depending on respondent accessibility and organizational requirements. Participation was voluntary; respondents were informed of the study purpose, confidentiality, academic use of the data, and their right to withdraw. Responses were screened for completeness, missing data, inconsistencies, duplicate responses, and coding errors before entry into IBM SPSS Version 29. All 170 returned questionnaires were complete and retained for analysis.

The sample comprised 170 respondents: 87 males (51.2%) and 83 females (48.8%). The largest age group was 20–29 years (52.9%), followed by 30–39 years (23.5%), 40–49 years (17.6%), and 50 years and above (5.9%).

IBM SPSS Version 29 was used for analysis. Frequency and percentage distributions described respondent characteristics, while means and standard deviations summarized the study variables. Cronbach's alpha assessed internal consistency. Normality was evaluated using skewness and kurtosis; observed skewness ranged from -1.428 to -1.141 and kurtosis from $.190$ to $.886$, within the thresholds adopted in the thesis. Pearson correlation tested bivariate associations, and multiple regression estimated the unique predictive association of each diversity dimension with leadership development while controlling for the other predictors. Statistical significance was evaluated at $p < .05$. Because the predictors were highly intercorrelated,

multicollinearity was additionally assessed using tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF) values derived from the reported predictor correlation matrix.

Table 1. Reliability and Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	Cronbach's α	Mean	SD
Gender diversity	.768	20.0647	3.52866
Age diversity	.742	19.9412	3.57292
Cultural diversity	.786	20.7529	3.87651
Educational diversity	.766	20.2529	3.57682
Leadership development	.852	20.6412	4.20419

All constructs recorded Cronbach's alpha values above .70, indicating acceptable internal consistency. Cultural diversity had the highest mean among the diversity dimensions, while leadership development had a mean of 20.6412.

Correlation Analysis

Table 2. Pearson Correlations between Diversity Dimensions and Leadership Development

Predictor	r with Leadership Development	p-value
Gender diversity	.733	< .001
Age diversity	.777	< .001
Cultural diversity	.810	< .001
Educational diversity	.736	< .001

All four diversity dimensions showed strong, positive, statistically significant bivariate relationships with leadership development. Cultural diversity had the strongest correlation ($r = .810$), followed by age diversity ($r = .777$), educational diversity ($r = .736$), and gender diversity ($r = .733$).

Multiple Regression Analysis

The combined regression model was statistically significant, $F(4, 165) = 98.732, p < .001$. The model produced $R = .840$, $R^2 = .705$, and adjusted $R^2 = .698$, indicating that the four diversity dimensions jointly explained 70.5% of the variance in leadership development.

Table 3. Multiple Regression Predicting Leadership Development

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Gender diversity	.075	.100	.063	.748	.456

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Age diversity	.307	.107	.261	2.864	.005
Cultural diversity	.484	.095	.446	5.075	< .001
Educational diversity	.152	.092	.130	1.656	.100

Cultural diversity was the strongest significant unique predictor of leadership development, followed by age diversity. Gender diversity and educational diversity did not make statistically significant unique contributions after the other diversity dimensions were controlled.

Regression Diagnostics and Assumption Testing

The predictor correlations were high ($r = .700$ to $.820$), so multicollinearity diagnostics were examined before interpreting the unique regression coefficients. Using the reported four-predictor correlation matrix, tolerance values were .253 for gender diversity, .215 for age diversity, .232 for cultural diversity, and .291 for educational diversity; the corresponding VIF values were 3.948, 4.652, 4.308, and 3.432. All tolerance values exceeded .20 and all VIF values were below 5, indicating substantial overlap among predictors but not multicollinearity severe enough to exceed the commonly applied thresholds in multivariate analysis (Hair et al., 2022). The thesis also reported acceptable univariate skewness and kurtosis for all constructs. However, it did not report residual plots, a Durbin–Watson statistic, casewise influence diagnostics, or formal tests of residual homoscedasticity and linearity. Consequently, those regression assumptions cannot be independently verified from the thesis and are acknowledged as a reporting limitation rather than assumed to have been satisfied.

Table 4. Multicollinearity Diagnostics Derived from the Reported Predictor Correlation Matrix

Predictor	Tolerance	VIF
Gender diversity	.253	3.948
Age diversity	.215	4.652
Cultural diversity	.232	4.308
Educational diversity	.291	3.432

DISCUSSION

The findings show an important distinction between bivariate association and unique predictive association. At the bivariate level, employees who perceived greater gender, age, cultural, and educational diversity also reported stronger leadership development. However, when the four dimensions were entered simultaneously into the regression model, only cultural and age diversity remained statistically significant unique predictors. The strong intercorrelations among the predictors ($r = .700$ – $.820$) indicate considerable shared variance, although the calculated VIF values remained below 5. This helps explain why gender and educational diversity were strongly correlated with leadership development yet did not retain statistically significant unique coefficients in the simultaneous model. The pattern is consistent with prior diversity research emphasizing that demographic dimensions may operate through overlapping social and relational processes rather than as isolated influences (Roberson, 2021; Guillaume et al., 2022; Shore et al., 2023).

Cultural Diversity

Cultural diversity emerged as the strongest predictor. In a multinational organizational setting, interaction across cultures can require employees to adapt communication styles, interpret different viewpoints, develop empathy, negotiate differences, and make decisions collaboratively. These experiences closely correspond with the interpersonal and adaptive competencies measured as leadership development. The result is also consistent with the study's Social Identity Theory perspective: repeated constructive interaction across social boundaries can reduce rigid in-group/out-group distinctions and create opportunities for learning and leadership identity development. This interpretation aligns with research emphasizing cross-cultural leadership, inclusive interaction, and diversity management as mechanisms that can strengthen communication and adaptive capability (Chengere & Bekele, 2024; Den Hartog & De Hoogh, 2024; Haque et al., 2024). The present finding therefore adds context-specific evidence from a Malaysian energy-sector organization, while not implying that cultural diversity itself causes leadership development.

Age Diversity

Age diversity was the second significant predictor. Intergenerational teams provide opportunities for reciprocal learning: experienced employees can share organizational knowledge and practical judgment, while younger employees may contribute new perspectives and contemporary technical skills. Such exchanges can strengthen communication, mentoring, adaptability, and problem-solving. The result supports the practical value of structured intergenerational collaboration rather than treating age differences simply as demographic characteristics. This is consistent with literature describing age-diverse workplaces as potential settings for knowledge exchange and intergenerational learning (OECD, 2023; Baloch & Paoletti, 2025; Suh & Kim, 2025). Because the present design is cross-sectional, the result should be understood as a unique predictive association rather than evidence of a causal developmental effect.

Gender and Educational Diversity

Gender diversity and educational diversity were strongly correlated with leadership development but were not significant unique predictors in the regression model. These results should not be interpreted as evidence that either dimension is unimportant. Rather, within this sample, their independent predictive contribution was limited once age and cultural diversity were considered simultaneously. The high correlations among several diversity predictors also indicate that employees' experiences of different forms of diversity may substantially overlap.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Organizations can use multicultural project teams and cross-functional assignments as deliberate leadership-development experiences. Employees should be given opportunities to work with colleagues who differ in cultural background, communication style, and professional perspective while receiving appropriate support for inclusive collaboration.

Intergenerational mentoring can be strengthened through two-way knowledge-sharing arrangements. Senior employees can transfer organizational and operational experience, while younger employees can contribute emerging technical knowledge and new approaches. This reciprocal model can develop leadership competencies across career stages.

Leadership-development programmes should include cultural intelligence, inclusive communication, conflict management, collaborative decision-making, and the management of diverse teams. Diversity initiatives should therefore be connected to talent development and succession planning rather than treated only as representation or compliance activities.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The study extends the application of Social Identity Theory to leadership development by showing that diversity dimensions are not equally predictive when examined together. Cultural and age diversity appear particularly relevant to the interpersonal learning processes through which employees develop leadership capabilities. The results support a view of leadership development as a social and experiential process occurring through repeated interaction across different identities and backgrounds.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the cross-sectional design measured diversity perceptions and leadership development at one point in time; temporal ordering cannot be established and causal claims are therefore not supported. Second, all focal variables were measured through the same self-reported questionnaire. This creates a risk of common-method bias through shared measurement context, consistency motives, social desirability, and general response tendencies. Confidentiality and anonymity were used as procedural safeguards, but the thesis did not report a dedicated statistical test of common-method variance. Future studies should combine procedural remedies with an appropriate statistical diagnostic and, where possible, collect predictor and outcome information from different sources or time points. Third, the study was confined to one organization and one location in the Malaysian energy sector. Its workforce composition, organizational culture, operational environment, and management practices may differ from those of other organizations, sectors, and regions; therefore, the findings should not be generalized beyond the study context without replication. Fourth, convenience sampling means that employees did not have equal probabilities of selection, which may introduce selection bias despite the 100% response rate among the 170 questionnaires distributed. Fifth, although the questionnaire demonstrated acceptable internal consistency, the thesis did not report factor-analytic construct-validity evidence; future studies should establish convergent and discriminant validity. Finally, predictor correlations were high. Calculated VIF values ranged from 3.432 to 4.652 and remained below 5, but the thesis did not report residual plots, independence-of-errors statistics, or influence diagnostics. Future research should replicate the model across multiple organizations and locations, use probability-based sampling where feasible, incorporate supervisor, peer, or objective indicators, and adopt longitudinal, multilevel, or mixed-method designs. Potential mediators or moderators such as inclusive leadership, psychological safety, organizational culture, knowledge sharing, and team cohesion should also be examined.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationships of gender, age, cultural, and educational diversity with leadership development among 170 employees in a Malaysian energy-sector organization. All four diversity dimensions were strongly and positively correlated with leadership development. In the multiple regression model, cultural diversity and age diversity were the only significant unique predictors, with cultural diversity showing the strongest unique predictive association. Multicollinearity diagnostics calculated from the reported predictor correlation matrix produced VIF values between 3.432 and 4.652 and tolerance values between .215 and .291, indicating notable shared variance without exceeding the adopted VIF threshold of 5. The findings are consistent with the possibility that cross-cultural and intergenerational interactions are especially relevant to employees' communication, adaptation, knowledge exchange, and collaboration. Nevertheless, the cross-sectional and self-reported design does not establish causality, convenience sampling and the single-organization setting limit generalizability, and construct validity requires further factor-analytic confirmation. The results therefore provide context-specific evidence of associations between diverse-team experiences and perceived leadership development rather than evidence of causal effects.

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