



Role of social identity for effective leadership by frontline supervisors.

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to understand how frontline supervisors in the South African mining industry, leverage of social identity dynamics to acquire legitimacy, authority and influence in high-risk multicultural environments. The study employs a qualitative research methodology to examine examines how social identity shapes effective team leadership practices.

The findings reveal that frontline supervisors establish legitimacy by being authentically caring, rather than through their position. The results of the study identifies three dimensions of engagement (physical, cognitive, and emotional) that frontline supervisors use to create cohesion by listening to concerns, interest in welfare, and involving workers in decisions.

The study contributes towards Social Identity Theory by demonstrating that leaders coordinate multiple identity categories to strengthen team cohesion. The findings challenge mining organisations to develop culturally informed and emotionally intelligent leadership training over technical competency training. The study provides a framework for developing supervisory leaders who can care for the individuals and the organisation.

Keywords: *Social Identity; Collective Identity; Relational Leadership; Perceived Similarity; Leadership legitimacy; Mining Sector*

PLAGIARISM DECLARATION

I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.

Name:

Date: 03 November 2025

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1 CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

1.1 Introduction

The South African mining industry continues to experience complex challenges such as tenacious safety hazards, diverse workforce, and increasing technological developments. In many mining operations, frontline supervisors are typically responsible for leading teams consisting of individuals from various cultural backgrounds. Building trust, managing communication and ensuring that safety regulations are followed consistently becomes challenging for frontline supervisors.

Zen et al. (2023) highlights that for effective supervisory leadership to exist in these environments, both situational adaptability and sensitivity to group identity dynamics become essential. The critical role of frontline supervisors is highlighted by Muthelo et al. (2022) as many have to oversee teams with a grasp of social and psychological dynamics due to operational complexity, workforce diversity, and ongoing safety problems.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) provides useful insights into how teams develop a sense of shared identity, cohesiveness, and performance however, for frontline supervision leadership remains underexplored (Steffens et al., 2021). Research opportunity exists for practical leadership applications for frontline supervisors guided by SIT frameworks. This highlights the necessity for leadership models to integrate situational adaptability with profound understanding of group identity to enhance safety and productivity in mining operations (Janssens et al., 2022).

1.2 Problem Statement

The mining industry in South Africa plays a significant contributing role towards the country's GDP and provides employment for thousands of individuals (Prinsloo, 2022). Despite this, it is confronted with a variety of obstacles which includes a diverse workforce, elevated workplace fatality rates, and unforgiving working conditions (Suharyani et al., 2024).

Frontline supervisors largely supervise majority of the mine's workforce to drive productivity, face daily complexities in sustaining team cohesion while also accomplishing operational and safety objectives (McLaggan et al., 2013). Conventional leadership training frequently neglects to acknowledge the significance of frontline supervisors who are responsible for the execution of strategy, the promotion of change, and the assurance of safety (Kim et al., 2020).

The current reality reflect that majority of the frontline supervisors' backgrounds are without formal education or have received little structured leadership training (Sibindi & Ndlovu, 2024).

Addressing the leadership development gap at the frontlines is not just a strategic need for businesses, but an issue of equity (Louw, n.d.).

According to Social Identity Theory (SIT), effective leadership is derived from the capacity to cultivate a shared sense of "us" by the leader (Steffens et al., 2021). Shi et al. (2024) highlights that leadership practices in relation to social identity processes are subject to limited research. Relevant leadership strategies ought to be developed informed by understanding how frontline supervisors construct and enact leadership through the lens of social identity (Davis et al., 2019a).

This study intends to fill a gap in academic research and industry practice in leadership formation and deployment amongst frontline supervisors in the mining industry with little formal educational backgrounds (Ntsane et al., 2022). Developing frontline supervisor brings about tangible benefits to workplace safety, operational efficiency and retention within operations.

The outcomes emanating from this study will be used to strengthen contextually, all relevant leadership development programs, which in turn, result in safer, more effective and inclusive mining operations in one of South Africa's most important industries.

1.3 Research Objectives

The South African mining sector remains a significant contributor to the country's economy where many frontline supervisors face structural and hazardous workplace complexities from these operations (Sibindi & Ndlovu, 2024). Compounded with stringent safety regulations, operational demands, responsibility to navigate through these is afforded to the frontline supervisors and leaders where reality presents a culturally and linguistically diverse environment (Louw, 2022).

This presents a leadership challenge in fostering cohesion and adapting to a changing workplace which relies heavily on the leader's capability. Further to this, operations that promote frontline supervisors on operational experience rather than education, encourage a reliance on informal learning and social identification processes to build legitimacy and influence.

Current research centres on formal leadership models with little attention paid to informal leadership models that arise from lived experiences and behaviours that may impact leadership effectiveness in this environment (van Knippenberg, 2023). From a business

perspective, there also exists a compelling commercial case to invest focusing on frontline leadership development.

In summary, the research problem is that there is a lack of understanding of how frontline supervisors in South African mining construct and implement leadership through social identity processes, despite the critical business and theoretical need to close this gap for improved safety, team functioning, and organisational performance.

2 CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The intersection between Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Team Leadership (TL) can be used to define the organizational behaviour in risk-prone industries such as mining (Kadakure & Twum-Darko, 2024). Employees are most likely to identify and relate well with a team that share the same attitude towards safety practice and performance outcome (Asif et al., 2023). A collective identity creates greater engagements with what is needed to be done operationally in a risky and hazardous environment.

Frontline supervisors' role are not only to lead but to inspire the individual towards shared goal but also to continually and recurrently define the team identity and team membership. Effective team leadership is suggested to contribute to the unity and diversity among team members (Marlina Verawati et al., 2020). Frontline supervisors have to strike the balance between inclusion of diversity and exclusion of individualism.

Although, the emerging leadership among the mining industry is increasing interestingly, but much is yet to be done considering approaches that can integrate identity process and leadership that could foster innovation, engagement, and safety (Karelaia et al., 2022). This paper synthesises and summarises recent literature based on SIT and team leadership as interrelated constructs that can set a successful leadership formula in the mining industry.

2.2 Social Identity Theory

2.2.1 Foundational Theory and Evolution

Social Identity Theory (SIT) is a theory developed by Tajfel and Turner in 1979 on the basis of works by Sherif (1966) and Simon (1964) on intergroup psychology. SIT suggests that people define themselves according to groups, to which their self-concept is tightly tied to. The result is that people display in-group favouritism and outgroup differentiation, which affect their behaviour or decision-making process. Recent studies have seen the transition from rigid demographic categorizations to fluid, dynamic, and situational identity features, relying on a spectrum of possibilities that can be extended or contracted depending on context and demography or on particular organisation's characteristics and culture (van Knippenberg, 2023).

High levels of social identification are positively associated with several organisational outcome variables, including turnover intentions, and more discretionary effort from members

of the group. However, there appears a set of negative outcomes, with people with high identification being more likely to experience conflict in the group, dissatisfied with change initiatives and refusal to cooperate with other departments, with which departmental units they officially identify (De Klerk & Swart, 2023).

The dynamic nature of identity is especially relevant for mining professionals and leaders working in mining organizations due to high volatility, workplace accidents rate, and workforce mobility. Team leaders continually work on maintaining their identity which presents an opportunity to manage identity salience of followers strategically instead of relying on demographic lines (Khan & Auret, 2025).

2.2.2 Self-Categorisation Theory and Group Dynamics

Self-Categorisation Theory (SCT) builds upon Social Identity Theory (SIT) by clarifying the cognitive processes of identity formation or depersonalisation which allows one to change from personal identity which emphasizes individual distinctiveness and uniqueness to social identity which underscores membership in a group or teams according to situational cues. The cognitive process of categorization plays a significant role in the emergence and effectiveness of leadership in teams. It suggests that people who resemble the prototype of a given group most are most likely to succeed as leaders because of depersonalisation when the identity is hidden behind the person (van Knippenberg, 2023).

In the mining environment, this becomes particularly complex because of the overlap between social identity categories such as countries or regions, ethnic background or language groups, skill levels, and according to ease of shift arrangements. For example, in South African mines, the language spoken is a critical factor which undermines work cohesion. Workers with Zulu, Afrikaans and Sotho language background are required to develop a shared professional language which can be divisive and hinder cohesion within the team.

Recent studies show that good leader are those that work hard to make all social identity structures inclusive instead creating exclusive group identity environment (Charness & Chen, 2025). These individuals transcend the social barrier that typically separates groups by demographic distinctions. Female leaders in male-dominated mining environments are one of the examples of such approach, as they have to create a professional image of themselves that is not as aggressive as male leaders are often perceived by subordinates (Hernandez Bark et al., 2022).

2.2.3 Identity Leadership Behaviours: The Four-Dimensional Model

Gleibs (2025) research identifies four key identity leadership behaviours that facilitate a leader's ability to shape team related social identity processes, namely; characteristics as follows: prototypicality, advancement, impresario-hip and entrepreneurship. Identity prototypicality is the phenomenon in which a leader behaves as a prototypical team member, having characteristics in common with other members and embodying shared values genuinely. Prototypical leaders are display "one of us" leader, prototypical leaders are more likely to be trusted by their followers and have more influence with their followers as a result. For example, leaders who possess prototype qualities receive more support from followers, more trust and more favourable judgments of effectiveness than less prototypical leaders (Steffens et al., 2021).

Another behaviour is identity advancement, in which leaders sacrifice personal interests for those of the group. Group interests are greater than self-interests and leaders endorse the group over their personal profit. This group serving motivation allows followers to view leaders as more prototypical. For example, mine supervisors who push for safer equipment, better work hours, and recognition programs for the team rather than their own career (Haas, 2020).

Identity impresario-ship is the ability to generate shared identity experiences through storytelling, ritual, and symbolic action. For example, mine supervisors in underground mining are able to generate a shared identity with their crews by sharing group success stories, group pride in the group's safety record and group milestone celebrations. These experiences make their group identity meaningful (Hou et al., 2021a).

Lastly, identity entrepreneurship is the active shaping of group boundaries, norms, and aspirations by leaders, aligning with the organisation while maintaining authenticity in representing the group. This is the most difficult, as leaders must balance meeting organisational needs with remaining true to the group, without appearing manipulative or inauthentic (Haslam et al., 2022).

2.2.4 Effectiveness of Identity Leadership - Moderators and Boundary Conditions

Given that contextual influences determine the salience of the group identity and the significance of prototype-based evaluations, the impact of identity leadership would also depend on these factors, specifically related to the environmental instability and crisis (Shi et al., 2024). During periods of environmental uncertainty or crisis, the effects of identity leadership are heightened as followers look to prototypical leaders for guidance (Haslam et

al., 2024). In order to assist followers to navigate through crisis, the leaders embody shared group characteristics and provide cognitive stability, during these times.

The strength of group identification is viewed as a crucial moderator consisting of pronounced effects observed among followers who strongly identify with their group. This is particularly true and relevant for mining organisations as the team members come from diverse cultural backgrounds and possess varying years of experience or tenure (Ntsane et al., 2022). New employees often require time to establish group identification before the full benefits of prototypical leadership can be realized (Hou et al., 2021).

Notably, the implications of cultural diversity for identity management are notably complex in the context of South African mining, where the legacy of apartheid significantly influences workplace relationships and identity formation (Nelwamondo & Price, 2025). Leaders must be adept at managing multiple cultural prototypes simultaneously while promoting inclusive professional identities that transcend demographic differences (Louw, 2022).

Recent studies indicate that leaders who are viewed as prototypical receive greater tolerance for errors following performance failures, suggesting a "license to fail" effect. Meta-analytic evidence shows that the effects of leader prototypicality strengthen under distressful times or inter-group conflict (Rovetta et al., 2025).

2.3 Leader Group Prototypicality

2.3.1 Theoretical Foundation and Empirical Support

Leader Group Prototypicality (LGP) is a key concept that connects Social Identity Theory (SIT) with leadership effectiveness. It is defined as the extent to which followers perceive their leader as embodying the group's distinctive characteristics and authentically representing the collective identity (Hou et al., 2021a). Meta-analytic studies conducted by Steffens et al. (2021) indicate that LGP is a strong predictor of leadership effectiveness across various organizational contexts, with effect sizes comparable to those found in established leadership theories.

This demonstrates that prototypical leaders enjoy greater follower support developed through trust. This is due to the underpinning theory of influence processes that says that followers believe that the prototypical leaders prioritize the group's interests over their own and their trust is rewarded with power.

Finally, longitudinal investigation has demonstrated that thoughts of LGP can be managed through behaviours that show legitimate alignment to group values and devotion (Rodgers et al., 2024). This, therefore, challenges the past beliefs that prototypicality is an unchangeable characteristic and illustrates that LGP as a fluctuating dynamic leadership construct that can increase with time.

2.3.2 Mining-Specific Applications and Challenges

Mining supervisors face the continued challenge of combining technical competence with the need to authentically represent the membership group. Both dimensions of credibility are fundamental to the successful exercise of leadership in a mining setting. According to research, the problem stems from promotion practices that prioritizing technical skills over the ability to manage identity, relational dynamics, and interaction norms underpinning “prototypical leadership (Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm, 2020). This non-consideration in employment conditions implies that supervisors may be masters of operations but lack critical capabilities required to engage and motivate their teams, which might be especially challenging in mining due to its diversity.

The challenge of having to maintain authority in safety while also being viewed as “one of us” is also a divisive one. Supervisors are required to strike a balance between authority and nurturing peer relationships. This means that, supervisors must be firm on safety regulations, while on the other, they must retain relationships with their employees as peers to feel like they belong. Such a relationship sense-making approach maximizes influence possibilities without the reliance on formal authority (de Metz et al., 2024). Therefore, it is important to fuel a positive organisational climate and create a sense of belonging, especially when the team’s cohesion can directly affect member compliance.

The implementation of accountability systems becomes a critical predictor of safety behaviour outcomes, particularly when these systems operate within supportive organisational cultures that recognize and reinforce prototypical leadership behaviours.

2.4 Team Leadership Theory: Relational Approach

2.4.1 Team Leadership Theory

Team Leadership Theory has been applied in a mining context to move leadership away from the traditional command-and-control model and towards a more relational and shared model. Teams are viewed as complex adaptive systems where leaders are seen to be responsible for creating the conditions and support systems needed to enhance the collective intelligence

building, coordinating of the distributed expertise, and the architecture of the collaboration processes.

This perspective is especially valuable in mining, where scenarios involve dispersed and culturally divergent teams. In a mine, workers may be spread over vast distances and work in other languages. Moreover, functions will have varying expertise, and everyone is dependent on the other for their personal safety. Hierarchies are unhelpful in this dynamics since the complexity, uncertainty, and cultural diversity are beyond hierarchy handling.

Mining companies also usually do not invest in the development of frontline leaders who are essential for their survival and success (Davis et al., 2019a). They are the linchpin of mining company viability since front-line leaders will facilitate collective problem-solving during times of difficulty.

2.4.2 Team Leadership Competencies

2.4.2.1 Effective task orchestration

Coordination mechanisms are needed to enable effective task orchestration, information sharing, and role learning that contributes to the opportunity for broader individuals to achieve collective performance outcomes that are not possible on an individual basis. In mining environments, sophisticated coordination is particularly crucial due to safety-critical interdependencies, time-sensitive decision-making requirements where failures can lead to severe consequences such fatalities or environmental disasters (Zhang et al., 2023). Effective team leaders contribute to efficient coordination by creating clear roles, enabling positive information flow and creating psychological safety amongst the team members.

Another essential element of coordination is relationship management, which covers the rest represented by trust-building, conflict, and communication. Such relationships foster psychological safety, enabling team members to contribute their expertise and engage in collective problem-solving without the fear of failure. Research shows that relationship quality is still crucial over authority as genuine leadership impacts actual trust in supervisors, psychological safety, and work engagement (Batool et al., 2023). Additionally, mining industry leaders must also relate beyond the team to ensure that employee interests are protected in the broader spectrum scenario. For one to achieve that, she or he must have political tolerance skills comparing to mining operations (Domínguez-Gómez & González-Gómez, 2021).

2.4.2.2 Inclusive communication strategy

Leadership of multicultural teams in mining settings is challenging to achieve due to these complex influences on cultural continuity, inclusive communication and team identity across demographic and professional boundaries. Nonetheless, recent research findings have shown that the leader's benefits from group prototypicality, as this adjusts the focus from representation to within-group (van Knippenberg & Lee, 2023).

To ensure that their supervisors develop an authentic leadership style with strong communications and supportive attitudes. The supervisor needs to develop team identity and focus on shared experiences while implementing diverse strategies to manage the language barriers. The communication strategies of the supervisor may include the use of visual communication aids and use storytelling to promote understandings between the team members.

Furthermore, effective identity integration involves aiding diverse team members in forming a collective professional identity centered on safety awareness, operational excellence, and team reliability, all while acknowledging and respecting the cultural differences that contribute to team diversity. Such a process requires sophisticated cultural competency and inclusive leadership skills that many supervisors may lack as they are inducted to their position.

2.4.2.3 Balancing error tolerance with compliance

Management of distributed decision-making in safety-critical contexts should also balance empowerment and compliance by allowing members to make routine operational choices in controlled safety boundaries. The empowerment process fosters taking safety responsibilities and they enhance skills via judgement making which is vital in mining (Kim et al., 2020). Balancing error tolerance with compliance mandates fostering a psychological safety climate where team members feel comfortable reporting mistakes, near misses, and safety concerns without fear of retribution, while still maintaining accountability for safety-critical behaviours.

Studies indicate psychological safety predicts employee engagement and proactive safety yields. A learning culture in high-risk settings demands maintains of skilled leaders who promote the sharing of acquired knowledge and developments traits without wavering on signalling operational control and safety concerns (Frazier et al., 2017). Developing a learning culture in high-stakes environments necessitates leaders who can promote knowledge sharing, encourage continuous improvement, and support skill development, all while maintaining operational focus and an emphasis on safety (Haas, 2020). Mining organisations

that implement structured leadership development programs stand to benefit from improved safety performance, heightened productivity, and increased employee engagement.

2.5 Employee Engagement Theory: Kahn's Multidimensional Framework

2.5.1 Three-Dimensional Engagement Architecture

Kahn's personal engagement theory provides a theoretical basis for understanding the interaction between social identity and team leadership with personal commitment. According to Kahn (1990), three types of engagement are possible, namely, physical, cognitive, and emotional.

According to Kahn (1990), employees who are highly engaged are vibrant in their work and are vibrant and energetic. Research evidence indicates that physical engagement is heavily affected by how workloads are managed, how resources are made available, and how every worker's role is made clear through effective supervisory practices (Zanabazar et al., 2024).

Cognitive engagement is when the employee understands the organization's vision and strategy, comprehending how they contribute to performance. This type of engagement relies on the availability of meaningful work assignments, learning opportunities, and intellectual challenges (Bao et al., 2022). Greater cognitive engagement is promoted when the employees understand their contributions in relation to the broader organisational goals which in turn benefits the performance of the organisation.

Emotional engagement develops from the perceived positive affiliation that the employee has with their employer. Employees feeling a part of the organisation, trusting the people in it, and feeling in alignment with the organisation's values. Kahn (1990) discussed how positive interpersonal relationships, group dynamics, and supportive management styles create the psychological safety of which, individuals need to form an emotional connection with the workplace. Supervisors play an important role in shaping engagement with the team members. When group or team members feel included, their emotional engagement is higher. This type of engagement increases their commitment and their performance.

In summary, Kahn's personal engagement theory provides a basis for understanding how social identity and effective team leadership are connected to the employee's personal commitment, with each element being essential to achieve high retention and performance. When team leaders understand how factors of physical, cognitive, and emotional engagement can be linked, they are able to develop a more committed and productive workforce.

2.6 Theoretical Convergence: Social Identity Leadership and Team Leadership Theory

2.6.1 Identity-Informed Leadership Approach

When combined, the Social Identity and Team Leadership Theories yield greater effectiveness than the individual theories by themselves. In particular, the combination arises when using identity-informed approaches to team leadership that serve the leader's team members' need to belong and the team's need for performance, which is reflected in the literature as "identity leadership" (Haslam et al., 2020).

This synergistic combination occurs through three key mechanisms. Firstly, social identity helps team processes by creating shared mental models and collective accountability mechanisms that increase information sharing and decision quality as well argues by (Stewart et al., 2023). Second, team leadership supports the development of identity by offering meaningful participation opportunities and recognition systems that provide group identification (Shi et al., 2024). Finally, this combination provides trust-based influence mechanisms by which team leaders can coordinate complex activities through the alignment of identity rather than by relying on formal authority (Janssens et al., 2022).

An identity-informed team leadership approach brings together an authentic representation of the group and the facilitation of its performance (Krug et al., 2021). It does so by acknowledging that team coordination inherently relies on the shared group identity, psychological safety, mutual trust and collective accountability it creates while not losing sight of the team's performance (Widianto et al., 2024). Leaders who successfully combine the two theories create teams that share a strong identity while also valuing individual uniqueness.

Finally, mining supervisors require a multi-level supervisory competency framework to achieve operational effectiveness. Research shows that authentic communication approaches prove more effective than aggressive tactics (Haas & Yorio, 2022).

2.7 Conclusion

The best leaders are those who exude authenticity in their shared value and promote an inclusive and adaptive culture for the best engagement, trust, and performance (Rovetta et al., 2025). Research confirms that leaders who embody group prototypicality while fostering

inclusive team identity create enhanced coordination mechanisms and stakeholder alignment (Steffens et al., 2024; van Knippenberg, 2023).

Mining supervisors must balance competing paradoxes through adaptive leadership capabilities, managing simultaneous pressures from productivity, safety, stakeholder expectations, and community relations (Abukalusa & Oosthuizen, 2023).

Ultimately, successful mining leadership requires authentic identity alignment that promotes collective engagement while maintaining organisational effectiveness through systematic competency development across multiple operational levels (Batool et al., 2023).

3 CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH QUESTION

3.1 Introduction

Frontline leadership in the South African mining sector is characterised by a complex interaction of social identities, organisational culture and both formal and informal leadership structures. Team leadership is decided upon by more than just formal hierarchy, but the leader's ability to create a shared team identity and a sense of legitimacy amongst many team members (Siyal, 2023).

Prinsloo and Hofmeyr (2022) highlights that for effective supervisory leadership to exist in such environments, both situational adaptability and sensitivity to group identity dynamics become essential. Empirical research focusing on how these dynamics are exhibited in the mining sector are scarce, and even less is known about how frontline managers perceive and engage in social identity processes in their teams (De Klerk & Swart, 2023).

This study is sought to fill a gap in academic research by focusing on leadership formation and execution among frontline supervisors in the mining industry, particularly those with little formal educational backgrounds. From the literature review in chapter 2, this research study seeks to address the following research questions emanating from the theoretical shortcomings identified.

3.2 Research Question

3.2.1 To explore how frontline managers in the South African mining sector perceive and experience social identity within their teams.

This goal is to explore how supervisors, who often originate from the ranks, and have limited formal power, leverage social identity dynamics to acquire legitimacy, authority, and influence. Understanding and appreciating these practices is critical to understanding the rise and efficacy of frontline leadership within high-risk, multicultural contexts.

Through the lens of Social Identity Theory (SIT), the research question focusses on how supervisors legitimise, legitimate and empower themselves in low informal power contexts. This research question seeks to investigate through the lived experiences of frontline supervisors in the process of identifying and establishing social identity within their teams. The research question will also investigate how organisational structures, informal networks, and cultural norms present in the mining industry contribute towards this process of identification.

3.2.2 To understand the ways in which social identity influences team leadership practices and outcomes.

This question explores how social identity shapes team leadership and its consequences. According to the literature, high team identification may promote psychological safety, accountability and performance while strengthening silos if subgroup-identification is high (Weisman et al., 2023).

3.3 Conclusion

Social Identity Theory provides an effective perspective for understanding how leaders can be trusted and thus influential in representing group norms and values.

Team leadership effectiveness is not only based on formal authority, but more importantly, on the capacity for the leader to build a shared team identity and establish team legitimacy. The lack of research to conceptualize how frontline supervisors navigate and leverage social identity in their teams through their lived experiences is of critical importance in enhancing operational performance and transformation in mining.

This research seeks to add to the body of knowledge by exploring how frontline supervisors perceive and experience social identity processes, and how these processes contribute to the team leadership practices and outcomes in the workplace.

4 CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

Leadership and the complex interactions between frontline supervisors and their subordinates in mining cannot be considered rational or objective. The depth and richness of the lived experience of these instituted dynamics can only be revealed through a research design that allows for the exploration thereof. A qualitative interpretivist research paradigm was adopted for this research work in view that reality is not fixed or objective, but rather socially constructed in people's subjective meaning of their daily lives (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). This research will adopt a descriptive-explanatory design that will allow the researcher to describe the phenomena through the lived experiences of the frontline supervisors and their teams.

The interpretivist paradigm and the inductive methodology required the use of qualitative methodologies through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Following a narrative process, the study obtained valuable insights from lived experiences of the participants. In performing semi-structured interviews, it allowed for the frontline supervisors an opportunity to provide the experiences and issues that they are facing in their own words (Lim, 2024a).

The study adopted a cross-sectional approach rather than a longitudinal one to allow the research to concentrate, perform an in-depth examination of present practices, patterns and dynamics, of which, are in line with the study's goals and practical limitations (Vogt et al., 2021).

4.2 Research Methodology

This study aimed to explore how people narrate their group membership and construct their identity and leadership within their workplace context, more specifically, frontline supervisors and managers in the South African mining sector. Narrative analysis is a great method to use because it allows the researcher to uncover how individual and group stories contribute to the formation of social identity and how leadership is perceived and enacted (Sadarić & Škerlavaj, 2023). A narrative inquiry as allows for an effective method to capture the complex ways in which participants with varied educational backgrounds are understanding and enacting leadership (Grieb, 2024). By anchoring this study in Social Identity Theory and Team Leadership frameworks, the research approach aligns to the theoretical underpinnings that matter in organizational behaviour, group membership and the workplace (Alharbi, 2023).

4.3 Population

The sample for this study mainly made up of frontline supervisors and managers working for South African mining companies, with particular focus on those who reach their positions through experience on the job and not through formal qualifications (Mokganya et al., 2024). This is a specific group of participants because of the unique role they play as frontline supervisors in the operational teams and the unique leadership challenges that they face due to the uncommon path that takes them up in their organisations. This enabled exploration of socially constructed identities and how they play a role in effecting leadership influence.

These supervisors have a wealth of experience and rely mainly on learning through informal experience to reach their positions. They often have to navigate very complex workplace relationships through adaptive problem solving. It was proposed that these supervisors are socially constructing and maintaining their authority and legitimacy through such skills, as opposed to formal qualifications and thus is an interesting group to research in the context of social identity theory. The supervisors are recognised and accepted by their peers as being legitimate leaders (Jonsdottir & Kristinsson, 2020). The research study sought to unmask the social identity processes that render these supervisors' leadership effective, and how this enables their influence and group cohesion in a context where leadership ascent is not based on formal education (South et al., 2018).

This research study adopted purposive and chain-referral (snowball) sampling to access the real and nuanced experiences of frontline supervisor from diverse operational environments from South African mining companies. Purposive sampling is well established in qualitative studies as it allows the researcher to select participants who have the required characteristics, such as frontline supervisor who have extensive experiential knowledge and responsibility. This approach is particularly effective as the research aims to explore complex phenomena, such as the formation of social identity and informal authority among supervisors lacking formal qualifications. The need to include frontline supervisor from across the range of operational environments specifically from mining companies, therefore, is justified in order to get closer to richer real-life qualitative data.

To further reach other less accessible populations, chain-referral (snowball) sampling was carried out whereby respondents under purposive sampling were asked to invite and refer other peers who also qualify to be part of the study to increase the sample size (Naderifar et al., 2017). Snowball sampling increased the sample diversity and the authenticity of data, which is an important aspect of empowering the credibility of qualitative research findings on

leadership and group identity (Ting et al., 2025). The researcher is, thus, able to obtain other perspectives or views on the topic, which the study may find. This approach was consistent with the nature of qualitative research.

The sample was explicitly required to acknowledge the informed consent for participation and understanding of confidentiality for protection of the identity and not reflect connection to organisations they report to.

The significance of focusing on this particular population of under-credentialled mining supervisors, provides this research study to reveal how social identity and experiential expertise interact and combine to create legitimacy from authority and influence in frontline supervisory work. The contribution from the findings generated builds ongoing academic debates on non-traditional leadership development in the high-risk industries, while demonstrating practical solutions to foster leadership development among frontline supervisors (Wijngaards et al., 2022).

4.4 Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis for this study is the individual frontline supervisor or manager working in South African mining operations. Focusing on the individual was justified by the research as the study aimed to investigate how the individual's perceptions, experiences and identity-formation strategies shape frontline leadership practices in environments characterized by high operational risk and limited formal educational attainment (Henderson et al., 2022).

Social Identity Theory is an appropriate starting point for this study as SIT posits that group membership forms the basis for authority, belonging and normative behaviour (Hogg, 1998). By choosing the individual as the primary unit, the study is aligned with SIT principles of a leader's self-concept and behaviour being shaped by identification with social groups and the ability to personify group norms (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). This allowed the researcher to explore how supervisors 'make sense of' their leadership role, how they manage their groups and how they foster collective efficacy at the team level (Davis et al., 2019a).

The study explored how supervisors perceive and construct their social identity within operational teams and how such identity processes shape their leadership and important outcomes such as organisational culture, safety behaviour and group cohesion (van Knippenberg & Lee, 2023). It was thus, particularly appropriate that individual cases are analysed in qualitative research in order to capture variation in the construction of leadership

identity, namely unique personal histories and informal learning, and workplace experiences (Alharbi, 2023). By investigating frontline leadership in the South African mining sector, the study aimed to contribute to the understanding of how social identity and experiential learning interact to legitimize authority, promote team performance and enhance safety outcomes.

This approach followed was in line with the recent literature that suggests that the investigation into frontline leadership is important to generate practical and theoretical insights into non-traditional leadership pathways in resource-based and hazardous sectors (Giessner et al., 2009). This approach supports the development for formulating targeted interventions and policy guidelines for the development of leadership in similar occupational contexts especially in high-risk and non-formal-education settings.

4.5 Sampling Method and Size

4.5.1 Sampling Method

Following best practices with qualitative research, purposive sampling affords the researcher the direct access to frontline supervisors and managers whose lived professional experience is most pertinent to questions of leadership development and social identity construction in the case of the mining industry (Renjith et al., 2021). The researcher identified and selected individuals whose lived experience best represents the phenomena under study. The intention was to capture the lived experiences of frontline supervisors or managers whose lived experience that closely aligns with the theoretical concepts on leadership and social identity such as a supervisor who started out as a general worker and rose through the ranks, learning on the job.

To develop deep understanding around particular experiences or phenomena, the sampling criteria used was as follows:

- (a) current or recent experience as a frontline supervisor or manager in the mining sector;
- (b) little or no formal post-secondary education; and
- (c) day to day responsibility for directing operational teams.

A typical example would be a shift team-leader or supervisor who started their career as an entry level general worker and move into supervision through workplace learning. These parameters allowed for inclusion of supervisors with practical, on-the-ground experience and those who have moved up through experience as opposed to education in reflection of the study's social identity framework (Lim, 2024b).

The research study aimed at eliciting context-rich narratives from participants in a variety of different mining settings in order to identify patterns and variations in the construction of identities and leadership. In deciding between a single-organization case study and a multiple-organization approach, recent research highlighted the need to balance depth (internal validity) with transferability (external validity) (Weise et al., 2020). While a single-site study would allow for greater depth and engagement with trust-building, multi-site sampling may improve the study's relevance to the mining industry as a whole, ability to capture broader themes, and to identify cross-organizational identity practices.

Given practical constraints of accessing a single large mining entity, this research study purposively sampled supervisors from multiple organisations through personal networks, mining associations, and participant referrals (a supplementary snowballing technique). Ethical considerations informed consent, anonymity, and sensitivity to workplace power dynamics, guided all participant recruitment, data collection and build trust and candour with the participants (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016).

4.5.2 Sample Size

A pool of possible interviewees was selected on the basis of sector, role, length of employment and educational background to ensure maximum variation (Naz et al., 2022). The study planned to recruit between 10 to 12 participants for the interviews (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Recruitment largely leveraged on the researcher's professional network from current and past roles in mining operations.

Initial contact was made by telephone calls, digital media communication platforms such as WhatsApp, social and professional platforms such as LinkedIn and Facebook. To further to extend the sample and improve credibility, interviewees were asked to recommend colleagues who met the research study criteria (Naderifar et al., 2017).

The research study also targeted interviews with participants from across the commodity sectors (gold, chrome, PGMs, and coal mining), across varying organisation sizes, genders, races, and experience levels. This size was deemed sufficient for reaching "saturation" whereby additional interviews no longer produce significantly new insights or themes - especially as the research population was not homogenous but shared similar experience and roles.

4.6 Measurement Instrument

Semi-structured interviewing is considered state of the art in organisational research to obtain authentic and context-sensitive reflections particularly for topics such as informal leadership, legitimacy and group identity where personal experience is central. The main measure instrument in this study was semi-structured interviews, which has been specifically designed to elicit informative insights about how front-line supervisors and managers experience, enact and navigate leadership and social identity in their team.

The development of the semi-structured interview guide for this research has been shaped by existing literature on leadership and social. The interview guide included open-ended questions about career pathways and daily leadership, trust, team diversity, and how social identity influences decision-making. (Refer to [Appendix A](#) for the Interview guide used.)

Recognising the participants' diverse educational backgrounds, the language of the questions was deliberately not academic, given the low education level of the participants. Questions ought to be designed to be relatable and easy to understand to allow participants to engage in honest discussion. The researcher applied one-line sentence prompts for further clarification, such as "Can you give an example of when...?" and being flexible to follow the unexpected but relevant topics (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lim, 2024a).

To enhance the interview guide's practicality and participant comfort, and to increase the reliability and effectiveness of the interview guide, special care was taken to make each question as relevant and approachable as possible for mining supervisors with different backgrounds. Each question was crafted using a simple language tone however, where there were some questions that the participant requested for clarity, the researcher would be able to offer clarity.

The interview guide was informed by several core theoretical domains central to the research study. First, questions explored participants' career histories and pathways to leadership. The researcher included this question because in mining, and especially among supervisors, promotion and legitimacy can often be achieved informally rather than through formal avenues. Further questions to explore their daily enactment of leadership, asking participants to describe particular situations in which they made a decision, mediated conflict, or solved an operational problem.

Participants were further invited to share outcomes from significant events where they established their credibility with the team and a time where their legitimacy had been challenged as a leader. The guide will also consider team diversity and the social identities of the team by asking participants to discuss how age, culture, language or gender impacts their relationships and style. The interview questions were designed to elicit participants' perceptions of how their own social identity impacts both their decision-making and the wider outcomes for their teams. The researcher encouraged and probed interesting or unexpected lines of discussion that rose, leading to more authentic and context-specific insights to move beyond surface-level responses.

4.7 Data Gathering Process

Data was gathered through interviews conducted in-person and on a secure online platform, depending on the availability and access of the participants. Throughout the data collection phase, the researcher made interview notes to supplement the audio recordings from the interview (with the consent of the participant) to ensure the accuracy of the data (Engin & Kasap, 2025).

Consent was secured from the participant to record the interview on audio. Participants were informed the reason for recording and the need to transcribe the interview after the interviews using digital tools. Consent forms were dispatched to the participants prior the interviews such that if question rose, the researcher would be able to address them with the participant. Fortunately, throughout this research, none of the participating individuals expressed any questions.

Ideally the researcher was prepared to partake in follow up sessions if any (based on availability with the participants, on different shifts/sites) in order to clarify or expand further on areas that need more clarity so there will be more than one interview as a follow-up for more information). Each interview was approximately 60-90min in length. All information and recordings gathered during the study was kept safe on the researcher's personal computer to be later securely stored on the institution's cloud storage system. Confidentiality was assured, and the reason for the observation was well explained as well as the safe keeping of the data anonymity.

4.8 Analysis Approach

Large amounts of non-numerical data was collected from qualitative data analysis and required close analysis (Renjith et al., 2021). Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data collected and is the most popular approach to analysing large qualitative data sets. It is helpful in analysing large interview transcripts by reducing them to a few, well-defined themes that are relevant to your research questions. When using thematic analysis you can examine the surface-level patterns in the words (the 'surface' content) and the deeper meanings or workplace 'stories' that emerge in participants' accounts because we are dealing with this type of narrative-type data. This method reduced large data from the interviews and notes taken into a concise, manageable set of findings.

Braun and Clarke (2006) provides a simple, six-phase step-by-step process that is both flexible and accessible to researchers. The step-by-step process followed allows the researcher to return to earlier steps as meaning and interpretation develops, and this is advised to find deeper levels of meaning.

Braun and Clarke's six steps begin with getting familiar with the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher accomplished this by means of the data transcription procedure. The process followed by the researcher was to first transcribe the interview data into converted word text data. From this data, similarity patterns have already begun to emerge. Once the transcripts became accessible, the researcher was able to review and examine them multiple times and listen to the recordings periodically to contextualise the participant's responses (Saldaña, 2013). By thoroughly reviewing the interview transcripts and field notes multiple times, documenting noteworthy observations, and making initial insights, a deeper understanding of the collected data was achieved.

The second step involves generating initial codes in a systematic manner. Initial codes are short labels describing data in a succinct way that is relevant to the research question. This step involved the utilisation of ATLAS.ti software. All transcribed word documents were uploaded to the software, and the researcher continued with the coding process steps. The third step involves identifying higher-level ideas or patterns by grouping similar codes and looking for broader themes. Next, the fourth step is to evaluate the themes to ensure the themes fit with the data and fit across all interview responses. To ensure that each theme has a clear and distinct meaning, the fifth step is to define and name it. Finally, the sixth step was to report the findings and link the analysis to the research question by using quotes and evidence from the data.

Lim (2024b) suggests a triangulation procedure to ensure data reliability as data would be collected from various sources. The findings were cross validated to ensure their validity and authenticity. Using statistical tools such as Atlas.ti to assist in systemically organising, analysing and understanding of responses improved the qualitative analysis by providing further insight in the topic of this research. Mercader et al. (2021) emphasizes the fundamental descriptive statistics which are useful, especially when combined with other qualitative data analysis methods.

4.9 Quality controls

To ensure data quality, the researcher reviewed the findings with the supervisor to detect potential biases. The interview transcripts and summaries were reviewed by the researchers to ensure correctness. To ensure the data's accuracy, interview transcripts were cross-checked with participants. This allowed for a triangulation process to ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the data acquired by validating the findings.

4.10 Limitations

Limitations included researcher bias due to the researcher working with some of the participants. Some participants were not open to discuss issues present in the workplace that affect them due to concerns over any repercussions from the information shared. Limitations also arose with accessibility to some participants from other operations.

Coordinating availability of participants in order to conduct the interviews also presented a challenge. Once the timing was finalised, many participants operated on shift cycles, resulting in unpredictable schedules that varied according to work demands. As all the interviews were conducted through Teams or WhatsApp calls, this also presented a challenge for some supervisors, as access was limited or they did not have Teams active on their computers, necessitating the interviews to be carried out via WhatsApp conversations.

There were instances where network reception signals weakened during the interview, leading to an extension of the interview beyond the scheduled duration. Explaining the concepts proved challenging for the participants; the researcher had to occasionally simplify some of the questions to ensure participant comprehension, often by utilising instances. The potential for certain participants to modify their behaviour during interactions, referred to as the "Hawthorne effect" (French, 1953), may have occurred during the interviews (Lim, 2024a).

The researcher acknowledges all of these limitations and ensures transparency as these present opportunities for future research.

5 CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the empirical findings obtained from the data collection described in Chapter 4. Following a semi-structured interviews process conducted, rich qualitative data was collected from participants to answer fundamental research questions posed in the previous chapter, as shown in Chapter 3.

The primary purpose of this study was to generate comprehensive themes that help to explain how leaders create acceptance in different organisational contexts. The research design approach was with the view of understanding the personal lived experiences, beliefs, and practices encompassing leadership in different mining operations in South Africa.

This research study was guided by two research questions that sought to explore the intersection of social identity and leadership practice of frontline supervisors within the mining sector:

Research Question 1: *To explore how frontline managers in the South African mining sector perceive and experience social identity within their teams.*

Research Question 2: *To understand the ways in which social identity influences team leadership practices and outcomes.*

An interview guide was designed to elicit genuine personal stories, aimed at enlightening the complex interplay between an individual's cultural background and their relational practices that directly shape their effectiveness as leaders. The findings of this research study are presented thematically, in a coherent narrative manner that directly addresses each of the research questions. The analysis are supported by direct quotations from participants and the researcher's analysis in order to link the individual experience within a broader theoretical framework.

5.2 Review of Data Collection Process

5.2.1 Background of Participants

Purposive sampling selection process was employed targeting individuals within the supervisory and leadership occupying positions at various hierarchical levels within mining operations. This approach ensured that various perspectives regarding leadership was

captured, especially from the leaders who are exposed to diverse multicultural teams within the South African mining organisations.

This study engaged ten participants, all with substantive mining industry experience. The participant cohort comprised of individuals from varied functional roles across mining operations, each leading teams of varying sizes and compositions. To ensure that we preserve participants' confidentiality and ensure ethical compliance, all demographic details have been anonymised throughout the data analysis process.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Participant ID	Years as Frontline Supervisor/Leader	Functional Area	Team Size Range
P01	21	Engineering – Tyre Bay	18
P02	28	Engineering – Trucks	14
P03	12	Engineering -Trucks	8
P04	25	Production – Hauling	65
P05	15	Construction -Dumps	25
P06	10	Safety - FTSR	40
P07	20	Procurement – Stores	8
P08	8	Safety - FTSR	60
P09	12	Engineering - Drills	18
P10	8	Engineering – Auto-Elec	6

Note: Specific demographic information has been anonymised to maintain participant confidentiality while preserving analytical integrity.

The research employed a semi-structured interview methodology to allow the participants to respond to their experiences in detail, while ensuring that important themes related to leadership identity, team dynamics and conflict resolution were covered systematically. This approach ensured rich data is collected through an exploratory narrative and allowed practical examples to be provided by the participants from their operational experience.

The interviews were conducted over a six-week period through digital platforms, Microsoft Teams and WhatsApp voice calls, thus accommodating participants working shifts cycles. An extended time frame resulted due to operational commitments from some of the participants.

The analysis shed light on the tension that exists between the relational leadership approach and the need for dissonant action within decision-making in the mining operations. Through systematic constant comparison the research identified both commonalities among leadership experiences and unique insights regarding socially legitimized leadership within multicultural mining contexts.

5.2.2 Data Coding process

The detailed interview transcriptions were coded and analysed using Atlas.ti. This process of data management ensured that the data were systematically coded, and common patterns and themes were identified. Snapshot of the initial coding results is reflected in Appendix C. Figure 1 below reflects the most frequently occurring terms, reflecting the general themes and the most important terms for analysis.

Figure 1: Word Frequency Analysis Report



Source: ATLAS.ti Word Frequency Report.

The initial coding process generated over 600 distinct codes from 391 quotable quotations from the participant interviews. Following iterative rounds of duplicates removal and categorising and refinement, the researcher condensed the codes into 8 key sub-themes, as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of Research Themes

Research Question	Main Theme	Sub Theme	Refined Codes
RQ1	Social legitimacy	Perceived Similarity	Cultural background, Language shared, Value alignment
		Relational Practices	Shared meals, Team rituals, Informal interactions
		Adaptability	Behavioural flexibility, Chameleon metaphor, Integration of cultures
		Balance of Authority and Closeness	Compliance vs. accountability, Leadership pressure, Unity vs. standards
RQ2	Leader-follower relational dynamics	Collective Identity	Mutual respect, Shared values, Team cohesion
		Leader-Follower Dynamics	Accessibility, Trust-building, Relational engagement
		Conflict Management	Listening, Miscommunication, Emotional safety
		Compliance and Accountability	Relational closeness, Overlooking infractions, Performance standards

5.3 Findings and In-depth Analysis of Themes

5.3.1 Research Question 1 (RQ 1) Findings

The findings addressing Research Question 1 (RQ1) exploring how Frontline supervisors in the South African mining sector experience and perceive social identity within their teams revealed interchanging of shared experiences, cultural alignment and relational practices which constitute good leadership principles.

Table 3 below presents the thematic map which outlines the primary theme of social identity and its associated sub-themes, emerging from the qualitative analysis conducted from the participants' interviews. Four main sub-themes are highlighted namely; *perceived similarity*, *relational practices*, *adaptability*, and *the balance of authority and closeness*. These form

essential ingredients that make up the experience and perception of how frontline managers perceive and experience social identity within their teams.

Table 3: Thematic map summary based on RQ1.

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Key codes	Frequency of codes
Social Legitimacy	Perceived Similarity	Cultural background, Language shared, Value alignment	15
	Relational Practices	Shared meals, Team rituals, Informal interactions	12
	Adaptability	Behavioural flexibility, Chameleon metaphor, Integration of cultures	10
	Balance of Authority and Closeness	Compliance vs. accountability, Leadership pressure, Unity vs. standards	8

5.3.1.1 Sub-theme 1: Perceived Similarity

A predominant sub-theme that stood out was that of "perceived similarity", which proved to be a key driver of effective leadership in complex environments such as mining operations. From the interviewed group of frontline supervisors, perceived similarity was a powerful precursor to social identity construction and, as a result, leadership effectiveness around culturally diverse team.

Frontline managers who had cultural similarities or roots with their teams exhibited more capability and confidence to deal with complex social dynamics.

This meant that for a frontline supervisors to cross the hierarchical structure, the leader must sustain authentic leadership acts and interactions based on shared culture and values.

Participant 05 echoes this sentiment by stating,

"Especially with other African people, the first thing that counts is culture and language. So that plays a big part because it gives confidence to some of the guys. They think, 'Oh, this is going to be one of us', because we have the same beliefs and I have the same background."

The participant echoed the importance of shared cultural backgrounds and language, which create a sense of belonging and hence foster trust and ease of working relationships within teams. This also illustrates how shared cultural background and better use of language creates a working environment where team members can feel more comfortable and thus minimise conflict and better collaboration efforts.

In the multilingual South African mining context, managers who communicate in the team's preferred language gain considerable followership influence and legitimacy. This further indicates that their leadership trustworthiness is enhanced through effective communication which can impede effective leadership in multilingual teams in teams.

The value alignment describes how supervisors, whose personal values and beliefs align with that of their team, create a strong foundation for trust in a relationship. When a frontline supervisor shows that he or she has a genuine understanding and commitment to the values that best represent the team, the authenticity and credibility is increased. The supervisor's role as a leader worthy of followership is established.

Managers noted that such affinities are important because they help minimize conflict and enable cooperation as indicated by Participant 09 who noted,

"I would say it is very important because if you guys are the same, you won't have... conflicts, a lot of conflicts,"

Participant 03 also expands on this as he stated,

"If you are not similar within your organisation... it's gonna be a lot of conflicts, and when you are, you are similar or alike, you're gonna build trust and respect."

According to these accounts, similarity is not just figurative, it is a pragmatic glue that knits the team together. This therefore practically proves the significance of perceived similarity in enabling team cohesion.

The frequency of the codes analysed greatly imply that perceived similarity points to a common understanding regarding the role of matching backgrounds for strong interpersonal interactions across diverse teams. This common pattern denotes that the frontline supervisors intuitively recognise the pragmatic advantage of similarity-based connections as being integral tools for anchoring team stability in harsh settings, hence underpinning effective leadership.

5.3.1.2 Sub-theme 2: Relational Practices

Relational practices between frontline supervisors is a sub-theme that further strengthens social identity and cohesion in teams. Practices such as shared meals, team rituals and informal interactions are the daily practices that deepen connections and build trust. Relational

practices are therefore a more complex forms of leadership that recognize the value of authentic human connection for effective team dynamics across cultural boundaries.

The participants highlighted the importance of building bonds and informal interactions with the team members as these bridged the hierarchical level divide. Participant 07 highlighted communal practices that he partakes, as he explains,

"During stock takes, I would buy food and eat with the team. We are one team,"

This quote illustrates the depth of the team's camaraderie and mutual respect that is gained by the simple practices demonstrating the strategic value of these informal leadership behaviours.

Participant 09 also confirm a similar practice that builds camaraderie stating that,

"One of our department's culture is to have lunch together. They would call each other on the radio and say it's blasting time. For then they know that it's time for lunch and then everyone puts their food on the table and they eat. So that built a good relationship amongst our guys. So and they through that they've managed to get along. So even when there's issues at work, they would assist each other."

The practice of sharing a meal goes beyond filling a stomach because it also serves as a powerful ritual amongst employees that makes them feel connected and equal to each other therefore breaking the hierarchical divide, this can be useful for frontline managers to build deeper connections with their team members. Frontline Supervisors actively engage in informal relational practices with team members, it is through these casual conversations that a sense of participation "belonging" is formed among the team members.

These relationship-building efforts encompass an emotional investment aimed at fostering unity beyond transactional work exchanges. Participant 09 expressed this by referring to his approach to welcoming new member, saying,

"I'll obviously welcome him to the team and tell him that he's part of the family and whatever whenever he feels that he needs some assistance, he must feel free to give me a call at any times if he's a shift guy."

The above testimony highlights the underlying emotional depth the process of team identity formation and illustrate the ways in which possible successful managers create familial metaphors that move beyond traditional workplace boundaries. These shared rituals further build on trust and enhanced cooperation among team members, contribute to effective communication and collaborative problem-solving in challenging work conditions. The analysis showcases the empirical evidence that bolsters these relational practices as critical in developing positive team culture within team members.

5.3.1.3 Sub-theme 3: Adaptability

Adaptability emerged as a sub-theme characterising the ability of many frontline supervisors to being flexible in their leadership styles. In other words, the ability to roam from one leadership style to another based on the cultural background of the team members. Secondly, frontline leaders with their communication channels. Participant 04 provided the following metaphor to explain adaptability,

“I always make an example with the you know a chameleon. chameleon you know usually it's very slow. And then it becomes a target to the predators. Because it it's slow and so it cannot run away. But there's one thing I like about the chameleon and it's that this thing of it's changing colours and adapting to whatever the surrounding, to the surroundings then it makes it easier for the chameleon to avoid danger. And to and to stay alive. So slow as it might be, but because it can easily adapt and quickly adapt to the surroundings. Then it becomes difficult for the predators to get and target it.”

This metaphor indicates that the frontline supervisor must be able to adapt his or her leadership approach based on the culture, the team and the context of the operation, in order to be able to achieve the best safety outcomes and team outcomes. The metaphor epitomises an adaptable leader and it indicates that a frontline supervisor's behaviour and communication styles should be fluid and continuously adapt to the social dynamics of the team.

Based on the frequency of the codes, adaptability signifies a critical competency that enhances to team integration. Purposeful use of adaptive strategies provides a better channel for communication and also brings the feeling of recognition of individual identity, which is beneficial to the team overall performance and the operation.

5.3.1.4 Sub-theme 4: Balance of authority and Closeness

The tension between authority and closeness of relations appears to be a more complex sub-theme that the leaders need to navigate through their leadership roles. The data analysed depicts the struggle for leaders to maintain authority and closeness of relations. This appears to be problematic when leaders are to enforce compliance and finding themselves being impartial. Participant 05 argues that being seen as 'one of them' conflicts with leadership.

Participant 05 adds that one of the things that makes one a leader is to hold people accountable. To this regard, he says that leaders disrupt the sense of closeness and solidarity.

"If you become a leader, you'll change. You'll be saying when they are going on the wrong side, you need to put them back. So that means we are not allowing them to do the wrong things."

The challenge becomes pronounced and complex when leaders have to transition from being "one of the group" as per their legitimate role in ensuring safety protocols and productivity standards are met. Participant 05, in his critical analysis, captures the essence of this leadership paradox as leaders opt for being relatable and overlook transgressions and under performance in exchange to being accepted.

"I overlook it and I just brush it away because I'm one of them. That means you are not a leader. You're just going with them."

According to the participant, this type of behaviour does not define leadership, it but rather in compliance with group expectations. This quality of leadership is more likely to endanger the welfare of the team. This tension becomes more apparent when team members begin to expect preferential treatment on the basis of association "identity" to the group and not on the grounds of the organisational performance expectation from the team. This becomes an essential aspect to consider from the data analysed.

Frontline supervisors need to be aware of social identity as it may compromise their ability to hold people accountable. Frontline Supervisors may need to disrupt the sense of closeness and solidarity in order to ensure standards are met. With this approach, If the latter is sacrificed for the former, then the team loses out.

The truth of the matter is that in order to lead a team, frontline leaders must be willing to disrupt the bonds of identity and closeness. Leadership is not about popularity, but about accountability and this can only be achieved by the ability to disrupt bonds of identity and closeness when necessary.

In summary, the results in the study point to the multifaceted nature of social identity experienced by the frontline supervisors. Perceived similarity, relational practices, ability to adapt to situations and the ability to maintain the balance between closeness and accountability shapes the social identity of the frontline leaders in the workplace. The participants expressed rich, vivid understanding of the interplay that influence their leadership effectiveness.

5.3.2 Research Question 2 Findings

Based on our analysis from the preceding analysis, RQ2 consider the mechanisms through which social identity influences team leadership practices and subsequent outcomes. The thematic analysis of RQ2 is presented in Table 4 below. It provides a structured thematic mapping of the primary themes, associated sub-themes and codes.

Table 4: Thematic map summary based on RQ2.

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Key codes	Frequency of codes
Leader-follower relational dynamics	Collective Identity	Mutual respect, Shared values, Team cohesion	15
	Leader-Follower Dynamics	Accessibility, Trust-building, Relational engagement	12
	Conflict Management	Listening, Miscommunication, Emotional safety	10
	Compliance and Accountability	Relational closeness, Overlooking infractions, Performance standards	8

We identify collective identity as the most salient, followed by leader-follower dynamics and conflict management and finally compliance vs. accountability. Collectively, these results suggest the participants in our study value establishing real practical practices that go towards establishing shared group identity. The subsequent analysis discusses each sub-theme in turn and the nuances relating to how these themes point to effective leadership practices and outcomes.

5.3.2.1 Sub-theme 1: Collective Identity

The emergence of “collective identity” reveals a critical construct through which team members trade shared understanding among themselves and trade commitment with the leader to achieve a collective shared goal. As stated by one of the participants, Participant 07,

“In terms of the beliefs or norms, it's very important to understand and as a leader, you need to explain those things to say that guys, the most important thing is respect. If we respect, care for one another, those two aspects are very, very important because it will distinguish whatever beliefs or norms we are having as individuals.”

The above statement suggests that when team members share a collective identity, especially one rooted on mutual respect and care for one another. In the same context, though with a little difference, Participant 03 collaborates this view by stating,

“We do help each other. Whenever we even challenges all the time. We have a team. We have a, I'm leaving unity.”

The above statement illustrates bonding that is created within the team by the leader in order to establish trust and unity based. This further reinforces the team members' belief in teamwork and unity, irrespective of the individual background. This emphasises respect and non-discrimination values, culturally aligned shared values on unity and equality within the team. The participant further explains that leaders must actively promote and reinforce these values, as their absence can lead to team dysfunction. The findings show that collective identity promotes a high relational bond in teams. Respect and mutual care for the team members are practical cultural beliefs that facilitate teamwork, reduce friction.

5.3.2.2 Sub-theme 2: Leader-Follower Dynamics

Drawing from the preceding analysis, the second emergent sub-theme is esteemed leader-follower dynamics. Accessibility, trust-building, and relational engagement were among the key codes and words that emerged. This demonstrated that leaders actively engage with their team in an accessible and genuine manner to establish trust and rapport. Participant 07 explains,

"Yeah, ... Because once you come to your level, you address everything. And they will appreciate you because they will feel that no man, this man he's part of us, you know..."

From this, it implies that in order to motivate and support the team, leaders establish relational connection rather than positional power, thus the leader is accessible and connecting. This encourages open and honest dialogue.

The approach in enhancing leader-follower dynamics suggests that leadership legitimacy be derived through approachable and relatable interactions with the team members. Participant 08 reported that employees seek his advice before acting to confirm his authority and knowledge.

"Technically, I know this because of sharing of information. I think that is the most important point I can highlight regarding that... Also, before they engage in action, some of the employees they consult with me to get my view and advice. From that perspective, I believe people have accepted me as their leader."

This illustrates the level of trust that employees share their ideas and concerns without fear of being reprimanded. The outcome is the creation of an inclusive environment for sharing diverse opinions on matters. This also demonstrates that frontline supervisors create strong bonds with team members by engaging relationally through social interactions that enhance dialogue and cooperation. Teams with healthy leader-follower dynamics demonstrate improved communication, reduced time needed to resolve disputes, and increased adherence to safety procedures.

5.3.2.3 Sub-theme 3: Conflict Management

The emergence of conflict management indicates how frontline managers used their awareness of social identity to better handle conflicts. This sub-theme reflected how leaders, who respected the diversity of social identities in the team, enabled an environment for open discussions and transparent communication.

"When disagreements arise, I prioritize listening to all parties and identifying miscommunication,"

Participant 06 shared the above understanding, which means that leaders who are aware and respect the unique identities of team members can manage conflict better. From the data analysis, the ability to listen and communicate clearly demonstrates the leaders' effort to fix the source of the problem and not the symptom during conflict management. Listening promotes emotional safety by allowing staff to raise a concern without the fear of failing. It is thus a way to listen and understand different perspectives and de-escalate tensions and misunderstandings amongst the team members. Participant 05 emphasised the listening aspect,

"I focus on listening to them. I tell them if I don't understand something or if they have a problem, they should explain it to me. I make time for them - if I don't have time immediately, I tell them to call me later. I listen to their concerns, and if it's something I can help with, I let them know what options they have."

"There's also a belief that I'll always look after them. They have confidence that when they report something to me, I won't throw them under the bus. They believe I'm always looking out for them, so they're comfortable reporting issues."

This statements above highlight the need for frontline supervisor in creating safe environments where individuals feel secure in expressing themselves and reporting any issues.

5.3.2.4 Sub-theme 4: Compliance vs. Accountability

Tension between compliance expectations and accountability requirements, representing a critical challenge confronting frontline supervisors in mining operations. Data analysed indicate existence of reciprocal expectations created by the relational proximity of the leader-follower relationship that requires supervisors to balance being close to their teams and holding them accountable for their work.

Participants indicated that their team members interpret leadership accessibility as an indicator of potential leniency, leading to presumptions about selective enforcement of rules and procedures. The participants noted that there may be an expectation among team members to overlook certain behaviours in order to foster a sense of unity as Participant 06 expressed that

"Sometimes, if you're too close, team members might expect you to let things slide."

Participant 05 also expressed candidly that,

“When you become too close, you overlook the wrongs because you want to be one of them.”

The team’s proximity to the leader generates implicit (emotional) expectations regarding selective enforcement of policies and procedures. This causes an erosion of accountability, where leaders inadvertently place more priority on team harmony over performance because the team expects the leader to overlook some issues. The findings show that relational closeness puts pressure on leaders to overlook team members’ transgressions, which in turn undercuts accountability and performance standards.

The evidence presented suggests that leadership effectiveness hinges on the leader balancing “closeness” or relational investment made to cultivate trust and engagement, while leaving sufficient professional distance to enable objective performance assessment and correction.

The tension between relational closeness and enforcement of accountability indicates that while social identity could make the team bond stronger, the phenomenon needs to be managed carefully in order not to jeopardize the team’s performance and policy compliance.

In summary, the overall findings revealed that collective identity, leader and team relationship dynamics substantially influences team leader practices and the team’s outcomes.

5.4 Conclusion

This research study explored the different facets of social identity in shaping frontline leadership practice within the South African mining sector in considering the two interconnected research questions. These findings cumulatively illustrate that social identity functions act systematically on the team dynamics, leadership effectiveness and organisational outcomes in these complex operational environments.

RQ1 explored how the frontline managers perceived and experienced the social identity within their teams and found that perceived similarity acted as the facilitator of trust and cooperative behaviour. The findings revealed that shared cultural and linguistic backgrounds amongst the team members are essential components for the formation of shared collective identity.

Key relational practices such as eating meals together and having informal interactions illustrates how the frontline supervisors are able to bridge hierarchical divides, bond and bring about a sense of belonging within the team. These relational engagements emerge as essential leadership competencies that frontline supervisor use to create supportive work environments that are directly linked to improved operational team performance.

RQ2 investigated how social identity functions influenced team leadership practice and outcomes by explaining the myriad ways in which social identity functions have an influence on team leadership and team outcomes. It is found that the leader-follower relationship dynamics constitute the primary determinant for effective team atmosphere. The findings highlight that leaders who strategically invested in being accessible and trust-building initiatives gained significantly more influence and authority over their teams.

The findings also highlight that empathetic listening and the creation of emotional safety directly reflects how social identity manifest in organisational conflict resolution processes. The findings reveal the need for effective leadership which transcends higher than positional authority such that leaders will have to develop sophisticated capabilities in fostering real, authentic and strong relationships.

The findings stress the need for dual responsibility of the leaders in fostering accountability while creating a culture of inclusivity. Leaders are required to ensure that team members meet performance standards without sacrificing strong interpersonal relationships.

In conclusion, the findings allow the research study to deepen understanding of the complexity of leadership within different cultural contexts. It also serves the foundational need for mining operations to nurture leaders who are adaptive, empathetic and socio-culturally aware of the leader-follower and team social identities that exist within teams.

6 CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

6.1 Introduction

In Chapter 3, Research Question 1 (RQ 1) addresses how frontline supervisors perceive and experience social identity in their teams. Research Question 2 (RQ 2) examined how social identity influences team leadership practices and performance outcomes.

Based on these research questions, this chapter discussed the results within the literature framework established in Chapter 2 and discusses how the results compare, contribute, or challenge the extant of the literature on leadership legitimacy. The discussion reviews how the empirical evidence answers the research questions in relation to the existing literature on leadership legitimacy in an organisational settings.

6.2 Role of Social Identity in Leadership

Leadership in diverse, often hierarchical, work settings has never been about formal authority or technical competence. Instead, legitimacy in leadership is embedded in relational, cultural, behavioural dynamics (van Knippenberg & Lee, 2023). Leadership legitimacy is based on collective goals and group serving and not on position and power.

Culturally diverse teams in particular make the process of legitimacy particularly convoluted, as it involves transcending multiple identity boundaries (Gleibs, 2025). From the analysis conducted on chapter 5, a clear pattern and understanding emerged of how leaders are not appointed but socially legitimised (Krug et al., 2021).

6.3 Research Question 1

6.3.1 Perceived Similarity and 'One of Us' Identity

Perceived similarity is the matching of cultural, linguistic and behavioural attributes between leader and followers and individuals seek to satisfy two concurrent needs of belonging (acceptance by the group) and uniqueness (preserving personal distinct individuality) whereby effective leadership facilitates both needs in daily work interactions (Assefa et al., 2024; Shi et al., 2024). Perceived similarity fulfils this basic tension through optimal distinctiveness between inclusion (belonging) and differentiation (the need to preserve personal individuality) needs (Farid et al., 2020). This balanced positioning fulfils leaders' followers' belonging needs without treading on leader authority and resolves the relatability-effectiveness contradiction through strategic identity management.

Throughout the interviews, it was also evident that the shared cultural and linguistic background helps to build trust and confidence in the frontline leadership. The research study revealed a common characteristic being the basis for developing a "one of us" identity, similar to "family-like" bond, that promotes team cohesion and increases leader acceptance.

Academic research by Haslam et al. (2022) confirmed this trait, which found a perceptively significant relation between leaders embodying group traits with high levels of trust in all types of organisations. This confirms that leader effectiveness does not come from having the traits, but rather from showing and embodying the trait of the group identity and values through actions, and leading as a living representative of "who we are as a group."

The research findings support existing theories, they do present a subtle challenge to existing leadership theories that emphasize authority over relationship. Similarly the argument by Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm (2020), ethical leadership must ensure relational closeness and accountability for the team to work well.

This presents a subtle challenge on the overemphasis of the "one of us" identity, otherwise the leadership may be valuable but the team will not perform well, especially in the context of a multi-cultural and multi-faceted organization. the leader should be vigilant to ensure that the leader is not only part of the group but also accountable for what is happening.

6.3.2 Signs of Leadership Acceptance

Empirical evidence from this research emphasised acceptance of leadership on the basis of observable behaviours such as listening attentively, obeying without resisting, and consultative actions before making decisions. Participant 05 reiterated that listening to their leader "is a sign that he is a leader in the group." This example illustrates how these behaviours become a means for leadership recognition and affirmation.

Team leadership theory indicates that collaborative dynamics serve as the main engine for acceptance behaviour (Jiang et al., 2023). If the leader shares the same goal with team members and open communication is encouraged, team members feel like they belong and are engaged. Terpstra-Tong et al. (2020) shows that high-quality relational exchanges among leader and team members creates positive psychological conditions. Participant 01 also reiterates this risk of disengagement due to acceptance behaviours misread by the team members.

This tension is notably highlighted by Participant 01, who voiced concerns over "accepting directives without questioning," emphasizing the risk that acceptance behaviours could result in disengagement rather than genuine commitment. Participant 05 highlighted the effect of active listening behaviours as means to "reinforce the leader's position within the group", because they are cues of group membership rather than dominance. Jonsdottir & Kristinsson (2020) acknowledges that active-empathetic listening by supervisors demonstrates engagement by the leader.

Leaders need to discern when immediate compliance is necessary versus when consultative engagement would be more beneficial. Participant 05 stressed the importance of listening behaviours as it reinforcing the leader's "standing within the group"; such actions signal shared membership rather than dominance. Research findings suggest that acceptance is demonstrated through listening, compliance, and open-consultative dialogues. Leaders create relational ground for "engaged acceptance"—responses that signal respect and trust, but also preserve the intellectual freedom needed for organizational learning and adaptation.

6.3.3 Balancing Relatability and Authority

Empirical findings from this study show that frontline supervisors establish relatability with their team members through their consistent alignment between their expressions of care and their actual care behaviours, not general promise-keeping and social connection. This is a striking finding, as it implies that relatability comes through a deeper integrity of word and action, in particular through emotional and interpersonal dimensions.

Literature describes this care-centred word-action alignment as "relational approach" grounded on behavioural integrity (Anker-Hansen et al., 2025). Aquino et al. (2025) views person-centred leadership as that which "fosters healthful relationships", by genuinely engaging with the well-being and developmental needs of followers. The study aligns with care-centred word-action alignment that suggests that supervisors are seen to enhance their own relatability by actively demonstrating a balance between care for their teams and upholding operational standards. However, this insight contradicts concept of behavioural integrity that are primarily based on task-related commitment. This suggests that relatability in the mining industry is fundamentally founded on care-centred word-action alignment.

The Researcher noted that supervisors appeared to attain relatability through a more relational form of emotional intelligence. Participants obtain credibility not through transactional promise-

keeping, but rather by demonstrating a genuine care for their team members' welfare, while at the same time adhering to safety standards. This relational alignment contrasts fundamentally with the existing measures of behavioural integrity that emphasize completion of tasks and procedural consistency.

6.4 Research Question 2:

6.4.1 Collective Identity

According to (Hou et al., 2021b), collective identity is a shared sense of identification among team members and is formed through common social backgrounds, values and past experiences. Collective identity is then the depersonalisation process that creates self-categorisations for individuals to shift from "I" and "me" to "we" and "us".

The same idea is reflected in the words of Participant 07, in which he acknowledges that a shared sense of identity (in this case, identities that are founded on respect and care for each other) create an enabling environment for a team to work together. This implies that when team members have a shared identity, they would mostly operate on the norms of mutual support and inclusiveness. This in turn explains why teams with a strong collective identity would demonstrate high levels of cooperation and commitment which are instrumental towards organisational success.

These findings are significant in the fact that they have shown how a collective identity would promote a cooperative work environment where members feel important and hence contribute effectively. Sultana (2025) also posited that honing a collective identity among team members enhances job satisfaction and reduce turnover intentions. Similarly, Participant 03 expressed that the team is driven by deep-rooted values based on the collective effort and unity of the group, and therefore, the team becomes resilient when facing challenges. Therefore, this indicates that the team members operate beyond their own efforts for higher discretionary effort towards organisational goals (Mohase et al., 2025). Observations from the research findings also do indicate that over emphasis on team identity can compromise accountability.

6.4.2 Leader-Follower Dynamics

Findings from the research analysis show that cultivating accessibility, trust-building and relational engagement in an empathic manner creates better team cohesion. Khan & Auret (2025) argues that leaders who spend time with their employees can create cultures of trust which are a true asset to employee's morale and productivity. Kahn goes further to outline

three interconnected engagement dimensions to explain how Leaders build trust through physical, cognitive, and emotional engagement.

6.4.2.1 Physical engagement

Physical engagement is where they support their teams continuously with support and resources that make people feel safe in putting in the effort, Participant 07 highlighted this where he emphasizes the importance of meeting employees constantly and at their level, suggesting that when leaders are present and accessible, employees feel safer in investing their energy into their work. The continuous support tells employees that their efforts will be appreciated and will not be punished.

6.4.2.2 Cognitive engagement

The research findings highlight cognitive engagement as the ease with which team members share ideas with their leader. This openness demonstrates that everyone's thoughts are valued, promoting creativity and informed decision-making (Mohase et al., 2025). Participant 08 noted that employees often consult with him before taking decision, indicating their understanding of expected outcomes and the impact of their contributions towards the organisation. This connection fosters an environment that encourages innovative ideas and informed decisions (Paulus, 2023).

6.4.2.3 Emotional engagement

Emotional engagement refers to the creation of safe and positive relationships that enable team members to feel valued and trust the organization's mission. Participant 06 emphasized that fostering positive relationships and a strong sense of belonging among employees. When team members feel acknowledged and integrated as a group, it strengthens their emotional connection to the values and goals of the organisation (Zen et al., 2023).

The above findings suggest that the legitimacy of leadership emanates from approachable and consistent interactions that are aligned to team values, which provide support and clear guidance. Gerhardt et al. (2025) argues that emotional intelligence is power, and empathy and accessibility are necessary to create the required relationships.

6.4.3 Conflict Management

The findings suggest that leaders' awareness of social identity can be utilized as a means for conflict resolution. The leaders' awareness of their followers' social identities enhances their ability to navigate conflicts and promote collaboration. The research findings essentially position social identity awareness as a strategic leadership competency used by frontline supervisors, suggesting that leaders who master this capability can more effectively unite diverse individuals around common purposes and navigate the inevitable tensions that arise in group settings (Davis et al., 2019b).

Participant 06 demonstrated this by prioritizing active listening during conflicts, which aligns with Hemshorn de Sanchez et al. (2024), who states that leaders who practice active listening and are committed to promoting emotional safety are better equipped to de-escalate tensions and foster an atmosphere of trust and respect. Similarly, Participant 05 accentuates the importance of allowing team members to connect and be forthright, letting team members express concerns without fear of retribution. This approach enables him to identify miscommunication and foster open dialogue, bridging differences and promoting collaboration (Jonsdottir & Kristinsson, 2020).

6.4.4 Compliance versus Accountability

The conflict between responsibility and compliance draws attention to the difficulties leaders encounter in upholding standards and preserving uniqueness and unity. The research findings indicate that frontline managers recognize that being close to their team as a friend is both a boon and a curse. This role-conflict that frontline supervisors face, is the hard tension that arises when the role requires different actions, contrary to the group's identity. For example, imagine a mining foreman who has become very good friends with his crew. When safety rules are violated, the foreman is torn between maintaining the closeness and enforcing safety standard. This problem, Haslam et al. (2022) terms "dual identity", is that leaders find themselves being both a buddy and a boss simultaneously.

Enforcing compliance standards requires the leader to step outside of the shared identity and employ the formal authority they otherwise try to avoid preserving the group identity. Reflections from both Participant 06 and Participant 05 confirm this inner tension as a concerning pattern where leaders feel pressured to bend the rules in order to maintain the sense of harmony and group belonging. Kim et al. (2020) found that relational closeness bolsters rather than undermines enforcement effectiveness. The findings in this research study support this position.

The findings indicate that when leaders develop good working relationships with their teams, they are better able to enforce compliance without having to rely on consequences. Supervisors with established trust relationships are better able to enforce safety protocols because the team understands that the leader is genuinely concerned for their well-being and not just ticking boxes (Stewart et al., 2023).

This tension points to the fact that the social identity strengthens team bonds but also requires tremendous awareness. If left unmanaged, the closer the group is, the greater the chance of accountability breakdowns, and a greater likelihood of compliance failure.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter described how frontline leadership practices in mining operations provide insights into leadership dynamics. The research findings show that perceived similarity among team members increases trust and cooperative behaviour when frontline supervisors and workers come from similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Charness & Chen, 2025).

The research study further showed that relational practices and informal interaction allow frontline supervisors to transcend formal hierarchies and create authentic belonging within the team members. This was found to be in alignment with Grossman et al. (2022), who acknowledges that supervisor relational awareness practices enhance group cohesion.

The findings also demonstrated how supervisors use relational practices to increase accountability and operational effectiveness. The research study also revealed that supervisors who are able to prioritise embedding trust and accessibility, have greater influence on their team cohesion (Deng et al., 2023). The research study provides evidence that shows that social identity enhances leader-follower dynamics and that they are not merely theoretical constructs but practical drivers for team performance outcomes (Gleibs, 2025).

These findings fundamentally challenge conventional approaches to frontline leadership in mining operations. The social identity approach to frontline leadership revealed in this study suggests that effective leadership emerges through shared group membership and collective identity construction rather than relying solely on individual characteristics or positional power (Kadakure & Twum-Darko, 2024).

The research revealed that empathetic listening and organisational empathy serve as critical components for effective conflict management in multicultural mining teams. This finding resonates with Gerhardt et al. (2025), who emphasises that emotional safety space allows for productive dialogue in conflict situations. The study's evidence suggests that frontline leaders who develop emotional intelligence capabilities can more effectively bridge cultural divides and maintain team cohesion during operational challenges.

Furthermore, this research study demonstrates how leaders who understand both emotional intelligence and relational dynamics create environments where diverse team members feel valued and heard. The findings from the study align with the argument by Gerhardt et al. (2025), who states that for effective leadership to exist, understanding of both emotional intelligence and relational dynamics is required. Meta-analytic research also indicates that leaders who focus on technical expertise without developing social identity awareness will find it difficult to establish the psychological safety necessary for effective team performance in multicultural environments (Siyal, 2023).

7 CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

7.1 Introduction

The objective of this study was to determine how social identity dynamics influence leadership effectiveness in the South African mining industry. This was achieved by exploring how leaders build collective identity and manage relationships and complexities within the organisation. The research questions were based on SIT and Team Leadership Theory and focused on how supervisors achieve positive self-validation and self-empowerment in situations where they have very limited informal power.

Research Questions:

RQ1: *To explore how frontline managers in the South African mining sector perceive and experience social identity within their teams.*

RQ2: *To understand the mechanism in which social identity influences team leadership practices and outcomes.*

The aim of these questions was to discover how leaders in mining operations understand and apply social identity leadership principles, assess the impact of these principles on their effectiveness and analyse how they implement identity-based strategies to build team cohesion and enhance operational outcomes in high-risk environments (Krug et al., 2021).

The analytical framework enabled a detailed exploration of how the mining context creates a unique setting for leadership effectiveness that extends beyond traditional organisational settings. The findings demonstrated that leadership effectiveness in mining does not depend on technical skills alone but also includes ability to navigate cultural diversity, manage competing accountability demands and integrate emotional intelligence (Wilson & Cunliffe, 2022).

This chapter summarises the key findings and provides practical recommendations for mining organisations. The theoretical and practical implications of this study towards the industry are discussed. The chapter also reviews the limitations of the research and provides suggestions for future research in this research field.

7.2 Summary of Key Findings

7.2.1 Research Question 1

The findings based on RQ 1, challenge leadership theory by demonstrating that effective frontline supervision in mining is not about positional authority but rather a complex integration of identity.

Indeed, this research proposes that leader effectiveness is about dynamic identity positioning as opposed to rigid behavioural trait focused approaches (Giessner et al., 2009). Second, this research has distinguished between task-related commitments and care-centred word-action alignment. Elucidating that how care-centred word-action alignment is a definable competency and not a simple transactional concept.

The study discovers that relatability in mining is based on care as opposed to keeping promises, is a significant finding in itself. Supervisors in mining establish relatability through emotional intelligence by demonstrating care for the welfare of the people they supervise while at the same time maintaining accountability to the operational priorities of the business.

Conversely, asking workers about their families as well as about the operative needs demonstrates care-centred integrity that builds trust (Hannah et al., 2011). Acceptance behaviours, such as active listening, asking for advice before making a decision and seeking input, build collaborative partnerships, to demonstrate that effective leaders connect with their team and not merely comply with rules (Karelaia et al., 2022).

Finally, this research redefines leader effectiveness as an authentic relatability of identity integration. Effective frontline supervisors need to be able to occupy a group identity and be accountable while managing complex identity integration of emotional intelligence and strategic thinking for a complex multicultural mining environment (Nishii & Leroy, 2022). This research is valuable insights in developing leaders who can attend to the needs of individuals and the organisation to build a culture of trust and safety.

7.2.2 Research Question 2

The findings from Research Question 2 addressed how front line supervisors manage social identity, team cohesion and organizational performance in the mining environment. The study found that collective identity is a significant advantage for team functioning and as such has a considerable influence on how teams operate in the harsh conditions of a mine. Having a

unifying “we” identity encourages team members to cooperate with each other in a psychologically safe and inclusive manner (Haslam et al., 2022). Teams with sound collective identities are more likely to be resilient to the operational challenges of the mining environment and also more aligned to organizational goals.

The study identified three dimensions of engagement which are physical, cognitive and emotional dimensions. Physical engagement creates psychological safety through the physical presence of the supervisor and resources. Cognitive engagement encourages the sharing of information by team members to enable higher quality decision-making processes. Lastly emotional engagement creates relationships for the team. These dimensions of engagement align with Burhan et al. (2023) conceptualisation of engagement and include how frontline supervisors leverage and develop high performing teams and ensure safety standards are met.

This contribution of the study is that safety in the mining environment could be improved with supervisor coaching and training related to engagement. The findings of the study indicate that the dual identity conflict is very present in the mining environment. The supervisor must ensure that he is a friend to his team, but he cannot be so close that he is unable to ensure that the team sticks to safety standards and has consistent performance.

It is in the nature of coal mines and other mines as mining activities being inherently dangerous that safety compliance is also a critical concern. The study found that this is best managed by the supervisor through active listening and creating emotional safety for team members to enable them to speak their mind and give voice to concerns where it relates to safety.

This research also highlighted the value of social identity awareness as a competency. In an industry like mining, where safety and effective performance are critical, a relationship based leadership approach (e.g., relational social identity approach) may be more effective than a traditional hierarchical style.

7.3 Contribution of the Research

7.3.1 Theoretical

This study makes a theoretical contribution by bringing in Social Identity Theory and Team Leadership Theory in the context of frontline supervisory work. In contrast to previous applications of Social Identity Theory, which focus on the followers' perception of leader prototypicality, this study shows how mining supervisors actively orchestrate multiple identity

categories (cultural, linguistic, and operational) to enhance team cohesion while maintaining hierarchical effectiveness (Fonseca et al., 2022).

The paper extends identity leadership theory by illustrating how leaders create a shared identity that balances safety and productivity for multicultural and hierarchical mining teams. Such an integrated contribution links organizational-level competing demands (e.g., strict control and local adaptability) to micro-level behaviours that integrate these tensions in everyday tasks (Sott & Bender, 2025).

This study demonstrates that team leadership in a mining context requires contextual leadership intelligence, which is an ability to navigate between consultative and directive leadership depending on situational safety needs (Fonseca et al., 2022). The study's key contribution lies in showing that identity legitimacy, meaning activation, and paradoxical team coordination are interrelated leadership processes, not separate ones.

These elements were previously treated as independent and separate in the design and application of leadership processes, and neglected in these highly volatile contexts, in which cultural diversity, safety requirements, and operation needs intersect. The findings reinforce that leadership in such contexts requires competent paradox managing, which implies the enactment of apparently incompatible behaviours and achieving coherent and sustainable results.

7.3.2 Practical

7.3.2.1 Cultural Intelligence and Supervisory Capacity Building

The research suggests that mining organisations should shift their focus in building frontline leadership beyond technical competency models. Research suggests that companies who invest in culturally informed leadership practices have better operational efficiency and safer workplaces (Prinsloo & Hofmeyr, 2022). Because perceived similarity impacts team functioning, mining leaders need to knowledgeably understand the values, norms, and aspirations that are fundamental to mining culture, and not just a superficial understanding but deeply acknowledging excellence within ethnic communities (Mishra & Ansari, 2021).

Organisational supervisory training programmes need to embed emotional intelligence; cross-cultural communication and team building; and inclusive team building practices. Importantly, these are competencies that will unlock the potential of South Africa's diverse workforce whilst maintaining operational integrity (Ntsane et al., 2022). This includes the use of competency profiling tools to elicit specific training needs; behavioural coaching to navigate identity-

authority integration challenges; and peer-learning systems to facilitate learning among culturally diverse supervisors (Mishra & Ansari, 2021).

7.3.2.2 Strategic Implementation Considerations

These practical insights establish paradox management as a measurable leadership competency, while also recognising the challenges in measuring identity-based leadership behaviours in high-risk operational environments. The empirical framework provides a rigorous theoretical base, as well as pragmatic insights, for expanding research and practice into mining leadership (Ntsane et al., 2022.). Implementing these frameworks requires a commitment to continuous development initiatives, which place cultural intelligence at the forefront, of operational competencies (Nelwamondo & Price, 2025).

7.4 Limitations of the study

While the phenomenological approach elicited rich depth of frontline managers' social identity experiences in a South African mining context, it is worthwhile acknowledging that methodological and theoretical constraints constrained the findings. Below is a discussion of some of these limitations of the research findings, while also highlighting opportunities for further research.

Firstly, the scope of the research design limited the temporal dimension of the research to an exploration of how perceptions of leader-follower similarity changed with critical decision-making contexts, such as safety-critical operational decisions. According to van Knippenberg (2023), argued that understanding how a leader responds to these decision-making contexts is key in establishing the success of identity leadership. Indeed, the limited temporal dimensions constrained the understanding of the causal mechanisms via which the effectiveness of identity leadership will change in a high-risk mining environment.

This, therefore, provides an opportunity for further research. Secondly, although underpinned with rich theoretical foundations of Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Team Leadership Theory, the methodological dimension of the study restricted the study not only to assimilate the respective theoretical underpinnings within the South African frontline supervisory setting but also provided an opportunity for further research.

For example, (van Dijke, 2020) recognise that social identity is often necessary for team functioning; and while the phenomenological methodology allowed for a depth of inquiry into

the phenomenon, the inability to generalise findings to other organisational contexts is a challenge. This depth methodological structure may limit findings that may have been discovered had a quantitative approach been taken. Thirdly, the scope of the study did not extend to how a different regulatory framework, technological infrastructure, and cultural context influences social identity dynamics within a frontline mining leader-related relationship.

The focus on the frontline manager's perspective limits the opportunity to understand the reciprocal identity dynamics between the supervisor and their direct reports, which is integral for a complete understanding of team interactions (van Knippenberg & Lee, 2023). Current findings highlight avenues for further research. Firstly, the temporal dimension of similarity-based trust remains under researched, particularly how perceptions of similarity evolve during a critical decision-making context. Secondly, the mining industry is heterogenous; hence, the inclusion of diversity, while a strength, raises questions about balancing similarity and inclusion within shared workgroups and subsequently provides an opportunity for further research.

7.5 Recommendations for Future Research

Furthermore, the study focused only on frontline managers, which limited the understanding of how individual identity processes are influenced by organizational authority in the dynamic setting of mining operations (Abukalusa & Oosthuizen, 2023).

Future studies should examine the reciprocal effects between supervisors and their subordinates to understand how effective leadership emerges from these interactions. Including supervisors and team members could increase understanding of the ways that shared work team identities are constructed (Kumar, 2024). Another area for research is how cultural-linguistic identity influences leadership in ways that are responsive to different cultural contexts (Louw, 2020).

This is important for understanding how identity legitimacy interacts with leadership functions to improve team outcomes in high-risk work environments. Whereas Social Identity Theory and Team Leadership Theory have been tested in separate contexts, future studies should combine these theories in contexts relevant to frontline supervisors (van Knippenberg & Lee, 2023).

7.6 Conclusion

This research has shown that Social Identity Theory is a valuable lens and basis from which to understand and evaluate the effectiveness of leadership on South African mines, which require adaptation to its context of high risk. It has demonstrated how collective identity formation is not only a mechanism for group cohesion, but also a need for safety-critical decision making.

The frontline mine leader has to manage collective identity, relational transparency, conflict resolution, and performance standards in a way that integrates beyond a traditional model of leadership (Haslam et al., 2024). Strengthening the ability of leaders to foster collective identity while managing cultural diversity is a significant driver to establish a culture in which safety values are shared.

The results recommend that mining organisations develop leadership training programmes that are identity based, illustrating the thread that connects the leader's identity navigation to team effectiveness, which can be applied in times of skill shortages and safety performance challenges.

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ii. APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

The interview guide serves to elicit rich and complex thoughts from supervisors on the frontline of a South African mining operation. It assesses the influence of social dynamics, leadership, and life experiences on teams.

Section 1: Contextual and Demographic Profile

- (1) I would like to know a bit about you. Share your life as to where were you born and where did you grow up?
- (2) Tell me more as to what options did you have after finishing high school? If you could go back, what would have chosen?
- (3) Describe for me some of the obstacles you encountered along the way to where you are now.
- (4) Looking at your upbringing and history now, tell me if they had an influence on where you are right now in doing this job and why?

Section 2: Teamwork and Leadership Techniques

Understand the daily running of the supervisory position and team leadership in action.

- (1) As a frontline supervisor or leader, please describe to me what you do daily at work?
- (2) As the leader in your team, tell me more as to what it means “to be a good leader or supervisor”? Does having education matter or not?
- (3) In your opinion, what are the most important values or ways of working in your team?
- (4) Describe a time when your team was unhappy with your decision and they felt not consulted on? Describe what happened as a result?
- (5) Explain to me how do you keep your team motivated, during hard times and when under pressure?
- (6) Describe how your team reacts when being disciplined or one of their members is being reprimanded?

Section 3: Interactions, team identity, connections to group values, building trust, and Social Identity. Examine how team identity and social identities influence team dynamics and leadership issues.

- (1) Can you describe how you became trusted or accepted as the leader of your team?
- (2) Describe to me as to how will a team show me that they accept you as their leader?
- (3) If you were able to describe your team as person, how would you describe your teams identity?

- (4) If a new team member was joining your team today, tell me how would you help them feel included or part of the group?
- (5) If your team members tell you that you are 'just like us' or 'different from other supervisors', how would that make you feel?
- (6) Can you describe a time when your team doubted you as a leader? What did you do to win them over?

Section 4: Leadership style, conflict management, communication style, managing diversity and cultural background. How diversity, challenges faced by team within the organisational is perceived and how it affects frontline leadership.

- (1) Can you describe some the beliefs within your team that make it easier or harder for everyone to work well together?
- (2) Describe what you will do to make sure everyone feels welcome and treated fairly on your team?
- (3) When problems or disagreements come up in your team, what do you usually do? What are the common sources of these conflicts?
- (4) According to your experience, how important is it for a supervisor to be like the team members?
- (5) How do you ensure that your leadership decisions are transparent and impartial?
- (6) Explain to me how do you keep the team's trust when you have to make difficult decisions?
- (7) Your team members are of different ages, come from different backgrounds, or have different beliefs. How would you change the way you lead or talk to them so everyone feels included?

Section 5: Challenges faced by frontline supervisors, training and development needs. Determine the main challenges to and as well as organisational support systems.

- (1) What are some of the biggest things that make it hard for you to do your job as a supervisor?
- (2) What kind of support do you get from the mine or management in your work?
- (3) If you could ask the company for one thing to help you grow as a leader, what would it be?
- (4) If you could give one tip to a new supervisor taking over your role, what would it be?
- (5) Are there things you wish leaders here that need to start doing in order for their teams do perform at their best?

iii. APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM



INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

I am currently a student at the University of Pretoria's Gordon Institute of Business Science and completing my research in partial fulfilment of an MBA. I am conducting research on **the role of social identity in effective leadership of teams** and I am trying to find out more about **how frontline supervisors leverage social identity dynamics to acquire leadership legitimacy, authority, and influence.**

Our interview is expected to last between 60-90 minutes. ***Your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without penalty.*** By signing this letter, you are indicating that you have given permission for:

1. The interview is to be audio-recorded;
2. The recording to be transcribed using digital transcribing tools;
3. Verbatim quotations from the interview may be used in the report and your names or of your organisation will not be reported;
4. The data to be used as part of a report that will be publicly available once the examination process has been completed; and
5. All data will be reported without identifiers.

If you have any concerns, please contact my supervisor or me. Our details are provided below.

Researcher name:	Research Supervisor Name:
Email:	Email:
Phone:	Phone:

Signature of participant: _____

Date: _____

Signature of researcher: _____

Date: _____

iv. APPENDIX C: ATLAS.ti Code List Summary

Initial Results: Using analyse results function

