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## **THÈSE**

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## **PERSONAL NETWORK AND WOMEN LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION**

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## The 7-Year PhD Journey: Loss, Challenges, and Gratitude

I'm about to finish the final steps of my 7-year PhD journey - a journey not only towards earning a prestigious doctorate degree from a renowned university in France but also a journey of self-discovery and overcoming internal and external limits.

It has been seven years filled with struggles, during which I often felt like giving up as I faced the pressures of academics and life. There are four most important aspects of a person's life: health, family, finance, and career. All four of these were tested during this journey.

- **Family Loss:** In the third year of my PhD, I lost my mother. When she was nearing death, I faced the difficult choice of staying in Vietnam to care for her or returning to France to complete my research. I decided to go to France quickly and return immediately. Not long after, it was the last time to see her.
- **Career Pressure:** Balancing PhD research with academic responsibilities at a university, I was reprimanded for not meeting work expectations. Eventually, I resigned to focus on my research, but this decision made my family's financial situation precarious, leaving me nearly exhausted.
- **Family Strain:** My relationship with my husband and children was strained due to prolonged separation. When I returned, the pressure of research turned me into a cranky mother, affecting my husband and children.
- **Depression and Loss of Direction:** Not finishing my PhD after five years led to mild depression, a loss of direction, and emotional instability.

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## INTRODUCTION

The “glass ceiling” and “leadership labyrinth” refers to unseen barriers that prevent women and minorities from advancing to top leadership positions, regardless of their qualifications or accomplishments. Despite the increasing number of women graduating from universities and entering various fields, this barrier still exists in sectors like business, politics, and other organizations. It reflects deep-rooted biases and structural inequalities that hinder women’s progression to higher-level roles, even when they are equally or more qualified than their male peers.

Over the past years, this issue has been extensively researched, and while some progress has been made, the gap in leadership roles between men and women remains a significant global challenge. Women often encounter obstacles such as unconscious bias, lack of mentorship, and organizational cultures that undervalue their contributions, all of which contribute to their underrepresentation in executive positions and the continuation of gender inequality in the workplace.

Many previous studies have shown relevant leadership styles that could facilitate leaders’ identity development. Whereas some of them emphasize masculine characteristics of leaders, some focus on feminine traits. Much has been written about using formal structures to construct leadership identity. The main issue in leadership development theories, however, is the controversial debate of a proper orientation for women leadership, and little is known about how informal structure can lead to leadership identity construction. This research objective is to bridge the gap between informal structure and leadership identity construction.

## **Rationale**

In many years, obstacles to women's career development always claim for gender stereotypes in almost societies (Glick et al., 1995, Heilman, 2001, Rudman and Glick, 2001, Heilman, 2012, Mihalčová et al., 2015), which has created an image of lower competency, more aligned to family responsibilities than that of men. In addition, those challenges do not only appear in the top positions (Powell and Butterfield, 1994, Maume Jr, 1999, Cotter et al., 2001, Ryan and Haslam, 2005), but also occur during women's leadership journeys (Williams, 1992, Bruckmüller et al., 2014, Eagly et al., 2007, Carli and Eagly, 2016).

Fortunately, women have enjoyed more benefits in their personal and professional development by experiencing the situation of changing business contexts (Teece, 1992, Dalakoura, 2010), fashionable leadership conceptualization (Conger, 1993, Cacioppe, 1998), and requirements of diversity in top management boards (Morrison, 1992, Eagly and Chin, 2010, Kalaitzi et al., 2017). Many scholars argue that some barriers do not come from societal norms, but it's women who cannot take use of new opportunities. Some women refuse to get promoted due to their internalized impediments (Nguyen, 2013, Singh and SDurgaPrasad, 2014, Cubillo and Brown, 2003, Rudman and Heppen, 2003), such as lack of intrinsic motivation owing to prosperous family, romantic husbands who can take care of women's whole life. As a result, some women trap in the situation of lacking efforts for development and claiming for external reasons. Hence, in a modern world, constructing women leadership development depends much on their own intrinsic motivation. The process to develop their identities, confirm their contributions, and gain others' acceptance requires much time and effort, and it has no starting or ending points, rather than a continuous process (DeRue and Ashford, 2010). Indeed, it's an interaction process between leaders and followers in a long-term period with relationship development.

Identity involves the meaning individuals attach to themselves (Callero, 2003; Stets and Burke, 2003). Hogg et al. (1995) argue that “identity is the pivotal concept linking social structure with individual action; thus, predicting behavior requires an analysis of the relationship between self and social structure.” Consequently, identity can be understood on three levels: individual, relational, and collective.

In terms of leadership, beyond traditional views focusing on traits, behaviors, and situational approaches (Meindl, 1993; Yukl, 1998; Bass and Avolio, 1993), recent research emphasizes interpersonal relationships and the social network theory of leadership (Brass and Krackhardt, 1999; Brass, 2001; Mehra et al., 2001; Mehra et al., 2003; Brass et al., 2004). Hesselbein and Goldsmith (2006) also stress that a key condition for being a leader is receiving acceptance from collaborators. Accepting this perspective, recent literature highlights the leader-follower relationship rather than focusing solely on leaders’ qualities. Yukl and Becker (2006) describe leadership as “the use of influence to encourage participation in achieving set goals.” Additionally, Antonakis et al. (2004) argue that leadership is a process that requires both the leader’s personality and behaviors, and the followers’ perceptions of the leader, which are formed through interactions in specific contexts. This perspective is often referred to as “relational leadership,” which emphasizes leadership as a relationship of influence.

To provide a comprehensive overview of the process of constructing a leadership identity, it’s important to integrate all three levels of identity (Hogg et al., 1995) because leadership involves multiple individuals participating in interpersonal interaction and mutual influence (Hollander, 1978). DeRue and Ashford (2010) propose a leadership identity construction process that consists of three key elements: individual internalization, relational recognition, and collective endorsement.

1. **Individual internalization:** At this stage, individuals incorporate the identity of leader or follower as part of their self-concept (DeRue et al., 2009; Gecas, 1982).
2. **Relational recognition:** Leadership identity is confirmed relationally through reciprocal role recognition between leaders and followers.
3. **Collective endorsement:** This is about being recognized within the broader social environment as part of a particular social group (DeRue and Ashford, 2010).

In this model, the interaction process involves “claiming” and “granting” activities, where individuals contend for and are perceived in alignment with their desired identities. This process is often more straightforward in formal structures, such as hierarchical organizations, where leadership roles are clearly defined, making it easier for a person in a leadership position to claim and be granted leadership status. The same applies to followers. However, the dynamics of this process in informal structures remain underexplored, especially in the context of gender.

When examining the leadership identity construction process for women, gender stereotypes and both visible and invisible obstacles present unique challenges. These factors are crucial to understanding the gaps in DeRue and Ashford’s (2010) model, particularly when investigating women’s leadership identity construction under the influence of these barriers. This gap will be explored in greater detail in this paper.

Several noteworthy methods have been used to argue while women usually address known challenges in formal structure, such as hierarchical organizations, a raising question is whether informal structure contributes or challenges women’s identity construction process. Informal structure can be known as social networks or social capital (Albrecht, 1983, Krackhardt and Hanson, 1993, White et al., 2016, Ibarra, 1993). In the scope of this study, I focus on the concept of informal structure as informal personal networks. Accordingly, informal personal networks

can be defined by each individual about which network is personal or organizational, and also about topics related to work, social, or both.

The term “networks” can be understood as “relationships between individuals, groups, or organizations, as well as between collectives of organizations” (Tichy, 1981; Granovetter, 1985). The relationships that evolve within a network can be categorized based on their contents (e.g., products or services, information, emotions), form (e.g., relationship duration and closeness), and intensity (e.g., frequency of communication). The form and intensity of these relationships establish the overall network structure (Burt, 1978).

While formalized networks play a significant role, the literature also highlights the importance of informal networks in organizational decision-making processes (Koppenjan and Klijn, 2004) and information flow (Walker, 1985). Interestingly, as the business landscape evolves, the boundary between formal and informal networks has become increasingly blurred (Tichy, 1981; Kotter, 1982).

Networking is defined as “the actual behavior of people developing, entering, maintaining, altering, and leaving social networks” (Benschop, 2009). More specifically, networking refers to the interactions between individuals as they seek to form and maintain relationships with others who can potentially support their career or work progression (Broadbridge et al., 2006). It is also a mechanism of social exchange (Blau, 1964), where reciprocity and trust are built on informal relationships and social obligations that involve the exchange of favors. Brass et al. (2004) describe networking as “a set of nodes and the set of ties representing some relationship, or lack of relationship, between the nodes.” They argue that internal network ties have a positive and significant impact on both unit and organizational performance outcomes.

Furthermore, successful networking has been shown to positively influence career outcomes, such as increased job opportunities, improved job performance, higher income, promotions,

and greater career satisfaction. Networking also provides access to valuable information, increased visibility, career advice, social support, business leads, resources, collaboration, strategy making, and professional support (Burt, 1982; Brass, 1985; Hays and Oxley, 1986; Brass et al., 2004; Gayle Baugh et al., 2005).

In summary, positive networks can enhance managers' social capital, facilitating the transfer of human capital into career advancement and success. With their growing importance, networks—especially informal networks—have become an essential tool for leadership development. Informal networks tend to involve more discretionary interaction patterns, and the content of these relationships may be related to work, social activities, or both. Many studies have emphasized the value of informal networks, which not only support task-related organizational goals but also address the social and personal objectives of participants. These networks also provide instrumental and psychosocial support, which is crucial for leadership development (Ibarra, 1992; Ibarra, 1993; Ibarra and Hunter, 2007).

However, similar to the challenges women face in formal organizational settings, they also encounter obstacles in informal networks. Some studies have argued that women are excluded from informal networks due to gendered career development norms and organizational cultures (Ram, 1994, Ibarra, 1993, McGuire, 2002, Forret, 2006). Additionally, women may be limited in their access to informal information, which is crucial for decision-making and information processing within organizations. Several studies suggest that men may avoid communicating with women in informal settings out of concern for potential accusations of sexual harassment or because of gender stereotypes that frame women as being less knowledgeable or developed. In certain cultural contexts, such as in Muslim-majority countries or other regions with strong religious or traditional values, the bias around leadership roles, particularly for women, may be more pronounced. It's crucial to underline that many studies are often conducted in specific cultural contexts that may not fully capture the diverse experiences of women in leadership

roles globally (Syed, 2009). Conversely, some studies argue that women exclude themselves from informal networks because they lack self-confidence or feel isolated. Regardless of the reasons, it is clear that women face numerous obstacles in gaining access to informal networks, which can hinder their professional and leadership development.

Both informal personal networks and leadership identity construction are about relationship development (Ibarra, 1993, DeRue and Ashford, 2010). Then, the main consideration is what's the relationship between informal personal networks and leadership identity construction; and, if informal personal networks are considered as a factor of informal structure, how informal personal networks will contribute to leadership identity construction process. The authors of this model, DeRue and Ashford (2010), have researched in formal structures, and they have also called further research on the investigation of how informal structure contributes to women leadership identity construction. From this motivation, this paper potentially contributes to three following discussions. First, there is a reciprocal interaction between informal personal networks and women leadership identity construction. Second, an emerging concept on leadership identity is raised to define which image can be attached to a person as a leader. Last, new conceptions on informal personal networks can be launched thanks to the development of digital ages.

Apart from the importance of networks to leadership and leadership identity construction, cultural context is also a key factor to impact the process. Many studies have been conducted to justify the importance of cultural dimensions on leadership which helps leaders adapt their styles to different culture contexts, ensuring effective leadership across diverse environments. The GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness) study is indeed one of the most significant research projects examining the impact of culture on leadership. Initiated in the early 1990s by Robert J. House, the GLOBE study is built on the idea that leadership behaviors are not universal but are strongly influenced by cultural norms and values.

It aimed to answer questions about which leadership styles are more effective in certain cultural contexts and how cultural dimensions affect leadership preferences. In the same vein, other studies such as Inglehart (2005), Kluckhohn (1961), Hall (1976), Schwartz (1994), Trompenaars (1997), and Hofstede (1980) also conveyed leadership in relation to cultural contexts. However, almost of studies were conducted in Western countries and some Eastern developed countries, few ones concern such developing countries like Vietnam that is a (post) Confucian culture with some specific cultural characteristics. It's the main motivation why this paper chooses Vietnam context as the main sample to do research.

Vietnamese culture, influenced by a blend of Confucian, socialist, and modern global values, affects women's leadership identity in various ways. Like other East Asian cultures, Confucian<sup>1</sup> values emphasize traditional gender roles, where women are often expected to prioritize family duties and maintain domestic harmony. This can limit their aspirations and opportunities for leadership. Furthermore, Confucianism promotes respect for authority and hierarchical structures, often favoring male leadership in both family and societal contexts. Gradually, more development opportunities are enhanced to let women join leadership and other specific industries. Nowadays, Vietnam is also opening up to embrace many Western cultural values, and there are significant differences in the values of the younger generation, such as Gen Z (Nguyen, 2024). Furthermore, women have more channels and opportunities for their self-development. However, in such a diverse environment, without careful consideration, any actions or methods aimed at building leadership identity could provoke controversial reactions. This issue is also my research interest, and I aim to study in more depth the mechanisms

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<sup>1</sup> *Confucianism is a complex philosophy with varied interpretations depending on the context and time period. In this discussion, the focus is on the traditional East Asian perspective, particularly regarding social hierarchy, filial piety, respect for authority, and the value of community. However, it is also crucial to recognize that Confucianism stresses personal moral growth, the cultivation of virtue, and regionally adapted interpretations. This analysis acknowledges the evolving nature of Confucian thought and the risk of oversimplifying it, while concentrating on the aspects most relevant to leadership and intergenerational dynamics in modern Vietnam.*

between personal networks and leadership identity construction within the Vietnamese context to identify what noteworthy aspects stand out.

Due to Confucian norms, women are often viewed as less capable than men when it comes to holding positions of power and authority. They are seen as more emotional in building relationships and are considered more suited to household responsibilities, which poses a disadvantage for leadership roles. Furthermore, these perceptions and norms, rooted in Confucian values, not only present obstacles for women reaching top management positions, as illustrated by concepts like the “glass ceiling” (Powell and Butterfield, 1994), “glass cliff” (Ryan and Haslam, 2005), and tokenism (Zimmer, 1988), but they also create numerous challenges in daily interactions with stakeholders as women work to shape their leadership identities (Eagly et al., 2007; Carli and Eagly, 2016). This phenomenon can be partly understood through the metaphor of a “labyrinth” which includes various visible and hidden barriers. However, further research is needed to explore how to overcome these challenges to support women’s career development.

This research employs qualitative content analysis based on in-depth interviews with 33 women managers, averaging about 90 hours of conversation, accompanied with archival data collection from social media of 4 women, to offer a concrete proposal for women to develop their leadership identities. I contend that leveraging informal personal networks is one of the most effective strategies for enhancing women’s career advancement. Additionally, the emerging understanding of leadership identity as a process of value creation, along with the reciprocal relationship between informal personal networks and the construction of leadership identity, has been validated as a potential solution for women’s leadership challenges. A distinctive aspect of my research is the exploration of women’s leadership within the context of Confucian culture.

## **Research questions**

The overall purpose of this research is to explore how Vietnamese women define and construct their leadership identity from overcoming what have been regarded as their traditional responsibilities. This research also sheds a light on investigating how personal and contextual attributes influencing Vietnamese women in leadership identity construction, which facilitates them to construct their collective leadership identity by leveraging their personal networks.

To explore these research objectives, the research questions are addressed:

1. *Question 1: What is the perception of Vietnamese women regarding the significance of personal networks and leadership identity in their professional journeys?*
2. *Question 2: Which personal and contextual attributes influence how Vietnamese women perceive the construction of leadership identity?*
3. *Question 3: Who are the key actors in the personal networks of Vietnamese women that influence their leadership identity?*
4. *Question 4: How do Vietnamese women construct their collective leadership identity by leveraging their personal networks?*

## **Literature screening process**

Following the establishment of the strategy, methodology, and selection of the suitable methods for thesis implementation, the subsequent crucial phase involves conducting a comprehensive literature review. Reviewing literature plays a pivotal role in academic research as science fundamentally relies on cumulative knowledge (vom Brocke et al., 2009). Among various approaches, literature reviews are indispensable for (a) recognizing existing works on a subject or topic, (b) assessing the prevalence of interpretable trends or patterns within a specific

research area, (c) consolidating empirical findings pertaining to a focused research question to support evidence-based practice, (d) formulating frameworks and theories, and (e) pinpointing areas or questions warranting further investigation (Paré, Trudel, Jaana, & Kitsiou, 2015).

Commonly found in a journal paper or a section of a graduate thesis labeled as “literature review” or “background,” this component amalgamates existing literature and often highlights gaps in knowledge addressed by the empirical study (Sylvester, Tate, & Johnstone, 2013). Additionally, it might establish a theoretical basis for the proposed study, validate the existence of the research problem, substantiate the research’s novelty, or authenticate the methods and approaches employed (Hart, 1998; Levy & Ellis, 2006).

The screening process involves two primary phases. In the initial step, literature is systematically researched, and decisions are made regarding the relevance of the material to be included in the review (Cooper, 1988). Three main coverage strategies exist. Firstly, exhaustive coverage encompasses all relevant studies, both published and unpublished, to establish conclusions based on this comprehensive knowledge base. The second strategy involves presenting materials representative of most other works in a given field, often by searching for relevant articles in a small number of top-tier journals (Paré et al., 2015). The third strategy focuses on prior works central or pivotal to a specific topic, including studies or conceptual papers that initiated a line of investigation, altered the framing of problems or questions, introduced new methods or concepts, or sparked important debates (Cooper, 1988). The subsequent step is to assess the applicability of the identified material (Levy & Ellis, 2006; vom Brocke et al., 2009). Once a set of potential studies is identified, researchers must screen them to determine their relevance (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). A predefined set of rules serves as the basis for including or excluding specific studies.

Several approaches and methods exist for making sense of existing literature, all aiming to contextualize current research findings or explain contradictions among a set of primary research studies on a particular topic. Among these, systematic reviews, characterized by the rigorous application of scientific strategies, can be particularly suitable for this study.

Systematic reviews aim to consolidate, evaluate, and synthesize all empirical evidence meeting predetermined eligibility criteria into a single source. Their purpose is to address a clearly defined and often specific research question on a particular topic of interest, facilitating evidence-based practice (Liberati et al., 2009). These reviews closely adhere to explicit scientific principles (Liberati et al., 2009) and stringent methodological guidelines (Higgins & Green, 2008), intending to minimize random and systematic errors that could introduce deviations from the truth in results or inferences. The utilization of explicit methods enables systematic reviews to amalgamate a substantial body of research evidence, assess the consistency and magnitude of effects or relationships, elucidate potential inconsistencies among study results, and gauge the overall strength of evidence for each outcome of interest based on the quality and general consistency of the included studies (Cook, Mulrow, & Haynes, 1997).

A comprehensive literature search was conducted using the two most important databases, Scopus and Web of Science. Scopus is used to identify English-language articles containing the term “leadership” and studies labeled within the research domain “Social Sciences”. WoS is used to investigate studies labeled in the field of research “Gender, Identity, and Leadership Identity”. Additionally, databases accessible through Regent University Library, including EBSCO Online, Emerald Management XTRA, and ScienceDirect, were utilized for this study. The screening and review process occurred in three phases. Initially, titles and abstracts were scanned to exclude irrelevant papers, with inclusion criteria focusing on articles addressing all aspects related to identity or leadership identity construction. The second phase involved full-text screening for eligibility, and in the third phase, full papers were categorized based on the

concepts of leadership identity, leadership identity construction, and gender-based leadership theories. Articles lacking a definition or conceptualization of leadership were excluded.

The initial database comprised 1843 articles, and after removing 956 duplications, 887 articles remained. Of the 887 abstracts identified, 190 duplicates were removed, resulting in 687 abstracts for title screening. Reading further 687 abstracts, I excluded irrelevant articles leaving 205 for abstract screening. After reading their literature review and discussion for an overview of the studies, an additional 39 abstracts were excluded due to their irrelevancy. The remaining 166 articles underwent full-text screening, and 28 were excluded based on different research direction, resulting in 138 articles for data extraction and analysis

A summary of the search strategy adhering to the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Item Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis) framework is illustrated in Figure 1.1.

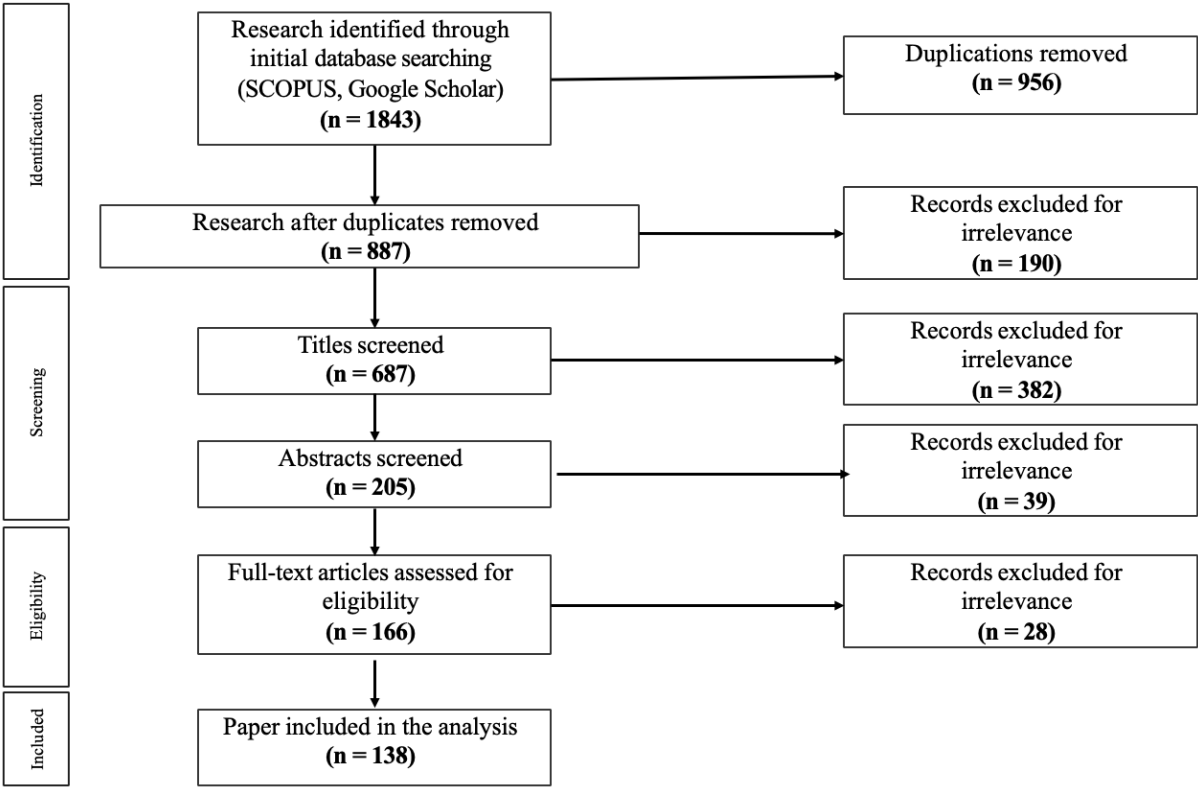


Figure 1.1: Overview of the literature screening process (the author)

## **Study procedure**

In my study, I recruited 33 women in leadership positions in various professional sectors through my personal networks and snowball sampling. Apart from in-depth interview, I collected information from the social media that 5 typical participants frequently use and examined archival data from their social networking sites going back about one year to two years to the time I analyzed my data. After recruiting my participants, I conducted the pilot round of interviews with 10 women to answer questions related to their leadership perception and how they develop their leadership career. From these 10 interviews coded themes, I found the emerging topic related to personal networks in leadership identity construction mechanism. During my data analysis, I used Leximancer and Nvivo and made use of qualitative content analysis approach as this technique is widely used and accepted in qualitative analysis. Finally, I interpreted the results to answer the research questions to mainly focus on the reciprocal interaction between personal networks and leadership identity construction.

## **Main findings**

The topic of gender and leadership has attracted the attention of many scholars and will likely never become a saturated area of study. This is because gender issues are deeply influenced by context and culture, making it impossible to generalize findings globally. This is also true for my research, which focuses on Vietnam, a (post) Confucian culture where many cultural values and norms continue to influence women's behavior, particularly in how they construct their leadership identity using informal personal networks.

Most of the female participants in my study, when discussing the construction of their leadership identity, emphasized the importance of bringing value to their networks. They also stressed that it is not enough to simply possess values; those values must be beneficial and valuable to others. This mindset can be attributed to the lingering influence of Confucian values

on women's behavior. In Confucian culture, women have long been tied to a range of responsibilities to their fathers, husbands, and sons. Their primary roles were to manage household affairs, which in turn allowed their husbands to advance their careers and fulfill the role of the family breadwinner. Confucian teachings equated the family to a microcosm of the state, with the father holding natural authority, much like the emperor governed the state under the mandate of Heaven. This legitimized the superiority of men in social contexts, relegating women to the home, where they were tasked with child-rearing and domestic duties. Confucian culture also promoted the "Three Bonds," which established authority relationships between the ruler and the minister, the father and the son, and the husband and the wife. Furthermore, women were expected to embody four virtues: fidelity, fine appearance, appropriate speech, and good skills in domestic chores. As such, women were trained to prioritize the care of others and to bring value to their families and communities rather than focusing on their own career development. As a result, the women in my research viewed leadership identity as the creation of value for others within their community.

A behavior considered inappropriate for women in Confucian culture is being overly forward or forming close associations with others, whether male or female. Doing so could be seen as a lack of respectability and decorum, which would be looked down upon in society. Moreover, women in business or entrepreneurship face challenges when attempting to expand their relationships and brand through traditional offline methods due to cultural norms. For instance, if a woman were to invite a prospective business partner to a meal, it could damage her "prestige" rather than enhance it. Beyond the usual difficulties that women in Western countries face, such as balancing family and work responsibilities, women in Confucian cultures must also navigate the risk of losing their reputation if they violate conventional cultural ideologies, such as the four virtues expected of women.

However, the rise of the digital age has provided women with alternative ways to build their leadership identity. Today, social online networks allow individuals to easily connect and interact. These virtual communities serve as online spaces for people to communicate and engage on various topics (Murray and Waller, 2007). In fact, online social networks are a unique form of virtual community that enables individuals to interact and connect with one another. Like many others around the world, the female managers in my research used online networks as informal personal networks to help construct their leadership identities. For instance, they might post updates about their values or current circumstances on their online platforms, exchanging value with their network members. Female leaders in top management positions also saw these online networks as a useful tool to sharpen their identities within the context of Confucian culture.

While my research makes significant contributions to the theory of leadership identity construction by examining how informal networks facilitate this process, there are some limitations. First, my study was conducted solely in Vietnam, without considering other countries influenced by Confucian culture. Although Vietnam is not the birthplace of Confucian philosophy, it was dominated by China, the source of Confucian culture, for over 1,000 years. As a result, Vietnamese people have absorbed many Confucian perspectives, particularly regarding women's interior responsibilities. However, this scope is limited and may not meet the generalization requirements of academic research. Second, due to the context of Vietnam as a socialist country, there are likely differences between how women in the private sector and those in state-owned enterprises experience leadership and relationship development. My research, however, focused primarily on women working in the private sector, so these differences within state-owned organizations were not reflected in this study.

## **Presentation of the Plan of the thesis**

The thesis is structured into two main sections: Part I includes the literature review, research objectives, and methodology, while Part II presents the empirical findings. In Part II, I will analyze the construction of women's leadership identities and examine the role of personal networks in facilitating this process.

Below is a summary of the structure of the thesis:

### **PART I: LITERATURE REVIEW, RESEARCH AIMS AND METHODOLOGY**

Chapter 1: Leadership identity construction

Chapter 2: Gender and leadership identity construction

Chapter 3: Women's personal network

Chapter 4: Vietnam context as a post-Confucian culture

Chapter 5: Research aims and methodology

### **PART II: PERSONAL NETWORK AND WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN VIETNAM CONTEXT**

Chapter 6: Analysis and Findings

Chapter 7: Discussion

Chapter 8: Conclusion

### **REFLECTION AND IMPLICATIONS**

## **PART I : LITERATURE REVIEW, RESEARCH AIMS AND METHODOLOGY**

This first part of the thesis outlines the intellectual journey that led me to explore the leadership identity construction of women and its connection to their personal networks within a (post) Confucian culture.

**Chapter 1** provides a comprehensive overview of leadership theories, with a particular focus on the role of identity in the leadership development process. This is especially relevant in today's increasingly diverse and complex society, where personal validation and social interactions play a critical role in shaping and sustaining leadership identity. The framework proposed by DeRue and Ashford (2010) on leadership identity construction serves as the foundation for this research.

The literature review presented in **Chapter 2** delves into gender issues related to leadership and leadership identity construction. Here, we analyze the "glass ceiling" phenomenon, exploring various explanations across multiple levels of analysis (societal, organizational, and individual). Additionally, we examine alternative metaphors used to describe women's underrepresentation in senior leadership roles, particularly the more recent metaphor of the "labyrinth" (Eagly & Carli, 2007). This metaphor complements the "glass ceiling" concept, providing further insights into how more subtle elements, such as professional identity, contribute to the scarcity of women in top management positions. Notably, recent research on the glass ceiling has shifted away from focusing on intentional efforts to exclude women, towards examining "second-generation" gender biases. These biases are less overt and pertain to aspects such as professional development and career progression.

In **Chapter 3**, the concept of personal networks and some main activities conducted by women to develop their networking and networks. Then, the role of personal networks in leadership identity construction is explored. We also investigate some of the challenges women face in

building formal networks, which often motivates them to develop personal networks instead. This chapter reviews existing research on the influence of personal networks on women in leadership and their identity construction.

**Chapter 4** shifts to the Vietnamese context, outlining key features of Confucian culture that impact how women balance family responsibilities with their career development. We also discuss how modern Vietnamese women striving for success must navigate dual roles in the family and the workplace. By including research on the contextual factors shaping women's leadership identity construction, we aim to offer solutions for Vietnamese female leaders to overcome these challenges.

In **Chapter 5**, I will present my epistemological positioning, define my research objectives, and outline the methodology chosen to address the research questions.

Next, in **Chapters 6 and 7**, I primarily presented the findings from my data, which were gathered through interviews and archival data collection. In these chapters, I also demonstrated how personal networks and leadership identity share a proactive interconnectedness that enhances women's leadership development. Furthermore, I analyzed how certain personal attributes, and contextual factors influence women's perceptions of leadership and the methods they use to construct their leadership identity. These analyses provide deeper insights into the factors that shape the leadership journey for women and the mechanisms they utilize to overcome challenges in leadership development.

Finally, in the **Chapter 8 – Conclusion**, I presented my main contributions to DeRue and Ashford (2010) and leadership identity in term of theoretical contribution. Concurrently, my research limitations and suggestions for future research have been discussed



**CHAPTER 1:**

**LEADERSHIP IDENTITY**

**CONSTRUCTION**

## I. Leadership definition

Leadership stands out as a remarkably intricate and multifaceted phenomenon within the realm of research. Explored over the years, its significance has surged in today’s dynamic and globally interconnected environment. Despite the wealth of research, discussions surrounding leadership perpetuate captivating debates. Leaders with stable leadership skills can motivate individuals to attain specific objectives and steer organizational change (Kowang, Zainol, Hee, Fei, & Kadir, 2021). Discrepancies arise in defining leadership across articles, with some stipulating a formal leadership position as a prerequisite while others do not. This chapter seeks to explore the primary conceptualizations surrounding leadership and the construction of leadership identity, drawing insights from a systematic literature review.

Though the term “leader” has been observed as early as the 1300s, the term “leadership” itself emerged in the late 1700s, as highlighted by (Stogdill, 1974). However, scientific inquiry began in the twentieth century (Bass, 1981). Since that time, there has been a dedicated and extensive research effort focused on the subject.

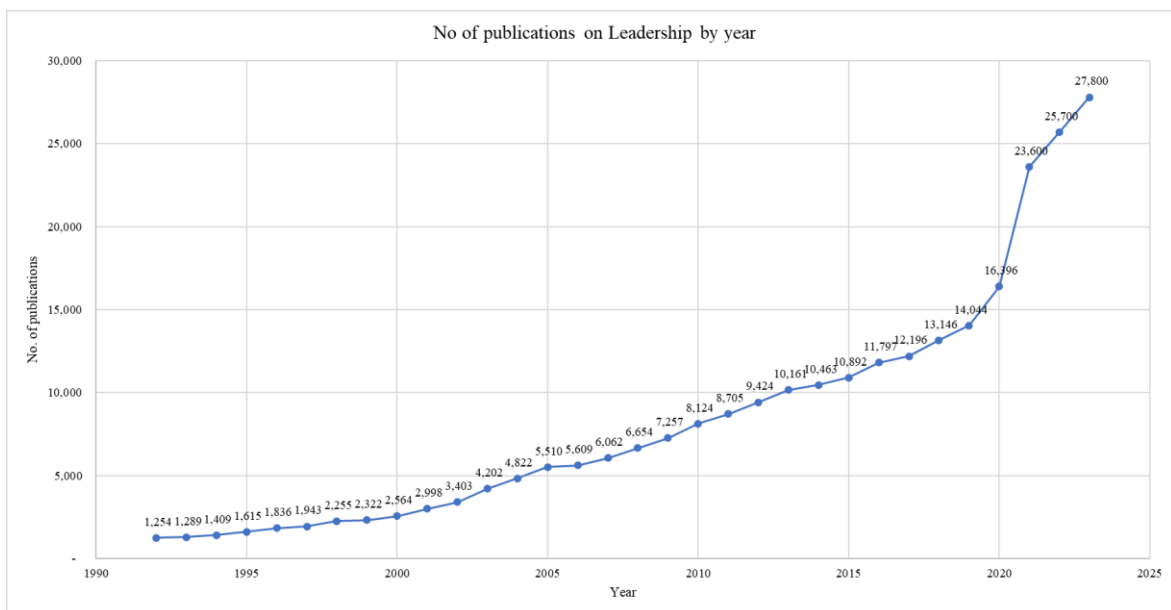


Figure 1.2: Number of publications on “leadership” by year (*Data from a Scopus search of article titles, abstracts, and keywords on May, 2024*).

Organizational leadership is a multidisciplinary field and has been an area of interest to scholars from a wide variety of backgrounds, i.e., sociology, psychology, management, education, political science, and organizational studies. The concept of leadership has been defined by many research scholars in the past. According to Fiedler (1967), leadership is characterized as an interpersonal relationship marked by an uneven distribution of power and influence, wherein a singular individual assumes the role of directing and controlling the behaviors of others. Northouse (2009) takes leadership as a power relationship between leaders and followers. Hollander & Julian (1969) assert that the essence of leadership encompasses three key aspects: (1) it is a process embedded in an influence relationship, (2) the leader operates as one participant within this relational dynamic, and (3) there exist “transactions” or exchanges between leaders and followers, underpinned by the expectation that benefits provided will yield corresponding rewards (cf., Homans, 1974; Jacobs, 1971). Building on this foundation, Hollander (1995) posits that leadership constitutes “a shared experience, a voyage through time,” emphasizing the collaborative nature of leadership rather than the leader functioning as a solitary entity. Furthermore, he underscores the significance of the leader’s self-perception in relation to followers and, reciprocally, how followers perceive the leader, highlighting a pivotal component of the leader-follower relationship. Consequently, this model delineates processes within the perceptions and cognitive frameworks of the individuals engaged in the relationship.

In a more contemporary perspective on leadership, as articulated by Gardner (1990, p.38), leadership is defined as “the accomplishment of group purpose, furthered not only by effective leaders but also by innovators, entrepreneurs, and thinkers; by the availability of resources; by questions of value and social cohesion.” Gardner challenges the conventional notion that leadership resides solely within an individual and a specific context. Instead, he redefines leadership as the collective endeavor of achieving a group goal, not merely reliant on the efforts of a singular skilled individual (i.e., the leader) but shaped by the collaborative contributions of

multiple members. In this view, leadership necessitates not only someone guiding the group's direction and progress while serving as a resource but also involves the valuable input of other innovative thinkers and doers, access to appropriate resources, and consideration of the social dynamics within the group.

Sims and Manz (1991) also offer a revised, integrative perspective on leadership. A new management style that is essential for team-based organizations is defined, termed "Super-Leadership". They challenge the traditional leadership paradigm as one person doing something to others. Instead, they suggest another leadership model: "The most appropriate leader is one who can lead others to lead themselves." They suggest that, for leaders to be most successful, they need to facilitate each individual in the process of leading himself or herself. Leaders ascend to greatness by unlocking the potential and capabilities of their followers, leveraging the collective knowledge of a diverse group rather than relying solely on their skills.

Drath and Palus (1994) introduce a theory centered on the concept of leadership as a process. Departing from the traditional emphasis on a leader and followers, they advocate for examining the social dynamics within groups engaged in a shared activity. In this perspective, leadership is not primarily characterized by the attributes of a leader; rather, it is viewed as the process of orchestrating collective efforts and facilitating coordinated progress within a group. Consequently, motivation and dominance are not the focal points, and active participation in leadership is assumed for everyone involved in the shared activity. Similarly, the research conducted by Sims and Manz (1991) reviewed earlier supports this notion. Their emphasis on self-leadership within each individual takes precedence over scrutinizing the behaviors and actions of a limited set of individuals formally assigned as leaders within an organization. Contrary to the conventional model where a single formal leader holds sway, the "Super-Leadership" theory posits a dynamic shift in the locus of control over time, transitioning from the leader to the collective team. Expanding on this notion, the proponents assert that self-

leadership stands as a pivotal element for the success of teams. Self-leadership is elucidated as a repertoire of strategies aimed at steering oneself towards higher performance and efficacy, progressively shouldering greater internal responsibilities.

As theoretical perspectives evolved to explore the leader's environment (e.g., Fiedler (1967)), the leader-follower relationship (House and Mitchell, 1975) and organizational culture (Schein, 1986), researchers have increasingly recognized the intricately interconnected nature of leadership. These theories have laid the groundwork for a paradigm shift, wherein leadership is conceptualized as a process, diverting attention from the singular emphasis on an individual leader.

Northouse (2018) classifies approaches to leadership in identification of four foundational leadership components: (a) leadership is a process, (b) leadership involves influence, (c) leadership occurs in groups, and (d) leadership involves common goals.

Given the repeated and recent emphasis on identifying attributes and behaviors associated with successful leadership, it appears that, to date, the objective of defining successful leadership has yet to be satisfactorily accomplished. However, though numerous definitions of leadership exist, most of the definitions share the similarity that leadership is an effort to influence, the power to make subordinates submissive (Wren, 1995), and/or to transform the organization (Conger & Kanungo, 1987; House, 1976). Besides, most definitions are related to trait, ability, skill, behavior, and relationship, which shows that the leadership field of study rushed from one fad to another (Yukl and Mahsud, 2010). According to Yukl (1989), the major lines of empirical research on leadership include leadership versus management, traits and skills, power and influence, situational determinants of leader behavior, and the importance of leadership for organizational effectiveness. In addition, *leadership and gender*, *culture and leadership*, and *congruence in leadership styles* are also significant areas of research. On the basis of empirical

research, different theories were developed to address different organizational issues and to predict proposed situations in response to different behaviors (Bass and Avolio, 1993b). The following table summarizes basic leadership theories mentioned in Leadership Quarterly publications from 2000 to 2009 (Gardner et al., 2010).

Prominent leadership theories reflected in LQ publications.<sup>a</sup>

Leadership Theories	Number of articles reflecting theory										1990-1999		2000-2009	
	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	Total	%	Total	%
Trait theories											17	8.5	26	3.8
Leadership traits and attributes <sup>b</sup>	0	2	4	1	1	4	3	3	1	7			26	3.8
Behavioral theories											5	2.5	37	4.4
Behavioral approaches	0	2	1	0	1	1	3	1	1	2			12	1.8
Leadership skills <sup>c</sup>	7	0	1	1	2	2	0	1	0	0			14	2.1
Participative leadership, shared leadership, delegation and empowerment	0	0	2	0	0	0	4	1	2	2			11	1.6
Contingency theories											25	12.0	7	1.0
Contingency theories of leadership	0	1	2	1	0	1	1	0	0	1			7	1.0
Multiple level approaches											19	9.0	89	13.0
Multiple level approaches <sup>b,c</sup>	0	2	8	4	4	2	5	5	9	10			49	7.2
Dyadic relations and followership <sup>c</sup>	1	2	2	2	5	1	5	4	6	12			40	5.9
Leadership and information processing											16	8.0	38	5.6
Leader and follower cognition <sup>c</sup>	1	2	2	2	4	7	5	3	7	5			38	5.6
Neo-charismatic approaches											68	34.0	86	12.6
Neo-charismatic approaches <sup>b</sup>	3	5	6	9	10	8	8	6	13	18			86	12.6
Other prominent approaches											28	14.0	21	3.1
Power and influence <sup>b,c</sup>	2	0	2	0	9	1	0	0	3	4			21	3.1
Other approaches											50	25.0	33	4.8
Leadership and diversity <sup>b</sup>	0	0	2	3	2	1	1	0	2	2			13	1.9
Cross-cultural leadership <sup>b</sup>	1	1	0	1	1	1	2	2	0	2			11	1.6
Nature of managerial work	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0			0	0.0
Other	4	0	0	1	2	1	0	0	1	0			9	1.3
New directions											29	14.0	303	44.4
Contextual influences on leadership <sup>c</sup>	0	2	3	4	2	4	3	5	6	9			38	5.6
Development and identification of leaders and leadership	10	0	1	2	3	10	2	1	2	6			37	5.5
Ethical, servant, spiritual and authentic leadership <sup>c</sup>	0	1	1	2	2	16	4	0	7	3			36	5.4
Leading for creativity and innovation <sup>c</sup>	0	0	2	10	8	1	2	1	5	6			35	5.2
Strategic leadership by top executives	2	0	0	2	4	0	3	2	8	8			29	4.3
Emotions and leadership <sup>c</sup>	0	0	9	1	1	2	4	1	2	7			27	4.0
Leadership in teams and decision groups <sup>c</sup>	1	1	3	1	3	2	7	2	5	3			28	4.1
Political and public leadership <sup>b,c</sup>	0	2	0	1	1	2	1	2	8	3			20	3.0
Complexity theory of leadership <sup>c</sup>	0	2	1	0	0	0	2	6	0	2			13	1.9
Leadership effects of task, technology, distance and virtuality	1	0	2	1	0	1	0	0	1	3			9	1.3
Ideological and pragmatic leadership	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	3	2			8	1.2
Destructive leadership	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	6	1	0			8	1.2
Leading change in organizations	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	3			6	0.9
New directions	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	1	3	1			9	1.3
New methods category											NA	NA	42	6.2
Measurement and methods for studying leadership <sup>c</sup>	3	1	8	4	3	4	4	4	5	6			42	6.2
Total	36	27	63	55	71	74	69	58	101	128	257	100	682	100

<sup>a</sup> Categories are not mutually exclusive.

<sup>b</sup> Special issue on topic, 1990-1999.

<sup>c</sup> Special issue on topic, 2000-2009.

Figure 1.3: Leadership theories that are mentioned in Leadership Quarterly publication from 2000 to 2009 (Gardner et al., 2010)

In the same vein, Benmira and Agboola (2021) summarize the evolution of leadership theories in some periods of time.

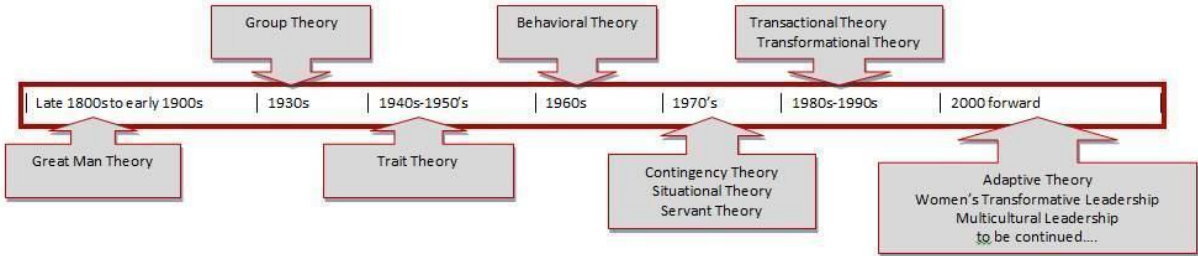


Figure 1.4: The evolution of leadership theories (Benmira and Agboola (2021))

Era	Period	Theory	Description
Trait	1840s 1930s - 1940s	Great Man Traits	Focus on natural born leaders Focus on identifying traits and characteristics of effective leaders
Behavior	1940s - 1950s	Behavioral	Focus on actions and skills of leaders
Situational	1960s	Contingency and Situational	Focus on leaders adapting their style taking into account the environment
New leadership	1990s 1990s 2000s 2000s 2000s	Transactional Transformational Shared Collaborative Collective Servant Inclusive Complexity	Focus on leadership as a cost-benefit exchange Focus on an inspirational style pushing followers to higher and higher levels of achievement Focus on followers leading each other Focus on engaging followers. Person-centered style Focus on the whole system of an organization

Table 1.1: The evolution of leadership theories (Benmira and Agboola, 2021)

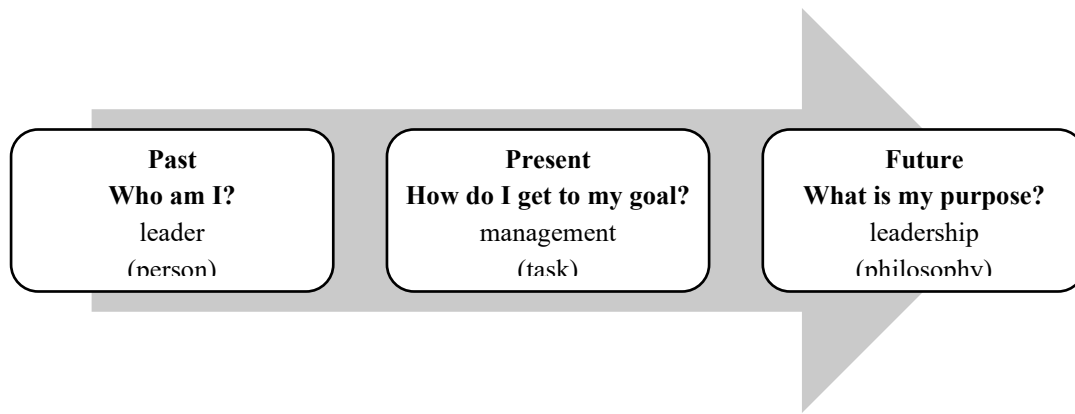


Figure 1.5: Leadership’s timeline (Mostovicz et al., 2009)

Based on the evolution framework of leadership studies, this paper will be divided into four main parts to discuss the main theoretical approaches to leadership analysis, namely (1) leader-focused theories: trait theory, (2) relationship-focused theories: transactional leadership, transformational leadership, followership, (3) context-focused theories: contingency leadership theories, (4) leadership and culture context: towards global leadership.

## 1. Leader-focused theories

### a. Trait theory

This first wave of leadership research was to prove the contribution of some born personalities. Stogdill (1974), an advocate of the “Great Man” theory, asserted that leaders possess innate abilities from birth. This perspective aligned with Bernard’s study (Bernard (1926), which proposed that leadership could be attributed to the internal qualities inherent in an individual. Stogdill (1974) and Bentz (1990) found significant correlations between multiple measures of leadership effectiveness and some personal characteristics, such as surgency, emotional stability, conscientiousness, and agreeableness. This line of research can be linked to trait theories of leadership, suggesting that personal qualities, such as dimensions of personality, are somehow related to effectiveness as a leader.

One of the biggest academic disputes about leadership is whether leaders are born or made. The first theory on leadership argued that it is predominantly innate rather than being developed by learning. The traits theory (also known as the qualities approach) focuses on the person in the job, not the job itself. It states that leadership “consists of certain inherited characteristics, or personality traits, which distinguish leaders from their followers” (Mullins, 2010, p. 375). This theory attempts to identify specific characteristics associated with leaders’ success. These characteristics can be physical, mental, or related to the leader’s personality. The studies supporting the traits theory tried to comprise a list of traits of successful leaders. For example, Ghiselli reported several personality traits associated with leader effectiveness (Ghiselli, 1963). He studied leaders at different levels in organizations and examined differences in their personality traits.

#### **b. Behavioral theory**

A second type of leader-focus theory looked at leader behaviors in an attempt to determine how successful leaders behave toward others (Halpin and Winer, 1957, Hemphill, 1957). These studies marked a pivotal turn towards scrutinizing leaders within the organizational milieu, elucidating the behaviors contributing to heightened corporate efficacy. The renowned and documented Michigan and Ohio State leadership studies adopted this paradigm, identifying two fundamental and independent factors: consideration and initiation of structure. Concurrent research in various academic institutions yielded congruent results, challenging the prevailing notion that leadership is inherently intrinsic. Rather, Saal and Knight (1988) posited that effective leadership methodologies could be imparted to employees, signifying a departure from the innate trait perspective. These scholars made substantial progress in discerning distinctive behaviors that differentiate leaders from followers, laying the groundwork for pedagogical interventions. Another outcome of this line of inquiry involved expanding the purview of management to encompass both people- and task-centric activities.

Expanding on this trajectory, Blake, Shepard, and Mouton (1964) formulated a two-factor model of leadership behavior akin to the frameworks established at Ohio State and Michigan. The factors, labeled as “concern for people” and “concern for output,” were later augmented with the inclusion of a third variable, namely flexibility. These studies show that leaders manifest behaviors within the two primary categories (task or people). Depending on the predominant category, a leader could be positioned along each of the two continua. The outcome of this research primarily assumed a descriptive nature, contributing to the categorization of leaders based on their behavioral tendencies.

However, the linkage between leadership behavior and its effectiveness remains elusive. While some studies substantiate the impact of leadership on managerial effectiveness, the body of research remains constrained. Nevertheless, these findings may signal a departure from the prolonged fixation on consideration and initiation of structure, prompting researchers to scrutinize more granular behaviors in the pursuit of comprehending leadership effectiveness.

In contemporary contexts marked by intricate dynamics involving numerous stakeholders, leadership necessitates focusing not solely on individual behaviors and traits but also on interpersonal relationships. Consequently, scholars have sought to address the limitations inherent in leader-focused theories. The ensuing sections will expound upon relationship-focused and context-focused theories, offering an overarching portrayal of the evolutionary trajectory of leadership theory.

## **2. Relationship-focused theories**

Within this paradigm, leadership is characterized as an interactive dynamic involving two key participants – leaders and their followers. Followers, designated as subordinates, possess lesser power, authority, and influence, adhering predominantly to established norms and expected behavioral standards (Kellerman, 2008). Followership entails both emotional and rational

engagement with individuals in higher formal or informal positions. Operationally, followership is defined as “the capacity or willingness to follow a leader” (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2018), with trust, dedication, communication, and skills identified as fundamental contributors. Consequently, followers contribute substantively to organizational endeavors, functioning as collaborative partners with leaders in the pursuit of organizational success.

This approach underscores the dual facets of the leader-follower relationship, delineated into transactional and transformational dimensions, with Burns (1978) and Bass (1985) providing a distinct categorization. In short, transactional leadership aligns with traditional perspectives on labor and organizational dynamics, leveraging the leader’s positional power to direct followers toward task completion (Burns, 1978). In contrast, transformational leadership seeks to motivate followers by addressing higher-order needs and actively engaging them in the work process (Bass, 1985).

Alternate definitions of leadership introduce the concept of vision, encompassing the provision of direction, influence in processes, orientation toward achieving a future desired state, and the energization of followers (Chin, 2011). Other studies delve into the structural aspects of interpersonal relationships, adopting a social network theory of leadership (Brass and Krackhardt, 1999, Brass, 2001, Mehra et al., 2001, Mehra et al., 2003, Brass et al., 2004). Similarly, Hesselbein and Goldsmith (2006) highlight the significance of leader recognition by followers, positing leadership as an attribute bestowed by others akin to reputation. This characteristic prompts a shift in scholarly focus towards the relationship between leaders and collaborators, termed “relational leadership,” with an emphasis on communication over traditional perspectives like management or institutional organizational studies. In this vein, leadership is construed as a non-coercive relationship of influence, where leaders shape collaborators’ behaviors to align with desired objectives (Rost, 1993). Yukl and Becker (2006)

align with this perspective, defining leadership as the use of influence to encourage participation in achieving predetermined goals. The leadership process incorporates the leader's personality and behaviors, the follower's perception of the leader, and the contextual backdrop influencing their interaction (Antonakis et al., 2004). The pivotal role of the leader-follower relationship in leadership is underscored, asserting that central to the concept of leadership is the dynamic interplay between leaders and followers (Locke, 2003). Leadership, therefore, transcends individual possession of traits or prescribed behaviors, extending into a relational process molded by contextual factors (Bass and Stogdill, 1990, Fiedler and Chemers, 1974).

Chemers (2002) emphasizes leaders' focus on credibility, legitimacy, understanding followers' needs, and deploying resources to optimize follower contributions towards established goals. It necessitates an embracement of change and the motivation of followers in a desired direction (Gardner and Gardner, 1993).

The historical evolution of leadership, rooted in diverse patterns such as hierarchy, strength, authority, and personal abilities, is further shaped by contemporary technological changes. Castells (2015) claims that the more leaders use new technologies, the more they can extend their influence. Thus, since this characteristic is called a "relationship of influence", technology has become an essential tool for strengthening and achieving this supremacy, above all when it is expected to bring different generations together (Wisniewski, 2010). Recently, authors have pointed out the ambiguity of the term "digital leadership", involving leaders to adapt and excel in a digital landscape, leveraging the opportunities presented by emerging technologies while confronting new challenges (Wilson III et al., 2004, Westerman et al., 2014). The rise of digital leadership or e-leadership has been in line with the increase of digital transformation of business by a huge contribution to the success and efficiency of business transformation strategy (Espina-Romero et al., 2023, Türk, 2023). Additionally, since the COVID-19 pandemic began, numerous organizations have embraced remote work, leading to the emergence of the digital

workplace. This digital environment allows employees to fulfill their duties by connecting, communicating, and collaborating with colleagues from any location. The organization's dynamic capabilities are crucial in facilitating this shift in the work environment, in which digital leadership has played an important role in this digital transformation of the workplace (Chatterjee, 2023)

The evolution of leadership definitions underscores a shift towards prioritizing relationship development, extending beyond immediate subordinates. Balkundi and Kilduff (2006) showed that leadership as “social capital that collects around certain individuals”. Furthermore, leadership is based “on the acuity of their social perceptions and the structure of their social ties”. Effective leaders comprehend social network relationships within and beyond organizational boundaries, leveraging personal networks for organizational benefit. This relational emphasis extends to project leaders, particularly those engaged in information systems, who must cultivate trust to harness critical social capital for project success (Tansley and Newell, 2007). Responsible leaders extend their purview beyond projects, considering the creation of stakeholder social capital by building relationships and ties (Maak, 2007). In sum, leadership involves the ability to build and maintain relationships, cope with change, motivate and inspire others, and deploy resources.

### **3. Context-focused theories**

#### **a. Contingency leadership theories**

This approach aims to address inquiries regarding optimal leadership methods by considering the intricate interplay between the leader's traits, behaviors, and the contextual setting. Contingency theories underpinning this perspective posit that the impact of one variable on leadership is contingent upon other variables. This framework facilitates a more pragmatic understanding of leadership, acknowledging the complexity and situational specificity inherent

in overall effectiveness. Various contingencies have been identified and explored, yet no single theory can be universally deemed more valid or valuable than another.

The analysis of leadership has extended to include additional contexts, such as the dynamics between leaders and followers and organizational culture. House and Mitchell (1975) highlight the substantial contribution of followers to leadership effectiveness, framing leadership as an interactive process aligning followers' goals with those of the leader. Furthermore, the evolution of leadership research has broadened its scope to encompass organizational culture (Schein, 1988). According to this perspective, influential leaders must identify and address issues related to the prevailing organizational culture.

In tandem, the aforementioned leadership research and theories heavily lean on the exploration of motivation, suggesting that leadership is not merely a predefined set of behaviors but involves creating an environment wherein individuals are motivated to contribute and align with the leader's direction. Consequently, influential leaders are compelled to adopt innovative approaches and rely on personal values to guide their actions, departing from textbook solutions.

Zehndorfer (2020) provides a historical perspective on the progression of leadership studies, offering a comprehensive summary that delineates the primary focus of each approach.

Theory	Main focus
Great man/Trait Theory	The first systematic study of leadership in modern leadership studies. Focuses on the traits that influential leaders possess. It concentrates on the idea of a leader being born with innate abilities.
Skills theory	Critiques of trait theory led to the study of influential leaders' skills. This theory posits that leadership can be developed.
Situational	Situational and contingency leadership were the first theories to focus on followers and situational variables that can affect leadership, replacing a 'leader-centric' approach with recognizing leadership as a process involving the leader, follower, and environment.

<b>Theory</b>	<b>Main focus</b>
Behavioral	Behavioral theories encapsulate scientific and motivational approaches to the study of leadership. Both focus on the behavior of workers in order to identify ways in which worker productivity can be enhanced.
Charismatic	The first of the ‘new leadership school’ theories. This theory focuses on the decisive role of charisma in leadership. It was around this time that leadership emerged from management studies as a separate academic discipline.
Transformational	Currently the most widely researched theory of leadership that leads to the most efficient performance outcomes. The transformational leader transforms followers to achieve their potential and inspires them to elicit performance beyond expectations.
Emotional Intelligence	Emotional intelligence has been theorized to be positively related to transformational leadership, and within this context, it is presented as a theory of interest to leadership scholars.
Authentic	A leadership theory that has emerged from transformational leadership and has been further influenced by emotional intelligence, authentic leadership focuses on the central role of morals and authenticity of the leader.
Destructive leadership	It is not only elementary to understand what makes a leader great but also to develop an appreciation of what makes a leader destructive. Theories of destructive and toxic leadership provide insight into how destructive leaders create and perpetuate a toxic workplace and how they can command loyalty from followers despite their destructive nature.
Self-leadership	Self-leadership theory focuses on how an individual can empower themselves via the development of self-leadership competencies and to achieve high levels of performance as a result.

Table 1.2: Main focus of leadership theories (*Zehndorfer, 2020*)

Leadership constitutes a process, as individuals designated as leaders are invariably associated with specific groups or collectives, such as departments or work teams, rather than existing in isolation. Ideally, leaders and followers are parts of a common group. More generally, leadership can be regarded as a process of social influence (Haslam et al., 2001, Turner, 1991). The Social Identity Model of Leadership (SIMOL) elucidates this by emphasizing an individual’s capacity to embody shared social identity within a group (Hogg, 2001).

Contingency or situational leadership theory diverges from trait theories, positing that varying situations demand distinct leadership characteristics, precluding the existence of a singular leader profile. These theories scrutinize organizational culture and explore the interplay of leadership behavior and traits with follower characteristics. While the visibility of a leader's charisma may facilitate successful transformational change, less conspicuous styles of leadership can be equally effective, contingent on context. For instance, assertiveness, considered crucial to good leadership, manifests differently across cultures, exemplified by the subtle pushing from behind in Native American communities (Boyd, 2010) and the strategic use of silence in Asian American communities (Yabusaki, 2007).

The evolution of leadership definitions has transitioned from top-down, command-and-control models to collaborative and transformational paradigms in the face of rapid social and technological changes globally. Contemporary leadership theories extend beyond the competencies of individual leaders, incorporating factors beyond their purview. Leadership is conceptualized as an effective management of social identity, deeply rooted in the social relationship between leaders and followers. In essence, leadership necessitates the establishment of a social connection between leaders and their followers. The overarching objective of leadership is to foster unity among group members, cultivate collective enthusiasm, and guide its collective application. Consequently, the pivotal goals in effective leadership encompass creating a cohesive unit and channeling collective energy.

## **II. Leadership and context**

Prior to the culture-centric era of leadership, certain scholars argued that leader involvement in followers' performance was unnecessary and could potentially hinder employees' development and creativity. This perspective was coined as the Leader-Substitute Period in conceptualizing leadership (Kerr and Jermier, 1978). This line of thought has been followed by Howell et al. (1986), Howell and Dorfman (1981), illustrating instances when leadership is less likely to exert

strong effects on organizational performance. Subsequently, the culture-centric era posited that leadership is not confined to individual, dyadic, or small-group phenomena but permeates the entire organizational culture. This era served as a natural extension of the Leader-Substitute Period, proposing that employees will autonomously assume leadership roles if a leader can establish a robust organizational culture (Manz and Sims Jr, 1987). Once the culture is entrenched, it engenders the emergence of the next generation of leaders. Formal leadership becomes necessary only when there is a need to change the existing culture and establish a new one (Schein, 1986). It's logical that leadership can present passively or even be absent except during the initiation and change process.

In the examination of the relationship between leadership and culture, House et al. (2004) identified cultural dimensions as predictors of desirable leadership traits. Understanding national culture is deemed sufficient to identify appropriate leadership behaviors that can be successfully enacted in each cultural context. It was argued that national culture indirectly shapes leadership behaviors through societal expectations. Executives tend to lead in a manner consistent with the leadership prototypes endorsed within their particular culture. Leaders who align with these expectations are deemed most effective. Additionally, it was found that some leadership behaviors, such as charismatic/value-based leadership, are universally effective, while others are more culturally sensitive, such as participative leadership. In diverse societies with distinct expectations, leaders can be perceived as superior or inferior based on alignment or deviation from societal expectations.

In summary, the evolution of leadership theories can be encapsulated in the following figure:

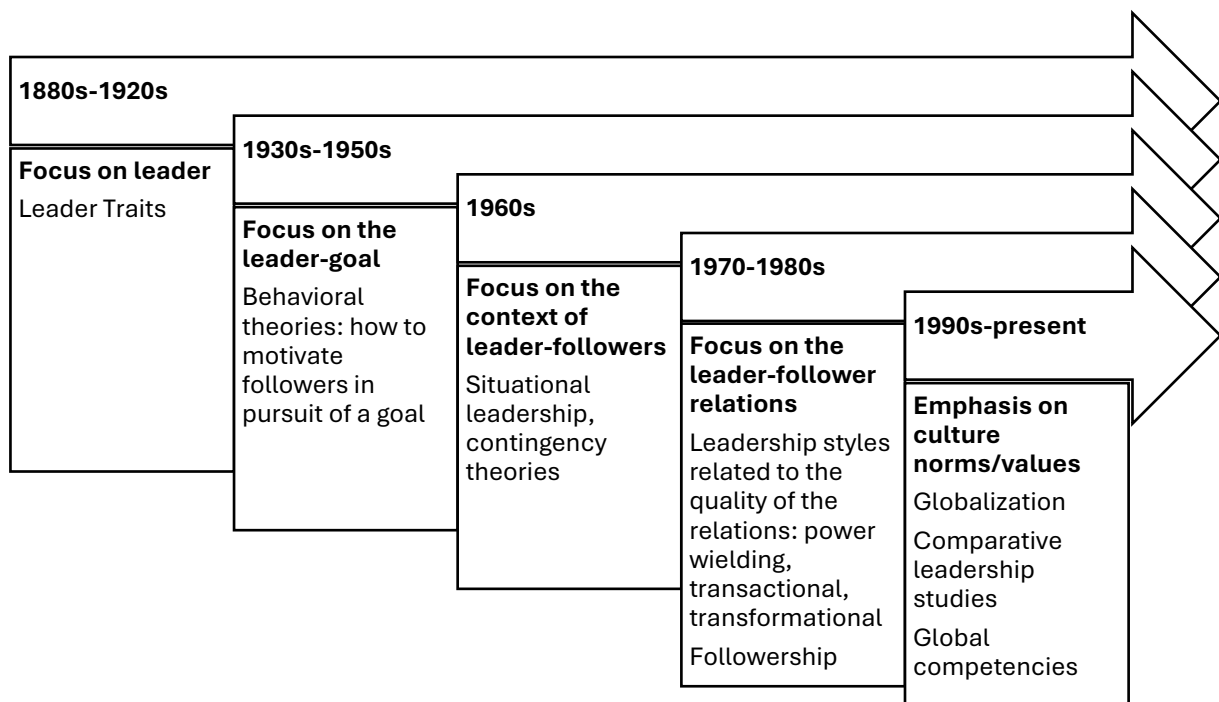


Figure 1.6: The evolution of leadership (summarized by the author)

Some typical definitions of leadership are presented as following:

Article name	Author, Year	Leadership
The origins of leadership	Mumford (1906)	“... is the preeminence of one individual in a group in the process of control.”
Leadership in reform	Blackmar (1911)	“... is the centralization of effort in one person.”
Leadership and propaganda	Bernard (1927)	“... focuses the attention of group members into the desired direction.”
Psychology and the Soldier	Copeland (1942)	“... is the art of influencing.”
Leadership: a conception and some implications	Knickerbocker (1948)	“... consists of a relationship between an individual and a group.”
Leadership, membership and organization	Stogdill (1950)	“... is the process of influencing the activities of an organized group in its effort toward goal setting and goal achievement”

Article name	Author, Year	Leadership
Leadership theory and administrative behavior: The problem of authority	Bennis (1959)	“... induces a subordinate to behave in a desired manner.”
Some aspects of attempted, successful, and effective leadership	Bass (1961)	“... is an individual’s effort to change the behavior of others.”
Social psychology of organizations	Katz (1978)	“... is an influential increment over and above compliance with the routine directives of the organization.”
Leadership. New York: Harper and Row	Burns (1978)	“... transforms followers, creates visions of the goals that may be attained and articulates for the followers’ ways to attain those goals. “Leadership persons mobilize resources to arouse, engage and satisfy the motives of followers.
Leadership is a language game	Pondy (1989)	“... is a form of social influence.”
Super-Leadership: Beyond the myth of heroic leadership	Sims and Manz (1991)	“...the most appropriate leader is one who can lead others to lead themselves. We call this powerful new kind of leadership as Super-Leadership”
Organizational culture and leadership Jossey-Bass	Schein (1992)	“... is the ability to start evolutionary change processes that are more adaptive.”
Leadership for Tomorrow’s Schools.	Patterson (1993)	“The process of influencing others to achieve mutually agreed upon purposes for the organization”
Improving organizational effectiveness through transformational leadership	Bass and Avolio (1994)	“... is an interaction and leaders are agents of change whose acts affect other people more than people’s acts affect them.”
How can we train leaders if we do not know what leadership is?	Barker (1997)	“A dynamic social and political relationship that is based in a mutual development of purposes which may never be realized”
Essentials of Management: An Asian Perspective	Koontz & Weihrich (1998)	“The art or process of influencing people so that they will strive willingly and enthusiastically toward the achievement of group goals”

Article name	Author, Year	Leadership
Leader-follower attachments: Understanding parental images at work	Cacioppe (2001)	“The ability to influence and develop individuals, teams and organisations to achieve a worthwhile vision that meets the present needs of everyone and everything affected by their work”.
Influence tactics and leader effectiveness	Yukl, (2002: 7) & Yukl (2006: 8)	“A process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives”
Defining leadership	Fairholm (2002)	“The art of influencing people to accomplish organizational goals”.
School leadership: Concepts and evidence	Bush & Glover (2003)	“A process of influence leading to the achievement of desired purposes. It involves inspiring and supporting others towards the achievement of a vision for the school which is based on clear personal and professional values”.
The role of the situation in leadership	Vroom and Jago (2007)	“... refers to a potential or capacity to influence others.”
Allgemeine Managementlehre	Jung et al. (2011)	“...is the alignment of subordinates’ activities and their motivational activation for goal attainment.”
Leadership and organization (RLE: organizations): A behavioral science approach	Tannenbaum et al. (2013)	“... is interpersonal influence (...) toward the attainment of a specified goal or goals.”
Leadership: Theory and practice	Northouse (2013)	“A process whereby an individual influences others to achieve a common goal and is composed of leaders, followers, and situations”.
Leadership management: Principles, models and theories	Sharma & Jain (2013)	“Leadership is a process by which a person influences others to accomplish an objective and directs the organization in a way that makes it more cohesive and coherent”.
What is leadership	Kruse (2013)	“Leadership is a process of social influence, which maximizes the efforts of others, towards the achievement of a goal”.

Article name	Author, Year	Leadership
The exercise of leadership of nurses in the family health strategy	Silva (2016)	“The process of interactive influence that occurs when, in a given context, some people accept someone as their leader to achieve common goals”.
E-leadership in small and medium-sized enterprises in the developing world.	Belitski & Liversage (2019)	“...Develops an e-leadership framework for small- and medium-sized enterprises in developing economies”
The role of leadership in a digitalized world: A review	Cortellazzo et al. (2019)	“...Provides a comprehensive analysis of the contribution of studies on leadership and digitalization.”
E-leadership or “how to be boss in instant messaging?” The role of nonverbal communication.	Darics (2020)	“...Exposes the strategies leaders employ to achieve a range of complex communication goals”
The e-leadership linking inter-organizational collaboration and ambidextrous innovation.	Doghri et al. (2020)	“...Investigates the effect of inter-organizational collaboration on ambidextrous innovation”
More self-organization, more control—or even both? Inverse transparency as a digital leadership concept.	Gierlich-Joas et al. (2020)	“...Provides a solution to the challenges of using transparency in leadership in a mutually beneficial way for managers and employees.”
Leadership revisited: Towards an integrative understanding of leadership	Doulgerof, I. (2023)	A multifaceted synthetic process, where the leader, through the usage of adequate qualifications, manages him- or herself, creates meaning in complexity, unfolds situational behaviors and interacts with followers to effectively solve socially defined tasks which are embedded in the leadership context.

Table 1.3: Typical definitions of leadership (*The author*)

In the author’s perspective, leadership encompasses the proficiency to administer, execute, oversee, and direct a team with the aim of generating value to realize the organization’s collective objectives. Individuals exhibiting exemplary leadership prowess demonstrate the capacity to steer and inspire others towards effective collaboration and mutual development.

### **III. Leadership identity and leadership identity construction**

Undeniably, leadership is the process in which one or more members of a group influence others with efforts to motivate them to contribute to the achievement of common group goals (Haslam et al., 2015), Hogg et al. (2012), (House et al., 2004, Rost, 2008, van Knippenberg, 2012). Nevertheless, the predominant focus in leadership development scholarship pertains to skill-building or short-term interventions such as retreats or courses rather than delving into how leadership capacity or identity is generated or evolves. In this regard, investigations into leadership require acknowledging what leaders think, feel, and believe beyond their actions, which involves studying leadership identity (Sugrue, 2015). Identity within the realm of leadership constitutes a burgeoning area of inquiry in leadership academia. Haslam and his associates proposed the development of an identity-oriented perspective on leadership in 2011. This perspective underscores the necessity for contextualization in examining both identity and leadership. Moreover, it posits that the efficacy of leadership does not solely hinge on the attributes of the leaders themselves, but rather on the dynamics of the relationship between leaders and followers (Haslam et al., 2011). Relationships serve as the framework for our identities, which are discernible and latent within both leaders and followers. This intricate interplay suggests the need for further interdisciplinary investigation into the correlation between leadership and identity construction.

The process of becoming a leader and assuming the role of a leader fundamentally revolves around questions of identity. Scholars such as DeRue and Ashford (2010), Ibarra et al. (2010), Lord and Hall (2005), and Van Knippenberg and Hogg (2003) have highlighted that leadership is intricately linked to one's identity. A leader's identity is not merely a reflection of a formal leadership position but rather emerges through engaging in two critical interconnected tasks: internalizing a leader's identity (DeRue and Ashford, 2010) and cultivating an elevated sense of purpose (Quinn and Norton, 2004).

“Identity refers to the various meanings attached to a person by self and others” (Gecas, 1982). Gecas and Burke note the importance of identity as fixing an individual’s place in society by the relationships with others implied by the meanings individuals adopt for themselves. These meanings, or self-conceptions, derive from individuals’ social roles and group memberships (social identities), along with the personal and character traits they exhibit and that others ascribe to them based on their behavior (personal identities) (Ashforth and Mael, 1989, Gecas, 1982). Some scholars also assert that it is challenging to conceptualize “identity” as it is not an objective reality and is developed based on self-perception, which is in turn based on values, impulses, beliefs, traits, and experiences with others (Ibarra, 1999, Slay and Smith, 2011). Indeed, identities have long been seen as constructed and negotiated in social interaction (Mead, 1934). Individuals make identity claims by projecting images that communicate their self-perception or how they aspire to be perceived by others. Individuals uphold or adjust their private self-conceptions through self-observation and consideration of others’ reactions, whether accepting, rejecting, or renegotiating these public images (Swan, 1983, Swann, 1987).

Ritacco Real and Bolívar Botía (2018) state that successful leadership largely depends on leadership identities. It has justified that identity is constructed not only in an individual way but also with a decisive contribution of society in this construction. A successful leadership identity consists of multiple components, is subjectively (re)built to adapt to the political and social context, and results from interactions with others. Personal beliefs, values, and feelings also determine leadership identity.

Those mentioned studies all discuss the idea that leadership has a social dimension. In this meaning, relationships with leaders’ communities impact their identities. When the leader has a weak leadership identity, others may need to recognize their leadership, which could negatively impact organizational performance outcomes, for example, low team spirit, low staff commitment, and weak common shared goals among employees and between employees and

organizations. For this reason, a leadership identity sheds light on its importance in leadership development and organizational effectiveness. Concurrently, with the approach of “made” leadership in which leadership can be changed in different situations and leadership styles, leadership identity construction is central to leadership development programs. In the following part, the contribution of identity to leadership analysis will be more clearly discussed.

### **1. The role of identity in leadership analysis**

Leadership definition has experienced changes. As Ford et al. (2008) summarize, “Leadership is no longer used to be a series of tasks or characteristics. It is now an identity.” Thus, Leaders are encouraged to create an individual “brand” that transcends their organization and feeds the romance (Meindl et al., 1985). Societal norms dictate the range of identities individuals can adopt, and leaders navigate the societal and organizational expectations of their roles. A growing focus in leadership research involves exploring these identity regulation processes and examining how they intersect with other identity markers, such as gender (Essers and Benschop, 2009) and race (Thomas, 2004).

Numerous scholars have delved into examining identity’s role in leadership analysis. Day and Harrison (2007) argue that a forming and being-formed relationship between leaders and followers requires leaders to reflect on and react to identity issues. Leadership definition now goes beyond a leader-centric approach. Today’s leaders are more and more energetic in joining the process, which also requires understanding and executing ways of developing connections between individual leaders to bring about shared, distributed, collective, or connected leadership capacity in organizations (Brown and Hosking, 1986, Day et al., 2004, Lipman-Blumen, 1992). In this interaction process, identity holds significance for leaders as it provides a foundation for comprehending their essence, fundamental goals, objectives, and individual strengths and limitations (Day and Harrison, 2007).

From the leader and leadership development perspective, the images of the self are a time-circular construction that is constantly created and re-created. The development of the self is linked to human interaction. It is similar to consider leadership and leader development, which is recognized via the interaction between leaders and followers. As mentioned above, leadership is the process of relationship development and identity negotiation to gain intentional influence on followers. Then, a growing series of research (Day and Harrison, 2007, Day et al., 2009, Lord and Hall, 2005, Van Knippenberg and Hogg, 2003, Hogg, 2001) suggests that it is necessary to understand better the relationship between identity and leadership, and how this affects people's development and behaviors as leaders.

Numerous contemporary studies posit the pivotal significance of cultivating a leader's identity in leadership's continual and progressive evolution. Day and Lance (2004) contend that leader development unfolds as a leader sub-identity undergoes increased complexity, ultimately integrating into a comprehensive global identity. Successful leader development involves differentiating and integrating leadership with personal experiences, values, and self-perception. Moreover, leader development is characterized by optimizing the alignment between the demands of the leadership role and the leader's identity (Hall, 2004).

Nowadays, when referring to leadership, not only traits and personal skills but also relationship development (Epitropaki, Kark, Mainemelis, & Lord, 2017). A paramount skill for a leader is the capacity to establish robust relationships both within the organization and externally. This finding appears to support the contention that building and maintaining interpersonal relationships is vital for effective organizational leadership. Nevertheless, in practice, the primary focus is on the skills and abilities (i.e., human capital) possessed by individual leaders with little corresponding attention to the relationships or connections (i.e., social capital) that develop. Hence, it is a transformation trend from leader development to leadership development. One particular lever that can be used to bridge development levels better is

identity. Incorporating an identity lens in development efforts can go beyond individual leader development to include the kinds of relational and collective identities that can facilitate the development of social capital in organizations. In a spiral-like fashion, taking on a leader identity becomes a motivational force for seeking out opportunities to practice leadership skills and taking on new leadership challenges, which further develops individual leader capabilities around leadership.

Then, if focusing on leader development, it is necessary to emphasize the individual skills of leaders. However, when transforming from lower to higher levels in the organizational hierarchy, leaders need to move from managing or leading the self to leading others and the entire enterprise (Freedman, 1998). This transformation involves a significant increase in accountability and leadership responsibilities. It also requires leaders to face a remarkably distinct set of psychological challenges. In other words, rather than focusing solely on the acquisition of particular leadership-related knowledge, skills, and abilities, developmental efforts should focus on building individual, relational, and collective-level identities. As such, leadership development should focus on building healthy working relationships with subordinates, peers, and managers.

In a broader context, identity serves as a lever for advancing leadership development, wherein leadership is shaped by how leaders construct their identities. Thus, leadership manifests in interpersonal interactions involving the recognition and acknowledgment of individuals and the establishment of the credibility essential for assuming a leadership role. Simultaneously, identity is best conceptualized as a multidimensional construct denoting an individual's self-perception as a distinct, autonomous entity intricately linked to self-image, self-esteem, personality, and individuation. Leaders' self-images are socially constructed and continually shaped and reshaped. The process of self-development is intricately tied to the interactions between leaders and followers, as well as with individuals in general. Leaders craft their

identities, forming unique pathways to leadership. Uncovering these individual routes to leadership necessitates a commitment to self-development. This identity construction unfolds over time and space, comprising a collection of temporally interconnected self-images. These self-images wield influence over leaders’ actions. Therefore, the essence of leadership lies in an individual’s capacity to muster the discipline required for self-development, contemplating identity within a social context and aligning it with leadership actions. Consequently, an identity-centric approach becomes imperative in the analysis of leadership.

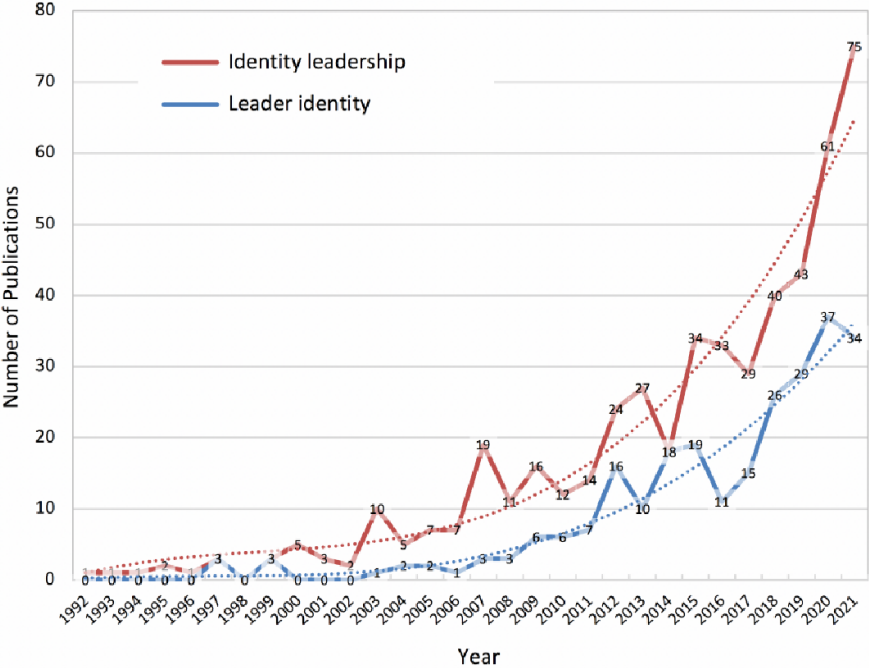


Figure 1.7: Number of publications on (a) “identity leadership” (or “social identity” and “leadership”), (b) “leader identity” (or “self-identity” and “leadership”) by year (*Data from a Scopus search of article titles, abstracts and keywords on October 12, 2021*).

## **2. Leadership as relationship development**

Drawing on identity theory, originating from Mead (1934) and expanded by Stryker (1968), a process has evolved wherein individuals engage with others to establish an identity—an undertaking termed identity negotiation. Identity negotiation aims to cultivate a repertoire of behaviors that substantiate an individual's identity. In essence, individuals negotiate separately for each identity they hold, interacting with those influenced by the particular role, especially within the context of leadership. Mead (1934) argued that the individual mind is the silent conversation and role-play of an individual body with itself, equivalent to social processes. Mead thus states that humans – and thereby leaders – cannot be understood in isolation. Leaders cannot be isolated in creating identity. Leaders need to interact with followers to constitute their identities actively. Also, they must negotiate with followers to accept their identity as a relational. Then, leadership can be regarded as the process of relationship development.

When discussing leadership effectiveness, the modern perspectives focus on attributes beyond the business outcomes. Drucker (2004) emphasizes leadership effectiveness on opportunity, performing actions, and taking responsibility. Vision, discipline, passion (Covey, 2013), and the need to master capabilities such as sense-making, relating, visioning, and inventing (Senge, 1990) are also taken into account for assessing leadership effectiveness. Most of the above conceptions of leadership and leadership effectiveness predominately introduce the assumption of the intentional influence of leaders over followers to facilitate activities in their groups or organizations (Karp and Helgø, 2009). Besides, Karp and Helgø (2009) argue that it is ordinarily impossible to identify the preferred leadership characteristics of the ideal leaders and confirm that a person with those preferred attributes will effectively perform and facilitate the organization's development. The main reason is that leadership effectiveness is also dependent on the recognition of followers, which is constructed by the relationship between followers and leaders.

In their publication, Reicher et al. (2005) contend that the influence of leaders on followers necessitates examination within the framework of the shared engagement of leaders and followers in a social categorical relationship. The main contribution of this research is the interplay between leaders and followers in the leadership process, in which both leaders and followers are creators of their leadership identity. Leaders contribute an active intervention in redefining identities and transforming their followers. Followers are engaged, too. They are not merely passive in endorsing leaders who violate their understanding of either identity or social reality. This interplay can facilitate how leaders constitute their identity under followers' recognition. This process's success also depends on their relationship, which will be discussed further in the next chapter.

### **3. Identity and relationship development**

Viewing leadership as an identity construction process, it manifests in the interaction between individuals, involving the mutual recognition between leaders and followers. Consequently, leaders' self-images are products of social constructions, and the evolution of a leadership self, and subsequently leadership, is intertwined with the interactions between leaders and followers (Karp and Helgø, 2009). Considerable researchers support this perspective. According to Shaw (2003), in the process of identity construction, people communicate in organizations in order to couple their practical activities with those around them. Then, they create meaning in their activities and express their identity, which shows the relationship construction. Hence, when leaders influence how people talk in organizations, they construct new relationships and constitute identities. Griffin and Stacey (2005) argue that the group forms the identity and behavior of leaders as they form the group in their recognition of others. Specifically, leaders' formal or informal role is continually iterated in social recognition processes. The act of leadership is, therefore, created simultaneously between leaders and followers. Leadership is then intricately connected to both the followers' current acceptance of the leader's sense-

making and power relations, as well as the leader's perception of feasible leadership actions based on their ongoing sense-making and future orientation. The leader-follower relationship acknowledges a power configuration where the leader's identity holds a tilted power balance.

Day and Harrison (2007) advocate for the concept of leadership as identity construction, asserting that utilizing identity as a developmental lever fosters leadership. Leaders materialize through interactions involving mutual recognition and the acquisition of essential trust, credibility, and respect to function effectively. It underscores that leadership is a social phenomenon, exclusively emerging through interaction and lacking significance without it. This perspective challenges the traditional notion of a formal leader assigned to oversee activities and attain specific outcomes. Instead, the authors contend that the formation of a leadership identity results from self-understanding and development in relation to others—a dynamic process emerging in social interactions dependent on identity and relationships.

#### **4. Leadership identity construction**

##### **a. Interaction between leaders and followers in identity construction**

Researchers focused on leader-centered leadership often describe the process of leadership identity construction (LIC) as a singular, independent, and one-dimensional event. However, scholars in organization and management, such as Alvesson and Willmott (2002) and Brown (2019), suggest that constructing and maintaining identities—whether leader-related or not—is filled with ambiguity, insecurity, and contradictions, making it a complex, multi-actor, and multi-dimensional process that influences individual agency. McCall George and Simmons (1978) posit the indispensability of negotiation with others in enacting a role identity, emphasizing that a role identity is invariably crafted in tandem with a corresponding counter-identity. Each party maintains distinct self-conceptions and perceptions of the other's identity, necessitating coordination and compromise to ensure seamless role performances. In the realm

of leadership, a parallel process unfolds as leaders negotiate their prototypicality and elevate their individual identities to collective levels. Moreover, the triumph of leadership identity construction hinges on the followers' perception and acceptance of the leadership reality (Schyns and Schilling, 2011). The leader-follower relationship substantiates the nascent identities of leaders and their followers, stemming from this more domain-specific application of leadership knowledge.

In a landmark paper from 2010, DeRue and Ashford presented LIC as a relational phenomenon, where individuals are socially constructed as either leaders or followers. They described a reciprocal process through which leaders and followers engage in mutual granting-claiming actions, co-creating these identities. This model continues to shape empirical research on LIC, as noted by Epitropaki et al. (2017). Building on DeRue and Ashford's (2010) model, Epitropaki et al. (2017) adopt a multi-level perspective, organizing existing literature around three levels of leader identity work: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and group, alongside three levels of self: individual, relational, and collective. Their review reveals that, while social identity researchers have focused significantly on group-level identity processes, other levels remain underexplored. Similarly, Denis et al. (2015) note that research on hybridity often emphasizes the macro (organizational) level, though it also has important "local" implications at the meso (team) and micro (individual) levels. This is particularly relevant in examining "hybrid" roles at the micro level, which blend professional and managerial logics and have spread globally, such as the medical manager role in the UK (McGivern et al., 2015).

Since the publication of DeRue and Ashford's (2010) "claiming" and "granting" model, further research has explored various aspects of leadership identity construction, including the role of leadership development programs (Moorosi, 2014), the influence of context in initiating the leader identity construction process (Humphreys et al., 2015), leadership identity and decision-making (Marchiondo et al., 2015), and Schedlitzki et al.'s (2019) critical examination of

organizationally assigned leader-follower relations and the impact of the absence of a follower discourse on these relations and identity construction.

Howieson, W.B., (2023) stated that the construction of a leadership identity takes place when claims and grants of leader and follower identities are mutually endorsed through reciprocal actions. In this context, the data highlighted the critical role of trust in enabling the claiming of followership and the granting of leadership identities. However, the process can happen in specific contexts, it's not always a reciprocal claiming and granting procedure.

In essence, leadership identity construction entails an interplay between leaders and followers, with leaders taking an active role in this dynamic. However, followers' engagement, perception, and recognition are imperative for achieving leadership effectiveness. Instances of dissenting with leaders' behaviors or discerning incongruities in leadership social reality may result in the withholding of endorsement for leadership identity by followers. Additionally, the three levels of identity analysis—individual, relational, and collective—come into play. Leaders typically transition from the individual level to the collective level, yet the success of this transition is contingent upon the relational level. Therefore, the chronic nature of relational identity development underscores the importance of cultivating relationships with followers to foster inclusive identities. Consequently, establishing relationships within the realm of identity construction assumes exceptional significance for leadership effectiveness.

#### **b. Leadership identity construction process**

In the discourse on leadership, individuals commonly encounter traditional leadership paradigms such as trait, behavioral, and situational theories, wherein the terms leadership and leaders are often used interchangeably. As individuals transition towards perceiving themselves as interdependent with others, their conception of leadership aligns with a perspective embraced by most group members, akin to the post-industrial outlook on leadership (Komives et al.,

2006). Identity work studies corroborate that individuals engaged in identity construction actively shape, repair, maintain, strengthen, or revise their identities, serving as a fundamental basis for comprehending the social processes inherent in becoming a leader (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).

In the subsequent stages of development, a consensus among numerous studies asserts that the construction of leadership identity is most effective when contextualized and endorsed by followers rather than being leader-centric. While some leadership theories emphasize a core understanding of leadership practices (Ibarra, 1999, Ely et al., 2011), others perceive leader identity as a role, category, or process (Ibarra et al., 2014). Recent research situates the locus of leadership across diverse contexts and the enactment of leadership through various mechanisms, shifting away from a leader-centric perspective. Notably, the leader is not a solitary actor in constructing their leadership identity; instead, it is a “relational reality” intricately tied to relationships with others and the leadership context.

It is affirmed that leadership identities emerge and evolve within social interaction, shaped by how others perceive the individual as a leader. Komives et al. (2006) define leadership identity development as progressing from personal awareness to acceptance by followers:

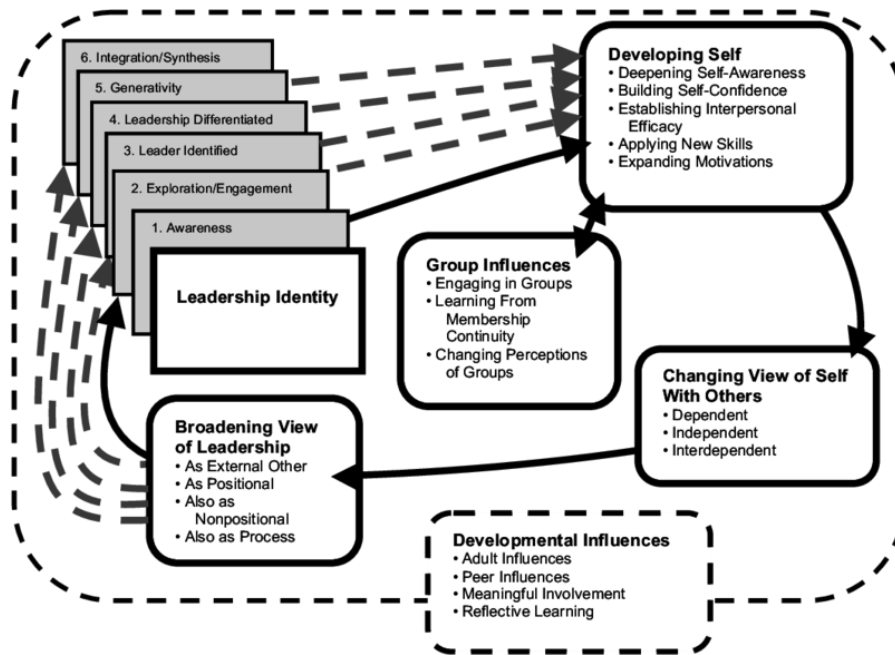


Figure 1.8: Developing a leadership identity: Illustrating the Cycle (Komives et al. (2006))

This model delineates the sequential process by which individuals shape their leadership identity. The progression initiates with personal awareness regarding the nature of leadership identity and the potential for anyone to assume a leadership role, prompting a reevaluation of concerning others and a subsequent broadening of the perspective on leadership. Throughout this developmental trajectory, individuals engage with individual factors, including enhanced self-awareness, confidence development, interpersonal efficacy establishment, leadership skills cultivation, and goal clarification. Simultaneously, they interact with group factors, involving a shift in perceptions of groups from friendship structures to organizations and systems, meaningful group experiences, and sustained membership in crucial groups. Various developmental influences, such as peers, adults, meaningful involvement, and reflective learning, act as defining factors or constraints within the environmental context where leadership identity development unfolds.

In alignment with this framework, DeRue and Ashford (2010) rationalize that the internalization of a leader's identity entails a series of relational and social processes, wherein

the focal individual begins to perceive oneself and is perceived by others as a leader. Specifically, the focal individual initiates actions to assert leadership, and others either affirm or disaffirm those actions, thereby encouraging or discouraging further assertions, creating a reciprocal cycle. Through this iterative process, the individual gradually forms their sense of self as a leader and becomes adept at enacting the leader role. Within this perspective, leadership identity construction is defined as the process through which “individuals acquire, internalize, and validate a leader identity and refine, revise, and enact their other identities to minimize conflict with the leader identity and maximize group prototypicality.”

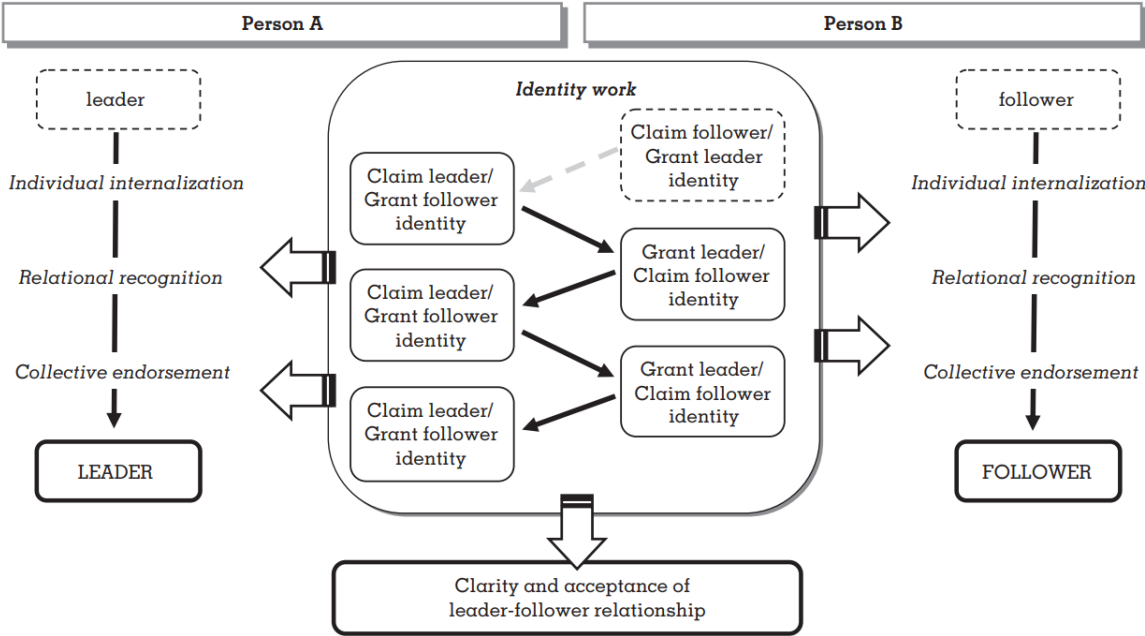


Figure 1.9: Leadership identity construction process (DeRue and Ashford, 2010)

According to DeRue and Ashford (2010), the conceptualization of leadership identity encompasses all three levels of self-construal, involving individual internalization, relational recognition, and collective endorsement. Individual internalization entails individuals integrating the identity of leader or follower into their self-concept, creating new facets of the self-linked to the leader’s (or follower’s) role. (DeRue et al., 2009, Gecas, 1982). Individuals’ identities are often tied to various roles (Stryker and Burke, 2000, Stryker, 1968), and certain

roles are reciprocally related. Leadership, therefore, is not a possession of the leader but signifies a recognized relationship among individuals. Relational recognition processes indicate that, alongside internalization, the leadership identity is affirmed through reciprocal role adoption as leader or follower. Collective endorsement involves being acknowledged as part of a specific social group within the broader social environment.

By conceptualizing leadership identity across all three levels of self-construal, it is proposed that leadership development and identity construction revolve around relationship constructing (DeRue and Ashford, 2010). This theory posits that social mutual influence processes play a crucial role in construction, explaining how individuals perceive themselves and how relationships are socially constructed, leading to the formation and evolution of influence patterns among individuals. Reciprocal claims and grants facilitate the internalization of leader and follower identities and their recognition within group members' roles and relationships. In this process, the leader-follower relationship evolves to establish **mutual trust**, subsequently progressing toward the cultivation of **mutual values**. These values, perpetually generated, exchanged, and resonated, contribute to the formation of emergent relational structures that enhance recognition within the organizational context. Hence, the leadership identity becomes collectively endorsed in the broader organizational context.

However, a notable limitation of this theory is the absence of gender considerations. Additionally, the contextual situation must be taken into account to understand how various antecedents impact leadership identity construction. Therefore, this theory provides a general process, lacking gender-specific considerations in different social contexts. It primarily focuses on the leader-centric perspective, exploring how a leader asserts and gains acceptance of their identity. Subsequently, the model proposed by Egan et al. (2017) responds to the call for leadership theories that encompass multiple contexts and mechanisms (Hernandez et al., 2011), perceiving leadership as a social and relational process where the individual and context interact

dialectically. In this view, the leader is not an isolated actor but exists within a “relational reality,” inseparable from relationships with others and the leadership context.

With the shared objective of emphasizing that leadership identity construction involves co-identity creation, recent theoretical advancements posit that influential leaders must not only embody group qualities (identity prototypicality) but also prioritize collective follower interests (identity advancement), actively shape a shared identity (identity entrepreneurship), and foster a profound sense of belonging among the group (identity impresarioship) (Steffens et al., 2014).

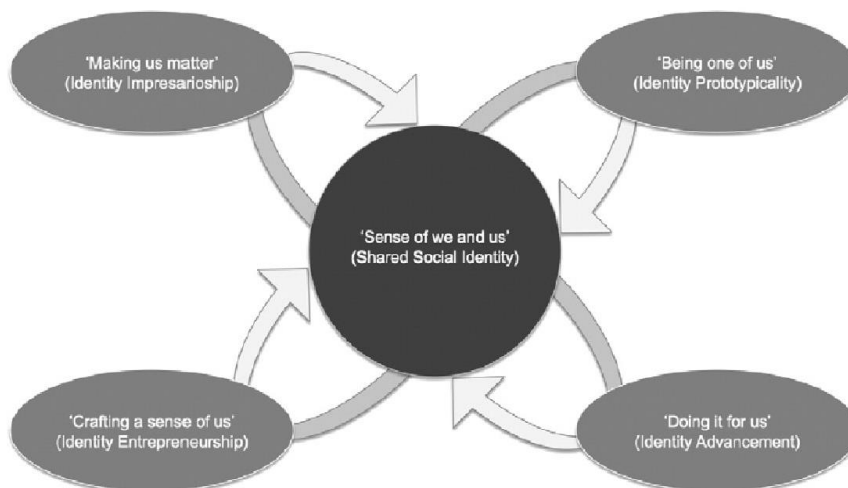


Figure 1.10: A four-dimensional model of social identity management comprising identity prototypicality, advancement, entrepreneurship, and impresarioship (Steffens et al., 2014)

By using the social identity approach to leadership, it is argued that leaders should be representative of group identity and be the best person to implement those identities. This approach asserts that leadership is a social influence process that occurs within a group, wherein leaders play a pivotal role in establishing, embodying, promoting, and embedding a collective sense of identity (referred to as “we” or shared social identity) among their followers. Additionally, those identities should align with followers’ expectations and encourage them to see what leaders are trying to do for their and the group’s benefit. This successful identity verification process can bring about a sense of “we” and “us” rather than a feeling of “I” and “me.” Significantly, the concept of self-categorization, which involves defining oneself based

on shared group membership, is believed to play a crucial role in influencing behavior fundamentally different from that based on personal identity. This distinction arises because self-categorization is influenced by and directed toward the collective interests of the group as a whole. In fact, self-categorization theory asserts that individuals' internalized perception of a shared identity, where they perceive themselves as part of a larger group, is what enables and facilitates group behavior.

In another leadership identity development model, Komives et al. (2006) assert that the development of leadership identity has evolved, transitioning from the perception of leadership as an external role held by individuals in specific positions to a more inclusive understanding that incorporates the idea of “self-as-leader” regardless of formal positions. In the final phase, there is a notable shift towards a focus on leading to drive social change.

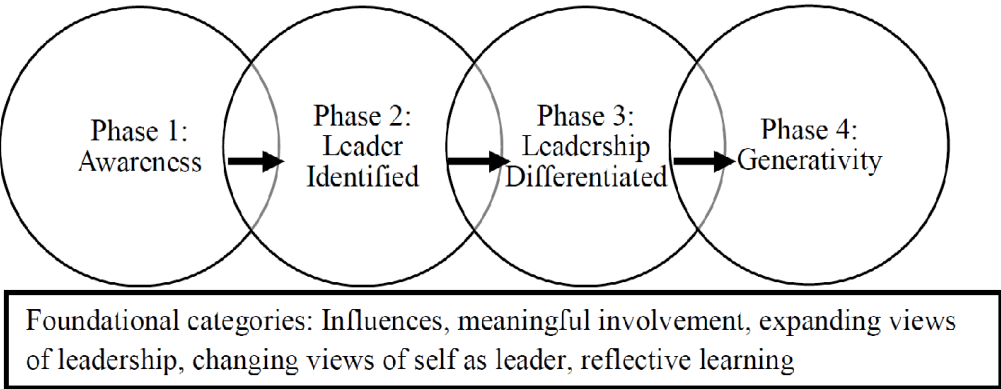


Figure 1.11: Leadership identity development model (Komives et al., 2006)

Within transitional phases, the shift signifies the conclusion of the preceding stage and the commencement of the subsequent one. It marks a change in perspective, characterized by a gradual departure from traditional leadership notions in favor of exploring innovative approaches. This transitional phase primarily involves reflection rather than active transformation. Individuals express their readiness to move to the next stage, acknowledging that they may not have fully embraced the thoughts or behaviors associated with that stage.

Environmental factors, such as a strong group sense, exposure to leadership learning opportunities, and mentorship, significantly contribute to facilitating the transition and the adoption of the new stage. Positive confirmation from others plays a vital role in enhancing individuals' self-confidence to progress to the next stage.

However, it is argued that the recursive and mutually reinforcing nature of leadership identity construction can have both positive and negative impacts (DeRue et al., 2009, DeRue and Ashford, 2010).

On the flip side, failure to receive affirmation for leadership attempts can diminish self-confidence and motivation to seek developmental opportunities, experiment, and assume new leadership roles (Day et al., 2009), thus weakening one's self-identity as a leader (DeRue and Ashford, 2010). In such cases, leaders require personal networks for advice, emotional balance, and solutions to mitigate potentially negative impacts. The degree of positive validation from others significantly influences the success of leadership identity construction, underscoring the importance of considering personal networks in leadership identity analysis. For any side, personal network still contributes a specific impact for leadership identity construction success.

## CHAPTER 1 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, a comprehensive literature review on leadership is presented, encompassing its multidisciplinary exploration by scholars from various fields. The evolving conceptualization is highlighted through diverse definitions of leadership as a dynamic process of relationship development. Despite varied perspectives, the pursuit of a definitive definition of successful leadership persists, often centering on group influence and organizational transformation.

The author delves into the significance of cultivating a leader's identity for continuous development, integrating personal experiences, values, and self-perception. Leadership, viewed as a manifestation of interpersonal interactions and credibility establishment, is intricately linked to the multidimensional construct of identity. The essence of leadership is posited in individuals' capacity to discipline themselves for self-development, emphasizing the necessity of an identity-centric approach in leadership analysis.

The chapter further explores the process of leadership identity construction, emphasizing the crucial role of social mutual influence processes and relationship development. However, it notes the absence of social stratification and status hierarchies and also calls for further exploration of contextual factors impacting identity construction process. Additionally, personal networks are discussed as pivotal for leaders, serving as "life preservers" for advice, emotional support, and solutions to mitigate negative impacts. The level of positive validation from peers is identified as significantly influencing the success of identity construction, underscoring the importance of personal networks in leadership analysis.

The upcoming chapter will delve into gender stereotypes and issues, examining their influence on leadership identity construction. The author will also explore the impact mechanism of personal networks and their significance in building women's leadership identity.

**CHAPTER 2:**

**GENDER AND LEADERSHIP**

**IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION**

## **I. Gender issues**

### **1. Gender issues in organizations**

Gender issues encompass the social, cultural, economic, and political challenges stemming from distinct roles, expectations, and opportunities assigned to individuals based on their gender identity. These socially constructed differentiations between men and women, coupled with their beliefs and identities, sustain inequality across various organizational contexts. These challenges impact individuals of both genders; however, their repercussions are frequently more pronounced for women, stemming from historical and cultural norms that have prioritized men's rights and interests. Workplace dynamics are shaped by gendered and sexualized attitudes, impacting supervisory practices and wage-setting processes. Despite the increasing presence of women in managerial positions, certain roles like secretaries, clerks, servers, and care providers continue to be predominantly filled by women.

Kanter (1977) was considered highly influential in the field of gender studies in organizations, as his theory highlighted how masculine managerial principles, gender stereotyping, and organizational processes kept women in low-level and segregated jobs. Feminist researchers have also examined women's work and wages, revealing the gendered distribution of jobs, wages, and power, as well as work organizations' assumptions and practices that shaped the conditions of both women's and men's paid labor (Acker, 1990, Kanter, 1975, Kanter, 1977). The concept of gendered organizations can be described as an organizational structure where advantages and disadvantages, exploitation and control, action and emotion, and meaning and identity are systematically arranged based on distinctions between male and female - masculine and feminine (Acker, 1990). Gender is embedded in hierarchical structures, job roles, division of labor, hiring and wage-setting processes, images of workers and managers, interactions in the workplace, work/family interconnections, and individual constructions of identity.

Weichselbaumer and Winter-Ebmer (2005) argue that women continue to earn less than men for the same job, with the gap being wider for women of color and women in low-wage jobs. Apart from the case of violence in the family and unequal access to education, women have to face a representation in leadership positions and some gender stereotypes that limit opportunities for both men and women and reinforce gender inequality, such as the idea that women are better suited for caregiving roles, and men for leadership positions.

Recently, some scholars have justified that organizing processes reproduce more inequalities (Acker, 2006, Williams et al., 2012, Acker, 2010). The first is the fundamental requirements at work. Typically, work is structured based on the concept of the “ideal worker” norm (Williams, 1999), which has its roots in societal expectations regarding the familial and occupational responsibilities of men and women. Ideal workers are characterized by their engagement in full-time employment outside the home, often involving extended working hours extending into evenings and weekends, as well as frequent travel for professional purposes. The perceived reward for adherence to this norm is the attainment of a stable and secure job, coupled with predictable career advancement. Formal policies and expectations such as working eight continuous hours away from home, punctuality, unwavering focus on work, and willingness to work long hours if needed all reflect the concept of an unburdened worker. High-level managers, primarily men, have more flexibility to deviate from these expectations than lower-level managers (Jacobs and Gerson, 2004, Gerson, 2004, Gerson and Jacobs, 2004). Certain professions, like college professors, may have considerable flexibility, although they often work long hours. On the other hand, lower-level positions generally offer limited flexibility. Some jobs are structured as part-time, which can help women balance work and family responsibilities. However, in some countries, such as the United States, part-time jobs often lack benefits such as healthcare and is typically associated with lower pay than full-time jobs (Mishel et al., 2003). Given that women typically have more non-work obligations than men,

this gendered organization of work plays a crucial role in perpetuating gender inequality within organizations and contributes to the unequal distribution of women and men across organizational class hierarchies. Therefore, constructing the working time and work obligations generates gender inequality.

The second organizing process that produces gender inequality is the recruiting and hiring process that identifies the most suitable candidate for a specific job. Employers tend to consider the gender of current employees to determine the suitability of potential candidates (Enarson, 1984). Accordingly, if there are more male employees in organizations who are assertive, decisive, and the like, potential candidates, including men and women, will be expected to have similar characteristics; otherwise, they will have no chance of employment. Additionally, competencies as the basis for decision-makers in the recruitment process can be affected by personal judgment; hence, if there are gender inequalities in organizations, the recruitment and hiring process continues to result in decisions that white males are more competent and more suitable for the job than others.

The third organizing process that produces gender inequality is informal interactions while “doing the work.” A substantial body of literature concerns how gender is perpetuated within organizational interactions (McDonald and Day, 2010, Reskin, 2005, Ridgeway, 1997). Some scholars asserted that when individuals engage in their daily tasks, they frequently rely on preconceived notions related to gender assumptions when interacting with others (Acker, 2006), with which the minority faces some barriers to joining informal interactions. For example, white men can marginalize and disregard white women and individuals of color through actions like disregarding their input in meetings, excluding them from social gatherings outside of work, and not seeking their perspectives on workplace issues. There are also practices like sexual harassment that may be evident to the victim but not necessarily apparent to others. In specific industries, such as travel and hospitality, there may be sexualized assumptions about what

constitutes good job performance. Women employees might be expected to conform to societal expectations of being sexually appealing, especially when interacting with male customers, which can create an unhealthy work environment (Adkins, 1995).

In general, gender issues in organizations lead to some expectations of which characteristics and behaviors are suitable for leadership, creating numerous obstacles to women's leadership development. In the following part, the consequences of gender issues for women in leadership will be further examined.

## **2. Consequences of gender issues**

### **a. Gendered traits**

The classification of individuals into male or female categories is deeply rooted in psychological factors that shape expectations regarding masculine and feminine qualities. Bem (1974) outlined characteristics associated with stereotypes of women, including nurturing, compassion, consideration, perceived weakness, subservience, emotional responsiveness, subjectivity, tactfulness, awareness of others' feelings, and emotional vulnerability. Conversely, stereotypes associated with men encompass traits like leadership, dominance, aggression, independence, and competitiveness. Traits often considered weaknesses in female leaders, such as relational skills, compassion, and a willingness to negotiate, are more commonly associated with male-associated characteristics. In another study, Marshall (1993) identified "feminine qualities" such as interdependence, cooperation, receptivity, merging, acceptance, and pattern awareness, contrasting them with masculine values like self-assertion, separation, independence, control, and competition. Traditionally, women are perceived as socially sensitive and interpersonally capable but less competent in traditionally male-dominated work (Korabik (1999). More recently, two emerging traits associated with both women and men have been identified as communal and agentic (Abele, 2003, Rosette and Tost,

2010, Ezzedeen and Ritchey, 2009). Communal associations refer to behaviors that are typically associated with women, such as being affectionate, helpful, friendly, kind, and sympathetic. Women are also often described as being interpersonally sensitive, gentle, and soft-spoken. On the other hand, agentic associations convey traits that are typically associated with men, such as being aggressive, ambitious, dominant, self-confident, forceful, self-reliant, and individualistic. These prescribed gender roles are not only encouraged by society, but they can also be internalized by individuals and shape their behavior. These stereotypes appear to be consistent across different cultures. However, as previously discussed, different cultures with their distinct norms, values, and assumptions, such as those based on tradition or religion, can have a specific impact on how these stereotypes are expressed in behavior, interpersonal interactions, and managerial practices (Eagly and Kite, 1987, Guimond, 2008, Den Hartog et al., 1999).

<b>Words commonly used to describe femininity</b>	<b>Words commonly used to describe masculinity</b>
Dependent	Independent
Emotional	Non-Emotional/Stoic
Pass/Non-assertive	Aggressive/Assertive
Quite	Tough-Skinned
Sensitive	Competitive
Graceful	Clumsy
Innocent	Experienced
Weak/Risk-Avoidant/Cautious	Strong/Risk-Taking/Bold
Flirtatious	Active
Nurturing/Other oriented	Self-confident/Self-oriented
Self-critical/Self-reflective	Non-Self-Critical
Soft	Hard
Sexually Submissive	Sexually Aggressive
Accepting/Empathetic	Rebellious

Table 2.1: Stereotypical Male/Female Traits (*Héritier, 1996; Johnson, 2008*)

## **b. Gendered roles**

The stereotypical characteristics attributed to men and women often lead to a general perception of their typical roles and the formation of specific occupations associated with each gender.

Gender stereotypes about roles contribute to the perception of the roles that women and men should occupy, as well as the specific behaviors expected of them in different contexts. In some cultures, women are associated with domestic roles, such as childrearing and maintaining family harmony. Prescribed gender roles dictate that women should manifest nurturance, sensitivity, and warmth within familial settings, often attributed to superior social skills for the care of in-laws and other relatives. Conversely, men have been ascribed roles primarily associated with employment, particularly in positions demanding authority, where expectations are placed on them to exhibit assertive and self-confident behaviors (Acker, 2006).

This perception of gender roles is also explained by the history of humankind, as discussed by Harari (2014). Men were traditionally seen as having more muscular biological health and being more flexible to fight wild animals. Their primary role was to go hunting to provide food for the entire family, especially during long winters. On the other hand, women, with their natural functions of breastfeeding and caring for children, could not venture far from home to search for food. Instead, they gathered fruits and other resources in the vicinity of their homes, which was safer and easier for them. Hence, from ancient to modern times, it has been a cultural norm in some societies for women to be aligned with family roles while men occupy employment responsibility to earn money.

Gendered roles are becoming less distinct as men and women are placing more importance on their family responsibilities than solely on their careers. According to Aven et al. (1993), both men and women increasingly desire to prioritize their family roles over their roles as good employees, indicating a shift in their values compared to previous generations. They suggest

that men and women are altering their perspectives on what they consider to be their primary life and work priorities. Even in more recent studies, including those by Clotilde Coron (2023), a strong connection has been identified between gender stereotypes and the professional disparities between men and women. Even when their performance is on par with men, women often experience anxiety stemming from the fear of negative evaluation, which can ultimately affect their performance. In turn, these gender stereotypes persistently influence the advancement of women's careers.

Women have undergone various gender equality campaigns thus far, and several countries have started to remove the traditional boundaries between men's employment and women's housework. Nowadays, both husbands and wives share the responsibility of household chores and earning money, especially in developed countries. Even in high-cost countries such as the UK, USA, Canada, and EU, men are actively involved in domestic chores when their wives have better job opportunities and choose to work outside the home (Russell, 1983, Coltrane, 1996, Brandth and Kvande, 2001, Doucet, 2004, Doucet and Merla, 2007). Nevertheless, this scenario remains uncommon, and a considerable number of women globally continue to grapple with the dual obligations of balancing their familial and professional commitments. Hence, it is imperative to identify strategies that can enhance gender equality and facilitate women's career advancement.

### **c. Gendered occupations**

Several studies have utilized the gendered organization paradigm to explore the gendered nature of professions and occupations, as demonstrated by (Williams, 1989, Pierce, 1996). This paradigm offers three distinct perspectives on how organizations and occupations are gendered, which includes (1) the differentiation between masculinity and femininity, which reinforces gender-based distinctions, (2) the domination of one gender over the other, and (3) a discourse that emphasizes and reinforces hegemonic ideals of masculinity and femininity (Britton, 2000).

Occupations are considered to be gendered when male workers replace female staff, or vice versa. Both men and women typically work in positions that align with their stereotypical gender traits, with women more likely to work in female-dominated occupations that emphasize communal qualities (Abele, 2003, Glick et al., 1995, Heilman, 2012, Mihalčová et al., 2015).

According to the International Labor Office (2015), women in managerial roles are primarily found in staff functions such as corporate communications, human resources, and public relations. Conversely, men in managerial positions are predominantly found in line functions such as research and development, sales, and operations.

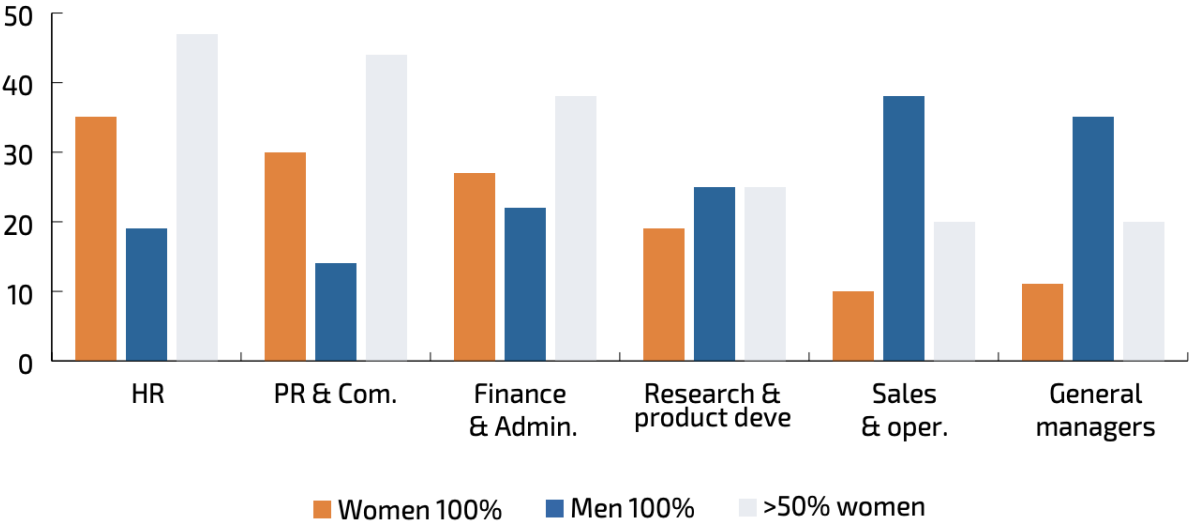


Figure 2.1: Percentage of companies with women and men in different types of management *(International Labor Office company survey, 2013)*

Several companies in various fields, including communication, publicity, and library sectors, have granted women the title of Vice President and encouraged them to join senior executive levels. However, some corporations have reported that they have not yet allowed any women to enter positions such as sales, engineering, and programming (Reskin and Hartmann, 1986, Bielby and Baron, 1986, Hakim, 2016). In the same vein, several studies have found that only

a small number of women have been recognized as the most prominent and influential corporate leaders. Additionally, many of the leadership positions occupied by women are on the periphery of the power structure. Some companies may give executive titles to women only for the sake of appearing diverse.

Although the prevalence of occupational gender segregation is widely acknowledged, it has traditionally been perceived as indicative of women's disadvantages. However, some studies point to an inverse relationship between the extent of segregation and the degree of women's disadvantages (Blackburn & Jarman, 2006). Overall, gender-based career boundaries continue to exist as a societal norm in labor markets and organizations, that are argued by Eagly and Carli (2007), Ryan and Haslam (2005), Ibarra (1993), Bielby and Baron (1986), Levin and Mattis (2006), Eagly and Chin (2010), among others.

#### **d. Gender stereotypes in careers**

The assessment of women's competencies often relies on subjective judgments lacking empirical evidence, leading to detrimental biases, such as the assumption that women are unsuitable for leadership roles, subjecting them to harsher evaluations, and associating femininity with physical attractiveness. Consequently, a woman's appearance can act as a hindrance in securing managerial positions perceived to require predominantly masculine qualities. Conversely, physical attractiveness may aid women in obtaining positions associated with more feminine qualities, contributing to the phenomenon of women facing career obstacles and being confined to certain roles (Acker, 1990, Brewis and Sinclair, 2000, Mavin and Grandy, 2016).

Traditional gender roles continue to exert disparate influences on men's and women's career choices. Men and boys typically prioritize roles offering solitude, leadership, good pay, and autonomy. In contrast, women and girls tend to favor jobs that allow for interpersonal

interaction, assistance to others, and convenient commutes, reflecting a desire for greater flexibility. These preferences underscore the enduring impact of gendered roles on career choices, as indicated by various researchers (Bem, 1974, Eagly and Wood, 1991, Eagly, 2013). According to Konrad et al. (2000), women who primarily function as homemakers tend to exhibit job preferences aligned with traditional female gender roles. Additionally, gendered stereotypes may lead to the assumption that women prefer less challenging or demanding work, contributing to their underrepresentation in certain sectors and occupations (Hackett and Betz, 1981). Women's career choices can be influenced by stereotypes suggesting they are naturally more suited to specific types of jobs, potentially leading to the perception that women are more interested in roles aligning with traditional gender roles and perceived characteristics (Gröpel and Kuhl, 2009).

Despite the presence of gender stereotypes, numerous studies indicate that both men and women grapple with similar reflections on work-life balance and professional ambition when pursuing higher positions and enhanced performance. (Ezzedeen and Ritchey (2009). Women, aspiring to advance in their careers, express a desire for professional growth unaffected by family responsibilities or domestic duties (Gröpel and Kuhl (2009). In managerial roles, women showcase ambition akin to their male counterparts (Wright et al., 1995, Elliott and Smith, 2004). It suggests that women do not automatically embrace conventional roles; instead, they meticulously evaluate the trade-offs between family priorities and career progression. Contrary to assumptions that employed mothers and wives shun leadership positions due to potential conflicts with family duties, evidence suggests that women with family responsibilities frequently hold authoritative roles (Burke, 1988, Skinner and Pocock, 2008). However, it's crucial to acknowledge that this may not be applicable to female homemakers, who might not share the same level of ambition or motivation for career development.

Both employed men and women have similar levels of psychological commitment to their careers and organizations, including a desire for top management position (Bielby and Bielby (1984); Konrad et al. (2000). This commitment is demonstrated by the effort individuals put into their jobs, their likelihood to stay in the job, and their psychological attachment to it, regardless of whether the job is satisfying or not, as noted by Rusbult and Farrell (1983). According to Chevalier (2004), in comparison to men, women tend to prefer work that provides a sense of accomplishment and intrinsic stimulation, such as intellectual challenge. However, when it comes to choosing between family and career, more women than men are willing to give up their careers, as discussed by Hakim (2016), Gregory and Milner (2009), and Skinner and Pocock (2008).

In summary, despite various hypotheses about the impact of gender stereotypes on roles, occupations, career choices, and job preferences, there is no evidence to support differences in ambition or career commitment between men and women. Therefore, gender differences cannot be used as a justification for the underrepresentation of women in top management positions. The main reason for this is likely the powerful role of gender stereotypes or perceptions. Stereotypes hinder women's progress in two ways: by creating doubts about their abilities and making them personally anxious about addressing these doubts. Although job preference and commitment are crucial factors in career success, women are willing to dedicate themselves fully to any occupation or career they are assigned. In recent years, particularly with the outbreaks of non-traditional communication channels like social networks, there has been a noticeable surge in women's empowerment initiatives (Spitzer, 2023). Social movements utilizing social hashtags such as #MeToo, #TimesUp, #NiUnaMenos, #HeForShe, #OrangeTheWorld, among others, have significantly altered the perception of gender equality among women and society at large. However, women still face challenges in finding

appropriate behaviors and styles in their managerial practices, which will be further explained in the next section.

## **II. Gender stereotypes of women's leadership**

Gender stereotypes of leadership refer to beliefs and expectations about the qualities, behaviors, and roles associated with individuals in leadership positions based on gender. These stereotypes often reflect societal biases and can influence how people perceive and evaluate leaders based on gender. However, it is critical to emphasize that these stereotypes do not accurately reflect individuals' true leadership capabilities but are manifestations of societal expectations and biases. Recognizing and challenging these stereotypes is crucial for promoting gender equality in leadership and allowing individuals to be evaluated based on their skills, qualifications, and achievements rather than their gender. Efforts to overcome these stereotypes include promoting diversity and inclusion, providing leadership development opportunities for women, and challenging biased perceptions through education and awareness. Some typical stereotypes toward women in leadership positions will be discussed as below.

### **1. Gender relevance in leadership**

In the first-generation gender bias, women are intentionally excluded from formal leadership positions (Brass, 1985) with some visible workplace policies and practices that, by today's standards, seem excessively harsh. Initial instances revolved around women's challenges in obtaining job stability and security. Second-generation gender bias refers to a type of discrimination against women that stem from practices and values established by men, often in the context of the workplace.

Sturm (2004) investigated the impact of implicit bias on workplace policies and developed a legal theory that posited how implicit bias among supervisors or managers, individuals in higher positions within the workplace hierarchy, contributes to the creation of policies that tend to

benefit the majority demographics, commonly white and male. Unfortunately, many individuals, including those working in single-gender workplaces, are unaware that this bias exists or fail to recognize it as a problem.

Men are normally associated with “power, dominance, competition, and control”, while women are considered “intimate, emotional, vulnerable,” (O’Neil, 1981), which conflicts with the statue of an exemplary leader. The conflicted perception significantly affects the acceptance of women’s leadership and their potentiality. According to the theory of role incongruity (Eagly and Karau, 2002), there is a dramatic difference between the characteristics and behaviors typically expected from women and leaders. Moreover, because stereotypical feminine traits are prescriptive for women, agentic traits are viewed as less favorable when enacted by women (Rudman and Glick, 1999, Rudman and Glick, 2001, Rosette and Tost, 2010).

Similarly, Eagly and Karau (1991) demonstrate that people are more competent and more readily perceived as leaders when they act confidently and assertively. However, the same qualifications of assertiveness and confidence could be detrimental in hiring and promotion practices for women. It means that with the same qualifications, women and men can experience different assessments due to gender stereotypes of leadership.

Gender stereotypes about women in leadership produce an implicit bias that women are less capable of taking leadership positions, which makes women demotivated in their managerial journeys. Their characteristics are mismatched with gender stereotypes as well as subordinates’ expectations of a leader, and they lose their self-confidence to take over the leadership position. Then, women find irrelevancy when taking higher positions due to the internalized mindset of their competency drawbacks. Furthermore, several organizational policies may cause their feelings of disqualification and exclude them from promotion opportunities, regarding long working hours and high-performance standards as managers’ expectations.

In order to identify their competencies, they must negotiate with their counterparts' perception of leadership rather than try to change themselves or others in a particular context. Many books suggest solutions to help women self-exhort to become more assertive or learn men's ways of management. The results of this movement, coupled with equal employment policies and affirmative action in the selection, may have increased the number of women in leadership positions (Eagly and Chin, 2010) and created a norm that dictated women leaders as being more demanding than their men colleagues (Rosette and Tost, 2010, Nash et al., 2017).

However, even when attempting to embody either masculine or feminine characteristics, they still encounter conflicting notions regarding relevant leadership styles, such as agentic, communal, transformational, or transactional. Over time, women have increasingly emphasized attributes like credibility and interpersonal sensitivity, marking a potentially significant shift in the perception of effective leadership. The idealized image of an inclusive leader, adept at balancing decisiveness with relationship-building and caring for team members, is supplanting the traditional image of a decisive and domineering leader (Hollander, 2009, Carmeli et al., 2010, Choi et al., 2015). The role of a leader is gradually becoming more acceptable for women and closer to the feminine values women hold as cultural norms.

## **2. Gender stereotypes about leadership behaviors**

There have been several models of leadership behavior, of which three main paradigms stand out: the Ohio State two-factor model of leadership behavior (Bass and Avolio, 1997), the decision-making model (Vroom and Yetton, 1973), and the transactional and transformational leadership model (Bass and Avolio, 1993a, Howell and Avolio, 1993). Numerous later authors have employed these models to examine disparities in leadership between men and women. The research indicates that leaders are often unaware of distinctions in their leadership styles, yet these differences are perceived by observers (Eagly and Johnson, 1990, Eagly et al., 2003,

Eagly and Karau, 2002). It implies that most of these studies depict leaders' behaviors based on their subordinates' perspectives. Consequently, if the observers harbor more traditional stereotypes about women, or if the circumstances are characterized by the dominance of traditional male roles, it may lead them to perceive differences in the behavior of men and women, potentially favoring men for leadership positions. Hence, the response to the query "Are men and women leaders behaving similarly or differently?" could depend on the observers' perspectives, influenced by their stereotypes, expectations, and the prevailing social norms (Ayman, 1993, Eagly and Karau, 2002).

The next part will focus on the repercussions of gender stereotypes regarding leadership styles and behaviors, which pose challenges for women in their leadership development and hinder their advancement to higher positions within organizations.

**i. Psychological associations about exemplary leaders**

In the challenging terrain of women's leadership progression, the obstacle of prejudice and discrimination can obstruct their career advancement. Discrimination against women is deeply rooted in daily psychological processes, where prejudice towards female leaders is shaped by both conscious and unconscious psychological associations regarding women, men, and leadership.

Gender stereotypes automatically emerge in various contexts, triggered by the categorization of individuals as female or male. Leadership is commonly associated with men and masculinity, which is evident in everyday depictions of leaders who emphasize traits like competition and hierarchy (Koenig et al., 2011). Many leadership responsibilities still firmly retain masculine images, especially in male-dominated organizations. Phenomena like "Think manager - Think male" (Schein et al., 1996), "Think talent – Think male" (Festing et al., 2015; Tieso, 2007), and similar concepts highlight the notion that assessments of managers and men align on a broad

spectrum of agentic characteristics. In contrast, evaluations of managers and women converge on only a few communal qualities (Rosette & Tost, 2010; Abele, 2003; Rudman & Glick, 2001), which were once considered irrelevant to leadership.

In prevailing perceptions, women are often associated with fulfilling family responsibilities rather than being viewed as capable leaders (Mihalčová et al., 2015; Hoyt, 2010). Cultural stereotypes, aligning women with family duties and communal traits, as well as men with professional roles and agentic characteristics, provide men with a dual advantage. Gender stereotypes not only confer an additional advantage to men in the competition for leadership roles but also complicate the path to authoritative positions for women (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Carli & Eagly, 2016; Ely & Rhode, 2010; Salas-Lopez et al., 2011). Furthermore, the idealized image of a leader with masculine characteristics poses challenges for women. It leads to women's negative perceptions about leadership roles, reducing their inclination to pursue such positions and undermining their performance as leaders.

## **ii. Agentic women and communal leadership**

Women both produce and reproduce social systems by acting based on their understanding of legitimate and illegitimate actions in their institutions. However, some studies have found that female leaders still face controversial arguments even when they navigate others' behaviors based on their situations. Specifically, accepting the idea that women should be nice while dealing with the stereotypes discussed above may deter them from assertively claiming leadership. It may make them feel awkward when performing managerial behaviors such as reprimanding others. In these ways, the prescriptiveness of stereotypes about women contributes to the labyrinth that slows women's route to authority (Heilman, 2001; Heilman, 2012).

Indeed, women behaving in their stereotypical manners that conflict with normative perceptions can be undesirable in leadership. Unfavorable feminine traits, such as perceived weakness and melodrama, may be unacceptable in men. Conversely, undesirable masculine attributes, like ambition, assertiveness, and promiscuity, face greater resistance when exhibited by women. This discrepancy contributes to women leaders' being disapproval and resistance, particularly when displaying these disfavored masculine qualities.

On the other hand, when women resist conforming to gender stereotypes associated with communal characteristics and adopt more agentic behaviors, they encounter challenges in performance evaluation. Individuals may perceive them as less-effective leaders, a phenomenon referred to as the "ugly leader" stereotype (Zimmer, 1988). The perception not only discourages other women from pursuing career development (Derks et al., 2016) but also isolates them from colleagues due to divergent behavior and excessive dedication to work at the expense of family. This isolation may inadvertently set a negative example for other women reluctant to navigate the perceived trade-off between professional and personal life.

In order to address those obstacles, female leaders have struggled to find effective ways to illustrate their leadership styles. Facial attractiveness (Re & Perrett, 2014), characteristics autobiography (Kapasi et al., 2016), narrative and storytelling (Barbulescu & Ibarra, 2008; Watson, 2009; Bell & Sinclair, 2016), media representation, personal value and personal leadership journey, a model of women leaders or family stories (Kapasi et al., 2016) and the like are persuasive to illustrate their leadership styles and competencies. Women have to develop other illustrations to display their virtue and trustworthiness, such as unrelenting hard work and self-sacrifice to promote the well-being of others. They foster the growth of others, deriving satisfaction vicariously and altruistically from the achievements of those they cherish and care for (Gilligan, 1982). According to Gilligan's findings, women frequently grapple with feelings of guilt and depression when their actions deviate from these norms.

### **iii. Biases in performance evaluation of women's leadership**

The phenomenon of low assessment of women's leadership involves the undervaluation of women's leadership abilities compared to men's. Women in leadership roles often encounter negative stereotypes and biased perceptions, leading to perceived ineffectiveness in certain contexts. This bias is particularly evident when women deviate from implicit expectations of leadership or work within culturally incompatible environments.

Several manifestations of this bias include gender stereotypes and biases which influence perceptions of women in leadership positions. The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions across various sectors, such as politics, business, and academia, can reinforce the perception that women are less capable or suited for leadership roles. Furthermore, women leaders may face higher expectations and scrutiny compared to their male counterparts, which forces them to navigate a narrow path between assertiveness and management. The lack of opportunities and limited access to mentorship programs can hinder women's career progression, perpetuating the perception of their lower qualifications. Implicit biases, which are unconscious and automatic mental associations, also can affect how individuals evaluate women's performance in leadership positions.

These biases can influence decision-making processes, including hiring, promotion, and performance evaluations, leading to unequal opportunities and barriers for women. Addressing these biases is crucial for creating inclusive and equal environments that empower women to excel in leadership positions.

### **III. Women's leadership identity construction**

The above exploration of gender issues and their repercussions within organizations highlights the imperative to incorporate gender considerations into the analysis of leadership identity construction. To justify the significance of a distinct approach for women in this process, it is

essential to delve into the challenges they encounter. This section will focus on the disparity in how women and men perceive and are perceived as leaders, serving as a primary rationale for analyzing women's leadership identity construction.

Numerous theories on gender and leadership identity construction have been presented in academic literature. The Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive their self-concept from group affiliations and social categories, suggesting that gender identity can influence perceptions of leadership roles and one's leadership capabilities (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Ely & Rhode, 2010; Salas-Lopez et al., 2011). For instance, women might be less inclined to view themselves as leaders due to gender stereotypes and societal expectations. The Role Congruity Theory argues that leaders are assessed based on their perceived alignment with gender role expectations (Eagly & Karau, 2002), potentially posing challenges for women in leadership roles due to stereotypes associating leadership with masculine traits. It may result in backlash when women display assertiveness or dominance. According to the Self-Categorization Theory, individuals classify themselves and others into social groups based on shared characteristics (Steffens et al., 2014). In the context of gender and leadership, individuals may identify more strongly with their gender group or leadership role, depending on the situation. For example, women may emphasize their gender identity in male-dominated workplaces but lean towards their leadership role in female-dominated environments. Additional theories in this realm encompass social learning theory, transformational leadership theory, and intersectionality theory.

Regarding empirical research, Ely et al. (2011) presents a comprehensive framework integrating identity and leadership to advance gender equality. Identity is a crucial aspect of examining gender-related issues within organizations. The process of becoming a leader is closely tied to constructing and internalizing a leader's identity. The pervasive presence of gender bias can hinder women's advancement by impeding the identity work necessary for

assuming leadership roles (Ely et al., 2011). As discussed in Chapter 1, developing a leader's identity involves engaging in two interconnected tasks: internalizing a leader's identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) and cultivating an elevated sense of purpose (Quinn & Norton, 2004).

Initially, "internalizing a leader's identity" involves a series of social and relational processes that shape one's self-perception and how others perceive them as leaders (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). It is emphasized that social processes play a crucial role in validating a leader's self-perception. If attempts at leadership are not acknowledged by others, establishing a self-view as a leader becomes considerably more challenging. This challenge is particularly relevant for novice directors and women leaders (Lord & Hall, 2005).

Women may encounter more incredible difficulty establishing a self-view as a leader, as their attempts might face less acceptance (Hogue & Lord, 2004; Ridgeway, 2003). Unlike their male counterparts, aspiring women leaders receive less social support in learning to assert a leader identity credibly. Women who assert leadership may be viewed less favorably than their male counterparts due to prevailing gender norms and culturally ingrained theories of appropriateness (Ely et al. 2011; Marchiondo et al. 2015), that is one of reasons leading to the underrepresentation of women in senior positions. It conveys that being female is a disadvantage, discouraging potential women leaders from seeking advice and support from senior women. The scarcity of senior women not only makes them scarce as role models but also portrays them as unsuitable role models. Both factors pose challenges for (young) women aspiring to leadership, making role modeling a complex task. Consequently, they encounter difficulties in their leadership identity construction, necessitating a unique approach to self-recognition and acknowledgment as leaders. This process is influenced by the context and experiences, shaping the sense of self as a leader and suitability for assuming the leadership role. In essence, social interactions where individuals claim, and grant leader identities are not isolated but are molded by culturally available ideologies about leadership.

Similarly, the second facet of the leadership identity construction process, “cultivating an elevated sense of purpose,” encounters comparable challenges. Life circumstances play a pivotal role in shaping individuals’ identities from birth to maturity. During childhood, the assignment of gender roles prompts individuals to adopt gender-stereotypic objectives, influencing their interest in occupations aligned with these goals. Childhood experiences also exert a direct impact on career aspirations, potentially shaping future career outcomes (Evans & Diekmann, 2009).

As individuals mature, all social interactions related to leadership are subject to gendered expectations (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Stereotypically, males are expected to exhibit agentic behaviors like aggression and competitiveness, while females are associated with communal and interpersonal sensitivity (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). Adhering to stereotypes, such as being interpersonally sensitive, may dissuade females from assertively asserting leadership and actively pursuing promotions (Eagly et al., 2007; Rudman & Glick, 1999). Consequently, the concept of leadership is predominantly linked with males, not females. Women are commonly associated with domestic roles requiring nurturance, sensitivity, and compassion, such as child-rearing and family maintenance. In contrast, men are stereotypically tied with employment roles, particularly those demanding authority and assertive or self-confident behavior (Eagly & Kite, 1987). These stereotypes provide men with a dual advantage in securing leadership positions, whereas women do not receive similar reinforcement. As discussed, women grapple with gendered stereotypes in their work and life, presenting numerous challenges in their leadership development and identity construction. Additionally, narratives from the past, present realities, and future expectations (Karp & Helgø, 2009; McAdams & Pals, 2006) are central to identity construction. Therefore, incorporating personal factors (in the realm of gender-based considerations) into the analysis of leadership identity

construction can elucidate the distinguishable ways women shape their leadership identity throughout their professional lives.

Due to the historical prevalence of gendered career paths and jobs, most organizational structures and work practices were established at a time when women had minimal representation in the workforce. Consequently, these features, often taken for granted, reflect men's lives and circumstances. This design poses challenges for women in pursuing and sustaining leadership roles (Acker, 1990; Acker, 2006; Hewlett, 2008). The idea that men are more fitting for leadership roles is partly driven by the historical crafting of these paths with men in consideration. This belief perpetuates a cycle where more men assume leadership roles, reinforcing the notion that men are inherently better fits, thereby preserving gendered practices. Consequently, integrating a gender-based approach is crucial for investigating how women navigate subtle barriers in their leadership development.

Nevertheless, the 1990s were an important time for women's development and empowerment. The world conferences of the 1990s, including those focusing on human rights, population, and social development, offered platforms to mobilize and establish a consensus among various stakeholders regarding women's empowerment. Besides, there have been studies offering solutions to support women's development. Research in the realm of women's empowerment has experienced a notable increase since 1999. This surge in publications correlates with fluctuations in research funding for women's empowerment initiatives. Out of a total of nearly 1,000 published articles, approximately 30% received research funding. However, among the 199 articles published in 2019, all 100 of the supported articles received funding. Notably, around one-third (32.4%) of the supported research received funding from organizations such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department for International Development of the UK Government (DFID), the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (Priya, 2021).

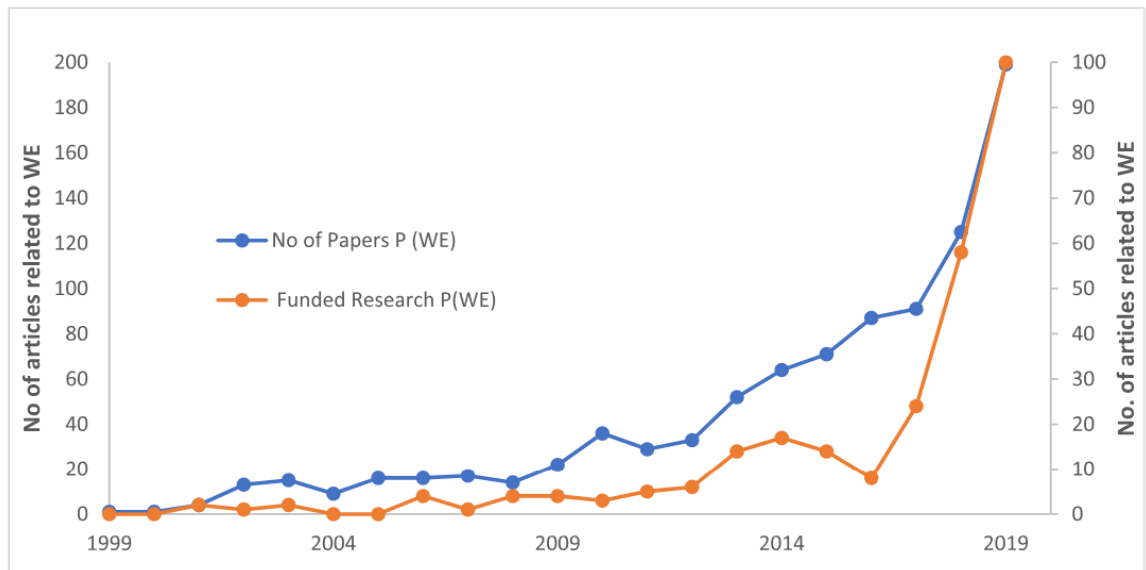


Figure 2.2: Trend in research funding and publication related to women’s empowerment  
(Priya, 2021)

In this kind of movement, women’s empowerment is to “alter relations of power ...which constrain women’s opinions and autonomy and2.2 adversely affect health and well-being” (Desai, 2010). Solutions from education to workplace conditions have been offered to enhance women’s empowerment and deal with persistent gender stereotypes (Turgeon, 2008; Merma-Molina, 2022).

In summary, the argumentation presented underscores the significance of a gender-based approach in leadership identity construction. This section aims to justify how gender stereotypes influence the perception of leadership, presenting nuanced challenges for women in both leadership and the construction of their leadership identity. Consequently, women must find innovative ways to interpret their identity as leaders, emphasizing the importance of integrating gender into the research of leadership identity construction.

## **CHAPTER 2: CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, we discussed gender issues that can hinder women's advancement, and several studies have highlighted the consequences of these gender issues, leading to the phenomenon of women encountering the glass ceiling. To address this challenge, women employ various strategies to build their leadership brand, which serves as a way for them to break through the glass ceiling and advance their careers. This process of leadership branding allows women to demonstrate their capabilities and reshape perceptions, ultimately facilitating their career development despite existing obstacles.

Over the years, the debate surrounding gender inequality and its impact on women's career development has been ongoing. While some argue that women face substantial barriers, particularly in securing top management positions deeply rooted in organizational culture (Krawiec, 2016), others contend that progress has been made, with women experiencing increased career opportunities and integration into organizational structures. Despite these claims, statistics on women in top management roles reveal persistent barriers hindering their advancement.

The rise of globalized businesses has posed new leadership challenges, especially with increasingly diverse workforces spanning across borders. One significant challenge is the notable lack of women in leadership positions. Despite the substantial increase in the number of women entering the workforce, recent estimates reveal that only 10% of Fortune 500 organizations are led by female executives (Forbes, 2023). This striking inequality has captured the attention of scholars in leadership, examining the barriers preventing women from reaching leadership roles (e.g., Heilman & Haynes, 2005) despite evidence suggesting that women are equally competent in leadership as men (Eagly et al., 2003).

Numerous studies have sought to identify the root causes of these challenges, attributing them to cultural and organizational barriers impeding women's career growth. Conversely, some studies suggest that women's reluctance to pursue promotions is tied to personal reasons, a phenomenon observed in both developing and developed countries (Ely and Padavic, 2020). In developing countries where basic needs often take precedence, women may prioritize family needs over leadership aspirations, perpetuating gender disparities. Indeed, women who are struggling with poverty, low quality medical care, and limited access to higher education, often become kind mothers rather than successful leaders. As a result, their challenges such as exorbitant childcare costs, long working hours, lower wages compared to men, and other gender-related issues contribute to limiting women's representation in top management roles. The lack of sufficient support for family responsibilities and concerns about the potential professional opportunity cost further deter women from pursuing top positions, making it challenging to definitively attribute the slow pace of women's career development to individual, organizational, or societal factors. Additionally, some women may not perceive themselves as leaders due to societal norms and stereotypes surrounding leadership (Grover, 2015).

Indeed, women's career trajectories are influenced by both individual and environmental factors. The ensuing discussion will delve into the intricate interaction between women's self-perception and their environment, underscoring the significance of gender diversity and personal networks in leadership identity construction and highlighting the pattern differences in how women and men develop their leadership identities.

**CHAPTER 3:**

**WOMEN PERSONAL**

**NETWORKS**

## **I. Networks and networking**

### **1. Definition**

The term “networks” refers to social relationships between entities. Individuals, groups, and even collectives of organizations, communities, or entire societies can serve as actors within social networks. These connections collectively shape the interpretation of the social behavior exhibited by the involved actors (Granovetter, 1973b; Tichy et al., 1979; Burt, 1982a; Hays & Oxley, 1986; Ibarra & Smith-Lovin, 1997; Sparrow et al., 2001). In all these scenarios, analyzing networks requires not only focusing on specific relationships among participants but also understanding the network as a whole, emphasizing the comprehensive description and analysis of the entire network structure (Granovetter, 1973; Tichy, 1981; Burt, 1982; Ibarra & Hunter, 2007).

The connections developing among individuals can be classified based on various factors such as the nature of the content (e.g., products or services, information, emotions), the structure of the relationship (e.g., duration and closeness), and the connection intensity (e.g., communication frequency). Network relationships commonly exhibit a diverse combination of forms and contents, showcasing a variety of relationship types with different exchanges of content. As outlined by Burt (1978), the network structure is shaped by the interplay between the forms and intensities of these relationships.

Within organizational contexts, nurturing relationships is a critical aspect of management. From a different perspective, networking is defined as “the tangible actions individuals take to establish, join, sustain, modify, and exit social networks” (Benschop, 2009). More specifically, regarding career advancement, networking involves individuals engaging in activities to build and sustain connections with those believed to be capable of supporting their professional development or career goals (Broadbridge et al., 2006; Kram, 1988).

Networking serves as a mechanism for social exchange, as articulated by Blau in 1964, fostering reciprocity and trust within informal relationships and social obligations for favor exchanges. Brass et al. (2004) define networking as “a set of nodes and the set of ties representing some relationship, or lack of relationship, between the nodes.” They propose that internal network ties, especially among leaders, significantly and positively impact unit and organizational performance. Successful networking can enhance career outcomes, including job opportunities, performance, higher income, promotions, and career satisfaction. It also opens avenues for accessing information, gaining visibility, receiving career advice, securing social support, generating business leads, acquiring resources, fostering collaboration, formulating strategies, and obtaining professional support, as highlighted by Burt (1982b), Brass (1985), Hays and Oxley (1986), Brass et al. (2004), and Gayle Baugh et al. (2005). According to Forret and Dougherty (2004), there are five different types of networking behaviors: maintaining external contacts, socializing, engaging in professional activities, participating in community activities, and increasing internal visibility.

Based on the research’ purpose and scope, networks can be classified in various ways. A prevalent classification in expert research involves categorizing them based on levels of formality. The upcoming sections will elaborate on this classification.

## **2. Formal and informal networks**

A formal network consists of explicitly defined relationships outlined within the official organizational structure, such as organizational charts, supervisor-subordinate connections, standing committees, advisory structures, and designated legitimate authority. These relationships involve interactions among superiors, subordinates, and representatives of functionally differentiated groups, working collaboratively to achieve organizationally defined tasks (Ibarra, 1993). Formal networks also include relationships established by committees, task

forces, teams, and dotted-line connections, all formally mandated by the firm but tend to be more flexible than those depicted in the organizational chart. However, given that managers often require collaboration and support from individuals beyond their formal reporting lines to accomplish tasks (Kotter, 1982), informal networks become essential.

On the contrary, informal networks, also known as emergent networks, involve more flexible patterns of interaction, where relationships may revolve around work-related matters, social connections, or a blend of both. Emergent networks arise from the intentional actions of social actors pursuing their self-interests, negotiating established patterns of relationships that serve these interests. In a workplace context, informal or emergent networks encompass voluntary associations and interactions, such as lunch groups, professional organizations, and social outings. These associations may not necessarily carry explicit authority or the organization's sanction, and they may or may not align with the prescribed formal patterns of interactions (Ibarra, 1995; Tichy, 1981). The informal networks within the workplace can constitute informal organization, cutting across formal reporting procedures to initiate stalled initiatives and meet extraordinary deadlines.

The key distinctions between formal and informal networks lie in their composition, origin, and interaction patterns (Tichy, 1981). Informal networks typically exhibit a broader scope compared to formal networks. While formal organization serves as the structural framework of a company, the informal organization acts as the central system influencing collective thought processes, actions, and reactions across its business units. The formal organization is structured to streamline anticipated challenges and enable standard modes of production. Conversely, in situations of unforeseen problems, the informal organization can augment its functions.

There are three categories of informal networks outlined by Krackhardt and Hanson (1993):

- **Advice Network:** This network highlights influential figures within an organization that others rely on to solve problems and provide technical information. Analyzing advice networks can unveil the roots of political conflicts and failures to achieve strategic objectives. These networks showcase the most influential players in the day-to-day operations of a company and are valuable for examining routine changes.
- **Trust Network:** This network identifies employees who share sensitive political information and support each other in times of crisis. Trust networks often reveal the causes of nonroutine problems, such as subpar performance by temporary teams. Companies should scrutinize trust networks when implementing significant changes or navigating crises.
- **Communication Network:** This network unveils employees who regularly engage in discussions about work-related matters. Analyzing the communication network can assist in identifying gaps in information flow, inefficient resource utilization, and the lack of innovation.

Informal networks can be scrutinized from two distinct levels of analysis: the organizational (or system-wide) network and the personal network (Ibarra, 1993). The system-wide network encompasses all relationships of a specific type (e.g., communication ties) linking the entire population of individuals within defined boundaries, such as a company. In contrast, a personal (“ego” network is the collection of relationships defined by an individual and their direct connections with others (Burt, 1982a). In the scope of this paper, personal networks will be the key object of research analysis.

### **3. Personal networks**

The composition of personal networks is shaped by several factors that define individuals' connections. Firstly, homophily reflects the extent to which interacting pairs of individuals share similarities in identity or organizational group affiliations (Marsden, 1988; Rogers & Kincaid, 1981). Commonalities among individuals can enhance the longevity of relationships. Specifically, shared life values can facilitate communication, enhance predictability of behavior, and cultivate relationships of trust and reciprocity (Kanter, 1977; Lincoln & Miller, 1979). People with similar concerns in terms of jobs, careers, or departments often share similar worldviews, facilitating interaction (Alderfer, 1983). Besides, people who have ethical connections grounded in principles of justice, bonds of compassion, or a sense of obligation, may create a network of individuals that is called a "moral community". It is characterized by both social integration, involving extensive and intimate attachments, and moral integration, marked by shared beliefs about morality and behavior. In contemporary usage, any small group possessing these qualities, such as a religious sect or military unit, may be labeled a moral community. These communities encompass both cultural and innate psychological components. Individuals often draw strength from these groups by understanding their guiding principles of thought and action. In certain situations, when facing challenges in life or work, individuals may not necessarily seek advice but reflect on the ideas and philosophies of the community, feeling empowered to move forward.

Secondly, range is defined as the level of diversity present in a personal network (Burt, 1982a). It pertains to the differences among contacts within a focal actor's network rather than the dissimilarity or similarity between the focal actors and those to whom they are connected. Various relationship attributes, including tie strength, density, and the interaction among personal network properties, can characterize the quality of a personal network. Tie strength is determined by "the amount of time, emotional intensity, intimacy (mutual confiding), and

reciprocal services that characterize the tie” (Granovetter, 1973b). Network density pertains to the extent of contact among members within an individual’s personal network (Marsden, 1990). It also emphasizes how a focal individual is influenced by relationships among their contacts. Density can be quantified by comparing the total number of ties to the potential number that would exist if everyone in the network were connected to everyone else (Marsden, 1990). Relationships within the composition of personal networks reveal the interconnectedness among homophily, range, tie strength, and density.

## **II. Differences between men’s and women’s personal networks**

Social capital emerges as a notably effective strategy for augmenting one’s career by facilitating access to individuals occupying influential positions and essential information and resources conducive to career mobility. A professional network stands recognized as a valuable instrument for attaining success in one’s career, particularly in the trajectory toward managerial roles. Nonetheless, scholarly literature articulates that women possess fewer networks than their male counterparts.

Several studies indicate that women often fail to cultivate robust informal personal networks due to a lack of recognition of their significance, instead focusing predominantly on enhancing formal networks. Lambert et al. (2006) contend that men typically enjoy superior access to crucial organizational contacts and higher-quality information than women. Scott (1996) substantiates this assertion, positing that even when women in corporate government affairs share identical titles, experiences, work histories, and ages with their male counterparts, men tend to have more connections with top government officials. Women, particularly in male-dominated networks, are frequently underrepresented, either deliberately or inadvertently, due to gender-stereotyped networks (Brass, 1985).

On the contrary, some scholars argue that women are acutely aware of the importance of personal networks. Both women and men establish networks with the goal of advancing their careers. However, due to gender disparities in networks, men and women experience different compositions in their networks for career advancement. According to Hanson and Blake (2009), men typically belong to larger, more economically oriented networks, while women are part of smaller, more localized, and community-minded networks. Women often have more family members in their social networks than men (Moore, 1990) and exhibit a greater social orientation (Vinnicombe & Colwill, 1995). Ibarra and Smith-Lovin (1997) discovered that women's networks were less homophilous than men's, and women tend to rely more on close ties and relationships than men.

Regrettably, despite women's awareness of the importance of networks, they encounter disadvantages in both organizational and personal contexts. Women experience unequal access to informal interactions and communications (Kanter, 1987; Brass, 1985; Timberlake, 2005). In comparison to men, women are more likely to be excluded from informal gatherings and networks within the workplace (Russell, 2006). This exclusion disadvantages them in one of the most crucial components of successful power acquisition, career advancement, and upward mobility. Essentially, women may hold less central roles than their male counterparts in the informal interaction networks of an organization. Consequently, they may miss out on valuable information, resources, or support typically associated with inclusion in such networks.

Several studies have documented various reasons for this situation. One reason pertains to the ease of communication and the preference for interacting with individuals who share similar attitudes, values, and experiences. Consequently, members of one gender may feel discomfort in informal settings predominantly populated by members of the other gender and may instead prefer interactions with individuals of the same gender. As identified by Kanter (1977), male managers, for instance, may experience discomfort in communicating with women.

Alternatively, another perspective posits that men, as the prevailing group in most business organizations, may intentionally seek to uphold their dominance by excluding women from informal interactions.

Moreover, men have traditionally held sway in high-level hierarchical positions, occupying roles with the most significant influence and decision-making authority. Consequently, women are less prone than men to be integrated into these informal, high-level interactions. Kanter's research (1979) corroborated this perspective by positing that influence in an organization is determined by the position, not the individual. Simultaneously, women tend not to hold pivotal and demanding positions. They typically engage in routine and highly standardized roles (Kanter, 1977) that entail minimal discretionary decision-making and offer limited visibility.

Scott (1996) discovered that women are inclined to interact and establish networks primarily with other women at similar organizational levels, forming fewer connections with women in high-ranking positions. In contrast, men's network connections offer more informal assistance than those of either white or black women (McGuire, 2002a), and men's mentors are more successful than women's in securing promotions (Ibarra et al., 2010). High-status men often support and guide the career development of male subordinates, whom they perceive as more likely to succeed than women (McGuire, 2002b). Consequently, women's networks yield fewer leadership opportunities, afford less visibility to their leadership aspirations, and generate diminished recognition and endorsement.

Differences in the networking patterns between women and men may also arise from women's hesitation toward undertaking the instrumental activities necessary for building a robust network. Women themselves have expressed a sense of exclusion from social interactions (Albrecht, 1983). Additionally, women may be concerned that engaging in these activities will be perceived as inauthentic and overly instrumental. Women exhibit reluctance to participate

in networking activities for at least two reasons. Firstly, they perceive networking as “inauthentic” or akin to “using people,” and they may feel pressure to engage in extensive networking. Secondly, many women find networking unappealing because they believe they must participate in activities like “playing golf” that either hold no interest or are challenging to schedule due to constraints in their private lives.

Hence, women’s limited progression to higher management levels is partly a consequence of their less developed internal networks compared to men.

### **III. The significance of personal networks to women’s leadership identity**

At the nucleus of social capital, a crucial factor in converting human capital into performance effectiveness, networks have consistently validated their role in facilitating managers’ progression and success. Luthans et al. (1988) discerned that a leader’s proficiency in networking stood out as the most potent predictor of managerial success, surpassing their aptitude for conventional management tasks, routine communication, and human resource management. Similarly, Michael and Yukl (1993) asserted that internal and external networking correlated with the rate of managers’ advancement within their organizations.

Traditional leadership studies have predominantly centered on the human capital attributes of leaders and the situational characteristics of leadership contexts. Human capital attributes encompass traits (House, 1977; Kenny & Zaccaro, 1983) and behavioral styles (Lewin et al., 1939). On the other hand, situational attributes of leadership contexts encompass task structure (Fiedler, 1971), the availability of leadership substitutes (Kerr & Jermier, 1978), the nature of the decision process (Vroom & Yetton, 1973), and the quality of leader–follower exchange (Dansereau Jr et al., 1975). Consequently, the efficacy of leadership can be evaluated through the quality of leader-member exchange, emphasizing the relational aspect. Hooijberg et al. (1997) and Bass and Stogdill (1990) contend that a comprehensive understanding of leadership

effectiveness involves considering leaders' cognitions about networks and the actual structure of leaders' network ties.

The personal network assumes a pivotal role in fostering leadership effectiveness among various network types. Transitioning beyond mere cognitive recognitions of networks within an individual's mental framework, the social fabric of relationships essentially envelops the individual. As posited by Burt (2000), the ego network constitutes a foundational influence on all other network relationships that a leader establishes. Furthermore, this personal network underpins the influential structural hole perspective, as articulated by Burt (2005). The density (Wasserman & Faust, 1994), range (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1973a), and cohesion (Balkundi & Kilduff, 2006) of personal networks are acknowledged as critical factors contributing to the enhancement of leadership effectiveness. Burt (1992) additionally advocates for prospective leaders to strategically configure their interpersonal networks, thereby reaching diverse constituencies and utilizing a limited number of connections to broaden the spectrum of information and resources accessed.

Effective leadership necessitates the adept management of social relationships, with particular attention directed toward the configurations of relationships within the ego, organizational, and inter-organizational networks, as underscored in analyses of leadership effectiveness (Balkundi & Kilduff, 2006). Moreover, the ties within personal networks wield influence over the construction of leadership identity, whether formal or informal (March, 1991). From a network perspective, the significance of social relations has been previously underscored in leadership research through frameworks such as the vertical dyad linkage model (Dansereau Jr et al., 1975) and the leader-member exchange approach (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Balkundi and Kilduff (2006) further accentuate the pivotal role of ego networks in shaping leadership constructs. Leaders effectively generate and deploy social capital by astutely discerning social structures and undertaking actions to establish connections with key constituencies, both within and across

social divides. To comprehensively grasp leadership effectiveness from a social network standpoint, it is imperative to examine the individual's position within the broader networks in which they are situated.

Several studies have justified the correlation between networks and leadership identity construction. If the process of constructing a leader identity is inherently relational, then individuals' personal networks are expected to play a pivotal role in the journey toward leadership (Ely et al., 2011; Day, 2000; Wilson, 1997). Personal networks wield the power to mold career trajectories by governing access to employment opportunities, directing the flow of information and referrals, establishing influence and reputation, and offering emotional support, feedback, political counsel, and protection, all while enhancing the likelihood and expediting the pace of promotion (Kalaitzi et al., 2017). In essence, the composition of one's personal network serves as a gateway to leadership opportunities, determines who will perceive and acknowledge (or not) one's claims to leadership, and shapes the knowledge acquired throughout the process.

In general, positive personal networks have the potential to enhance the social capital of both managers and leaders. The network not only facilitates the conversion of human capital into career advancement and success but also underscores the reality of divergent network compositions and networking activities between men and women. Systemic variations in the formal organizational positions of men and women, coupled with a tendency to engage more with individuals of the same gender, result in disparities in the composition and structure of men's and women's networks. These differences, in turn, can impact their capacity to construct a credible leadership identity (Ibarra, 1992; Ely et al., 2011).

As examined in the preceding part, a contributing factor hindering women from attaining leadership positions is the relative weakness of their personal networks compared to those of

men. Women encounter numerous barriers stemming from internal and external factors in their quest to establish an identity as religious leaders. Overcoming these challenges necessitates a profound understanding of behavioral science and network analysis, enabling women to pave the way for advancements in their careers. To a certain extent, the emphasis on cultivating personal relationships to generate career momentum holds even greater significance for women than men.

This underscores the primary impetus for a more in-depth examination of personal networks as fundamental drivers of the managerial development of female leaders. Despite the recognized significance of networks in women's career progression, the exploration of personal networks in the context of leadership identity construction remains an underexplored area in research on women's leadership. Consequently, this paper aims to scrutinize the extent to which personal networks can contribute to the construction of women's leadership identities. In the subsequent sections of the study, the author will construct a model to elucidate this influential mechanism.

### **CHAPTER 3: CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, the author has completed the initial phase of theoretical research for the analysis. The exploration begins by investigating the interplay between gender and the construction of leadership identity. Notably, existing studies reveal that women encounter more challenges in the workplace compared to men, largely attributed to entrenched gender stereotypes. These stereotypes act as obstacles to women's career advancement and provide misleading guidance in their efforts to establish a leadership image. It can be asserted that personal attributes, implicitly linked to gender-related concerns, exert a certain influence on the process of women's leadership identity construction.

Subsequently, the author delves into the realm of networks and networking, aiming to uncover the impact mechanism of personal networks on careers in general and women's leadership identity in particular. The research suggests that women encounter greater difficulties in cultivating personal networks, particularly informal networks, compared to men. This, in turn, poses challenges for female leaders in shaping their own identity.

Lastly, in order to augment DeRue's (2010) model, in the next chapter, the author examines the social context of Vietnam, a country deeply influenced by Confucianism. Modern women aspiring for success must navigate the dual responsibilities of family and work. The inclusion of research on contextual attributes in the women's leadership identity construction process aims to propose solutions for Vietnamese female leaders to overcome these challenges.

In conclusion, the initial research has formulated robust hypotheses regarding the relationship between gender, culture, networks, and the development of leadership identity. The proposed mechanism through which personal networks influence leadership identity creation, considering gender and cultural context factors, is outlined. Throughout this chapter, the author

systematically applies theories to establish a conceptual framework as the foundation for the entire research. The research methodology will be elucidated in the subsequent chapter.



**CHAPTER 4:**

**VIETNAM CONTEXT AS A**

**POST-CONFUCIAN**

**CULTURE**

## **I. Overview of Confucian principles in shaping relationships in Vietnam**

Confucianism found its way to Vietnam during the Chinese occupation, from approximately 111 BC to AD 938. It became Vietnam's official and predominant ideology from around AD 1000 to 1919 (Drummond & Rydstrom, 2004; Zhang & Locke, 2001). However, the influence of Confucianism in Vietnam was nuanced by the blending of other philosophical currents, such as Buddhism and Taoism, and underwent dilution during the French occupation (1883-1945). The latter period introduced Western ideologies, including nationalism, Communism, and Catholicism (Thi, 1999; Bélanger & Pendakis, 2009). Despite the subsequent shifts towards Communism and Modernization, Confucian principles have persisted in Vietnam, shaping the idealized image of a man, father, and husband. This image has progressively reinforced the elevated status of men within Vietnamese society, contributing to the delineation of societal and family roles for both genders (Grosse, 2015).

The Confucian concept of the “Five Code of Ethics” of social relationships, each accompanied by distinct ethical properties, has wielded significant influence. As outlined by Krieger (2004), these five sets delineate the expectations and virtues associated with specific interpersonal bonds:

- Sovereign and Ministers: Characterized by benevolence on the part of the sovereign and loyalty from the ministers, this relationship is termed the “relation of righteousness.” It underscores the ethical principles of justice and allegiance.
- Father and Son: In this relationship, the father is expected to demonstrate kindness while the son practices filial piety. Referred to as the “relation of love,” it establishes the ethical foundation of love and respect within the family structure.

- Husband and Wife: This relationship is defined by righteousness on the part of the husband and compliance from the wife, constituting the “relation of chaste conduct.” It emphasizes the ethical values of righteousness and obedience within the marital bond.
- Elder Brother and Younger Brother: Marked by respect from the younger brother and goodness from the elder brother, this relationship is termed the “relation of order.” It underscores the ethical principles of order and mutual respect within the sibling dynamic.
- Friendship: The social relationship between friends is characterized as the “relation of faithfulness.” It dictates that friends exhibit mutual faithfulness towards each other, highlighting the ethical value of trust and loyalty in friendships (Hwang, 2018).

In essence, the Confucian Five Code of Ethics prescribes a set of principles, which serve as a moral framework for navigating various social relationships in accordance with Confucian ideals.

The core of Confucian thinking places a significant emphasis on familial relationships and values, underscoring the importance of the extended family structure. In terms of women’s roles within the family and society, Confucianism outlines specific expectations for women as daughters, mothers, and wives. The moral code for women involves three types of obedience: towards the father before marriage, the husband during marriage, and the eldest son when widowed (Rydstrøm & Trinh, 2008; Schuler et al., 2006). In practical terms, the application of Confucian principles in countries influenced by Confucianism often results in patrilineal, patrilocal family arrangements. It includes practices such as polygamy, extended households, arranged marriages, and a societal expectation for wives to prioritize the care of their husbands’ parents over their own. Confucius supported society’s patriarchal nature, reinforcing traditional gender roles (Hwang, 2018). In this context, women are primarily assigned the responsibility

of child and family caretaking, aligning with the caregiving norm. This norm influences the expectations placed on women by reference groups, emphasizing the qualities of being a good wife, mother, and cook and demonstrating respect for the elderly. Women are encouraged to embody qualities such as gentleness, kindness, calmness, tactfulness in managing family relationships, and appropriate attire. While economic independence and stable employment are expected of women, a societal expectation exists that women should not earn more than their husbands. This complex interplay of cultural norms and gender expectations reflects the nuanced impact of Confucianism on the roles and expectations placed on women within family and society.

Indeed, Confucian ethical values and principles have both positive and negative impacts on societal dynamics. On the positive side, they establish a framework for reciprocally humanitarian relationships between superiors and subordinates, promote educational adoration among the people, and advocate for the necessity of moral norms. However, on the negative side, Confucian ethical values contribute to a male-dominant culture in which women often face discrimination. The cultural expectations placed on females, binding them to numerous family obligations, act as barriers to their participation in organizational contexts and hinder their career development. Consequently, many women find themselves opting for subordinate roles, eschewing higher organizational positions to prioritize their family responsibilities. This reflects the intricate interplay of cultural norms and their impact on gender dynamics within the framework of Confucianism.

Based on the available evidence, numerous scholars attribute the underrepresentation of women in specific roles traditionally occupied by men and in organizational management boards to Confucian culture. Confucian cultural norms are perceived as a determining framework for the societal position of females, emphasizing their roles within the family rather than in the broader social context. However, adopting a more positive perspective reveals that Confucian culture

and principles should not be viewed as a restrictive framework akin to “a box” controlling females. Instead, it can be understood as a system that empowers Confucian women to leverage these doctrines for personal development and career progression. The crux of the matter lies in women strategically utilizing their strengths and navigating the rules and routines established by external structures. By doing so, women have the potential to transcend perceived constraints and break free from the traditional roles dictated by Confucian cultural norms.

*Firstly*, in examining the evolution from early Confucianism to later iterations, it becomes apparent that the foundational tenets of the culture, encapsulated in the three central bonds, four virtues, and five relationships, initially emphasized principles such as trust, honesty, and loyalty within interpersonal connections. However, in the later development of Confucianism, these principles underwent a transformation, imposing obligatory roles upon women that encompass three normative functions: serving as the sexual object and possession of the man, functioning as a child-bearing tool to perpetuate her husband’s familial lineage, and acting as a servant to the entire family (Gao, 2003; Jiang, 2009).

*Secondly*, a profound contrast emerges between the interpretation of Confucianism in Eastern and Western cultural contexts. As elucidated earlier, Eastern nations often perceive the principles of Confucianism as exerting negative influences on the professional development of women within organizational settings. In stark contrast, Western countries grapple with the repercussions of a culture steeped in individualism, wherein the prevalent belief is that individuals are self-sufficient and entirely responsible for their own well-being. This cultural orientation in the West has been associated with escalating rates of divorces, criminal activities, and instances of self-harm within society (Jiang, 2009). It becomes evident that the paradigm of individualism has lost its relevance in Western cultural frameworks, and there is a growing acknowledgment of the potential efficacy of community-oriented philosophies in addressing specific societal challenges. In this context, early Confucianism, devoid of the later

presuppositions concerning social and sexual hierarchies, emerges as a potential advocate for gender equality and a salutary remedy for addressing social maladies stemming from the excesses of individualism in the Western cultural milieu.

*Finally*, certain scholars posit the pivotal role of the external environment in shaping individuals' perceptions of social norms. Notably, even when females reside in Western countries, having been born into Eastern cultural contexts and influenced by Confucian education, they may cognitively internalize Confucianism principles as constraining frameworks, colloquially referred to as "the box" (Son, 2006). In summary, a reciprocal relationship exists between social norms and the individuals inhabiting a given context, influencing the formation of their norms, knowledge, and behaviors (Bicchieri, 2016).

## **II. Challenges faced by Vietnamese women in cultivating personal networks**

Vietnam is characterized as a post-Confucian nation, exhibiting a higher degree of gender conservatism compared to, for instance, Protestant or Catholic countries (Grosse, 2015). This designation implies that while Vietnam has experienced the influence of Confucianism to a lesser extent than other nations steeped in Confucian traditions (United Nations, 2002; Zhang & Locke, 2001), it remains subject to its impact. Consequently, certain gender stereotypes have been established, delineating standards and principles for women. Specifically, in adherence to Confucianism principles, the act of women cultivating relationships is deemed exceptional for the following reasons.

Initially, as influenced by Confucianism, women are perceived as inherently destined for the roles of nurturing their husbands, children, and families. Engaging in activities beyond these familial duties, such as socializing, making friends, or fostering relationships through post-work activities like social drinking or golf, tends to evoke a plethora of contentious perspectives

concerning women. Furthermore, such pursuits are considered detrimental to women's moral standing and reputation.

Secondly, according to Confucianism, the nature of relationships is perceived as dependent. In contrast to other cultural frameworks, Confucian ideals characterize relationships as imbued with responsibility and obligation. In this context, dependency functions as the cohesive force that binds society together, as individuals remain perpetually indebted to one another, navigating a web of reciprocal obligations without explicit calculations of give and take (Yum, 1988; Krieger, 2004). Particularly for women, this dependency manifests in reliance on their fathers during adolescence, husbands in marriage, and first sons in the event of spousal demise. Consequently, the facilitation of women in establishing relationships becomes feasible only when met with concurrence and support from their husbands. Conversely, non-alignment in such matters can engender significant conflicts within the familial sphere. For instance, where husbands withhold agreement makes it impracticable for women to engage in post-work activities aimed at cultivating informal networks.

Thirdly, an association exists between women and aesthetic appeal within the Confucian paradigm. Their societal role traditionally dictated them to remain within the domestic sphere, utilizing their physical attractiveness to gratify their husbands and enhance their spouses' social standing. Consequently, the portrayal of women as alluring marionettes aligns with gender stereotypes. When women achieve success, there is often a prevailing perception that their accomplishments are attributed more to their physical attractiveness than to their inherent talents. Consequently, the prevailing stereotype surrounding women's success perpetuates the notion that their achievements are derived from leveraging their bodies and beauty in exchange for success (Hoang, 2019; Bell & Sinclair, 2016b; Mulford et al., 1998).

Historically, Confucianism ascribed values of diligence, chastity, and proper conduct to women, emphasizing their roles in accordance with the moral code of the “three types of obedience”. However, following the Vietnamese wars, particularly in the Post-1946 Socialist era, Vietnam underwent a form of social emancipation for women known as “women liberation”. During this period, women’s active participation in social and political spheres became pivotal elements in the anti-colonial movement despite the enduring emphasis on the traditional Confucian role of women as caregivers. Following the liberation, women’s equal rights with men were legally acknowledged in both public and private domains, leading to a pervasive transformation in the construction of women’s responsibilities. Consequently, in the new Socialist Vietnam, women assumed dual responsibilities for both family and nation, encapsulated by the slogan “good at national tasks, good at household tasks” (Bank, 2002).

In recent generations, particularly within Generation Y and Z, notable shifts have occurred in gender stereotypes. Notably, the responsibility for childcare during school periods has been increasingly distributed between fathers and mothers. Anthropological studies, as illustrated by Rydstrom (1998), suggest that Vietnam’s socio-cultural norms place women on an elevated pedestal. However, the foundational dimensions delineated by Confucian principles persist. In practical terms, it remains a reality that the predominant burden of child-rearing still falls significantly on wives. The contemporary expectations for Vietnamese women extend beyond diligent self-improvement and prioritizing family interests to embodying the image of successful women and shouldering personal responsibility when familial adherence to societal and cultural norms falters. With the evolving standards of successful women in Vietnam, the female demographic grapples with heightened responsibilities in both familial and professional domains. This dynamic presents challenges for women as balancing personal responsibilities with the demands of work and family becomes increasingly intricate, leaving limited time and resources for networking endeavors aimed at developing personal networks.

In conclusion, in addition to contending with formal networks fraught with challenges, Vietnamese women encounter obstacles in developing personal networks and leadership identities attributable to Confucian principles. In the contemporary landscape, Vietnamese women grapple with the dual constraints imposed by traditional Confucian principles. They are not only tethered to the conventional responsibilities of a daughter, wife, and mother but also seek pathways for advancing their careers. The complexity is compounded as they navigate the need to strike a delicate balance, avoiding conflicts with prevailing gender stereotypes for Vietnamese women. Consequently, the demand arises for Vietnamese women to exhibit heightened flexibility and sensitivity in constructing a leadership identity that reconciles traditional and modern female roles within society.

## **CHAPTER 4 CONCLUSION**

Confucian culture has had a profound impact on the development of Vietnamese women, especially in relation to their roles in society, leadership, and career progression. Rooted in hierarchical and patriarchal values, Confucianism has historically influenced family structures, gender roles, and the perception of women in leadership. Despite these limitations, modern Vietnamese women are navigating and reshaping their roles, often incorporating elements of Confucian values into their leadership while also challenging its traditional constraints.

While Confucianism tends to promote a male-centric hierarchy, it also places value on certain leadership qualities that can be embraced by both men and women, such as benevolence, humility, and respect for social order. Vietnamese women who rise to leadership positions often draw on these Confucian values, fostering leadership characteristics such as empathy, collectivism, and humility. While these leadership traits are valuable, the Confucian emphasis on modesty and submission has also contributed to the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles. As a result, women in Vietnam may feel less comfortable promoting themselves or asserting their leadership identity in traditionally male-dominated spaces, leading to fewer opportunities for career advancement.

In this chapter, the possibility to use personal network has been presented to argue that women have begun to challenge these norms by developing strong personal networks, seeking mentorship, and actively participating in leadership development programs. Especially, younger generations such as Y and Z are about to redefine these cultural norms, blending traditional values with contemporary leadership approaches to carve out a space for themselves in leadership, business, and public life.

## **SUMMARY OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW AND PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Drawing upon the concepts, definitions, and theoretical underpinnings scrutinized in preceding chapters, the author endeavors to formulate a conceptual framework to investigate the correlation between personal networks and the construction of women's leadership identity. Among the various theories elucidating leadership identity construction, DeRue and Ashford's (2010) theory particularly accentuates the mechanism of forging leadership identity through relationships. This theory offers a relatively comprehensive insight into internal metamorphosis leading to the external manifestation of leadership identity, with the ultimate aim of crafting an identity image that garners recognition from the majority. Consequently, the author has elected this model as the theoretical framework, concurrently exploring the relationships that link the factors of personal networks to elucidate the mechanism through which personal networks impact women's leadership identity construction. This approach may be aligned with their perspective that advocates for steering the leadership field away from a static and hierarchical conception of leadership toward a more dynamic, social, and relational understanding of the leadership development process.

As leadership identity construction falls within the purview of behavioral research (Fiedler, 1967), the research model is rooted in the theoretical framework of the Stimulus–Organism–Behavior–Consequence (SOBC) paradigm. Davis and Luthans' (1980) proposed SOBC model, grounded in social learning theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977), posits that various components of the environmental situation (S) exert influence on individuals or organisms' internal states (O). Subsequently, these internal states determine their behavioral responses (B), leading to contingent consequences (C) (Whelan et al., 2020). This concept is conceived as a modified and expanded iteration of the stimulus–organism–response (SOR; Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) and antecedent–behavior–consequence (ABC; Surratt et al., 1969) paradigms.

In accordance with social learning theory, as posited by Bandura and Walters (1977), the optimal explanation for behavior lies in a continuous, reciprocal interplay between cognitive, behavioral, and environmental determinants. Adopting this perspective, organizational behavior is understood to engage in a reciprocal interaction with cognitive processes and the environment. Organizational behavior is seen as both influencing and being influenced by participants' cognitions, the environment, and person-situation interactions. Consequently, in this research, the manner in which women construct their leadership identity through personal networks is not solely influenced by their own recognition of leadership and the importance of networks but also by contextual and personal factors.

In this context, personal attributes and contextual attributes are posited as stimuli (S) that propel motivation for women to acknowledge the importance of leadership (individual internalization) and the significance of personal networks. These constitute the internal or organismic states (O) of women in leadership positions, which in turn translate into behavioral responses (B) to achieve relational recognition. Subsequently, this drives toward the emergence of a collective leadership identity (collective endorsement), representing the consequential outcome (C). This conceptual framework offers an opportunity to understand the role of personal networks at the center of the leadership identity construction process. The conceptual framework is demonstrated as follows:

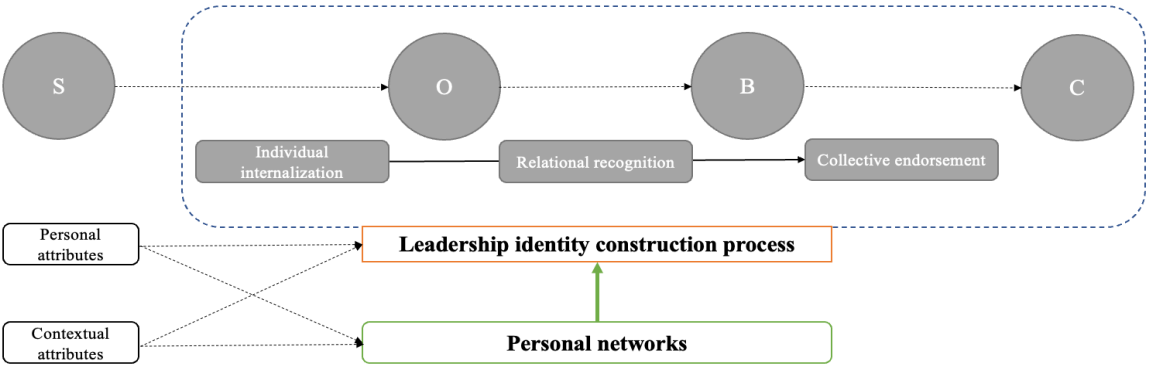


Figure 2.2: The conceptual framework (the author)

**CHAPTER 5:**

**RESEARCH AIMS AND**

**METHODOLOGY**

Consistent with the literature review presented in preceding chapters, this section delineates the research methodology applied in the thesis. Initiating with a review of the research objectives, this chapter delves into the research questions designed to address the investigated problem effectively. The research paradigm, which serves as the guiding framework for this study, is also examined along with its underlying assumptions. This paradigm elucidates the epistemological and methodological perspectives that inform the research. An exploration of these worldviews offers valuable insights for comprehending and navigating the assumptions that shape the research design. Subsequent sections of this chapter will expound on the data collection process, the instruments employed for data collection, and the methods applied for data analysis.

### **I. Research aims and research questions**

Following observations from the literature review chapters, it is evident that recent research has shifted its focus from obstacles hindering women's leadership in top positions to a consideration of impediments throughout their leadership journey. These challenges encompass unseen obstacles to women's career progress, stemming from gender-related concerns, workplace structures, and patterns of interaction that unintentionally facilitate men (Ely et al., 2011). Many researchers posit that the construction of leadership identity can potentiate women's advancement to senior positions in organizations (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). As previously mentioned, the construction of leadership identity involves establishing relationships and the accrual of influence through claiming and granting identities. Additionally, the theory considers antecedents that predict claiming and granting, encompassing (1) implicit theories of leadership, reflecting individuals' beliefs about what constitutes an effective leader, (2) the motivational risks and rewards associated with claiming and granting leader and follower identities, and (3) institutional structures that can impose leader and follower identities in group settings.

Moreover, scholars have unequivocally asserted the significance of cultivating informal relationships for a leader's career. Personal networks exert substantial influence in shaping career paths by regulating access to job opportunities, guiding the flow of information and referrals, establishing influence and reputation, and providing emotional support, feedback, political guidance, and protection. These factors collectively contribute to increasing the likelihood and expediting the promotion pace (Kalaitzi et al., 2017). Notably, in the business context, the emphasis on fostering personal relationships to propel career advancement holds heightened importance for women compared to men.

However, research on leadership identity construction primarily focuses on understanding how to foster leader identity in the leader-follower relationship without incorporating personal factors like gender or gender characteristics in informal organizational structures. This perspective is endorsed by DeRue & Ashford (2010), who identify these gaps as an avenue for future research by other scholars. While they underscore the significance of formal institutional structures as important antecedents, they advocate for scholars to enhance the theory by considering the impact of informal structures, such as social stratification, status hierarchies, and social networks. This suggests considering the influence of informal structures, precisely an individual's position within informal networks, on the claiming and granting process, regardless of whether they hold leadership roles in the formal organizational hierarchy or not. DeRue and Ashford (2010) also propose expanding their theory to explore whether gender stereotypes lead to different experiences of the leadership identity construction process for women and men.

Empirical studies applying DeRue and Ashford's Leadership Identity Construction (LIC) model highlight the practices of leadership-claiming and granting, examining how interactions, experiences, and relationships shape LIC within organizational settings (Ashforth and Schinoff 2016; Brue and Brue 2018; Lanka et al. 2020; Marchiondo et al., 2015; Tubin 2017). However,

the model's focus on the leader-follower dyad limits the understanding of the broader identity work involved in co-constructing leadership identities (Tubin 2017; Marchiondo et al. 2015). Additionally, the multiplicity and fluidity of identities are difficult to capture in a linear process, and the model's emphasis on sequential moments within the dyadic construction process overlooks other contextual factors constituting LIC (Carroll and Levy 2010). The model falls short in fully addressing the meaning-making process behind leadership identity. Exceptions include Clifton's (2019) research, which explores the complex interactions between characters, audiences, and societal discourses that contribute to the fluid nature of leadership identity. Similarly, Lanka, Topakas, and Patterson (2020) highlight the challenges individuals face in their LIC processes, particularly when experiencing "identity rejections". However, their study still operates within a reductionist view of singular identities. Most insights into the LIC process come from empirical studies focused on traditional leaders with formal authority, neglecting calls to examine "non-prototypical" leaders, such as women in male-dominated fields (Egan et al., 2017; Ibarra et al., 2014) or leaders of color in diverse contexts (Ospina and Foldy 2009; Ospina 2019). Much of the empirical work on DeRue and Ashford's model continues to overlook these critiques, with few studies expanding the scope to view LIC as a socially constructed phenomenon.

To shed light on these identified gaps, this study aims to:

- Examine to which extent women's personal networks can contribute to their leadership identity construction.
- Investigate how they construct their leadership identity by using their personal networks to enhance their career advancement in a gendered culture like in Vietnam as the culture of post-Confucian.

In order to address these aims, the following objectives were set:

- Firstly, assess the awareness levels of Vietnamese women regarding the importance of personal networks within the business context and the significance of leadership identity construction.
- Secondly, identify the personal and contextual attributes influencing Vietnamese women's perception of leadership identity construction.
- Thirdly, analyze the personal networks of Vietnamese women, specifying key actors that contribute to their leadership identity.
- Finally, explore how Vietnamese women construct their collective leadership identity by leveraging their personal networks.

To explore these research objectives, the research questions are addressed:

1. *Question 1: What is the perception of Vietnamese women regarding the significance of personal networks and leadership identity in their professional journeys?*
2. *Question 2: Which personal and contextual attributes influence how Vietnamese women perceive the construction of leadership identity?*
3. *Question 3: Who are the key actors in the personal networks of Vietnamese women that influence their leadership identity?*
4. *Question 4: How do Vietnamese women construct their collective leadership identity by leveraging their personal networks?*

## **II. Epistemological and methodological positioning**

### **1. The choice of interpretive approach**

Since the objective of this research is to understand the leadership identity construction of women, as well as the mechanisms of how personal networks can contribute to this construction, an interpretive epistemological positioning seemed appropriate and even necessary for my study.

As suggested by Lee and Lings (2008), the essence of research lies in generating knowledge by bridging theoretical concepts with the practical realm. The capacity to create knowledge is fundamentally reliant on the researcher's adeptness in navigating and comprehending the intricacies of various perspectives (Yin, 2018). To facilitate this process, a foundational comprehension of the research paradigm guiding a study serves as a valuable initial reference. McAdam (2004) singles out the positivist and interpretivist paradigms as the two primary influences on business and management research. These two approaches diverge in terms of data generation and interpretation, with positivism focusing on collecting quantitative data and interpretivism emphasizing qualitative data collection (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Indeed, the interpretive approach to organizational research has gained increasing attention as an alternative to the more traditional positivist. The interpretive approach asserts that the methods used in natural sciences are inadequate for studying social reality. This perspective holds that people, along with the physical and social artifacts they create, are fundamentally different from the physical phenomena studied by natural science. Unlike atoms, molecules, and electrons, which are studied objectively, people actively create and assign their own meanings to the world around them, as well as to their behaviors within that world (Schutz, 1973, p. 59). This means that in organizational research, it is essential to understand the subjective meanings and interpretations that individuals and groups attach to their experiences,

rather than relying solely on measurable or observable phenomena as in the natural sciences. The interpretive approach emphasizes understanding the contextual and culturally specific meanings within organizations, making it particularly suitable for analyzing complex human behavior and social interactions.

Interpretivism seeks to generate novel and more profound understandings and interpretations of social worlds and contexts by elucidating how humans interpret the world they inhabit and attribute meanings to this world (Saunders et al., 2016; Yin, 2018). Interpretivists conduct an in-depth examination of the phenomenon under study, recognizing that truth is subjective, especially in social interactions. An interpretive study offers the opportunity to delve into and comprehend the subjective nature of opinions and the diverse behaviors exhibited by actors in the business process, facilitating an explanation of the various socially constructed meanings expressed (Wahyuni, 2012; Saunders et al., 2019). The overarching objective of interpretive research is to comprehend social, economic, and political phenomena, aligning with an epistemological perspective that views human beings as active, knowledgeable actors in the construction and reconstruction of their social reality. From this perspective, the complex realities of leadership identity construction must be interpreted as something to be comprehensible.

The focus of this approach is on three central concepts: interpretation, meaning, and understanding (Denzin, 2001; Nordqvist et al., 2009). The approach entails that empirical material and theory are not compartmentalized; instead, researchers navigate between empirical observations and theory, refining original theoretical statements to align with observations and seeking relevant observations for the evolving theory (Emerson, 2007). The interpretive study facilitates this by being conducted in the natural setting of participants, with the researcher actively involved in the process (Saunders et al., 2019). Given the considerations discussed earlier, this research embraces the interpretivism philosophy to comprehend the leadership

identity construction of women in managerial roles, as well as how the concept of personal networks can contribute to explaining this process.

## **2. Methodological issues and women in Vietnam**

Vietnam is a country rooted in Confucianism and Feudalism ideologies. Although in recent years, Vietnam has embraced and absorbed many Western cultural influences with more progressive, modern, and liberal perspectives, the core values of the nation's culture and traditional values have been preserved. In the interference, this has become a significant barrier when studying gender and the role of women in Vietnamese culture.

According to Alvesson & Billing (2009), any researcher studying gender faces difficulties due to the fact that structures of this nature are complex and often contradictory, particularly when influenced by the cultural context. In Vietnam, where traditional values and gender norms are still deeply embedded, these contradictions become even more pronounced, making it challenging to explore issues of gender equality and women's roles within the society. This complexity requires researchers to carefully navigate cultural nuances while acknowledging the persistence of patriarchal values alongside the influx of modern ideas.

Methodologically, gender relations and dynamics present a particularly challenging area of study. Often, the most significant aspects are hidden and elusive. The ways in which social processes and cultural understandings produce and reproduce specific gendered social relations are seldom directly observable. Interview accounts on these matters may vary in their reliability and are often strongly influenced by the interview context, making them less likely to reflect pure or unfiltered experiences (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000).

This suggests that studying topics related to gender dynamics requires researchers to adopt a critical lens, recognizing that the data collected, especially through interviews, are shaped by both social norms and the situational dynamics of the research process. It underscores the

importance of being aware of the subjectivities and potential biases that can emerge during data collection, and that direct observation of gendered interactions may be rare or incomplete in uncovering the underlying processes at play.

While it is understood that researchers need to be independent and objective, when addressing issues related to women and the challenges faced by female leaders in their leadership roles, as well as the difficulties women encounter when seeking to advance their careers, expand their personal networks, and use those networks for professional purposes, it is almost inevitable that the emotions and personal perspectives of the researcher might influence the analysis. These issues often involve gender inequality, social barriers, and cultural expectations, making it challenging to maintain a completely objective perspective. This is especially true when the researcher may have their own personal experiences or opinions about the injustice or challenges that women face in advancing their careers and expanding their professional relationships. The intersection of social realities and personal viewpoints presents a significant challenge in research but also provides an opportunity to offer deeper insights and empathy on these issues. Researchers are never entirely objective, neutral, or distanced from their research. In such studies, existential concerns, personal background, and convictions, including political sympathies, play a more significant role compared to research on less emotionally charged topics, such as formal organizational structures, mergers, or acquisitions (Alvesson, 2002). This highlights the difficulty researchers face in maintaining a balanced perspective, as their personal beliefs and emotional connection to the topic may influence the research process and interpretation of the findings. Especially, in gender studies, where social justice and deeply held values often intersect, it becomes particularly challenging to separate personal biases from the research itself.

In my research, I also faced some emerging issues from participants. Some of them hesitate to share their viewpoints on leadership identity construction; some don't want to talk more about

their personal relationships. I understand that it's one of consequences of female in Confucianism and Feudalism culture. Like other East Asian cultures, Confucian values emphasize traditional gender roles, where women are often expected to prioritize family duties and maintain domestic harmony. This can limit their aspirations and opportunities for leadership. Furthermore, Confucianism promotes respect for authority and hierarchical structures, often favoring male leadership in both family and societal contexts. Gradually, more development opportunities are enhanced to let women join leadership and other specific industries. However, even though the Vietnam Women's Union and other organizations support women's rights and leadership development, the implementation and effectiveness of these policies can vary, and traditional biases may persist. Accordingly, in my research, it could be difficult to encourage females to openly share their perspectives on leadership, tell personal stories about the interaction between their personal networks and leadership identity creation. All these aspects highlight the specific challenges of studying gender issues from a methodological standpoint. Having explored these particularities, I will now move on to discuss the research method selected for this study.

### **3. Methodology and methods**

#### **a. Methodology**

This research was approached from an interpretative perspective, utilizing qualitative content analysis. An interpretative approach seeks to understand the meaning and significance of human experiences, behaviors, and social phenomena from the perspective of those involved. This approach emphasizes the subjective, contextual, and dynamic nature of reality, aiming to uncover how people make sense of their world and the meanings they attach to their experiences.

I decided to choose this methodology for some following reasons.

First, the interpretative approach recognizes that there are multiple realities or perspectives that exist within any given context. This approach encourages researchers to explore and embrace the diversity of experiences and viewpoints held by individuals or groups, rather than seeking a single “objective” truth. By acknowledging that different people may interpret the same phenomenon in unique ways, interpretivism allows for a richer, more nuanced understanding of complex social and psychological phenomena (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This strength fits to my first research question to explore women’s perceptions on the importance of personal network and identity in their leadership development.

Second, interpretivism research emphasizes understanding of how culture, history, and context shape individual and collective behavior. Rather than trying to isolate variables and remove contextual influences, interpretivist researchers explore how social, cultural, historical, and personal contexts influence the ways people make sense of the world (Patton, 2002). In my research, when studying how women construct their leadership identity in Vietnam, a interpretative approach would delve into how Confucian cultural values, gender norms, and societal expectations impact their leadership development. Then, with this approach, we can discover how contextual factors impacts the way women construct their leadership identity. This is especially relevant in my research on leadership identity in Vietnam, where Confucian values and Western influences intersect, influencing how leadership is expressed and interpreted.

Third, this approach enables the use of a variety of data collection methods, such as interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic or netnographic (online ethnography) techniques. It also allows researchers to interpret data while identifying emerging patterns. *Creswell (2013)* notes that interpretivist research is both iterative and inductive, granting researchers the flexibility to modify their methods as new insights from the data emerge. This is particularly significant in my study, as the influence of Confucian culture tends to make Vietnamese women more

reserved about sharing their thoughts openly. Therefore, employing more nuanced and sensitive techniques is necessary to delve into personal or delicate information that they may be unwilling to share openly. Additionally, with the possibility to generate rich, detailed, and contextualized data, we can delve into how individuals construct meaning from their experiences and explore the interconnectedness of main constructs in my research.

## **b. Data collection**

In my study, I used qualitative methods, including archival data collection, informal and semi-structured interviews. In endorsing qualitative methodology, Bernard and Ryan (2009) acknowledge various approaches for collecting qualitative data, such as interviews, focus groups, and observations. This study exclusively employed interviews to attain a nuanced understanding of Vietnamese women's perceptions in their various contexts. In my study, I also used netnography methods to collect more leadership identities shown on the social networks for following reasons. With the emerging development of social media, digital leadership has been identified throughout online platforms. As a result, leaders have more channels to convey their leadership identities, not only face-to-face facilitation, but also online showing via social media such as TikTok, Facebook, LinkedIn and the like. Additionally, Vietnamese women tend to use more channels, going beyond offline networks to initiate their identity to get rid of social assumptions about females.

### ***i. Informal semi-structured interview***

Interviews are advocated to capture individuals' perspectives, as they allow participants to be experts within their respective domains, with the interviewer interpreting reality based on participants' experiences (Hesse-Biber, 2010). Interviews, aligning with the interpretive lens, offer in-depth information collection and flexibility to accommodate participant needs (Rubin and Rubin, 2004). Adu (2019) underscores interviews as a potent tool for capturing experiences,

thoughts, and various rationales behind participants' views, actions, and decisions. McAdam (2004) views interviews as a connection between the interviewee and the interviewer, providing an opportunity for quality information generation about the participant's world, contingent on the participant's ability and willingness to engage.

In this study, semi-structured interviews were employed, offering the opportunity to build on participants' responses (Saunders et al., 2016). In semi-structured interviews, the investigator follows an interview schedule with a set of questions, but the interview is guided by the schedule rather than dictated by it. Fox (2006) notes that semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to pose questions similarly while using open-ended inquiries. Noaks and Wincup (2004) also highlight their flexibility, enabling the researcher to adjust the approach to fit the interviewed audience.

Semi-structured interviews allow respondents to be more active in shaping the direction of the interview, introducing issues the investigator may not have considered. In this dynamic, respondents are perceived as experiential experts, given ample opportunity to share their own narratives. Additionally, semi-structured interviews foster informal dialogue, allowing both researchers and participants to adapt the conversation's vocabulary (Madill and Barkham, 2011). They facilitate rapport and empathy, offer greater flexibility in coverage, explore novel areas, and tend to yield richer data. In this type of interview, the investigator's control is minimized, and the interviewer's role is to facilitate participants in openly expressing their understanding.

With this method, I'm able to eliminate doubts and distrust between myself and the participants. Some participants, who have known and worked with me for many years, understand my work, professional ethics, and life, so they will find it easier to share. However, there are some participants who I was introduced to through snowball sampling, so initially, there will be a

certain distance between us. Using informal semi-structured interviews helps me maintain the flow of questions without being too rigid, while also giving participants the opportunity to recall information relevant to my questions, such as their communities, their aspirations, achievements and failures, their leadership journeys, milestones, challenges, allies, etc.

After the interview, I ensured the trustworthiness and credibility of the study (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) through several procedures. Participants reviewed and provided feedback on the transcripts of their interviews. Once I received their confirmation, I proceeded to use the content for my writing.

### ***Stages of collecting data***

Acknowledging this, the following section initiates by delineating the research design stages, comprising a series of “lead-in stages” leading to the “core stages”. A similar approach was employed by Huggins (2000) to elucidate the data collection process. These stages aided the researcher in identifying locations that were both accessible and cost-effective for the research project. Furthermore, they facilitated the utilization of existing relationships and the establishment of new ones.

#### ***Stage 1: Pilot interview***

To make sure the credibility of this research, I conducted pilot interview with first 10 women participants in my second year of PhD studying. Through in-depth interview in minimum 90 minutes, I came to realize that I need to revise interview questions to proactively ask about their perception of leadership and how to construction leadership identity. Besides, after 10 pilot interviews, I realized the importance of personal networks in women leadership identity construction journey. Hence, in the next interviews, I added more questions relating to this point

#### ***Stage 2: Revising interview questions***

After consultations with initial contacts and a comprehensive review of the literature and conceptual framework, open-ended interview questions were crafted to elicit key concepts and extract additional insights from participants regarding their experiences.

The initial segment of the interview, featuring open-ended questions, aimed to delve into participants' perceptions and experiences regarding leadership. The data were subjected to thematic analysis, each set of questions being grouped under one of four themes – leadership, leadership identity construction, informal personal network, and informal personal networking. It provided a platform for them to discuss their career progression, leadership roles, and how they navigate such situations. Additionally, specific questions probed their most significant leadership memories, offering insights into their perception of leadership identity construction.

The subsequent part of the interview honed in on their approach to cultivating networks, with a particular emphasis on informal personal networks. Questions in this section prompted participants to articulate their understanding of personal networks and assess their perceived value in advancing their careers. Probing questions were strategically employed to encourage participants to elaborate on their opinions and elucidate their perspectives.

### ***Stage 3: Face-to-face interviews***

A series of face-to-face semi-structured interviews were carried out with a total of 33 participants in South and North Vietnam. During this phase, participants were encouraged to identify others in their network who might express interest in joining the study. Employing the snowballing technique, the author accessed participants through contact information provided by others, as advocated by Noy (2008). Noy suggests that this technique proves effective for researching organic social networks.

A semi-structured interview protocol was designed to ensure continuity across interviewers. After participants gave written informed consent, the interviews were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Through constant content analysis (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), I adjusted questions to explore emerging issues. I also maintained field notes during each interview, which lasted between 1 to 2 hours.

The interviews were typically divided into three parts:

- Part 1: Focused on general information about life and work experiences, using a life narrative method (Bruner, 1987). Participants were asked to reflect on their past with a question like, “How have you become the person you are now?” This open-ended question allowed for a broad range of stories to surface, helping researchers connect various experiences to the emergence of leadership identity.
- Part 2: Focused on identifying the main actors who significantly contributed to the construction of the participants’ leadership identity.
- Part 3: Explored how these actors influenced the changes in participants’ leadership identity over time. From this, I was able to observe how leadership identity and personal networks interact.

#### ***Stage 4: Transcription***

All interviews were meticulously transcribed into a text-based format, resulting in an extensive collection exceeding 660 pages of text. Personally transcribing 10 interviews, the author opted to hire professional transcribers for the others. This approach not only saved time on typing but also introduced alternative interpretations, as different transcribers might perceive nuances differently.

To enhance both interviewing skills and understanding of language nuances, the author revisited interviews deemed rich in content. Alongside transcriptions, the author crafted concise summaries for each interviewee, incorporating biographical data and noteworthy points from the interviews and observations. These summaries proved invaluable during the analysis phase and, notably, when composing the empirical chapters, providing quick access to essential details about each individual. Subsequently, the author's focus shifted to the in-depth reading and analysis of the interviews. These were juxtaposed with themes derived from the literature, conceptual framework, and network theories utilized within the study and were subject to review. This comparative analysis aimed to identify any missing themes not encompassed in the initial framework.

### **Interview details**

On average, the interviews spanned approximately one hour and 30 minutes. For optimal interview flow with minimal disruptions, it is generally recommended to conduct the interview in the presence of the respondent alone, although exceptions may arise. The choice of interview location also holds significance, considering participants' comfort. While familiar settings like their homes may foster ease, practical constraints may dictate an alternative venue. The initial focus of the interview centered on establishing rapport and comfort before delving into substantive areas of the interview schedule. Notably, only 2 out of the 33 (6%) interviews took place in participants' private residences. The majority of interviews occurred within office settings, constituting 81% of the total, while the remaining 13% were conducted in coffee shops.

Below is a brief of participants' profiles:

Participants	Position	Industry	Age	Interview location	Interview length (hour)	Place of residence
P1	CEO	Distribution	58	Office	1.5	North Vietnam
P2	Chief Finance Officer	Financial Investment	43	Office	4	North Vietnam
P3	CEO and Founder	Financial Investment	51	Office	3	North Vietnam
P4	CEO	Retailing	48	Office	2.6	North Vietnam
P5	Human Resource Director	Information Technology	39	Office	3.7	North Vietnam
P6	Global Recruitment Director	Information Technology	39	Office	2	North Vietnam
P7	Human Resource Director	Real Estate	39	Office	2	North Vietnam
P8	Marketing Manager	Distribution	38	Office	4	South Vietnam
P9	Head of Student Services	Education	39	Coffee Shop	3.5	North Vietnam
P10	Marketing Manager	Distribution	31	Private residence	7	South Vietnam
P11	Marketing Manager	Information Technology	41	Office	2	North Vietnam
P12	CEO	Distribution	39	Office	2.8	South Vietnam
P13	Training Director	Distribution	41	Office	2.5	North Vietnam
P14	Dean	Education	39	Office	3	North Vietnam
P15	Marketing Manager	Education	42	Coffee Shop	1.7	North Vietnam
P16	CEO and Founder	Education	42	Office	3	South Vietnam
P17	General Director	Information Technology	40	Office	2	South Vietnam
P18	Public Communication Manager	Information Technology	51	Coffee Shop	5	North Vietnam
P19	CEO and Founder	Financial Investment	38	Office	1.5	South Vietnam
P20	CEO and Founder	PR and Marketing	39	Office	3	South Vietnam

Participants	Position	Industry	Age	Interview location	Interview length (hour)	Place of residence
P21	CEO	Education	43	Office	2	North Vietnam
P22	CEO and Founder	Education	48	Office	2	South Vietnam
P23	Executive Director	Social enterprise	51	Office	1.5	North Vietnam
P24	Dean	Education	54	Office	1.5	North Vietnam
P25	Marketing Manager	Manufacturing and Distribution	44	Office	1.5	North Vietnam
P26	CEO and Founder	PR and Marketing	43	Office	1.5	South Vietnam
P27	CEO and Founder	Transportation	48	Office	2	South Vietnam
P28	CEO	Education	52	Office	2	South Vietnam
P29	Academic Head - Literacy Faculty	Education	48	Coffee Shop	4	North Vietnam
P30	CEO and Founder	Education	49	Office	1.5	South Vietnam
P31	CEO	Retailing	48	Office	0.5	South Vietnam
P32	CEO and Founder	Pharmaceutical Manufacturing & Distribution	67	Private residence	7	North Vietnam
P33	CEO and Founder	Social enterprise	48	Office	2	North Vietnam

Delving into the personal profiles of the participants in this study, the research is grounded in 33 semi-structured interviews conducted with female managers in both the South (39%) and the North of Vietnam (61%). The age range of respondents spans from 35 to 67, with a median age of 40. Among the 33 participants, 5 are employed in the distribution industry, 10 in education, 5 in Information Technology, 3 in financial investment, 2 in manufacturing, 2 in communication and marketing, 2 in retailing, 2 in social enterprise, 1 in real estate, and 1 in transportation.

It's noteworthy that all participants have attained graduate and post-graduate degrees, and they collectively boast a managerial experience of at least 3 years. While acknowledging that leadership identity construction extends beyond managerial roles, participants unanimously assert the necessity of managerial experience to gain a nuanced understanding of leadership concepts and styles. Consequently, all individuals in the sample hold managerial positions. Notably, 70% of the participants occupy pivotal decision-making roles, bearing ultimate responsibility for the financial and administrative outcomes of their organizations. The remaining women primarily focus on task execution (Please see Appendix 1 for the details of participants and their personal information).

### **Interview challenges**

Throughout the data collection via interviews, the author encountered numerous challenges. Initially, the author encountered difficulties due to the busy schedules of female leaders, resulting in limited time availability for interviews. Consequently, interviews often became disjointed and emotionally disconnected, hampering the exploration of deeper insights. For instance, with P32, the author conducted two separate interviews. During the first interview, time constraints led to quick responses from the participant. Subsequently, during a follow-up interview scheduled five days later, both parties struggled to recall the previous discussion. However, conducting the interview at the participant's home environment fostered a more relaxed atmosphere, encouraging greater willingness to share information.

Secondly, the choice of interview location significantly influences the continuity and depth of participants' sharing. The author endeavored to establish a tranquil environment, distinct from the workplace, such as private rooms in cafes or participants' homes, to foster focus and reliability during interviews. However, due to convenience, the majority of meetings occurred in office settings. This setting often leads to distractions, with participants handling work-

related tasks, such as responding to emails or messages, during the interview. Consequently, this dynamic significantly impacts the emotional depth of sharing personal narratives.

Thirdly, the interview questions pertaining to the study's scope, such as the challenges faced by women in the workplace, their support systems, and the personal relationships conducive to their leadership development, delved into highly sensitive topics. Consequently, there were instances where participants may not directly address the focal point of the question, instead veering toward alternative narratives. Moreover, strict corporate regulations regarding internal information security necessitated reliance on shorthand notes rather than audio recordings during certain interviews. These factors collectively presented challenges in gathering precise and comprehensive information.

Finally, throughout the interview process, female leaders often discussed the various individuals who supported their career development, including colleagues, superiors, parents, and children. Notably, few mentioned their husband or partner as playing a significant role in their advancement, and this topic was often avoided, except in cases involving divorced women.

In response to the challenges outlined above, the author employed several persuasive strategies:

The initial step involved sending their CV as an official self-introduction, showcasing the author's professional background and previous roles held in various organizations. This approach aimed to enhance credibility and establish a foundation for direct communication, thereby persuading participants of the author's genuine motivation for conducting the research.

The second step involved utilizing the snowball sampling method, wherein the author approached potential interview participants through informal channels such as social networks and text messages. This approach aimed to "break the ice" and initiate rapport-building with participants before formally conducting in-depth interviews.

In the final step, during the interviews, the author also shared their own practical experiences concerning the process of constructing a leadership identity. This included insights from both professional settings and family contexts, with the aim of fostering trust and rapport with the female leaders interviewed. As a result, participants became more inclined to open up and share their personal narratives.

*ii. Online archival data collection*

In this digital age, the internet has become an essential tool for communication and exchanging information, transforming how we interact and introducing new methods for research and data collection. One such method is netnography, a technique that has gained popularity for the online study of communities and cultures. The term “Netnography” was first coined by Robert Kozinets in his 1998 book, “On Netnography: Initial Reflections on Consumer Research Investigations of Cyberculture”. However, Kozinets initially developed the concept in 1995 to analyze online fan discussions about the Star Trek franchise.

Netnography is a research method focused on studying the behavior and activities of online communities. It is an innovative extension of ethnography, involving the systematic observation, analysis, and interpretation of online data. Researchers gather data from various digital sources, including social media platforms, online forums, and blogs. This data is both quantitative and qualitative, offering deep insights into the practices, behaviors, and attitudes of online communities.

Additionally, netnography integrates traditional ethnographic techniques such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus groups to provide a more comprehensive understanding of online communities and their cultures. In my study, there could be some sensitive information, identity and identity construction philosophy. That’s why I used both

interview and archival online data method to collect women's leadership identity construction via face-to-face interaction and virtual one.

In my research, I focus on 5 prominent females from different fields, each representing unique aspects within their respective segments. I have collected data from their Facebook activity over at least the past 3 years, aiming to analyze their identity and how they have constructed and expressed leadership identity through various methods. I mainly analyzed such contents as their storytelling, images, videos, hashtags and campaigns, personal and professional contents and the like. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of their public personas and leadership styles. Via posts about their work, career, charity activities, or interactions with the community, I can understand their personal values, life philosophies, or beliefs they follow, which can be crucial in shaping their leadership identity via social media.

The main reason why the author used Facebook as a primary site for data collection and analysis thank to its unique position as a **hybrid digital space**, where users simultaneously perform personal and professional identities. For women leaders in Vietnam, Facebook serves not merely as a communication tool but as a platform for identity negotiation, allowing them to share narratives of leadership, resilience, caregiving, and community involvement in culturally resonant ways. The platform's multimodal features—text, images, video, hashtags, and interactive responses—provide rich, layered data for analyzing how leadership identities are constructed, contested, and granted (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Facebook also enables the visibility of social validation processes through comments, likes, and shares, making it possible to observe the dynamics of public engagement with female leadership narratives. In the Vietnamese context, where Confucian cultural norms shape expectations of modesty, relationality, and gendered behavior, Facebook becomes a culturally embedded space where women leaders can both conform to and challenge traditional roles. Furthermore, the platform's widespread popularity across generations and professions in Vietnam ensures access to a

diverse sample of women leaders. The archival nature of Facebook profiles additionally allows for a longitudinal examination of identity development over time. Therefore, Facebook offers both theoretical and empirical relevance for exploring the social construction of leadership identity among women in a digitally networked, culturally complex environment.

### **c. Data analysis**

#### ***Qualitative content analysis***

The passage outlines qualitative content analysis as one of several research methods for analyzing text data, alongside approaches like ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology, and historical research. It emphasizes that qualitative content analysis focuses on language as a form of communication, paying close attention to the content and contextual meaning of the text. Text data for this method can come from various sources, including verbal, printed, or electronic forms such as narrative responses, open-ended survey questions, interviews, focus groups, observations, and media like articles or books. Rather than merely counting words, qualitative content analysis deeply examines language to categorize large amounts of text into themes or patterns that reflect similar meanings. These categories can be based on explicit communication or inferred meanings.

Content analysis is a systematic, rule-guided set of techniques used to analyze the informational content within textual data (Mayring, 2000). In qualitative content analysis, data is categorized using categories that are at least partially inductively derived from the data itself. This process often involves close reading to identify these categories (Morgan, 1993). Qualitative content analysis is one of many approaches for examining textual data and is considered a generic method because it is not tied to any theory. Instead, it provides flexible techniques that can be applied to any qualitative research where the informational content of the data is the primary

focus. This distinguishes it from other methods that employ theoretical frameworks to guide the analysis.

A useful way to structure content analysis involves breaking the process into three main phases: immersion, reduction, and interpretation (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Sandelowski, 1995a). Each of these phases works toward transforming raw, unordered data into new knowledge.

- Immersion: This is where the researcher becomes deeply familiar with the data, reading it multiple times to get a broad understanding.
- Reduction: During this phase, data is systematically broken down into smaller segments or categories that represent key themes or patterns.
- Interpretation: Finally, the researcher draws meaning and insights from these themes, making connections between cases or data points.

Content analysis requires both looking at each case (such as a participant or a site) holistically and breaking down the data into smaller parts for systematic examination. This process allows for comparison and contrast of data across different cases, which helps in generating new insights from the data.

The content analysis process is as follows:

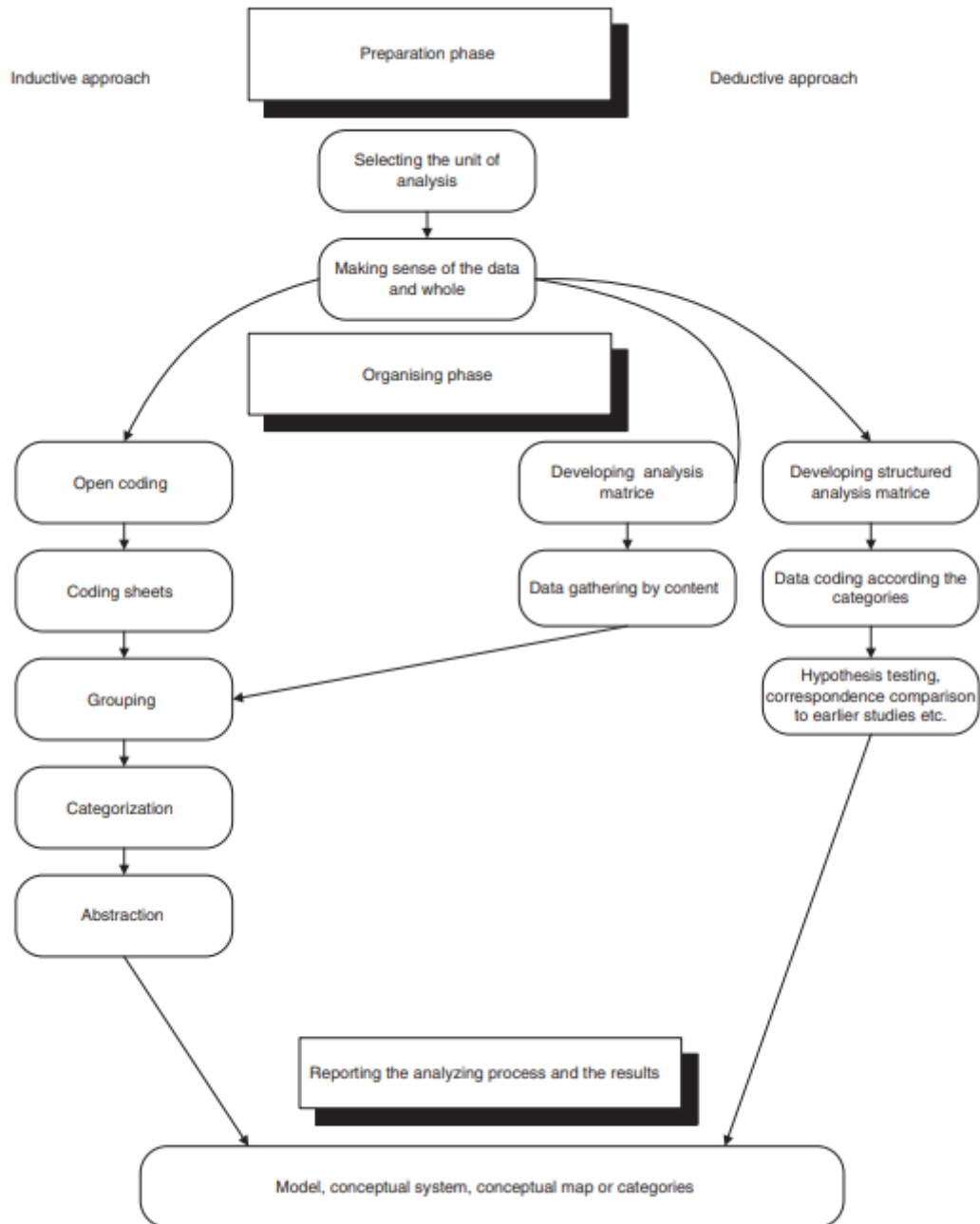


Figure 4.1: Preparation, organizing and resulting phases in the content analysis process (Elo, 2008)

### ***Material analysis process***

In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 33 participants from both South and North Vietnam. The collected interviews underwent transcription and coding to unveil themes, patterns, and concepts related to women’s leadership identity construction and their utilization of informal personal networks in the process. Open coding was employed to explore

various factors, avoiding limitations based on previous research. The author transformed initial interview notes and core coded information into concise phrases and themes, continuing this transformation throughout the entire transcript. At this stage, the entire transcript was treated as data, with no attempt to omit or selectively focus on specific passages, maximizing the emergence of themes. Following this stage, Leximancer as a semi-automated content analysis tool was used to analyze text automatically, extracting high-level concepts and delivering key ideas and actionable insights. It utilizes powerful models and interactive visualizations to provide users with a comprehensive understanding of the text's content. Additionally, Leximancer offers sentiment analysis without bias, allowing users to gauge the sentiment expressed in the text accurately (Wilk, 2021). Accordingly, key concepts are created and then Leximancer groups related concepts together into themes (Leximancer, 2020).

Following this stage, the transcripts were imported into Nvivo software, which facilitated data analysis by coding relevant text, categorizing identified codes, and generating or visualizing results (Adu, 2015). A word frequency analysis and word cloud generation were performed to provide an overview of frequently used words and their contexts. After reviewing the word cloud and annotated transcripts, empirical indicators were created to guide initial coding, marking the beginning of stage two. Empirical indicators, as described by Adu (2019), represent relevant portions of raw data selected to address a research question or purpose. At this stage, initial coding (also referred to as first-cycle coding by Saldana, 2013) commenced, with empirical indicators serving as a guide. While various coding strategies are available for qualitative analysis, this study contends that the comprehensive guidance provided by Saldana (2013) and Adu (2019) offered the most effective approach.

Similarly, Adu (2019) suggests that the choice of coding technique should be informed by factors such as research design, study purpose, and research questions. This study adopts Adu's DIP strategy, which stands for descriptive, interpretive, and presumption-focused coding. The

DIP strategy offers a clear and explicit explanation, facilitating a quick grasp of concepts and processes. For this study, descriptive and interpretive-focused coding strategies were employed, aligning with the research questions, design, and objectives.

Descriptive coding involves summarizing the basic topic of qualitative data, such as interview transcripts, using a word or short phrase (Saldana, 2013). This strategy directs the reader to see, read, or hear what the researcher experienced during data collection without attempting to deduce the reasons behind participant responses or actions. The verbatim use of participants' own words is emphasized in this coding strategy (Adu, 2019). Some participant comments required further interpretation, and the interpretive coding technique, utilizing implicit indicators, was applied.

Upon completing the coding, the third stage, which focused on answering the research questions, commenced. The final stage, according to Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2012)—the development of themes—followed. Utilizing the Leximancer tool, the initial 33 codes were collapsed into six themes. These emergent themes were further connected to a second level. The author listed the themes on paper and explored connections between them. The subsequent stage involved a more analytical or theoretical ordering, as the author sought to make sense of emerging connections between themes. Clustering of themes occurred, with some forming superordinate concepts. The author ensured that these connections resonated with the primary source material—the actual words of the participants—by checking against the transcript.

From Leximancer initial analysis, the themes that attract the most attention from women leaders are work, relationships, and leadership. These themes also align with the findings from literature reviews that relationships are crucial in leadership development. However, women face challenges in developing relationships in formal work settings and informal contexts.

Therefore, when asked about leadership identity and how to build it, they express significant interest in relationships and work.

The main reason I used both Leximancer and Nvivo because they can become complementary to sharpen my research and data analysis. This passage discusses the use of NVivo and Leximancer, two software packages commonly employed in qualitative management and business studies. NVivo is identified as the most widely used tool in this context (Jones & Diment, 2010), though the use of Leximancer has been increasing as researchers become more familiar with its features (Cretchley et al., 2010a).

Using both Leximancer and NVivo in qualitative content analysis is highly relevant and advantageous due to their complementary strengths. Leximancer offers an efficient, automated approach to uncover high-level conceptual patterns and relationships within large volumes of text, providing a valuable macro-level view of the data. In contrast, NVivo enables in-depth, interpretive analysis through manual or theory-driven coding, allowing researchers to explore context, meaning, and nuance at a micro-level. This combination facilitates methodological triangulation, enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings by validating automated patterns with human interpretation. Particularly in complex topics such as women's leadership identity construction—where both discursive patterns and contextual meaning are critical—the integrated use of Leximancer and NVivo allows researchers to move seamlessly from identifying emergent concepts to interpreting how those concepts are articulated and negotiated in lived experiences. Thus, using both tools together ensures a more robust, comprehensive, and context-sensitive analysis.

While both NVivo and Leximancer can be used on similar types of empirical materials, such as interview transcripts, documents, and open survey responses, they operate in fundamentally different ways, making a comparison between the two meaningful. NVivo is equipped with

tools for classifying, sorting, and arranging information, which helps researchers manage, organize, and analyze data, identify themes, and draw conclusions. However, NVivo requires manual coding by the researcher, meaning the analysis process is largely subjective, in line with the interpretivist paradigm that emphasizes the researcher's active engagement in theme development. Leximancer, on the other hand, automates much of the analysis process by identifying concepts and relationships within the data without requiring manual input from the researcher. This makes the analysis more automated, reducing subjective influence compared to NVivo.

In my research, I need to satisfy research aims of how to explore women leadership identity construction through personal networks that could be sensitive topics and frequently be away from reality. Leximancer help me to find out emerging issues, and then Nvivo helps me more thoroughly investigate the insight of women leadership in different sectors, levels and the like.

### ***Validity and Reliability***

To ensure the objectivity of my research analysis and to steer it in the right direction, I have collaborated with other professionals to cross-check the data analysis, following a structured approach. The paragraph below outlines how I identified the right individuals and organized the collaboration effectively.

By reflecting on my professional network, I identified two experts with similar research interests. The first is Dr. Nguyen Anh Loi, a Lecturer at Metropolitan State University, USA, and my co-author on several studies and a book chapter (“Management Innovation in Vietnam – Managing Culture for Management Innovation” and “Human Resource Development in Vietnam – Theory and Practice,” Palgrave Macmillan). The second is Mr. Ngo Quy Nham, a PhD Candidate at Paris Dauphine University and Lecturer at Foreign Trade University, Vietnam.

I reached out to them with an official request, outlining the following points to structure our collaboration:

- Clearly stating the purpose of our collaboration,
- Defining the scope of my study,
- Explaining why their expertise is crucial and what specific contributions I expect from them,
- Providing clear timelines, deliverables, and the extent of their involvement.

Once they agreed to collaborate, I provided them with all the necessary data, coding, and documentation. To ensure continuous and efficient feedback, we used Google Drive to manage version control. Additionally, I prepared a brief overview detailing the purpose of the study, the methods used, and any challenges I had encountered.

I requested that my collaborators independently code the interview transcripts of 10 out of the 33 participants to detect any discrepancies and to ensure the reproducibility of my results. After they completed their coding, I compared their outcomes with my original analysis, identifying any inconsistencies or areas that needed improvement.

Through these collaborations, I have strengthened my confidence in the validity and reliability of the analysis.

## **CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, I outlined the research aims and questions, along with the epistemological stance and methodology selected for this study. Additionally, I discussed the process of data collection and analysis.

It was argued that an interpretive approach was the most suitable choice for addressing the research questions effectively. This approach not only aligns with the study's objectives but also provides a framework that is well-suited to exploring the complex dynamics of leadership identity and personal networks. The chapter explored the selected research methods, providing a comprehensive account of the data collection and analysis techniques. The following chapter will scrutinize the participants' personal profiles, conduct data analysis, and present the resulting findings.

## **PART II : PERSONAL NETWORK AND WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN VIETNAM CONTEXT**

The second part of this thesis is empirical that is structured in three chapters.

In **Chapter 6**, I delve into the similarities and differences among the participants, focusing on the emerging concepts in their leadership identity construction. Through a close examination of the personal dimensions, including both innate and acquired traits, I explore how these traits help participants shape their leadership identity. Furthermore, I analyze the role of external factors—such as social, organizational, and cultural contexts—in influencing participants' leadership perception and the process by which they claim and grant their leadership identity.

### **Section 1: Personal dimensions and leadership identity**

The first part of this chapter emphasizes how participants draw on their personal qualities, experiences, and individual growth to develop their leadership identity. Some participants rely heavily on their born traits (such as confidence, charisma, or empathy), while others focus on acquired traits developed through education, work experience, and mentorship. This duality of traits—innate vs. learned—creates an essential foundation for constructing their leadership identity.

### **Section 2: Informal personal networks and leadership development**

In the second part of Chapter 6, I examine the role of informal personal networks in shaping leadership identity. Informal personal networks play a critical role in women's leadership development, particularly in how they are perceived by others and how they perceive themselves as leaders. I pay special attention to key actors within these networks who contribute significantly to how women define and develop their leadership identity. For instance,

colleagues, mentors, and family members often serve as facilitators of leadership identity construction by providing feedback, support, and guidance.

The discussion here is centered around how these key actors influence the process of claiming and granting leadership identity. I explore the mechanisms at work within informal personal networks and analyze how trust, reciprocity, and support within these relationships contribute to the leadership identity construction process.

### **Section 3: Mechanisms in the network's contribution to leadership identity**

Building on the analysis of key actors, this section looks at the mechanisms through which personal networks contribute to leadership identity construction. Specifically, I explore how reciprocal influence and social exchange shape the dynamics of leadership identity, as well as how women navigate cultural norms, gender roles, and the workplace hierarchy in Vietnam through these informal networks. This section will also illustrate how these interactions differ depending on the closeness, form, and intensity of the relationships, highlighting the ways women develop social capital through their networks.

**Chapter 7** focuses on identifying the most salient elements that contribute to constructing women's leadership identity. These elements are drawn both from the literature review and the empirical data collected during the interviews. By combining insights from theory and practice, I aim to explain how these factors relate to the glass ceiling in the Vietnamese context.

At the core of this chapter is an examination of how the construction of leadership identity can help explain the persistent gender inequalities, specifically the challenges women face in breaking through the glass ceiling. To this end, I analyze each of the most salient aspects of leadership identity, focusing on the role of personal traits, cultural influences, organizational dynamics, and the support of informal personal networks.

### **Section 1: Salient aspects of leadership identity**

This section will focus on identifying the key aspects of leadership identity, such as the ability to navigate cultural expectations, balance family responsibilities with career ambitions, and manage perceptions in the workplace. Additionally, I analyze how leadership identity is shaped by both personal and contextual factors. For example, participants' perception of themselves as leaders is influenced by their personal drive and ambition but also shaped by the socio-cultural context of Vietnam.

### **Section 2: Key actors and their influence on leadership identity construction**

Here, I further explore how personal networks, especially informal ones, have played a pivotal role in shaping women's leadership identity. I assess the role of mentors, peers, family members, and professional contacts in either facilitating or impeding the participants' leadership growth.

### **Section 3: Implications for women development in Vietnam**

I then turn to how these insights about leadership identity can be linked to the concept of the leadership labyrinth in Vietnam. I argue that the way women construct and negotiate their leadership identity—within the context of cultural norms and informal networks—provides a critical explanation for the challenges they face in rising to senior leadership positions. Issues such as gender stereotypes, expectations around femininity, and limitations in accessing influential networks contribute to the glass ceiling that many women encounter in their careers.

In the concluding section, **chapter 8**, I summarize the main contributions of this research. I highlight how this study advances our understanding of leadership identity construction, especially within the Vietnamese context, and how informal networks play a crucial role in shaping leadership trajectories for women.

I also address the limitations of this research, such as the focus on Vietnam, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, I discuss potential avenues for future research, including expanding this study to other cultural contexts and exploring more deeply the intersection between formal organizational structures and informal personal networks in leadership identity development.

Finally, I suggest that more attention should be paid to the informal mechanisms at play in leadership identity construction, particularly in cultures where formal leadership structures are influenced by traditional gender roles and expectations. Through this research, I aim to shed light on the subtle yet powerful ways that personal networks and cultural contexts shape women's leadership identities.

# **CHAPTER 6:**

# **ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

This chapter zeroes in on the analysis of the data stemming from interviews with Vietnamese female leaders. As highlighted in preceding chapters, the study aims to elucidate the impact mechanism of personal networks and networking on shaping the image and identity of female leaders within the specific cultural context of Vietnam. The data analysis process was outlined in Chapter 5, and the current chapter is dedicated to presenting the codes and themes derived from the analysis and subsequent findings.

### **I. Grouping by participants' similarity**

Utilizing Leximancer and Nvivo 12 for word similarity analysis among the 33 participants revealed that women sharing similar responsibilities exhibit comparable concerns and frequently used words during discussions about leadership identity and personal networks. Accordingly, the participants are categorized into eight sub-groups, each characterized by distinct features. The primary distinction lies in the women's chief concerns while executing their managerial and leadership responsibilities, influencing their leadership identity and the main relationships they prioritize, along with key factors within each relationship network. This segmentation identifies eight groups of women, each associated with a specific set of responsibilities. A search for the 50 most frequent words in each group reveals emerging words that align with women's primary responsibilities.

#### **1. Group 1: Women's development**

In the pharmaceutical and social enterprise industries, two participants, P32 and P33, expressed their concerns about developing career opportunities for women and safeguarding women's rights. Consequently, the primary actors in their respective networks are women, children, and family.

#### **2. Group 2: Finance and Investment management**

Participants P1, P2, P3, and P4, employed in the investment industry with primary responsibilities in finance and investment management, exhibit a cautious approach to investment decisions, aiming to minimize risks. In critical decision-making moments, their foremost considerations are their children and family. Consequently, their frequently mentioned words revolve around work, company, and money, followed by their children, family, and personal life.

### **3. Group 3: Social contribution**

Three participants, namely P21, P22, and P23, share a common focus on social contribution. They emphasize the importance of bringing value to their communities. As a result, their frequently mentioned concepts include work, life values, and strategies for conducting business to generate income.

### **4. Group 4: Strategic mindset for startups**

All women, including P24, P25, P26, and P27, serve as leaders in startup businesses. They demonstrate a clear understanding that they must dedicate time to their work, company, and business to generate income and foster its growth. Despite their strong commitment to their business endeavors, they also prioritize their personal lives and other relationships.

### **5. Group 5: Human development, Training and Coaching**

Namely P28, P29, P30, and P31, they hold roles focused on managing and leading their business outcomes. Three of them are businesswomen directly serving customers, taking full responsibility for their business outcomes. P29, on the other hand, works in the educational industry as the Academic Head of the Literacy Faculty. Despite not having a role as a businesswoman with clear financial responsibilities, she oversees the faculty's effectiveness in recruiting and retaining students at the initial entry stage. Her role is crucial as it directly impacts

student retention in the following academic years. Thus, she also adopts a service/business-oriented mindset rather than a traditional manager in an academic faculty. Their primary concern revolves around work, emphasizing work efficiency and customer service, as they understand that their main responsibility is to provide training and coaching for employees. Consequently, the dominant word frequently mentioned is work.

#### **6. Group 6: Business Management**

This group includes P5, P6, and P7. They work in supporting departments within their organizations, primarily responsible for handling daily emerging issues. While they may not hold formal leadership positions, they consistently mention aspects of leadership, training, and relationship development. It appears that despite their managerial roles in a department, they recognize the importance of cultivating a leadership identity and fostering relationships to manage their teams effectively.

#### **7. Group 7: Marketing and communications**

Women with primary responsibilities in marketing, namely P8, P9, P10, and P11. A common characteristic among these women is their birth in the 1980s, categorizing them as part of Generation Y. Their notable feature is the ability to balance work and life effectively. Being born in the internet age, they exhibit a preference for online channels in managing their relationships, supplementing face-to-face communication. Moreover, they leverage online networks for constructing their leadership identity, demonstrating a clear understanding of showcasing contributions to their networks. They engage in knowledge sharing, addressing others' personal concerns, and providing support when needed. The key terms frequently mentioned in their interviews include work-family, relationship, and Facebook/LinkedIn.

#### **8. Group 8: Marketing and Management**

All women in this group are involved in the marketing field and hold managerial positions. The members include P12 to P20. The shared characteristic within this group is their emphasis on prioritizing relationship building by sharing and showcasing the potential values they can contribute to their connections. Their primary concerns revolve around work and family.

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Main responsibilities</b>
P32	CEO and Founder	Women development
P33	CEO and Founder	
P1	CEO	Finance and Investment management
P2	Chief Finance Officer	
P3	CEO and Founder	
P4	CEO	
P21	CEO	Social contribution
P22	CEO and Founder	
P23	Executive Director	
P28	CEO	Training and coaching for employees
P29	Academic Head - Literacy Faculty	
P30	CEO and Founder	
P31	CEO	
P24	Dean	Strategy for Startup
P25	Marketing Manager	
P26	CEO and Founder	
P27	CEO and Founder	
P5	Human Resource Director	Management
P6	Global Recruitment Director	
P7	Human Resource Director	
P8	Marketing Manager	Marketing
P9	Head of Student Services	
P10	Marketing Manager	
P11	Marketing Manager	
P12	CEO	Marketing and Management

Participants	Position	Main responsibilities
P13	Training Director	
P14	Dean	
P15	Marketing Manager	
P16	CEO and Founder	
P17	General Director	
P18	Public Communication Manager	
P19	CEO and Founder	
P20	CEO and Founder	

Table 4.1: The clusters of participants by main responsibilities (*The author*)

## II. Differences among participants

Due to different personal circumstances, participants have various perspectives on leadership and how they construct their leadership identity. Married participants who are mothers often face expectations to prioritize family responsibilities, which can limit their availability and willingness to take on demanding leadership roles. Balancing career and family life can be challenging and may affect their career progression and leadership aspirations. This statement could be the reason why almost all interview participants are divorced and dedicate significant time and effort to their careers as well as their children. When asked about key factors in their networks that support career development, almost of my interview participants mentioned everyone except their husbands. If I asked more about their husbands, they diverted their answers to other topics, mainly their children, who they described as their best motivation.

Some participants who trusted me and were willing to share their family circumstances captured an image of their husbands as a burden on their career development. Besides their husbands, their parents-in-law also did not support them. A common point is that whether the parents-in-law are from the older generation or the younger generation, they still expect their daughters-in-law to handle household chores first before focusing on their work. Female participants from

the younger generation (Generation Y) chose divorce to focus on their work if they could not find common ground in sharing household chores and supporting their career development. The previous generation tried to balance both contributing to their careers and maintaining their families.

*“Even though I am the main breadwinner in the family, my husband still expects me to handle all the household chores when I come home. My mother-in-law requires me to be home by 4:30 PM to prepare everything before my husband returns. I had to do this for a very long time.” (P17)*

P23 shared that:

*“I felt liberated after the divorce. I immediately moved out of that house, focusing on raising and educating my two children.” (P23)*

P29 conveyed that:

*“Even when I was at the peak of my career, I had to make a choice. If I continued to climb and develop, what awaited me? So, I needed to decide whether to stop or continue to retain what I had achieved. This choice was very significant for my leadership. Actually, it was a failure lesson for me. During the years when I thought I was very successful, my family relationships were not good. There is no concept of work-life balance if you achieve outside success; you must sacrifice something. When I was very prominent outside, my husband and children wouldn’t see me at home.” (P29)*

The nature of their jobs also significantly influences how they construct their leadership identity, differing between state-owned organizations and private ones. In the state sector, women tend to be more reserved and are less likely to express their identities. P32 shared that during an election, she gave up the opportunity to a male deputy director because she believed

he would have more chances than her. However, her concession was not appreciated, and after being promoted, he suppressed her. It seems that in the state sector, influenced by Confucian culture, women are significantly affected and often step back to let men advance, aligning with Confucian views on women.

This is quite different from younger women, especially those working in private enterprises or startups. Their mindset is more open, willing to take risks, and compete with men for their own sake rather than worrying about how others will judge them. Especially in the current VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity) environment, the agility of participants is highly valued and developed. With the inherent compassion of women, they dare to face challenges and are willing to forgive mistakes or “dirty tricks” by male colleagues.

P12 told me about the male employee who cheated her and aimed to destroy company’s master data after being laid off, endangering customers and the business: *“I only talked to him to make him understand, with a bit of a threat so that he would never dare to do such harmful things to me and my company again. But I didn’t take him to the police because doing so would only solve the issue between my company and him. The more important thing was to address the problem of my company facing the risk of losing customer data”.*

Regarding marital relationships, those from the Baby Boomer or Generation X generations tend to endure and accept more disadvantages.

*“I still had to excel in my role as the CEO while coming home early to take care of my mother-in-law and husband.” (P23)*

*“We had times when we came home and were like strangers; he did his work, and I did mine. My eldest son is autistic, and I had to shoulder both work and family responsibilities. I couldn’t ask him for help because I was also dedicating myself to my work and couldn’t leave the family burden on him. So, I had to try harder.” (P29)*

In contrast, the younger generation tends to make decisions for themselves, not fearing judgment or how others might perceive them.

*“When I was one of the 30 Under 30 selected by Forbes, I was honored to receive the award and meet people. But instead of being happy for me, my husband showed displeasure, and my mother-in-law criticized me for not caring about the family before I left. It was like a push, and I decided to divorce, not because I wanted to dedicate more to work, but because I couldn’t live a life where someone constantly held me back and prevented me from realizing my full potential.” (P16)*

Clearly, younger participants are more flexible, breaking away from the constraints of Confucian culture. They balance work and family, living for their purposes and ideals rather than adhering to the old values of obeying their husbands.

Perhaps when pushed to a certain circumstance where they can’t rely on anyone, the strength within each woman will rise. They break away from the image of a submissive, gentle, and enduring woman, becoming as strong as men. When faced with a dirty trick by a male employee after he left, Ms. P17 talked face-to-face, took him to court, but mainly wanted to intimidate. She didn’t intend to pursue it to the end if he admitted his fault and officially apologized to her company. Deep down, she remains a traditional woman but strong, when necessary, ready to fight when facing enemies, and resilient to overcome adversities, not just quietly enduring and tormenting themselves.

### **III. Key Emerging Concepts**

By analyzing the 33 in-depth interviews using Nvivo 12 and Leximancer, several main topics have emerged.

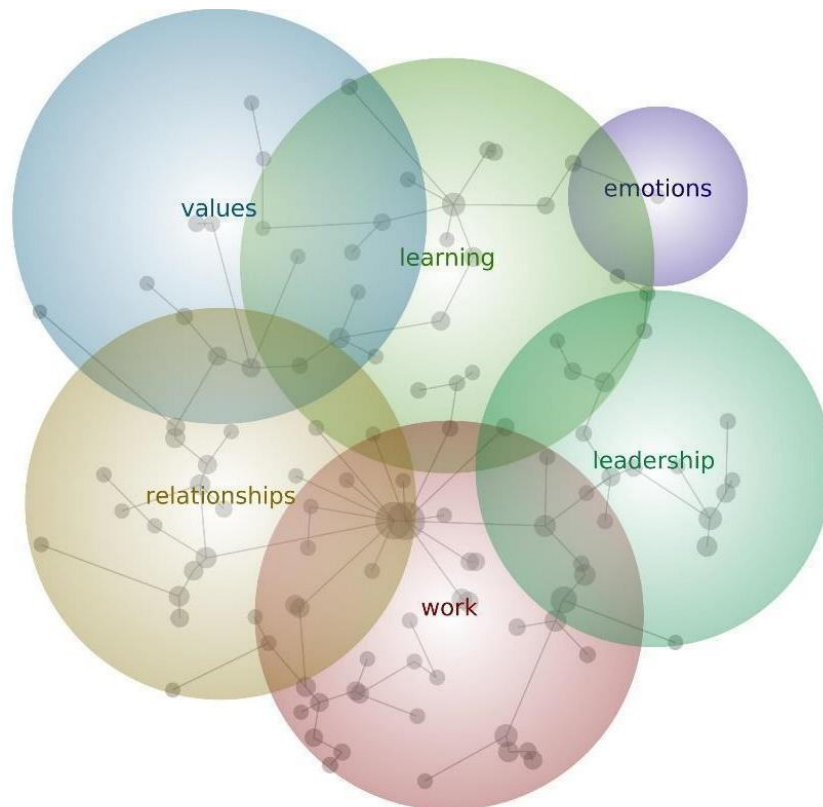


Figure 4.2: Data analysis using Leximancer (*the author*)

As illustrated in Figure 4.1, women consistently express concerns about **work, relationships, leadership, values, learning, and emotions**. Their focus on achieving outstanding results in their work is evident, and they prioritize constructing effective leadership styles and cultivating positive relationships with key individuals. Women recognize the importance of shared values in sustaining relationships over the long term. Additionally, they acknowledge the emotional aspect of their work and life but emphasize learning to control negative emotions while fostering positive ones.

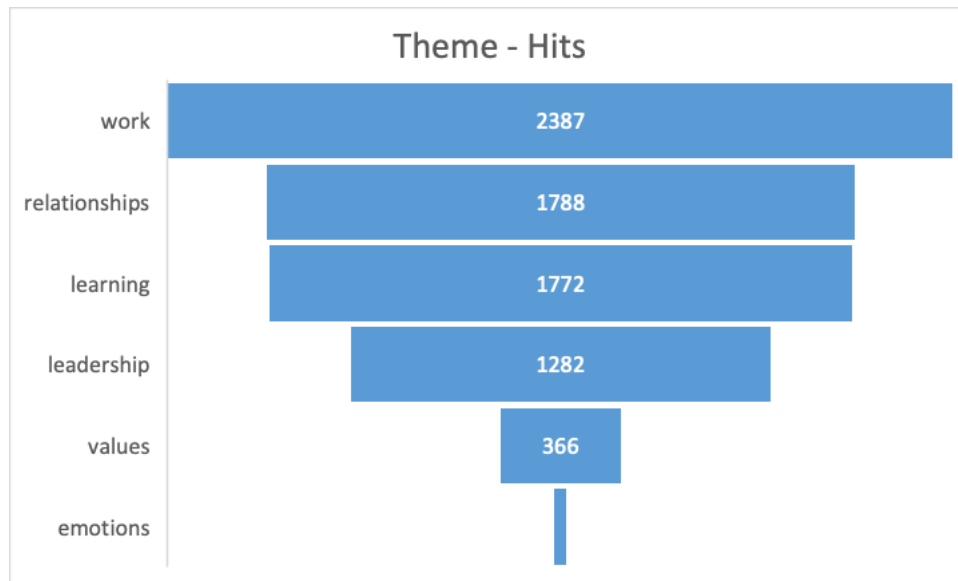


Figure 4.3: Hits of main themes (*the author*)

The number of concepts in the model and the size of each theme have undergone changes in the pursuit of different models. However, the central emerging concepts remain work, relationship, leadership, coach, and values. Despite variations in perspectives on leadership and relationship development across different professions, women unanimously agree on utilizing relationships to shape their leadership. They showcase the values they bring to each relationship, demonstrate efforts to learn and control emotions, and effectively contribute value to relationships, thereby constructing their leadership identity.

Employing Nvivo 12 to analyze work frequency, 33 interviews underwent clustering, revealing discernible segments and prevalent keywords. Subsequently, the elucidation of typical concerns within each cohort of women was informed by these identified segments. It becomes apparent that generational variances wield limited influence over women's proclivity for leadership and relationship maintenance. Instead, the industry of employment and the inherent characteristics of their positions play pivotal roles in shaping the primary concerns of women as they concurrently cultivate leadership and personal affiliations. Subsequent sections will expound upon how women cultivate leadership through the integration of relationship dynamics,

professional endeavors, values, learning processes, and emotional considerations. Furthermore, the study will further explore how women intentionally nurture relationships with the objective of facilitating their leadership identity, addressing the other research questions.

#### **IV. Women's leadership identity dimensions**

The examination of personal and contextual attributes serves as a conduit for elucidating women's perspectives on leadership and the construction of their leadership identity. This analytical endeavor also sheds light on the transformative evolution of their behavior as leaders. In particular, the analysis will scrutinize these attributes with the aim of delineating pivotal events that act as catalysts, fostering women's awareness of the significance of leadership in both their professional and personal spheres. Additionally, the analysis endeavors to identify pertinent strategies through which women can embody the characteristics of their idealized leadership roles.

##### **1. Personal dimensions**

Personal attributes play a pivotal role in delineating the essential traits that empower women to nurture their personal networks and disseminate their leadership identity. Personal attributes reflect women's comprehension of leadership and delineates the behavioral aspects integral to assuming a leadership role. In essence, possessing these attributes becomes instrumental in the self-positioning of women as leaders and in amplifying their influence on others. Considered as foundational elements, these personal attributes serve as antecedents, facilitating women in leveraging their personal networks for the construction of their leadership identity. The classification of personal attributes into two sub-dimensions, namely "born" and "made" variables, further underscores the dichotomy of traits that female leaders may inherently possess (Stogdill (1974)) and those that can be developed over time.

##### **a. "Born" attributes**

### **i. Personality traits**

In response to questions regarding the key attributes of effective leadership, participants predominantly underscore **agentic traits**, emphasizing a preference for these characteristics over communal leadership qualities. Notably, participants highlight the “cold-hearted” attitude, which they perceive as instrumental in enabling women to adeptly navigate and embrace business risks. However, there has been the distinctive nature of women’s risk perception, deviating from stereotypical norms associated with male counterparts. While men typically prioritize financial considerations such as profits and costs in risk assessment, women consistently prioritize familial elements, particularly the well-being of their children. This nuanced approach often manifests in women declining promotional opportunities, a decision grounded in the paramount importance they attribute to their children—a reflection of what is described as a natural instinct among women.

Some participants expound on the observed disparities between men and women in their approach to business risks. Instances of male leaders facing legal repercussions for their risk-taking endeavors instill a palpable sense of apprehension among women, leading them to avoid such risks whenever feasible. Even when confronted with unavoidable risks, participants invariably prioritize the welfare of their children, spouses, and extended family, steadfastly refusing to entertain risks that may compromise their family’s tranquility. This maternal instinct, as articulated by participants, emerges as a guiding force, underscoring the profound influence of familial considerations on women’s decision-making processes.

*Especially when women are forced to the last option, they immediately think about their children as an instinct. That is why they never take risky challenges and trade-offs between their job promotion and family, especially their children. In fact, most*

*failed case studies in the banking and financing sectors are made by male leaders.*

*(P2)*

Despite the potential drawbacks, possessing agentic attributes in their leadership roles can subject women to certain disadvantages that have implications for both their professional and personal spheres. For instance, they may be labeled as unattractive due to perceived traits of being meticulous and assertive. Alternatively, some individuals argue that they may be overly showcasing their robust characteristics, rather than exhibiting their inherent communal traits. Consequently, women adeptly employ a combination of communal and agentic traits to navigate various situations flexibly, aiming to exert effective influence on others.

Certain women leaders underscore the significance of **self-confidence**, particularly in the context of being women within a Confucian culture. In the Vietnamese setting (which will be explored more comprehensively in the following section), women encounter various gender stereotypes. Thus, self-confidence emerges as a vital tool to surmount these challenges. Women explicitly recognize that fostering self-confidence necessitates continuous knowledge enhancement, lifelong learning, and prioritizing their physical well-being. Women deeply acknowledge that beauty is susceptible to the ravages of time. Consequently, they steadfastly believe that the enduring construction of their identity relies on their knowledge and competence. As a result, they consciously deviate from the conventional standards of beauty within a Confucian culture, opting instead to focus on enhancing their competencies rather than solely emphasizing their outward appearance.

Some women recognize that to cultivate positive interpersonal relationships and foster constructive interactions, it is essential to exhibit qualities of courageousness and integrity. When certain women elaborate on the notion of “**courageousness**,” their immediate association is with risk-taking in business. However, as the interviews elucidated, women generally possess

a distinctive perspective on courageousness, or courage. For them, courage is not about indiscriminately embracing challenges without consideration for trade-offs; rather, it involves navigating the path forward judiciously and knowing when to halt. Their demonstration of courage extends to willingly shouldering difficult and challenging tasks. Yet, when confronted with insurmountable obstacles or surpassing their capabilities, they harbor no fear of losing face. Instead, they gracefully accept the limits and delegate tasks to others, prioritizing cooperation and power-sharing over cutthroat competition for leadership positions.

Women further showcase their courage by assuming responsibility for mistakes made by their subordinates. They firmly believe that the performance outcomes of their subordinates reflect on their own leadership. Consequently, any mistakes made by subordinates are regarded as their own shortcomings. This approach not only serves as an effective means to assert their leadership naturally but also aligns with their commitment to upholding integrity as women leaders. In addition to safeguarding the interests of their subordinates, they also shield their manager's reputation by shouldering responsibility for organizational mistakes. Their perspective is rooted in a Confucian culture, where Vietnamese women traditionally bear the brunt of blame from various quarters, including fathers, husbands, and workplace superiors. However, modern women display flexibility in maintaining the four virtues outlined in Confucian philosophy—particularly appropriate conduct and practical knowledge—while concurrently advancing in their professional trajectories. One participant fervently articulates this perspective:

*Courageousness is a dare to take responsibility. Being responsible means being willing to accept blame for our subordinates' mistakes. Concurrently, we must protect the reputations of our leaders. For example, if our leader makes some mistakes, we need to take responsibility for those mistakes that could be considered our suggestions. To be ready to take those risks, we need to understand which is more important: our reputation, our manager's reputation, or our company brand*

*name. In some cases, I know that my reputation is less significant than my organization's identity, and I have to accept that mistake. (P9)*

## **ii. Moral perception**

The second construct influencing women's approach to nurturing personal relationships is their perception of moral values. Most participants draw upon moral values shaped during their upbringing, which are likely influenced by Vietnam's societal norms and philosophy.

A recurring moral value highlighted in numerous interviews is “**sincereness**”, or sincerity. Several women leaders exhibit personalized care for both their subordinates and relatives, addressing minor daily matters as well as long-term plans and significant issues. In alignment with the transformational leadership style, individualized consideration is identified as one of the four dimensions characterizing this leadership approach. The primary impact of this leadership style lies in the cultivation of personal relationships through tailored attention to individual needs and circumstances. Consequently, the construction of personal relationships occurs organically within the framework of this leadership style.

Women employ various methods to express their sincerity. Some participants highlight their practice of demonstrating concern through a combination of online and offline approaches. Direct expressions of care include personal visits or sending words of encouragement when subordinates face health issues. Additionally, through attentive observation of subordinates' habits, they select presents for special occasions that align with their interests. Online expressions of concern manifest in comments on Facebook, surpassing the mere act of liking posts. The participants assert that giving likes alone does not authentically convey true concern; instead, providing specific comments indicates that they have read, comprehended, and formulated specific opinions about the post, going beyond generic likes.

Nevertheless, some women contend that sincerity should emanate naturally from within, and they refrain from deliberately showcasing it for specific purposes. They adopt a more subtle approach, avoiding rigid displays of concern and opting for a gentler expression. It seems that among the Vietnamese women interviewed, they shape their identity through their deep-rooted understanding of morality and ethics. Despite not being explicitly tasked with constructing relationships, every effort they invest in nurturing connections inherently stems from their ethical considerations. Indeed, they don't feel compelled to overtly demonstrate sympathy or sincerity; rather, these qualities manifest organically as a result of their ethical thoughts and behaviors.

**b. “Acquired” attributes**

In addition to innate characteristics, participants acknowledge the presence of certain disadvantages related to their traits and behaviors. They are cognizant of the possibility of overcoming these weaknesses through learning. This section will delve into specific characteristics that can be cultivated, demonstrating that learned variables play a constructive role in reshaping their leadership behaviors when they possess a comprehensive understanding of leadership perceptions.

**i. Consistency**

About how they present their leadership, the majority of participants asserted that they refrain from overtly showcasing their leadership; instead, they unintentionally construct their leadership identity. This identity, they believe, evolves organically through the consistent alignment of their mindsets, words, and actions. According to their collective viewpoint, maintaining consistency in both daily life and professional endeavors serves as a competitive advantage in establishing trust with key figures in their personal networks. Participants understand that by remaining consistent, others can perceive their leadership style, reducing potential criticism of their agentic traits and behaviors.

The creation and preservation of trust emerge as pivotal components that influence others' belief in their actions and contributions. Failing to fulfill promises erodes trust gradually, hindering any attempts to expose their identities or competencies. Some participants attribute this challenge to prevailing gender stereotypes that perceive women as having lower knowledge standards and primarily responsible for family and childcare, thus hindering the recognition of their notable achievements. Consequently, to construct a positive identity within their personal networks, participants emphasize the importance of creating and maintaining consistency, allowing them to serve as role models based on others' trust in their commitments and activities. This consistency not only establishes their leadership but also positions them as the final authority responsible for their company's or department's performance, fostering unconditional adherence to their instructions.

The significance of consistency extends to the realm of coaching, where it contributes significantly to a coach's reputation and identity. Coaches can naturally construct their coaching identity by showcasing empathy for customers' personal issues, cultivating a relationship akin to friends. This ongoing demonstration of empathy through behaviors and communication builds trust with customers, thereby sustaining and fortifying personal relationships.

*Consistency is significant to contribute to a coach's reputation and identity. The main reason is that if a coach can show his/her empathy for customers' private issues like sharing between friends, not only customers, the coach can naturally construct his/her coaching identity. This empathy is continuously illustrated via their behaviors and talking, and then she makes customers trust her coach as a result of consistency. Hence, personal relationships can be constructed and sustainably maintained. (P13)*

The demonstration of women's consistency is vividly manifested through the delicate equilibrium they maintain between their professional and personal lives (work - life balance), which can be a potent motivator propelling them to translate their passion into tangible actions. In this context, "life" encompasses all relationships outside of work—both formal and informal networking. Success, for them, is not solely defined by reaching the pinnacle of their career but also hinges on the concurrent cultivation of familial happiness. They recognize that a harmonious family life, characterized by contentment and successful children—integral elements in Vietnam's cultural ideals of a perfect family—provides the necessary foundation for them to wholeheartedly focus on their career development. The understanding prevails that an imbalance, where professional success coexists with personal dissatisfaction, is not synonymous with true success. Many women leaders, despite achieving significant milestones in their careers, acknowledge that unhappiness in their private lives renders their success incomplete or imperfect. The pursuit of perfection, therefore, necessitates the harmonious coexistence of career accomplishments and familial bliss. Additionally, women leaders recognize that their employees may not feel secure working with a leader who is consistently preoccupied with personal family issues, such as the health of their children, household responsibilities, and other familial concerns.

In these instances, women leaders face the challenge of striking a balance between personal well-being and professional responsibilities. Successful women leaders often convey that, upon entering the workplace, they purposefully set aside thoughts about family-related matters, such as meals and the health and safety of their spouses and children. During work hours, their focus remains solely on their professional tasks. Conversely, when they leave the office and return home, they swiftly shift their focus away from work-related concerns, immersing themselves fully in the enjoyment of their family lives. This deliberate compartmentalization allows them to navigate the demands of both professional and personal spheres effectively. By

demonstrating consistency in both their professional tasks and formal relationships, women leaders alleviate concerns about potential disapproval from others. It becomes evident to their colleagues that these behaviors are inherent to their communication and working styles. The understanding prevails that for effective collaboration, individuals must be willing to adapt and accept the inherent differences in approaches, fostering a culture of mutual cooperation and acceptance of individual distinctions.

*It's necessary to be consistent in life, work, and relationships. Accordingly, when we need to deal with some issues in the office, other colleagues can understand that my frank sharing is to improve common goals, not try to prove that I'm the right person. (P5)*

Consistency extends beyond women's external behaviors to encompass the alignment of their internal emotions and outward attitudes. For some women, this congruence signifies the ability to self-lead (which will be discussed in the following section). They actively cultivate positive emotions, love, and constructive thoughts to maintain a balance between optimistic thinking and impactful actions. Certain participants grasp the significance of establishing a connection among their thoughts, words, and actions, enabling them to engage in everything mindfully. This mindfulness practice contributes to finding inner peace, allowing them to approach tasks with a leisurely demeanor, thereby mitigating the impact of external challenges and fears. The equilibrium achieved between internal and external aspects serves as a steady validation of their identity and influence on others. Additionally, some women define their inner space through their habits and interests. When tasks are undertaken with genuine passion, they effortlessly radiate influence and attract others to accompany them on their journey. This approach, rooted in a harmonious balance between internal emotions and external actions, not only shapes their identity but also establishes a compelling presence that draws others toward collaboration and association.

Consistency, in the context of leadership, extends to the alignment between the way women lead and instruct their subordinates. Women leaders recognize that they cannot demand dedication from their employees unless they exemplify it themselves. Demonstrating a genuine passion for work is not merely reflected in the final performance outcomes but encompasses the values and contributions they consistently display. The pivotal success factor lies in the steadfast exhibition of this love for work. Women leaders are acutely aware of the potential hazards to their leadership if they frequently alter their instructions and strategic directions, a practice that could lead to confusion among their subordinates. As a result, maintaining a consistent approach becomes crucial for effective leadership and the cohesive functioning of their teams.

When asked about their most favorable or ideal leaders, women promptly highlight individuals who possess not only decisiveness but also sincerity, maintaining a balance between their thoughts and actions. What leaves a lasting impression on them is a leader who exhibits consistency both in their professional and personal life, even if they may not necessarily admire the leader's specific leadership or management skills. The attributes that resonate with women in a leader go beyond strict or lenient characteristics, as well as specific competencies deemed as either good or bad. Instead, they express admiration for leaders who establish rules and adhere to them consistently in both their work and personal lives, creating a sense of trust and reliability that inspires voluntary followership.

*I must be consistent in giving information, comments, and instructions. When I say ABC, I need to present evidence, and the next time, I still need to repeat ABC, which will make our subordinates believe in my strategic orientation. Hence, my employees will not care about personal conflicts with me because they know that my behavior in life and work is consistent and can estimate how they behave toward me. (P21)*

## **ii. Self-leading**

Many participants emphasize the importance of cultivating self-awareness skills and self-leading in projecting their leadership identity. They argue that a clear understanding of their strengths, weaknesses, competencies, and personality is essential to determine what aspects should be highlighted and how they can effectively illustrate their identity. They assert that a robust self-awareness ability is a pivotal success factor in their leadership journey. Particularly when aiming to nurture relationships with key individuals in their personal networks, women acknowledge the necessity of setting aside ego, managing emotions, and prioritizing mutual benefits. In specific sectors, where self-leading skills are crucial for career development—such as coaching or consulting—women perceive that the ability to lead their emotions and attitudes allows them to influence partners or customers through positive behavior. This, in turn, significantly contributes to customer loyalty, a key factor in their career success within these fields.

Participants generally find various ways to address both business and life issues, opting for solutions aligned with their sense and self-awareness of their potential. Certain leaders attribute their awareness of self-leading skills to experiences of failure. They contend that the more painful a failure, the more effectively it highlights their weaknesses, enabling them to design action plans for improvement. The key takeaway is not to succumb to disappointment but to cultivate resilience and seek solutions for moving forward. In fact, women leaders acknowledge that without robust self-awareness and self-leading capabilities, recovering after each failure becomes challenging. Some participants explicitly state that lacking self-confidence hinders their belief in their capabilities. Through self-leading, they find the means to navigate stress and anxiety, adopting a calm and thoughtful approach. They recognize that unforeseen events are inevitable, but by controlling themselves and effectively dealing with external circumstances, they demonstrate the result of a well-honed self-leading skill—knowing what needs to be done,

how to showcase their competencies, and how to manage their emotions in challenging situations.

*There could be many fluctuations in our lives. To stabilize, we must see ourselves, and inner thinking can help us find some good values that motivate us to go ahead. After my successes and failures, I know that I cannot hold everything. I should trade off something for some others. The key point is that I need to be aware of which one could be remained and which should be released. (P13)*

In their managerial roles, many of them acknowledge that perfection in every specialization is unattainable, and their employees may excel in specific areas. Recognizing their own strengths and weaknesses enables them to strategically allocate tasks among subordinates, fostering an environment conducive to their development. Women leaders widely accept that in areas where they lack expertise, they are open to allowing their subordinates to take the lead. They don't hesitate to relinquish control, empowering their team members to self-manage tasks. The central focus is on cultivating a positive work environment that nurtures employees' self-confidence and contributes to the enhancement of their leadership capabilities.

In general, women leaders share a common understanding that they can only bring benefits to others when they are happy, self-aware, and capable of leading themselves. Consequently, before successfully leading others, they prioritize leading and controlling themselves.

### **iii. Achievements**

The consensus among participants is a recognition that people commonly evaluate women's leadership effectiveness based on their achievements. Despite their self-perception and acknowledgment by others as leaders, they understand the imperative to substantiate their leadership through tangible accomplishments. Simply claiming a leadership role without a track record of success in their career development is not considered sufficient. Women leaders

firmly believe that their achievements play a crucial role in building trust and strengthening personal relationships as they navigate their professional journeys.

In response to inquiries about their leadership experiences, women leaders overwhelmingly highlight their achievements in business and company management. They view these achievements as compelling evidence that attests to their outstanding competencies and qualifies them for managerial and leadership roles. Women leaders universally recognize the immense significance of leaving a tangible mark in each phase of their career development. They perceive success in the present as a foundational step that paves the way for future growth. Many participants acknowledge that their past achievements played a pivotal role in securing new positions, contributing to the construction of their personal reputation. They are keenly aware that their track record of accomplishments serves as the primary driver in shaping their personal identity as leaders. It becomes evident that leaders cannot authentically construct their leadership identity without leaving a significant impact on their business and industry.

Additionally, women leaders take immense pride in their achievements when they extend to an international level. One leader, with evident pride, shared her recognition as one of the Top 50 Vietnamese businesswomen chosen by Forbes Vietnam—an accolade that stands as both admirable and inspiring to fellow women and leaders. Another leader paints a picture of her success by recounting her participation as a guest speaker in international events. These international accolades and engagements not only amplify their personal satisfaction but also serve as powerful examples for other women aspiring to leadership roles.

Not only sharing stories of their successes, they also delve into narratives of their challenging management experiences. Some recognize that painful experiences or setbacks can contribute significantly to shaping their reputation. In a similar vein, one participant emphasizes that achievements go beyond awards recognizing women's contributions to others or their

businesses; achievements also encompass their efforts to overcome personal limits. The acknowledgement of struggles and the determination to transcend limitations are regarded as integral aspects of their leadership journey and contribute to the multifaceted definition of achievements in their professional endeavors.

*It was when I became the representative of a luxury brand in Vietnam. I built up the branch from zero, setting up an organizational structure that was nothing before I took over the position. (P12)*

*After my failed experience in the company's competition for outstanding employees, I considered it a good chance to be self-aware of my drawbacks. I managed to fix my weaknesses in two years. Then, I successfully built up self-confidence in my expertise. In the last year, I achieved 3rd Top employees and became one of 100 Top employees who were rewarded. That's my true identity because I can show my efforts to create achievements after my failures. (P14)*

For some women leaders, their family happiness, particularly the quality of their relationship with their spouses, stands out as a significant achievement. In their perspective, sustaining family happiness represents one of the most profound accomplishments. This sentiment is shared across women leaders in both small and large companies, emphasizing a collective view that defines true achievements as achieving a harmonious work-family balance. The recognition of the importance of family well-being as a core accomplishment reflects a holistic understanding of success that encompasses both professional and personal spheres.

*My family members don't finance my business, but they contribute to and impact my success. After all, I have to return to my family, and I don't want to make my family members suffer from her success, and all private relationships are broken due to the lack of caring. (P19)*

*I'm regretful that I did not maintain my family stability after my outstanding achievements. At the end of my divorce, I think that my achievement was not sufficient due to her family loss. (P32)*

In general, women leaders believe that their achievements encompass success in both their professional and personal lives. They recognize that constructing their leadership identity involves not only leaving a significant career footprint but also maintaining and nurturing family happiness. The integrated perspective underscores the interconnectedness of their achievements, acknowledging that true success extends beyond the professional realm and incorporates a harmonious balance between work and life.

Overall, personal attributes, including born and made attributes, could be helpful to explain how women in Vietnam context tend to be modest and unintentionally show a form of their leadership. They don't suppose to hide their leadership or actively showcase; instead, they use their personal attributes to bring values to others and construct mutual trust in their relationship development. It's consistent to norms for Vietnam women but it's contradicted to theoretical leadership traits and behaviors for effectiveness.

With this analysis, the tentative behaviors of Vietnam women leadership are contradicted to leadership efficiency theory. In this research sample, participants perceive that the modesty softly and gradually construct their leadership identity, not self-promotion or agentic behaviors by some previous studies. Additionally, female leaders often don't proactively claim their leadership identity; instead, they strengthen themselves and strive for personal excellence every day. They don't deliberately showcase a specific identity but engage in a process of self-renewal from within, actively building a positive and value-driven self. They also don't intentionally influence others in one way or another; rather, it's a development process from within a moral community, creating a shared field of energy among individuals with similar frequencies.

## **2. Contextual dimensions**

In the earlier section, we delved into personal attributes to shed light on women's perceptions of leadership, serving as a robust foundation for shaping their behavior as leaders. Their interactions with key individuals in their personal networks inadvertently and organically communicate their leadership identity. In this segment, the focus shifts to key contextual attributes, encompassing both personal and cultural context. The analysis aims to demonstrate that these attributes play a crucial role as facilitators, encouraging women to reconsider their behaviors and interactions with key figures in their personal networks. Additionally, these attributes emerge as pivotal factors that prompt women to reassess the significance of individuals in their personal networks, subsequently guiding them in adopting appropriate strategies to nurture these connections.

Vietnamese culture, influenced by a blend of Confucian, socialist, and modern global values, affects women's leadership identity in various ways. Similar to other East Asian cultures, Confucian values emphasize traditional gender roles, where women are often expected to prioritize family duties and maintain domestic harmony. This can limit their aspirations and opportunities for leadership. Furthermore, Confucianism promotes respect for authority and hierarchical structures, often favoring male leadership in both family and societal contexts. Gradually, more development opportunities are enhanced to let women join leadership and other specific industries. However, even though the Vietnam Women's Union and other organizations support women's rights and leadership development, the implementation and effectiveness of these policies can vary, and traditional biases may persist.

### **c. Personal context**

#### **i. Leadership opportunities**

For certain women leaders, the perception is that in stable situations, women may not inherently harbor ambitions for leadership roles and lack intrinsic motivation to assume such positions. However, when life or work undergoes fluctuations, it propels them forward, compelling them to seize opportunities to showcase their leadership abilities. In specific scenarios, they find themselves appointed as temporary leaders due to a lack of available candidates to handle the situation. Rather than becoming demotivated by thoughts such as “*I was given this opportunity only because no one else wanted it,*” they remain eager to assume the position, viewing it as a significant chance to exhibit their creativity and leadership skills. Women leaders recognize that in challenging and biased situations, they have more opportunities to demonstrate their contributions to those circumstances. They perceive these opportunities as granted by fate or a higher power, where certain individuals extend help and offer opportunities for them to showcase their competencies.

*Honestly, it was impossible to recruit a new head of the training department at that time. I was trying to set up a big influential education center. It was quite fast. Within ten months, the center offered the first products, and the first classes were of the proper scale. Until that time, I knew that I had the capabilities to work. I also thought I loved learning new things, so learning something new for a particular position was not that challenging. (P5)*

Indeed, having leadership opportunities serves as a fundamental prerequisite for developing effective leadership. However, to ascend to greater heights, women leaders must possess strong leadership competencies and expertise. In essence, opportunities lay a robust foundation for constructing a leadership identity. Participants have conveyed that in the past, there was a

prevailing belief that leadership was an inherent trait, much like the gifted voice or musical talents of a singer. Yet, as women delve into the study of leadership, they come to realize that while innate potential is crucial, the cultivation of skills through consistent practice is equally vital. The right attitude towards practice becomes the catalyst for enhancing and refining their inherent leadership capabilities.

Some women acknowledge the significance of leadership and actively seize leadership opportunities when faced with tasks that require delegation and coordination. In scenarios where they cannot handle all the intricacies alone, they assign tasks to others, providing encouragement and motivation to ensure successful task completion aligned with their expectations. Developing leadership skills becomes essential in fostering seamless connections among subordinates. When changing their jobs, especially from larger corporations to smaller ones or from holding companies to startups, women leaders recognize that leadership in smaller entities is significantly influenced by the characteristics of their leaders. Assuming leadership roles in such settings provides them with opportunities to manifest the leadership style they aspire to cultivate. Notably, in challenging situations like financial difficulties or the absence of operational policies, women leaders find increased opportunities to reshape the company's governance processes in alignment with their leadership orientation, presenting avenues to showcase their leadership competencies.

## **ii. Learning opportunities**

Learning and continuous self-improvement have emerged as essential cornerstones for both personal and professional growth. Identifying and capitalizing on learning opportunities stands out as a critical success factor in this developmental journey. Nearly all participants attest to the significant impact of learning opportunities on shaping their leadership perspectives.

Throughout their managerial roles, participants have been afforded opportunities to learn, particularly when assuming positions in the training department. This exposure provides them with more chances to glean insights from renowned lecturers and esteemed leaders, drawing from their experiences and knowledge. Engaging in training programs focused on leadership skills becomes instrumental in shaping their leadership orientation and refining their unique leadership styles.

In certain instances, women who follow specific religions find profound lessons in their faith. For instance, those practicing Buddhism express a heightened awareness of leadership principles rooted in their religious teachings. Additionally, pursuing formal courses such as an MBA, coach training, or programs like “Search Inside Yourself” by Google contributes to enhancing their knowledge and understanding of leadership.

*Before studying for an MBA, I thought that leadership meant leading others and not leading myself. Then, my leadership perception changed. I joined a course named “Search Inside Yourself” that let me investigate my troubles at work, in my family life, and especially in my personal life, which made me stressed and tired. After, I understood that I needed to be happy and calm to deal with each issue in order. Without mindfulness, I cannot lead myself and obviously cannot lead others.*

(P5)

### **iii. Unexpected events**

For many women, the notion of possessing leadership capabilities and understanding the core essence of leadership may have never crossed their minds. However, when unexpected challenges arise in their lives, such as family issues or work-related setbacks, they undergo a sudden realization of the significance of leadership. This newfound awareness compels them to take charge of leading themselves first, clarifying their leadership position in relation to others,

and finding ways to maintain equilibrium within themselves while influencing those around them.

For others, leadership emerges as a solution in response to personal challenges. P17 shares that, faced with numerous problems in her job, family life, and personal life, she came to recognize the pivotal importance of leadership. Similarly, P19 describes how difficulties with her family-in-laws motivated her to seek change. Confronted with pressure and unsupportive behaviors from her family-in-laws, she decided to transform the situation and acknowledged the need to assume a leadership role and acquire the skills to influence others.

#### **d. Cultural context**

Due to certain cultural nuances in Vietnam, women encounter barriers hindering their career advancement. Participants highlight the influence of Confucian and Feudalism philosophies as factors that detrimentally affect women's opportunities. Additionally, some participants recount personal experiences related to the challenges they face in developing professional relationships. The specific narratives shed light on these barriers and their impact on women's career progression.

##### **i. Gender stereotypes**

Several participants confront challenges related to being undervalued in terms of their competencies, particularly when collaborating with male partners. Instances reveal that these partners may doubt the participants' capabilities, especially in careers where male counterparts rely on female expertise for decision-making.

P22, for instance, recognized that her male customers perceived her coaching capacity as insufficient. Instead, they seemed to view her role more as an educator, creating discomfort in dynamic coaching. P3 understood that Japanese counterparts aligned women's beauty with lower competencies. This association led the partners to express reluctance in collaborating

with her, particularly as the sole woman in a negotiation team. P19 shared a poignant memory of facing negativity when establishing her own startup business, experiencing skepticism simply because she was a woman embarking on entrepreneurship with an all-male team. Additionally, she encountered misunderstanding from friends and family members regarding her collaboration with male colleagues.

Due to pervasive gender stereotypes, women frequently encounter barriers in their career advancement, particularly in terms of promotions and leadership appointments. This is notably evident in Vietnam, where men are typically favored over women when it comes to appointing leaders, a trend influenced by Confucian ideology. P18 elucidates that labeling a woman as a leader is met with psychological constraints, perceived as “a loss of face” for men unless she demonstrates exceptional excellence. Such perceptions are rooted in feudalistic ideologies that elevate men and diminish the value attributed to women, reinforcing gender-based hierarchies.

In the context of the aforementioned stereotypes, another consequence is the prevalence of sexual harassment experienced by women, manifested through men’s thoughts, expressions, and behaviors. Within such societal frameworks, women are often linked to notions of beauty, and some men presumptuously assume the right to engage in sexual harassment towards their female colleagues.

P16 discloses that approximately 80% of males harbor such thoughts. To navigate the realms of business and maintain relationships, women leaders may find themselves compelled to tolerate, to varying degrees, instances of sexual harassment. The crucial consideration lies in determining the threshold at which women leaders are willing to accept such harassment. Even when burdened with busy schedules and an awareness that attending social events might expose them to harassment, some women leaders feel obligated to participate, as refusal may lead to consequences such as contract termination or a lack of promotional opportunities.

P13 points out that women encounter more challenges than men in cultivating professional relationships. If women establish close ties with male counterparts, even strictly within a business context, they risk being misconstrued as having unofficial relationships, such as engaging in sexual relations. This misperception has the potential to strain relationships with family members, reflecting a negative gender stereotype that detrimentally impacts women's career progression.

Due to these gender stereotypes, some women opt to abstain from leadership opportunities. They fear that collaboration or close working relationships with male partners may be interpreted opaquely. According to their perspective, Vietnamese women are expected to embody four distinct virtues: "propriety, righteousness, integrity, and shame." Consequently, engaging in private meetings with male business partners may induce feelings of shame due to the perceived personal relationship between a man and a woman. In certain instances, attending dinners with male partners, even in the company of their managers, leaves some women with the impression that they serve as mere instruments for relaxation and entertainment. Although the reasons may be elusive, many women share a similar sentiment.

The key distinction lies in the fact that while some women find strategies to overcome such thinking, others find it challenging to break free from these ingrained perceptions, resulting in significant personal distress affecting their professional development.

## **ii. Relationship construction**

The Confucian philosophy dictates the dynamics of the relationship between leaders and subordinates, with subordinates often extending their care not only to leaders but also to their relatives. In international companies, particularly those focused on research and development innovation, managers highly value employees with innovative and creative ideas. These organizations are typically task-oriented, placing less emphasis on relationship care. However,

in Vietnam, women spend a considerable amount of time on networking. Consequently, business plans are executed by subordinates, while leaders focus on relationship care. The ingroup-outgroup dynamic is prevalent, especially in state-owned organizations, where subordinates are required to remember important dates like birthday anniversaries of the managers' parents and grandparents. Women even find themselves remembering and prioritizing the ceremony days of their managers' family over their own.

Despite facing challenges in cultivating personal relationships with influential individuals, women acknowledge the importance of such connections. They recognize that these relationships can provide valuable support for their professional growth. For instance, when they encounter unfamiliar topics, having a trustworthy person in their network allows them to seek advice and obtain necessary information. Engaging in conversations with accomplished and reliable individuals enables them to learn and acquire valuable lessons. Unlike the traditional networks where familial ties were crucial for advancement, women now appreciate the role of relationships as a form of social capital, contributing significantly to corporate development in Vietnam.

The business landscape revolves around three primary resources: financial, human, and social capital. Unlike other cultures, Vietnamese business practices prioritize relationship-building as a foundational step before venturing into business development. Typically, individuals pursue specific majors after graduation, and as they enhance their skill sets, promotions are often influenced by the relationships they cultivate, particularly with higher-ups. Promotion based on inherent traits or leadership potential is uncommon, making personal connections with key figures crucial for career advancement. Vietnamese professionals not only leverage existing relationships but also nurture them by connecting people who can offer mutually beneficial value exchanges. In certain situations, women may gain access to sensitive information, such as lobbying for financial support or acquiring governmental licenses, through personal

relationships with partners, highlighting the significance of social capital in the Vietnamese business context.

*When I'm required to find a location to open a new school and must work with governmental agencies, the most difficult action is to calculate how much money could be given to them. Gradually, when I build a good relationship, they can openly tell me how much money is relevant for each case.*

### **iii. Family responsibilities**

In the context of Vietnam, women often feel compelled to adhere to family responsibilities, a perspective shaped by the influence of Confucian philosophy embedded in the educational system. The rigid training programs influenced by Confucian ideologies establish a framework of behaviors and attitudes that traditional women tend to follow, aligning with gender stereotypes that bind them to numerous family responsibilities. Feudalism and Confucian culture further contribute to the challenges and stereotypes faced by women. These cultural norms traditionally assign primary responsibilities to women, including pregnancy, childbirth, family care, and household management, allowing their husbands to focus on career development. These ideologies act as impediments to women's opportunities for development, particularly when presented with promotion chances, as they often grapple with the demands of these ingrained responsibilities.

Successful women leaders often require support from their relatives or the freedom to be unburdened by extensive family responsibilities. However, innate maternal instincts lead women to recognize the importance of sharing and caring for their growing children. During the teenage years, they feel compelled to be present for their children and are unwilling to delegate this responsibility to grandparents. Women understand that, as children mature, they need parental guidance and involvement, and these demands fall primarily on females other

than males in the Vietnamese context. Juggling various family obligations, meeting the expectations of other relatives, and managing these responsibilities generate significant stress in their lives. P13 asserts that Vietnamese females are bonded to some family responsibilities. Despite the support from their husbands, certain natural roles cannot be easily replaced or relinquished.

Several participants expressed their acknowledgment of the gender-based imbalance in promotion opportunities, attributing it to cultural stereotypes surrounding family responsibilities. Women's leadership is significantly constrained by Vietnamese cultural norms. The societal expectation is that women should marry husbands with higher education and experience. If not, women are expected to take a step back and show appreciation for their husbands. This cultural norm has persisted in Vietnam for an extended period.

Many women, fearing societal judgment, choose to forgo promotion opportunities to prioritize their family and support their husband's development. There's a prevalent concern in Vietnam that focusing too much on work might blur family responsibilities, potentially impacting family happiness. Some women worry that in Vietnamese families where wives hold high positions and husbands stay at home, traditional gender roles are challenged, leading to potential familial breakdowns. The perception is that husbands may struggle with wives acting as authoritative figures, disrupting the natural roles of women as nurturers and men as providers.

Gender stereotypes persist in organizations, with concerns that women in top management positions may be perceived as looking down on men. However, in the modern era, women can work more equitably than in the past when success for women could be negatively evaluated. Some individuals still harbor the belief that women may be promoted due to private relationships with their managers, financial transactions, or engaging in sexual relationships. Although this perspective may reflect a narrow viewpoint, it still lingers in the mindset of some

Vietnamese people. Consequently, there's a misconception that successful women leaders are unhappy in their private lives.

Some women find it challenging to bear the weight of family responsibilities, leading them to face a difficult choice between prioritizing their families or advancing in their careers. In pursuit of career growth, they may feel compelled to make the tough decision of sacrificing their family life, even opting for divorce. P19 discusses the reasons behind her divorce, attributing it to a lack of empathy from her husband.

This section underscores the importance of contextual factors in facilitating women's transformative journey in redefining their leadership perceptions and identifying key figures within their personal networks crucial for their leadership development. Many women view personal challenges as opportunities for self-discovery, prompting them to gain a deeper understanding of their identity, the reasons behind their potential for development, and the necessary behavioral adjustments. Additionally, certain women emphasize the imperative of possessing robust intrinsic motivation to transcend contexts shaped by Confucian philosophies. Their consciousness of contextual influences on identity becomes evident as they navigate personal fluctuations, prompting a reevaluation of priorities essential to their lives and careers. Consequently, they strive to adopt behavior consistently with their envisioned leadership roles.

### **3. Women's collective leadership identity construction**

For some participants, the process of claiming their leadership identity doesn't follow a specific method but is rather built through daily interactions based on trust and value exchange. In their view, leadership identity emerges steadily through the cultivation of mutual trust between leaders and subordinates. In this context, mutual trust with key actors serves as a particular precursor, elucidating how women leaders both assert and bestow their leadership identity.

Granting, in theoretical terms, involves the actions taken by an individual to confer a leader or follower identity onto another person. These grants can originate from individuals actively engaged in collaborative work with the focal person, where the latter assumes follower roles. Alternatively, grants can come from people who may not be directly involved in the work but still recognize and endorse a person as a leader, for instance, a colleague from a different department. Therefore, awareness of leadership identity can emerge from both those directly engaged in collaboration and those indirectly connected but aware of the focal individual.

It seems that women in Vietnam, influenced by Feudalism and Confucianism, tend to be modest and hesitant to acknowledge their own achievements. Instead, they prefer to share stories about others in their work and life, particularly those with high status in their community who appreciate their positive attributes. The validation of their leadership identity often comes from the recognition and appreciation of others in the community. During interviews, women emphasize the closeness of their relationships and the mutual care they share with influential figures in their community. The consistent focus on values, including **expertise, efforts,** and recognition of others' achievements, underscores the importance of these factors in shaping women's leadership identity in the eyes of others. It seems that the values women contribute to their relationships are highly valued and acknowledged by their peers.

In leadership roles, women have earned the trust of others in their **expertise**, as discussed earlier. Consequently, others rely on solutions proposed by women in my sample when they encounter life or work challenges. Some participants note that their leaders often have numerous "flying" ideas, at times impractical, and they, as subordinates, play a crucial role in grounding these ideas into practical implementation.

*Our leaders seem to "be flying" in their ideas. So, my function was to give specific solutions to turn their ideas into practices. I'm normally regarded as "Mrs. Thank*

*Tam” (the name of a famous psychology consultant in Vietnam). People usually tell me their troubles and ask for advice. Maybe thanks to my maturity, they believe in me. (P18)*

Consequently, when women’s managers believe in their expertise and **honest contributions to the companies**, the managers speak positively about them and highly appreciate their involvement. This positive recognition from higher-ups serves as a strong mechanism in constructing women’s leadership identity, as they gain the trust and respect of top leaders.

Most women believe that not only does their managers’ trust in their expertise and contributions enhance their identity, but also the trust of partners and others related to their responsibilities can elevate their leadership. One participant shared a story about opening a training school where many parents, who had worked with her before, believed in her expertise and witnessed her achievements, trusting the quality of her training program. She explained that these busy parents entrusted their children’s learning to her school with unwavering confidence.

*Almost all parents here know me well, and they consider my school as their lean for their children’s learning. They have a similar learning foundation to mine. Like me, they want to find a rather outstanding program to develop their children. They found me, they believe in my expertise, and let me have full power to manage their children. (P16)*

*“Some top managers in organizations used to ask me for advice, and up to now, they have asked me for some advice if they have some problems. Some people take turns giving advice to me because they work in corporations, and they have more experience. I share my problems with him, and he can advise me a lot. (P15)*

Effort is a prominent factor that women emphasize when discussing how they cultivate relationships and establish their leadership identity. Effort has a magnetic quality, creating an invisible attraction that draws people with similar value systems and even wins over former competitors.

Moreover, women recognize that when they see their employees passionately working and emulating their dedication, it is a form of acknowledgment of their leadership identity. Employees who mirror their leaders' commitment are seen as admiring their leadership style and willingly dedicate themselves to work in a similar manner. Women leaders express their efforts and passion for their work by not only completing tasks on time but also achieving the highest possible results. They pay attention to every detail of their job, going beyond meeting deadlines to ensure the quality meets standards. Consequently, when employees accept and adhere to these standards, they are, in essence, granting a leadership identity to women leaders.

*“I just want to finish my assigned tasks and make others working with me happy and satisfied and value the time they worked for me. I am showing you this message from my ex-subordinate. She no longer works with me, but for every difficult issue in her life and work, she usually asks me to coach her, which really motivates me and is valuable for me rather than a flashy image.”*

*“Some of my ex-subordinates announced that they would still work for the center in case I came back to be the Director. So, I think that people with long-term cooperation with me are aligned with my leadership, and they are willing to change jobs to go with me when I change to new departments or companies.”*

Women in the research demonstrate a keen understanding of the Cause-and-Effect principles, acknowledging that the efforts they invest today will bear fruit in the future. Consequently, in every facet of their work and life, they meticulously attend to even the smallest details, aiming

to achieve the best results and believing that these efforts will yield positive outcomes in the long run. This narrative aligns with the belief that the values and efforts invested in the past continue to resonate and influence relationships in the present and future.

In the realm of constructing leadership identity, women often ascribe leadership traits to others that they find admirable and impactful. These narratives often involve stories of how others perceive and speak about them. Moreover, women underscore the reciprocal value exchange inherent in each relationship, whether in the form of intangible emotions or tangible support, be it financial or physical.

**V. Key aspects of women’s personal networks**

**1. Key actors in Vietnamese women’s personal networks**

Constructing a leadership identity is intricately tied to relational attributes formed through interactions with others. The sustainability of these interactions relies on the delivery of values and benefits to those involved. This section delves into the various types of personal networks, elucidating the mechanisms inherent in each category to shed light on the individuals deemed significant in women’s personal networks and the strategies employed to cultivate these connections. By exploring how women leverage their personal network resources, this analysis aims to provide insights into the process of constructing their leadership identity.

Employing tools such as Nvivo and Leximancer for data processing has unveiled emergent relationship concepts. Subsequently, this examination of relationships will concentrate on the primary figures within women’s personal networks and the fundamental activities undertaken to nurture these connections. The emerging relationship concepts are outlined as follows:

<b>Network’s actors</b>		<b>Network nurturing</b>		<b>Values</b>	
friends	78	believe	4	life	44

<b>Network's actors</b>		<b>Network nurturing</b>		<b>Values</b>	
managers	33	build	57	value	22
family	32	share	45	home	18
women	30	care	44	experience	12
sister	29	support	38	money	11
staff	26	learn	37	love	10
children	23	understand	22	success	7
leaders	21	connect	12	trust	6
customers	12	coach	11	energy	5
partner	11	influence	10	balance	3
brothers	8	lead	8	beautiful	1
director	8	respect	8	qualities	9
parents	6	study	4	attitude	6
husband	4	rest	3	knowledge	6
mother	2	Facebook	9	emotions	3
		media	9	education	2
		brand	5	expertise	2
		communication	5		
		explain	2		

Table 4.2: List of dominants words in “Personal networks” concept (The author)

Given time constraints, women often find it challenging to manage all their relationships, necessitating a focus on key contacts. Previous studies have emphasized kinship and same-gender relationships due to time limitations and prevailing gender stereotypes. However, in this research, when queried about significant contacts in both work and private life contexts, women highlighted a diverse array of individuals providing support in emotional, appraisal, instrumental, and informational aspects. Notably, the study delves beyond traditional emotional support, uncovering contacts that contribute to women’s emotional stability and act as companions during life and work challenges. Some contacts serve as spiritual supporters, imparting philosophies and practices that guide women through difficulties.

Utilizing Nvivo and Leximancer for data analysis, this study identifies key concepts and themes from interviews. The findings reveal women’s primary focus on developing relationships within their work and family spheres. In terms of work relationships, women typically prioritize connections with their superiors and subordinates. On the familial front, it’s evident that women

channel a significant portion of their efforts towards family care, encompassing children, parents, and siblings.

<b>Concepts</b>	<b>Key actors</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
<b>relationships</b>	Managers (Leaders, director)	62	20.0%
<b>relationships</b>	Family (Mother, sister, brothers, children, parents, husband)	104	33.5%
<b>relationships</b>	Subordinates	26	8.4%
<b>relationships</b>	Professional community (Customers, partner, profession, community, friends)	104	33.5%
<b>relationships</b>	Buddhism	14	4.5%

Table 4.3: List of dominant actors in “Personal networks” concept (The author)

In the upcoming sections, the key actors in women’s networks, encompassing managers, subordinates, family members, professional communities, and individuals with religious commonalities will be delved into. These will be discussed within different profiles to cluster groups of women with similar network focuses. The subsequent analysis will spotlight the primary actors that women predominantly prioritize in their network development, taking into account variations in their industry characteristics and across different generations.

#### **a. Managers**

Some respondents acknowledge their managers as a motivator and even consider them akin to a relative, offering advice and assistance to navigate challenges. In instances where women encounter urgent issues and lack the motivation to progress, their managers provide encouraging words, spurring them to give their best and complete projects promptly. Despite not necessarily admiring their managers’ competencies, these individuals hold deep respect for the supportive and encouraging approach their managers adopt. Consequently, they view their managers as an emotional anchor during challenging work situations.

P15	<p><i>I don't learn experiences from my managers. However, he raised my spirit and working attitude. When he meets me, he always asks: "How long will you finish your course?". That question motivates me a lot.</i></p> <p><i>... This relationship can have a huge impact on my work. However, it's tough to define it, and I find it difficult to explain how my managers influences me. I can just say he is my motivator, especially in some troublesome situations.</i></p> <p><i>... I have three layers of relationship. Most of my advice is from the third layer of my relationship, including my parents and direct managers. Those people never criticize my work and love me unconditionally. They are my close friends. They are the right people to help me overcome challenges.</i></p>
P12	<p><i>My CEO is a really specific person. He requires me to finish everything immediately. Once he asks subordinates to implement tasks, everyone must follow and finish. In the beginning, I was a little bit shocked. After that, I have become familiar. I have been working for him for ten years.</i></p>
P7	<p><i>Mrs. Hong takes care of my private issues; she regards me as a younger sister rather than a subordinate. Perhaps no other managers calls a subordinate before her marriage and asks, "Do you have sex before your marriage day? Do you have enough money for your wedding? Do you know how to use condoms? ..."</i></p> <p><i>... when I decide to buy a new house, she asks me whether I have enough money; if not, she can fund me. I think not many managers are like her</i></p> <p><i>... I also regard her as my big sister. I can share with her some sensitive stories that I may not want to share with my mother.</i></p>
P16	<p><i>She is the person who advised me to return to Vietnam after my graduation in the USA. She told me there would be some exciting opportunities for someone like me. She also advised me on a potential career path. Then, anytime I find difficulties, I come to her and ask for critical advice.</i></p>

Certain women express the view that the connection between superiors and subordinates should extend beyond professional duties, asserting that personal relationships can boost performance effectiveness. As a result, the collaborative support and interdependence fostered contribute to the co-creation of a collective brand identity. Over time, some women observe a transformation in their behavior, aligning more closely with that of their superiors. Conversely, others contend

that, despite lacking intentional efforts to form personal bonds with their managers shared similarities lead to a gradual and organic closeness in their relationships.

A participant recounts her collaboration with a foreign manager, emphasizing his remarkable consistency that she admires and draws inspiration from. Despite acknowledging his lack of formal leadership skills, she holds deep respect for him due to his unwavering consistency in both work and life. Another participant speaks fondly of her ex-managers, expressing deep respect for him. Having immersed himself in the study of Buddhism ideology for a long time, he has cultivated a unique way of interacting with others. From her perspective, he stands out as the first person who has helped her unravel the roots of various issues, surpassing the teachings of her parents, teachers, and colleagues. She emphasizes that he remains her ultimate support, especially in moments of extreme difficulty.

#### **b. Family members**

Family members serve as a vital support system participants. Many argue that achieving a balance between family and work is a hallmark of effective leadership. Additionally, participants unanimously agree that the most valuable advice often comes from their close relationships, primarily their family members. These individuals offer unconditional love and support, never criticizing their work. They play a crucial role in helping women leaders overcome challenges, addressing feelings of loneliness or failure. Through encouragement, they contribute to the growth and strength of women leaders, a pivotal aspect of their development.

When queried about the primary contributors to their career development, women leaders overwhelmingly attribute a significant role to **their parents**. According to them, their parents have laid a solid foundation for their growth, providing them with systematic education and optimal conditions for learning and advancement. They emphasize that historical societal norms, particularly the Feudatory regime, imposed various family responsibilities on women,

acting as impediments to their progress. Nonetheless, with unwavering support from their family, particularly their parents, women leaders believe they can successfully navigate and elevate their career trajectories.

*My father-in-law always tells me, “You are intelligent; I should expose your intelligence.” Even though he was born in Feudalism, he doesn’t have the perception of gender stereotypes. He always perceives that once a person has good competencies, he/she should find opportunities to expose his/her strengths.*

*When I am required to go to business, I pack my bags and go on immediately. I just have to inform my parents-in-law so that they can be ready to take care of my children.*

Their deep appreciation extends to their parents’ education and experience, which forms a sturdy foundation for their intellectual development, shapes their career visions, and positions their values within society. Additionally, in certain instances, their family background plays a pivotal role in providing a clear direction for their career orientation.

*My parents have always believed in me, creating a good condition for my development. Thirty years ago, they had a mindset to let me study abroad. So, I feel I must respect what I have and what my parents are trying to give me. I always try to learn better and be more attractive; that’s what my father always reminds me of.*  
(P21)

*Many years ago, I wrote a post on my Facebook that my mother navigated my career orientation with a straightforward mindset. My father was an accountant, and my mother said that if I could not find a job after graduation, I would replace my father’s position in his company when he retired. At that time, the society worked*

*in that way. The second thing my mother clearly saw is that I cannot be balanced if I am too responsive. She likes me to be more resilient, patient, and more tolerant. (P2)*

The second crucial pillar of support comes from their husbands. Husbands play a pivotal role in encouraging them or hindering them to pursue their professional endeavors. Some participants acknowledge that they are not adept at cooking and other household chores due to infrequent practice. While they may not fit the traditional mold of a perfect wife and mother, their husbands accept this reality and willingly take on those responsibilities. The women realize that without the support of their husbands, achieving a balance between work and life would be challenging. Their husband provides sharing, encouragement, and empathy to help them navigate through certain family responsibilities.

*My husband supports me. Honestly, without him, I cannot balance my work and life. I cannot be a perfect mother and wife for family responsibilities without my husband's support. That's enough for my children to know they have a mother. I cannot take the time to cook and prepare all the dishes that they like. My husband takes care of it. He never claims for my absence at home. I think it's the main reason why I can achieve high results.*

Some participants express that at times, they view their husbands as individuals with whom they can share both joy and sorrow. They mention that sometimes they engage in casual conversations with their husbands, not necessarily seeking advice or comments. In certain instances, their husbands serve as motivators, encouraging the women to take on challenging responsibilities assertively. When both spouses work in the same industry, husbands can provide valuable insights and solutions to address their wives' professional challenges.

*...My husband is also a person for my storytelling. I have demands to talk and to tell stories without the need to receive feedback.*

*...It's so hard to see my impatience and failure. I will manage to find new methods to overcome my failure. If others tell me I cannot do that, I never believe, and it's not persuasive enough. My husband understands my characteristics and lets me do what I'm supposed to do. He is the person to encourage me when I want to take on a challenging task.*

However, only 2 of 33 participants talk about their husband as a person to facilitate them in career development. Some women share poignant experiences involving their family-in-law and husbands to emphasize the critical role of family support in their career development. Ultimately, faced with challenging circumstances, they make the decision to divorce in order to prioritize their personal and professional growth.

*...When I was married, I contributed a lot to my family-in-law. However, it was not enough for them. At that time, I was in the most successful period in my life. However, my parents-in-law regarded me as an insufficient mother and worker because they saw me stay at home all day and night. They think that I have to depend financially on their son.*

*...When I received the award, I knew other people regarded me as a person who inspired them to develop careers, especially other women leaders. However, I feel I totally failed. Then, I decided that it's better to have an influence on my family, husband, and children rather than on any other person.*

*...Some days, I recognize that I don't want to be well-rewarded in society. Meanwhile, my husband and children don't need my presence in our family. Maybe*

*they are familiar with my long-term absence. It was so painful and ugly when I recognized it.*

Besides their parents and husbands, women find motivation in their **children**. Some admit that the demands of work occasionally lead them to overlook their children, disrupting the work-life balance and causing an excessive focus on their professional responsibilities. The belief that high-performance results would bring satisfaction is challenged as they realize it's insufficient. They come to understand the need to compensate for the time spent on work by prioritizing quality time with their children. Recognizing the necessity for a balanced family life, some women acknowledge that achieving ideal career development is contingent on maintaining equilibrium in both aspects of their lives.

*I think I was imbalanced in work and life; I dedicated too much to my work. I used to think that I could be happy if I reached the peak of my career. However, I was wrong. I suddenly thought that children and my family should have been the first priority. I was supposed to give them the happiest life. But I failed in this project.*

This reflection highlights a common trait among working mothers, balancing their demanding careers with their deep care for their children. Despite their busy schedules, the instinct to be attentive to their children's academic and extracurricular activities remains strong. When asked about their children, the participants' eyes light up with joy, and they often use phrases like "well-behaved," "talented," "empathetic," and "caring."

One participant emphasized that her child is both a goal and a source of support for her. Whenever she feels overwhelmed and considers giving up on work, she thinks of her child. She acknowledges that stopping would mean compromising the quality of life she wants to ensure for her child.

Interestingly, these women are clear about separating work time from time with their children. One participant shared that once she is at work, she completely shuts off thoughts about her child. Unlike other mothers who may constantly check in through cameras or messages, she believes this habit is harmful for both herself and her child. It distracts her from her job and prevents the child from developing independence and self-discipline.

### **c. Subordinates**

In the realm of human resource management, a consensus among participants is that reaping the benefits of their subordinates' success is possible if they view their subordinates as partners and genuinely care for them. Some women leaders express a willingness to take responsibility for mistakes in specific situations instead of their subordinates. They actively guide and protect their subordinates, aiming to prevent errors and foster a supportive environment. Recognizing that subordinates are motivated to uphold the reputation and happiness of their women leaders, these leaders don't dismiss those with lower competencies but seek ways to assist them.

For some women, the success they achieve is closely tied to the attitudes of their subordinates, who demonstrate a commitment to fight for them, trust them, and hold unwavering faith in their leadership. Particularly noteworthy is the impact of ex-subordinates, as their continued belief and willingness to seek advice contribute to the leaders' enhanced reputation. Even when subordinates move on to different companies, these women leaders find that their ex-subordinates still hold a positive impression of the corporation and the leaders themselves. In some instances, ex-subordinates express a desire to return and work for the department if the women leaders resume their roles as leaders/managers.

*My ex-subordinate no longer worked with me, but for every difficult issue in her life and work, she usually asks me to coach her, which really motivates me and is more valuable for me than a flashy image. (P5)*

*I have never faced any case where my subordinates resisted my instruction. Even if they don't work for my company any longer, they still maintain a good impression. They even call me "Big sister" or "Managers" even though they are no longer my employees. (P29)*

#### **d. Professional community**

While the relationships with managers and family members offer women encouragement and spiritual support, connections with professional partners significantly contribute to building positive brand names for women. The majority of participants recognize that their leadership identity aligns with the community identity within which they operate. A Vietnamese saying, "Nguu tâm Nguu, Mã tâm Mã," emphasizes that your identity determines your networks. Consequently, most participants acknowledge that they actively engage with professional communities that share a similar brand identity to the one they aspire to cultivate. Seeking consistency between their desired identities and the communities they join is a recurring theme. When transitioning to different fields of work, participants also gravitate toward networks comprising individuals with similar expertise, viewing it as an opportunity to learn from experiences and bolster their brand in that particular field.

*I used to work in the marketing field; I knew every marketer in my network, as well as their strengths and weaknesses. Now that I'm going to work in academia, I'd like to have deeper relationships; I'd like everybody to know that person A or person B is the one I know about so that people can see that I am present and have a certain network in these academic circles.*

*I'm aware of the value of retaining close relations with professors, as more than just a graduate student, but also as a co-researcher. And, whether I have the*

*opportunity to collaborate, I would like to show my identity in that network and research community (P15)*

Through academic exchanges and mutual agreements, trust and respect gradually develop between the parties involved. As a result, relationships with professional partners evolve into close connections, and they become willing to navigate both the highs and lows of work and even life together.

*My long-standing partners might be able to see my third layer, which is linked to my emotions, feelings, and spirituality, as they have been with me through all the ups and downs of my life and sympathized with me.*

When discussing their reputation, most women prefer not to directly describe their identities. Instead, they focus on portraying the identities of their close friends, partners, or individuals in their immediate networks. They highlight the significance of these close relationships and the positive attributes they can learn from each other. Beyond reputation, the accumulation of knowledge and experience stands out as a key motivator for women to participate in professional communities. When discussing individuals in their professional networks, they express deep respect and admiration for those in high managerial positions within their organizations. The emphasis is on fostering close relationships and exchanging expertise, indicating a strong camaraderie among peers. P13 shared a story about a renowned trainer in Vietnam, expressing her eagerness to embark on a training career after conversing with the trainer. She was inspired by the trainer's work tolerance, igniting her enthusiasm for a career in training.

In the context of leadership identity construction, women tend to attribute leadership characteristics to others that they admire and are significantly influenced by. They share anecdotes of others talking about them as well. Ultimately, they underscore the value exchanged

in each relationship, whether it's in the form of invisible (emotional) or visible (financial or physical) support.

**e. Spiritual community**

It's becoming increasingly common for female leaders to turn to Buddhism when they experience stress and imbalance, seeking inner equilibrium. In challenging situations, some women contemplate the teachings of notable Buddhist philosophers. Zen Master Minh Niem, in particular, has been prominently featured in several participants' interviews, recognized as a figure who emanates a source of positive energy.

*Zen master Thich Minh Niem is my mentor in my mind. When I face challenges, I think about Zen master Thich Minh Niem. He has a principle: "Busy in a hurry". He can do everything with mindfulness and keep calm in all situations, even if they are so urgent. "You cannot finish anything well in case of a rush", he said.*

It's noteworthy that some women acknowledge a shift in their values over time. While they previously prioritized work, their focus has now evolved to center more on family, leading them to reduce activities unrelated to their core values. This transformation is attributed to meditation and adherence to Buddhism, which significantly influences their approach to business, interactions with customers, and leadership of employees. The profound understanding of the law of cause and effect, the principles of honesty in interpersonal relations, and the power of love acquired through Buddhism has a substantial impact on their work and leadership style. Many women in the sample express gratitude for Buddhism, recognizing its teachings on love, tolerance, patience, ego detachment, and non-judgment, which contribute significantly to their leadership philosophy.

Some women openly acknowledge that their embrace of Buddhism beliefs has facilitated self-understanding. Reflecting on their past selves, characterized by short-temperament, impatience, and greed, despite achieving significant work results, they often experienced unhappiness. Their aspirations to regain the joyful and positive attitudes of childhood find fulfillment through Buddhism practice. As these women integrate Buddhism into their daily lives, it evolves from a practiced skill to a natural behavior. The application of Buddhism knowledge becomes ingrained in their routine, effortlessly extending to both work and home. Through meditation and the principles of Buddhism, they cultivate positive thoughts, leading to relaxation of the body, unfreezing of the mind, and the generation of energy for optimal work performance.

In essence, Buddhism serves as a source of strength and energy, nurturing the internal resilience of women leaders. When confronted with challenging situations that demand people-related solutions, they consistently choose options that align with the Law of Cause and Effect, minimizing enduring consequences. While Buddhism may not represent a tangible person with daily interactions, it assumes the role of an invisible guide. In times of trouble, they turn to the principles of Buddhism, relying on them to find suitable solutions. For these participants, Buddha is a transformative figure with a profound impact on both their personal and professional lives, a refuge during moments of uncertainty, emotional turmoil, or imbalance.

*In 2012, I had a disease that made me unable to work. I had to use many medicines. At that time, I understood that I had severe health issues due to a long time I suffered from psychological damage. I found Buddhism. I reduced my workload; I spent more time on my personal habits. At that time, I saw that the most successful achievement in my life was to find myself. (P30)*

*Friends, colleagues and relatives don't affect my leadership style as much as Buddhism does. (P23)*

## **2. The mechanism of women's personal networks**

### **a. Mutual trust**

Most women express that their aim isn't explicitly to establish a leadership identity; instead, they seek to foster collaboration with their partners. Consequently, they find that their identity evolves as a trustworthy individual in the eyes of their counterparts. They believe that trust can be cultivated by exceeding partners' expectations and demonstrating their qualifications through completed tasks. This, in turn, allows partners to become acquainted with their work style, eradicating any concerns about the quality of their work and establishing trust in their professional identity.

Some women prefer to assert a mutual trust and tentatively claim their leadership identity by showcasing their dedication to achieving shared performance effectiveness. Essentially, they exhibit persistence in their work, positively influencing their peers' loyalty and satisfaction. They recognize that others are more likely to believe in them because their peers know they will persist until a task is fully completed. Through this mutual trust, women leaders naturally gain influence in their relationships.

Even for those who haven't consciously contemplated the concept of leadership, some women unintentionally claim a leadership identity. They don't aim to showcase their values or personality but consistently strive to fulfill their responsibilities to the best of their ability. Over time, as others recognize their contributions, belief in women's capabilities grows, and individuals become more willing to collaborate with them.

*I cannot satisfy all people. I only try to accompany people who recognize my contribution, trust me, and have a demand to cooperate with me. I don't want to*

*satisfy people who don't trust me because I know I cannot fill our gap even if I try my best. Our relationship can be based on our trust (P23).*

Most women also recognize that honesty is the optimal approach to cultivate mutual trust and bestow their leadership identity. Given their inherent characteristics, women often establish trust by genuinely caring for others and their loved ones. Women leaders further nurture mutual trust in their network management through sincere expressions of sympathy and genuine concerns for others' personal lives, avoiding overly formal relationships. Their authenticity is demonstrated by paying attention to others' interests or habits, occasionally presenting them with relevant gifts on special occasions. Notably, in state-owned organizations, some participants meticulously remember their managers' significant family milestones to prepare meaningful ceremonial gifts.

*When my subordinates report having a day off due to their relatives' illness, I always answer with the saying: "Take care of yourself."*

*I remember a time when I did not know the case of my employee; I asked her why she had taken many days off, and she said her father was heavily ill. Then, I bought some fruit with a message: "I heard your father was ill. I have some fruit for him. Hope he gets well soon."*

*I am very happy that the gift I gave her is a useful item, and she has been using this bag until now. I think just by observing people, we can understand their desire and what suits them (P29)*

Women leaders comprehend that a clear understanding of others' personal situations allows them to grasp the reasons behind the scenes. This insight enables them to genuinely empathize with others' sorrows and wholeheartedly celebrate their joys.

*“Now, many of my colleagues sell products online; for each shop, I buy something and reserve it to present to someone else on his/her birthday or special occasion. I can easily buy those products from outsiders, even with a lower price, but I buy from my colleagues; that’s the way I create informal relationships; I can create some stories beyond work to share with each other.”*

Women are highly attentive to maintaining credibility in their relationships, recognizing that safeguarding the reputation of those close to them is synonymous with protecting their own brand. They acknowledge the importance of credibility in both nurturing existing connections and establishing new ones, emphasizing the reliance on the prestige of old relationships for building new ones. In certain circumstances, women are even willing to shoulder responsibilities on behalf of their superiors, demonstrating a keen awareness of the relative importance of personal reputation, managers reputation, and organizational brand name. In these instances, they prioritize safeguarding the organizational identity as a means of securing the future.

Beyond expressing genuine concern for the work and lives of others in their networks, many women understand that mutual trust flourishes when they offer support at the right moments, particularly during their counterparts’ challenging situations such as financial or family troubles. Influenced, perhaps, by Buddhist philosophies, some women embrace the principles of giving and receiving, viewing support as a form of value exchange in relationship development.

#### **b. Mutual value creation and exchange**

The consensus among most participants is that all relationships are founded and sustained on values. If either party fails to deliver tangible or intangible values to the other, the relationship is bound to dissolve. Therefore, when initiating a new relationship, nearly all women concur

that they first assess their values and consider how they can contribute to the relationship. They contemplate the communities they wish to be a part of to fortify their own brand. As analyzed earlier, many participants lean towards engaging with community groups that share the same values. This shared value system serves as a foundation for steady enhancement. In essence, they prioritize addressing two crucial questions to nurture their close relationships and, in turn, construct their leadership identity: what key values they can **give** to others and what benefits they can **take** from others. *The Give-Take principles* also correspond to the claiming - granting mechanism, as identified by DeRue (2010).

### **Key values to give**

One participant shared that her **expertise** serves as the linchpin for her advancement and plays a role in fostering valuable relationships. Leveraging her expertise, she can offer advice to colleagues within her organization. Reciprocally, others recognize the value in their relationship and continue to stay connected with her. Over time, seeking advice has become a habitual part of their interaction, especially when addressing issues related to their shared value system.

Moreover, as they pinpoint expertise as a core value with potential contributions, some women gain increased self-confidence in joining their professional community. They have a clear understanding of their values in relation to others. One participant expressed heightened self-assurance due to her specialized knowledge, which she diligently cultivates every day. She recognizes the importance of being more knowledgeable than her managers, who may not be familiar with the detailed activities among employees. To provide guidance to her managers, she endeavors to refine her knowledge continuously. Additionally, potential contributions extend beyond academic knowledge and may encompass social knowledge in areas such as music, arts, psychology, and life. These factors enrich relationships and add an intriguing dimension to them.

*My expertise needs to be more thorough than that of my managers. We should not politely follow the managers' requirements and instructions. We should be a master in this aspect to re-direct our managers. He could not be outstanding in all majors. Hence, the managers need to have a supporter in each aspect. We also need to expose our reputation for the manager's belief. (P18)*

*Suppose I want to be promoted to higher positions. In that case, the core is my expertise and my ability, and the second is my relationship with important people in my community who regard me as a friend to share expertise and opportunities. (P15)*

The second factor that women offer to their counterparts is their unwavering **efforts**, particularly those that surpass partners' expectations. They recognize that the continuous dedication and high achievement resulting from their efforts can shape their reputation. When partners witness this commitment, it automatically instills trust, fostering long-term business relations. This dynamic is especially evident in collaborations with partners or superiors. However, the manner in which women contribute their values to subordinates varies, relying on daily efforts and thoughtful considerations.

Women leaders go beyond work-related concerns and exhibit a genuine interest in their subordinates' daily lives. For instance, within the scope of their responsibilities, they may adjust working hours for subordinates with small children. Their efforts are evident as they identify others' strengths, enabling them to shine and optimize their capabilities. Consequently, these leaders act as navigators for their subordinates' career paths.

Some women emphasize the importance of coaching employees by showcasing efforts rather than employing direct or coercive methods. They refrain from providing fixed solutions, opting instead to analyze the pros and cons of each option and allowing employees to finalize

decisions. Recognizing that their expertise may not surpass that of their subordinates, these leaders add value by offering consulting and advice based on their experience in areas like human relations and problem-solving. The final decision is reached through mutual agreement, with employees assuming responsibility. Women leaders understand the need to model dedicated efforts for their subordinates, demonstrating their commitment to common goals, work orientation, and problem-solving skills that enhance productivity.

*For some teachers with children entering 1st grade in primary school, they will need time to take care of their children. They usually need to take their children to school in the early morning and pick them up in the afternoon. Hence, I will automatically arrange their teaching schedule without slot 1 (from 7:30) and slot 6 (until 17:40). (P29)*

*Initially, the partner wanted to organize an event in Vietnam by himself. However, he was not successful in doing it by himself because he did not understand the Vietnamese context. In 2 months, he could call for 30-40 applications. After, he asked for my help. It's my strength when I clearly understand the Vietnam context; I understand which channels can be applied to transmit the information. After only one month, we had about 200 applications. It was so amazing because it was over our expectations. (P19)*

Women's values are also shaped through their **recognition** of others, creating a tangible exchange of value between both parties. Many women in my research grasp the importance of recognizing others' contributions, employing soft communication to encourage and appreciate the achievements of their colleagues. They acknowledge that everyone possesses strengths and weaknesses, emphasizing the reciprocity of respect for others' efforts. The belief is that by highlighting and appreciating the strengths of individuals in their networks, a mutual

enhancement of visibility and value occurs for both parties. The appraisal of others' strengths and accomplishments becomes an avenue for generating invisible values that benefit both sides.

*But in my daily life, I'm awkward, which can make people think that sometimes I also need their help and support. It may be my private issue or a problem to which I already know the solution, but I still ask for their advice to prove that they can always contribute value and benefits to my work and life. (P5)*

*I always try to find others' specialties and enhance them rather than focus on weaknesses. For their weakness, I will try to find other complementary to support them, not try to deal with their weakness. As a result, I can steadily push up their self-confidence. (P4)*

*A new fresher may have no value in consulting practical experiences for me, but she can give me some advice on lipstick or hair colors, so I can raise such kinds of questions to ensure that, to some extent, they can contribute to my life. (P1)*

### **Key values to take**

Almost all of the participants hold the perception that when they dedicate themselves to others, they don't anticipate any direct benefits in return. This aligns with the principles of Give and Take found in Buddhism and Confucian culture. They grasp the idea that by genuinely providing benefits to others, positive outcomes will naturally come their way without specific expectations. Some women express that even after achieving significant milestones for their organization, if they step down from managerial positions, they continue to earn trust and respect from their subordinates. The lack of immediate expectations for reciprocity is seen as their source of happiness, a habitual practice, and an integral part of their daily lives - being generously dedicated to others.

*The power of Give-Take is a continuous flow. When you give, you'll have a space to receive. Otherwise, it's stuck and will never be open for receiving. Similarly, when you receive from others, you'll have something ready to give. Otherwise, I have nothing to give any more. (P1)*

*I no longer think that if someone gives me something, I'll find another chance to pay it back. I focus on giving to others because I think that others give me, and then they have a space to receive from anyone else. If you think that, you can develop your personal networks without any purposive objectives that harm personal network development. (P6)*

## **VI. Typology of Vietnamese female leadership identity**

Through in-depth interviews with 33 female leaders, we have observed several outstanding points as follows: They still embody the characteristics and qualities of traditional women, but in an environment that demands change, they are also ready to change. This is in line with the definition of Agile leadership, which is a modern approach to leadership that emphasizes flexibility, collaboration, and rapid response to change. Combining with the strengths of traditional women, specifically prioritizing the needs and feedback of others, they engage in continuous dialogue with stakeholders to understand their expectations and preferences, ensuring what they do provides maximum value. This approach allows for regular feedback, continuous improvement, and the ability to pivot quickly if needed. Leaders are transparent about goals, challenges, and progress, creating an environment of trust and alignment. As a result, their teams are encouraged to experiment, take calculated risks, and explore new ideas. Moreover, overcoming the constraints of Confucian and Feudalism culture, they become more extroverted to foster more teamwork and open communication. Going beyond a formal and traditional environment, they are adept at adjusting strategies and tactics in response to shifting market conditions, customer needs, and technological advancements. This flexibility allows

organizations to remain competitive and responsive. With all these factors, we can summarize the identity of women in leadership as follows: Whether the identity is inherent in their qualities and traits or created through training and experience, these identities still carry agility, partly influenced by the intrinsic motivation to change, partly by external circumstances. Internal factors affecting the formation of the identity of women in leadership are largely influenced by their personality, nature, and perspectives. On a deeper level, it is influenced by ethical factors. Being born into a Confucian and feudal culture, they still inherently possess the virtues of Tam Tong and Tu Duc (Three Obediences and Four Virtues). However, due to external influences, women remain agile and adaptive to change. They understand that their qualities and virtues need to be adjusted and flexible over time, circumstances, and work, but they must maintain ethics to not lose themselves and the inherent good nature of Vietnamese women. The qualities, traits, and behaviors formed over time can also change to adapt to circumstances, and the women participants understand that change must foresee potential issues and risks if they change to adapt. Therefore, in an agile context, inherent traits must also be agile but still maintain ethics, acquired traits need to change to adapt but must foresee potential risks so that they still retain the qualities of Vietnamese women while being flexible in all situations.

This approach could be more explained by analyzing DeRue and Ashford's (2010) theory of leadership identity construction in Confucian-influenced context of Vietnam, then it could be understood why Vietnamese women in leadership positions seem to retain both traditional characteristics and gender norms. In Confucian-influenced contexts such as Vietnam, the construction of leadership identity among women is deeply intertwined with cultural expectations of morality, hierarchy, and gendered behavior. Building on DeRue and Ashford's (2010) theory of leadership identity construction, where leadership emerges through socially situated claiming and granting processes, women often adopt a strategic form of identity negotiation. They tend to claim leadership roles not by directly challenging traditional gender

norms, but by embedding their leadership within accepted moral and relational frameworks, emphasizing traits such as modesty, care, and emotional intelligence (Zheng, Kark, & Meister, 2018). These performances increase the likelihood of being granted leadership legitimacy in environments where overt displays of authority may provoke resistance (Bell, 2006; Warner & Joynt, 2002). Rather than representing a passive adherence to tradition, this approach reflects an adaptive strategy that allows women to navigate cultural constraints while progressively reshaping perceptions of leadership. Over time, these repeated, culturally embedded claiming–granting interactions contribute to a quiet but significant transformation of leadership norms, broadening the scope of what is considered legitimate leadership within such socio-cultural settings.

Based on those above analysis, suggested typology for women leadership identity as follows:

$$\mathbf{WLI} = (\mathbf{A}^{\mathbf{a1f}} + \mathbf{B}^{\mathbf{a2e}}) \times \mathbf{C}^{\mathbf{a3}}$$

A – Acquired traits

“a1” – Adaptive

B – Born traits

“f” – Foresight

C – Context

“a2” – Agile

“e” – Ethics

“a3” – Accelerating

Each person is born with innate qualities and those learned through experience. Through interviews with 33 female leaders, it is evident that the participants are highly flexible and agile in building their personal brands. The traits and characteristics they have learned are all flexibly adjusted to fit the circumstances. Notably, no matter what new behaviors or characteristics they adopt, they always remain mindful of potential risks that could damage their reputation or negatively affect those they consider important.

Although women from different generations and industries hold varying perspectives on adaptability, almost all participants agreed that they are flexible and adapt well to any situation. The Baby Boomer and Generation X participants tend to adapt by sacrificing or compromising for the sake of harmony and ensuring the interests of all parties. In other words, they change themselves to fit the situation. However, younger generations view adaptability as bringing their own values to shift the perspectives of others, making the situation or others adapt to them. Even with their innate qualities, they are willing to adapt to circumstances, but their guiding principle is not to change their values or personal ethics. Vietnamese women are still influenced to some extent by the cultural values of Feudalism and Confucianism, which shape moral standards, behavior patterns, and how relationships are maintained. However, unlike women of the past, who were confined by societal values, the female participants in my research tend to engage with these norms, selectively adopting what aligns with their personal ethics. They showcase their values and contributive qualities to interact with and change rigid societal norms, reshaping some of the unreasonable expectations placed on women.

In addition to women's internal forces, their desire to change, create value, and engage with circumstances, external forces also play a crucial role. This includes the environment and the support of those around them. These external factors can either hinder or accelerate women's efforts to construct their leadership identity. In some interview cases, participants mentioned that without the support of family (husband, in-laws, parents, bosses, colleagues), they wouldn't have the accelerating forces needed to successfully build their identity. Another accelerating factor is the professional community, which serves as an external force that helps co-create identity for women in leadership. Being part of a professional community provides a space where their identity is anchored, and they reinforce each other's identities.

The "accelerating environments" defined by the women in my interview sample are:

- Environments with diversity and fairness.
- Environments where women find their contributions valuable, which helps affirm their position in the organization.
- Environments in professional and personal life where women face obstacles that push them to fight harder to succeed and validate their capabilities.

These internal and external forces are necessary and sufficient conditions for women to construct their leadership identity.

To clarify my above suggested typology, I selected four cases, breaking down each to analyze key events that reconfirm my recommended typology of leadership identity:

- Participant No.32 (P32) – Baby Boomer generation, State-owned enterprise
- Participant No.2 (P2)– Generation X, Senior leader of a large private company
- Participant No.3 (P3) – Generation X, Business owner
- Participant No.19 (P19)– Generation Y, Start-up company founder

I chose these cases based on the following criteria:

- Generational diversity
- Diversity in professions, types of businesses, and work environments
- Individuals who have achieved significant success in their careers

In addition to in-depth interviews lasting a minimum of three hours each, I also applied the Netnography method to analyze how they express their identity both online and offline. As discussed in the literature review, after the Covid-19 pandemic, the concept of digital leadership

emerged. In this context, leaders use online tools to convey their identity. Furthermore, there is always a two-way interaction between how women leaders express themselves offline and online to strengthen their identity.

It's said that if there is alignment between online and offline leadership identity, then women have successfully built their identity. Otherwise, what they have built on one of the two channels may be undermined or even collapsed.

The structure of my presentation of these cases includes: their background and the major themes from their social media that most reflect their identity. I review and analyze their posts from August 2023 to August 2024. For a woman leader who doesn't use social media, I have to collect news and articles that discuss her career, achievements, and contributions. The main purpose of adding this channel is to triangulate the data through observation, interviews, and social media content, making my conclusions on the conceptual framework much stronger.

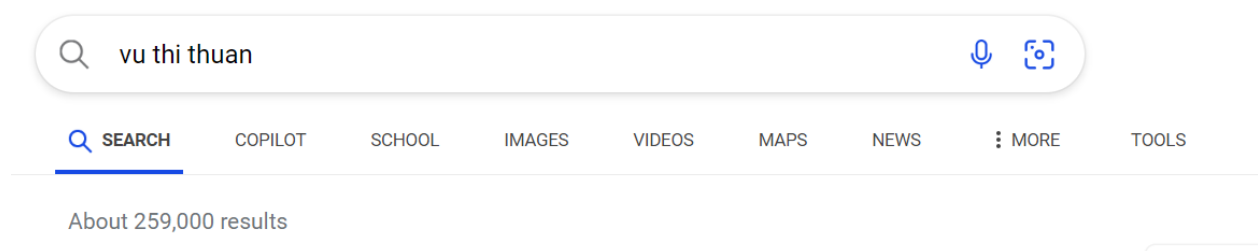
#### **i. Participant No.32 (P32)**

##### **Background**

Mrs. P32 – Chairwoman of Traphaco's Board of Directors was honored in the list of 50 Most Influential Women in Vietnam in 2017. P32 is a prominent figure in Vietnam's pharmaceutical industry, known for her leadership at Traphaco. She has been instrumental in transforming Traphaco from a small workshop into one of Vietnam's leading pharmaceutical companies. Under her guidance, Traphaco has achieved significant milestones, including becoming the first plant in Northern Vietnam with GMP-standard production lines. She has also been recognized as one of Vietnam's 50 Most Influential Women by Forbes Vietnam.

At the 2017 Women's Summit, organized for the first time in Vietnam by Forbes Vietnam, Mrs. P32 was honored in the list of 50 Most Influential Women in Vietnam in 2017.

For the older generation, Mrs. P32 is not familiar with social media platforms. Therefore, when I searched for information on social media, there were no results. However, when searching on Google with the keywords “P32 + Traphaco,” I found approximately 259,000 results, comparable to other prominent Vietnamese women, such as Tôn Nữ Thị Ninh – a distinguished Vietnamese diplomat, Nguyễn Thị Kim Ngân – former Chairwoman of the National Assembly of Vietnam, and even more than the 180,000 results found when searching for Top Stories about General Võ Nguyên Giáp.



### **Ethics and Kindness in Private Life and Business**

Mrs. P32 made a difference in the community of state enterprise managers at that time with her humanistic yet strategic approach to management and business:

- Focusing on correct moral values
- Emphasizing human development and the next generation
- Believing in kindness in business
- Being a pioneer, thinking innovatively, and doing things differently

Her development strategy also aimed at the goal: “Traphaco’s people are happy and satisfied with their lives and work, and the work environment is ranked among the best in Vietnam.”

Mrs. P32’s ethical management view is that “the more difficult the situation, the more you should care about your employees.” According to her, the most successful achievement in her

41 years with Traphaco is the development of people, building a working culture with virtue, and successfully developing the next generation.

“At Traphaco, perhaps one of my greatest contributions to the company’s development is not in scale, capital, or stock value, but in building the next generation,” Mrs. P32 shared. “Kindness in business and meticulousness in every product are always key factors for the sustainability of the business.” “I never think that I must use deceitful methods in business. Even in the most competitive times, I always strive to turn competitors into partners.”

Despite 40 years of development with Traphaco and many market upheavals, Mrs. P32 has consistently maintained her kindness and ethical approach to managing people and competing in the market. Mrs. P32 is also notable for her vision as a leader with heart, ambition, and skill. An example of this is when other pharmaceutical companies only outsourced drug manufacturing and did not adhere to any standards, Mrs. P32 and Traphaco took the lead in importing production lines to meet GMP standards. At that time, Traphaco was the only company in Vietnam producing according to GMP standards. Despite financial difficulties and having to rent land to set up the factory, Traphaco decided to build a GMP process (Good Manufacturing Practice) standards, initially following ASEAN standards in Northern Vietnam and later upgrading to World Health Organization GMP standards by 2005. This correct approach has been demonstrated by the results Traphaco has achieved over the 50 years of its establishment and development.

Furthermore, starting with GMP-standard production and utilizing tropical plants and the geological strengths of different regions, Mrs. P32 advocated for developing medicinal herb areas in localities. This approach not only yields high productivity but also creates local jobs, alleviates poverty, and more broadly, helps reforest barren hills, protect the environment, preserve valuable traditional remedies, and safeguard national borders. Through this, Mrs. P32

not only established a solid direction for the company but also made significant contributions to society.

Generally, P32 has made significant contributions to the pharmaceutical industry in Vietnam, particularly through her leadership at Traphaco. Here are some key highlights:

- **Modernizing Traditional Medicine:** She played a pivotal role in modernizing traditional Vietnamese medicine by integrating advanced technology into the production of herbal medicines. This approach helped transform Traphaco into a leading company in the field.
- **Economic Growth:** Under her leadership, Traphaco grew from a small enterprise into a major pharmaceutical company with annual revenues exceeding 2,000 billion VND and profits over 250 billion VND.
- **Innovation in Herbal Medicine:** Mrs. P32 introduced innovative products such as **Hoạt Huyết Dưỡng Não**, which gained significant recognition in the market. This product, derived from the Đinh Lăng plant, not only enhanced the company's profile but also supported local agriculture by creating a demand for this plant.
- **Leadership and Mentorship:** Even after stepping down from her role at Traphaco, Mrs. P32 continued to contribute to the industry by taking on leadership roles in other companies, such as Nutricare, and by mentoring young entrepreneurs.

Her efforts have not only advanced the pharmaceutical industry but also had a positive impact on local communities and the economy. Thanks to these contributions, she has been awarded the Honorary Doctorate Degree for Practice and Empirical Results from World Records University (WRU), with the title “Leading, Guiding, and Directing Traphaco to Become the No.1 Pharmaceutical Company in Modernization of Traditional Medicines and Owning Many

Best-Selling Traditional Medical Products in Vietnam.”

### **My Reflection on Ms. P32’s Social Media Practices**

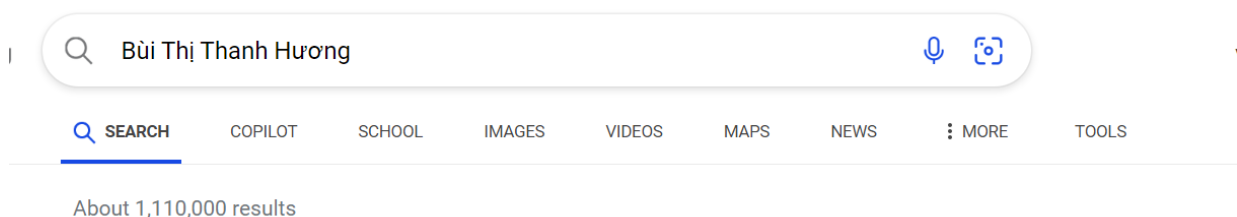
What Ms. P32 most frequently discusses and expresses through her social media interviews is her responsibility to society in the pharmaceutical industry, ethics in business, and her obligations to employees within the company. This is consistent with the values Ms. P32 shared with me during our two interviews. It also reflects my perception of her from our conversations. She embodies a woman who is both strong and humane in her leadership style. Strong when she enforces strict penalties for serious employee mistakes, yet very humane in her care for employees, such as providing meals, ensuring good rest, and even managing provisions like sanitary products for female employees during their menstrual periods.

As a traditional woman, she still maintains the ancient cultural values of Vietnamese women: **Công Dung Ngôn Hạnh** (a virtuous woman in terms of duty, beauty, speech, and conduct) and the patience of traditional women. However, when she needs to adapt to certain circumstances, she can adjust while maintaining her ethical values: that is, kindness in all her actions.

### **ii. Participant No.2 (P2)**

#### **Background**

Mrs. P2 is regarded as a prominent figure in the banking sector. When searching for her name on Google, there are approximately 1,110,000 results related to her.



P2 has an impressive track record in the financial sector. Here are some of her notable achievements:

- **Chairwoman of NCB:** She was appointed as the Chairwoman of the Board of Directors at National Citizen Bank (NCB) in July 2021<sup>12</sup>. Under her leadership, NCB has made significant strides in its restructuring efforts.
- **CEO of Sun Group:** Before joining NCB, she served as the CEO of Sun Group, one of Vietnam's leading private economic groups.
- **Strategic Roles in Banking:** She has held various strategic positions in major banks, including Vice President of TPBank and Chief Financial Officer at SeABank.
- **Educational Background:** She has a strong academic background, with a degree from the National Economics University, a CPA certification from the Ministry of Finance, and a Master's degree in Business Administration from the French-Vietnamese Center for Management Education (CFVG).

The following discussion is about her identity shown in the social media

### **Businesswoman**

On Facebook, Mrs. P2 presents the image of a successful businesswoman. Her posts are closely tied to the company where she works and holds a significant position. The content she often posts relates to the company, such as important events she is involved in as an organizer or a key figure, such as shareholders' meetings, inaugurations, or the groundbreaking of new projects. This is consistent with what she shared in interviews; once she is at work, she is fully focused on her responsibilities. Mrs. P2 mentioned that when her two children were small and attending kindergarten, she rarely checked on them via camera, believing that doing so would

decrease her work efficiency. This approach is similarly reflected on Facebook: although it is a personal account, her posts co-create with the company's brand and highlight her professional business woman image. The content posted on her personal Facebook reflects the success and growth of the company where she works, as well as milestones in her career.

### Active and Positive Woman

Mrs. P2 often shares quotes that express confidence and optimism in the face of life's and work challenges.



Mrs. P2 is highly active on social media, often posting multiple updates in a single day. Her posts frequently include vibrant images of her travels and life experiences, as well as philosophical reflections. Despite her role as the Financial Director, Mrs. P2 is actively involved in various company activities, including inaugurations, groundbreaking ceremonies, internal events, and external customer engagements.

However, in interviews, Mrs. P2 has shared that she is an introvert who dislikes noisy environments and prefers not to be the center of attention in crowds. This was also a reason why her mother was initially reluctant for her to study Accounting, fearing she would be too introverted. Nonetheless, Mrs. P2 pursued her interest in Financial Accounting and made efforts

to engage in school activities to overcome her introversion. In practice, she has adapted quickly, participating in numerous extroverted activities as required by her job.

Recently, however, Mrs. P2 has frequently deactivated her Facebook account for reasons that are not clear. If time allows, I will continue to follow up on this matter.

### **My Reflection on Ms. Huong's Social Media Practices**

**“Pretty and intelligent woman”** is my impression of Ms. Huong's Facebook presence. Born in Generation X, she has a style that allows her to freely express who she is, how she feels, and what she is doing. A common feature of her posts is her dynamism and youthful energy. Unlike other female leaders in my research sample, Ms. Huong does not focus much on kindness or professional ethics. Instead, she emphasizes determination and strength in her work. She also posts less about professional communities, special relationships, or high-level government officials.

### **iii. Participant No.3 (P3)**

#### **Background**

P3 is a prominent businesswoman in Vietnam and currently serves as the General Director of PAN Group. PAN Group is a diversified conglomerate focused on agriculture and food, aiming to enhance the quality and value of Vietnamese agricultural products.

P3 has a strong background in finance, with many years of experience working in international financial institutions. Before joining PAN Group, she held several senior leadership positions at major companies and investment funds. Her deep understanding of finance and business has enabled her to lead PAN Group's strong growth in the company's core areas.

#### **PAN Group**

PAN Group was established in 1998, initially focusing on plant protection services. However, since 2013, the group has transitioned to a diversified conglomerate in agriculture and food. PAN Group has executed numerous strategic mergers and acquisitions (M&A) to expand its scale and business scope, including leading companies in the industry such as Vinaseed (seed crops), Aquatex Ben Tre (aquaculture), and Bibica (confectionery).

Under P3's leadership, PAN Group has concentrated on building a sustainable agricultural value chain, from production to processing and distribution. The group not only focuses on improving product quality but also emphasizes adopting international standards and advanced technologies in production to ensure sustainability and food safety.

PAN Group is now one of the leading enterprises in the agriculture and food sector in Vietnam, with the goal of becoming a top supplier in the ASEAN region and globally.

A search for P3 + PAN Group yields approximately 652,000 detailed results about Ms. P3 and her contributions to PAN Group in just 0.2 seconds. Most of the information highlights the achievements of Ms. P3 and PAN Group in building a value chain in the agriculture sector.

### **Businesswoman**

Similar to Ms. P2, Ms. P3 also showcases her identity as a successful female entrepreneur on Facebook. The events she posts about are of national and international significance. Her photos often feature her with the Prime Minister of Vietnam, the CEO of Forbes Global, and even at formal diplomatic events with U.S. President Joe Biden.



**P3’s Social Media Practices:**

In her professional posts, P3 not only highlights significant events she participates in but also deeply reflects on her status and the value she aims to bring to partners or stakeholders related to her work. For instance, in a post about her visit to Kuwait, she discusses the potential benefits that PAN Group can offer beyond just the company’s revenue and profit. She wrote:

“Kuwait is among the top 3 countries with 30% of its population suffering from diabetes, possibly due to the sweet dates, a local specialty! They even have a dedicated Diabetes Research Institute! Due to harsh land and climate conditions, nearly all of Kuwait’s agricultural products and food must be imported from outside! I hope that nutritious shrimp, fish, rice, cashew nuts, and specialty coffee from Pan will soon reach you all! 🍤🍵”

This post illustrates her strategic approach to showcasing PAN Group’s offerings while demonstrating her commitment to providing value that extends beyond business gains.



### **Ethics in Leadership Identity:**

P3's approach to showcasing her leadership identity reflects a strong sense of ethics. Regardless of the circumstances, whether highlighting inherent traits or acquired qualities, she remains true to her moral values. This demonstrates how women in leadership, like Ms. P3, consistently choose to express themselves in ways that align with their ethical principles.

### **Inspiration:**

P3 is passionate about sports and maintains a disciplined routine of 25 minutes of exercise daily, regardless of her busy schedule. She is open to new experiences and enjoys trying new sports such as running and pickleball.

On Facebook, alongside professional posts, she frequently shares moments with her daughter, including fashion comparisons and playful interactions. These posts not only highlight her personal life but also showcase her as a youthful, outgoing individual who enjoys connecting with her daughter and engaging in lighthearted activities. This combination of professional success and personal engagement reflects her multifaceted identity and approach to leadership.



P3’s posts on social media often go beyond professional achievements to include inspirational quotes and reflections that showcase her optimism, confidence, and vitality. A distinctive feature of her posts is the inclusion of images from agricultural fields managed by her company, such as rice paddies and vegetable gardens.

In these posts, she often identifies herself as a farmer, sharing in the joy and challenges of those who work the land. For example, after Typhoon Yagi, she expressed empathy and solidarity with the farmers affected, praying for minimal impact on the harvest. This approach underscores her commitment to connecting with her company’s core activities and reflecting her leadership ethos in a relatable and grounded manner.



## Kindness and Integrity

In a post, P3 once wrote: “Every day, perhaps, by living true to oneself, living healthily, kindly,

optimistically, and joyfully, one will surely stay forever young!”

Beyond her optimism, this post reflects her commitment to a virtuous life. She believes that living well leads to good things and helps maintain a youthful spirit. P3 has established a fund to support orphaned children and has personally taken on the role of a foster mother for children in special circumstances. She shared in her status that she hopes to compensate for the emotional deprivations these children endure. She recounts her own tragic past: her mother passed away when she was just a few years old, and her father, who was HIV positive and addicted to drugs, died in prison when she was only 3 days old. “Mom, I’ve never even seen my dad’s face, not even in a photo!” she wrote. “I met her when she was not yet 4 years old. Over a decade has passed, and now she’s become a young woman! Her eyes are much happier now, even though she still has to take medication and requires special care every day. I feel happy watching them improve every day and am committed to always being their emotional support.”

She expresses gratitude towards life and these children, who have given her the strength to strive for a good, healthy, and beautiful life every day. Her kindness is also evident in a status where she recounted stopping by the roadside to help a lost child, keeping the child safe until the parents returned to find them.



Additionally, the company’s development strategy under her leadership focuses on enhancing

the value of Vietnamese agricultural products. One of her goals in choosing this path is to alleviate the hardships and reduce the losses experienced by Vietnamese farmers, who are often heavily impacted by weather conditions. Particularly, as many farmers are unclear about the input and output standards for their products. Her vision is that “rice grains should turn into golden grains,” reflecting PAN Group’s approach to building a sustainable development model and benefiting Vietnam’s agricultural sector.



### P3 Reflection on Ms. P3’s Social Media Practices

From reviewing Ms. P3’s posts from August 2023 to the present, I have identified several common characteristics:

2. **Positive Language:** All posts contain words such as “happy,” “good,” “love,” and “smile.”
3. **Polished Appearance:** Each post features carefully made-up and neatly dressed images of Ms. P3.
4. **Contextual Imagery:** Most of the images are linked to either rice fields or high-profile government, national, and international events.

5. **Optimistic Spirit:** The posts consistently reflect a positive, joyful, and proactive outlook on life.

Ms. P3's approach to building her leadership identity through social media involves leveraging professional communities that align with her goals. For instance, she frequently engages with national and international programs, and highlights collaborations with government officials and prominent business leaders from Vietnam and abroad. This is not merely for self-promotion; rather, it aligns with her mission of enhancing the Vietnamese brand and promoting sustainable development in Vietnam's agricultural value chain.

#### **iv. Participant No.19 (P19)**

##### **Background**

P19 is a prominent figure in Vietnam's startup ecosystem. She is the co-founder and CEO of 5Desire, a well-known venture in the field of technology and startup acceleration. He gained recognition for being part of Forbes Vietnam's "30 Under 30" in 2015, which highlights young, dynamic, and ambitious individuals in various fields, including technology, business, and the arts.

P19 has actively promoted entrepreneurship among the younger generation in Vietnam. She emphasizes that starting a business requires resilience, passion, and deep market understanding. According to her, one of the biggest challenges for young entrepreneurs is building a strong and complementary team, as well as gaining practical experience. She advocates for an altruistic approach to networking, advising entrepreneurs to build relationships with sincerity and support others without expecting immediate returns. This attitude, combined with a focus on knowledge and collaboration, is what he believes can lead to long-term success

##### **Typical identity shown on Facebook**

From observing P19' posts on Facebook and videos on YouTube, several aspects of her identity and perspective emerge, which she may not have shared during direct interviews, even with someone familiar like you from your time at the Foreign Trade University.

1. **Finance Orientation:** A prominent aspect of her identity is her focus on finance. While she previously shared insights on startups, her recent content emphasizes practical advice on financial management and wealth-building strategies. Notably, she encourages viewers not just to seek financial success but also to navigate the emotional landscape of business failures. P19 articulates that every loss is a form of giving, creating space for receiving in the future.
2. **Buddhist Influence:** P19 exhibits a profound connection to Buddhist principles. She incorporates Buddhist teachings into her analysis of success and failure, promoting a balanced and thoughtful approach to challenges. This perspective allows her to frame experiences—both positive and negative—in a way that encourages reflection and personal growth.
3. **Self-Care and Empowerment:** A striking theme in her messages is the importance of women caring for and loving themselves. P19 advocates that maintaining one's health is essential for being able to care for others effectively. Her content often mixes themes of wealth generation with messages of gratitude, suggesting that a holistic approach to success includes both material and emotional well-being.
4. **Balanced Messaging:** Her videos convey a blend of financial ambition and gratitude, encouraging viewers to appreciate all experiences, regardless of their outcomes. This balanced perspective is crucial in promoting resilience and a positive outlook.

These themes reflect not only her professional identity but also her personal philosophy, highlighting her commitment to empowering others through financial literacy and emotional intelligence. For further insights, you can explore her social media platforms and the content she shares.

**Pham Le Nguyen**  
August 16 · 🌐

**3 CÁCH TẠO DÒNG TIỀN HẠNH PHÚC**

Làm thế nào để tạo ra một dòng tiền hạnh phúc, hạnh phúc từ lúc tiền đến với bạn, cho tới lúc tiền ra khỏi túi bạn, và mở cửa cho các dòng tiền hạnh phúc tiếp theo chảy về túi bạn? Hãy xem đây đủ video trên kênh Youtube của mình nhé!

Các ông chủ, bà chủ, các nhà quản lý sẽ rất muốn nhân viên, đối tác, khách hàng của mình xem video này. Lúc mình làm video này thì có ông chủ **Neo Khuat** ngồi đó và gật gù vô cùng tâm đắc... [See more](#)




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**Pham Le Nguyen**  
August 22 · 🌐

Một bài hát mình nghe hàng ngày giúp chữa lành thân tâm. Hòa ra mọi đau khổ từ trước đến giờ không phải do ai gây ra cho mình, mà là do nghĩ nhầm thôi!

**Trong Suốt**  
August 20 · 🌐

Lời cầu nguyện chữa lành thân tâm bệnh tới đức Phật Dược Sư  
<https://youtu.be/dSE1eDVxTM?si=bqOjpZpRjxkxaini6>  
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**Pham Le Nguyen**  
August 25 · 🌐

Mình đang suy nghĩ về nội dung "3 tầng thay đổi để giàu có". Đó là một hành trình từ việc hiểu rõ những kết quả mà mình mong muốn - Tầng Kết quả, đến những hành động cần thiết để đạt được chúng - Tầng Hành động, và cuối cùng là sự chuyển hóa từ bên trong - Tầng Trạng thái. Càng suy nghĩ, mình càng thấy rằng để đạt được sự giàu có thực sự, chúng ta phải bắt đầu từ tầng sâu nhất - chính là trạng thái bên trong mình.

Các bạn nghĩ sao về điều này?



12 comments



**"MÁT" THỰC CHẤT LÀ "ĐƯỢC"**

**Pham Le Nguyen**  
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### My reflection on Ms P19's social media practices

P19 is recognized for her drive to innovate and create value in the Vietnamese market. Her work often focuses on leveraging technology to solve real-world problems. P19 is often viewed as a transformational leader who motivates teams and drives organizational change. Her leadership style emphasizes collaboration and empowerment among employees. Vision for Development: He is committed to promoting economic growth and sustainable development in Vietnam. His initiatives often reflect a strong alignment with national development goals and social responsibility, the principles of Give and Take. The key point here is the interplay between her identity construction and her context – Confucian culture, in which, she still sticks to some core values of Confucian culture. On the other hand, she still construct her identity in her own perception.

## **CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION**

This chapter delved into the most prominent facets—specifically personal networks—that played a crucial role in shaping women’s leadership identity. Drawing from both the literature review and insights derived from interviews, the objective was to investigate how Vietnamese women cultivate their leadership identity through their personal networks. This exploration aimed to elucidate the mechanisms through which key contacts in women’s personal networks contribute to the development of their leadership identity. In the last chapter, several recommendations will be discussed to guide women in optimizing their networks to fortify and augment their leadership identity. Additionally, the author will delineate the implications of the research, while acknowledging its limitations and providing suggestions for future investigations.

# **CHAPTER 7:**

# **DISCUSSION**

The core focus of this thesis is to gain a deeper understanding of how women in Vietnam, a society influenced by Confucian culture with strict social expectations for women's responsibilities, construct their leadership identities and to which extent personal networks contribute to the process. I began by discussing various gender-related issues and offered multiple explanations for this phenomenon through different levels of analysis, including social, organizational, and individual perspectives. We also explored metaphors that explain the underrepresentation of women in top positions, with particular attention to the "labyrinth" metaphor proposed by Eagly and Carli (2007). That could be the main reason why women face to some difficulties to convey their leadership in formal organization.

Some recent studies have shown that there is no difference between women and men in terms of pursuing and being motivated to develop their careers and lives (Coron, 2021). Therefore, it would not be reasonable to assume that women are limited by internal factors, which in turn reduces their career opportunities in gendered organizations. It is suggested that gender stereotypes are better represented not as a single scale but across four dimensions, contrasting traditional views with egalitarian ones (The conversation website, 2023). These dimensions include: one on skills (which challenges the belief that men are more competent than women in decision-making roles, in favor of the view that both genders possess equal skills); one on motherhood (which challenges the idea that children suffer if their mother works, and instead supports the idea that mothers need not sacrifice their careers for their children); one on essentialism (which contests the notion that women inherently desire to create a home, proposing that both men and women have similar desires); and one on inequality justification (which challenges the notion that gender inequalities can sometimes be justified, asserting that they should never be). Hence, I believe that there will be some niched ways for women to construct their leadership identity in both formal and informal organizational context.

In this research, I conducted an in-depth investigation of how women develop their leadership identities both online and offline, as well as the key actors influencing their perceptions of leadership identity as well as their leadership identity construction. As a result, I identified a new typology for women's leadership identity, which emphasizes the integration of context into identity construction and internalization for women in Vietnam as they progress into leadership roles. I concluded that personal networks play a crucial role in strengthening the creation of women's leadership identities. The contextual focus of this study is Confucian culture in Vietnam, where women are often bound by significant family responsibilities, potentially hindering their development. Furthermore, while traditional Confucian ideals, such as the "Work – Appearance – Speech – Morality" framework, still influence women's roles, modern women do not reject these frameworks entirely. Instead, they seek various ways and channels to express their leadership identity and reinforce their power.

Previous research has mainly explored how women build leadership identities within formal structures. However, there has been a lack of specific studies on the contribution of informal structures to women's leadership identity construction, particularly within the context of Vietnam.

This research can refill this gap by demonstrating the interconnection between key factors of leadership identity construction: women's leadership, identity, personal networks, and context. Additionally, previous studies have not fully explored the reciprocal interaction between these factors. Most of the available research has primarily focused on one-way relationships, failing to capture the dynamic and mutual influence between these elements, especially in contexts outside the Western or developed Eastern countries. Western-based studies have extensively explored leadership development, but they often overlook the cultural contexts that shape leadership identity in non-Western countries, particularly in developing nations. Existing research in Eastern tends to focus on relatively developed economies countries (e.g., China,

Japan, South Korea), which differ from the Vietnamese context in both economic development and cultural influences. Vietnam, as a developing country with strong Confucian roots, presents a unique setting for examining the reciprocal nature of these factors. The Confucian cultural context in Vietnam, which emphasizes hierarchy, collectivism, and social harmony, significantly impacts women's leadership identity development. This influence is especially evident in how personal networks shape leadership roles, as social networks are often embedded in family and community structures, which are integral to a person's social and professional identity. However, Vietnamese women face distinctive challenges, such as gender norms and social expectation that are not sufficiently addressed in existing studies.

In the next section of this analysis, I will highlight some of the one-way impacts between factors that have been justified in previous studies. These studies often describe leadership identity as being influenced by external forces like personal networks and cultural contexts, without fully recognizing how women actively shape their networks and negotiate their identity within those contexts.

Firstly, Vietnamese female leaders involved in this study exhibited a profound inclination towards cultivating personal networks as integral to constructing their leadership identity, perceiving it as a pivotal undertaking in their career development journey. This finding resonates with prior research conducted by Ely et al. (2011), Day (2000), and Wilson (1997). Besides, personal networks have been shown to influence leadership identity through mentorship, social support, and resource access (Ibarra, 1993; Brass et al., 2004). However, these studies primarily emphasize how networks shape leadership, rather than considering how individuals reciprocally shape their networks by selecting, maintaining, or leaving certain relationships.

Secondly, in the construction of leadership identity, female leaders are significantly influenced by both personal characteristics and contextual factors. This observation aligns with the study conducted by Bandura and Walters (1977), which suggests that personal attributes and contextual factors act as stimuli that motivate women to recognize the importance of leadership (individual internalization) and the value of personal networks. Regarding contextual impact, Confucian culture is often viewed as a determinant of leadership behaviors in Eastern countries (Fan, 2000), particularly in emphasizing collectivist values and gender role expectations. However, previous research tends to treat culture as a one-way influence on leadership, without considering how women leaders may challenge, adapt, or leverage cultural norms to their advantage.

Finally, the elucidation of the mechanism for constructing and cultivating women's personal networks in professional environments to enhance their leadership capacity is undertaken within the framework of Social Exchange Theory (SET). SET stands out as a prominent conceptual paradigm in understanding workplace behavior, as asserted by Russell C. and Marie S. M. (2005). SET posits that social exchange encompasses a series of interactions that generate reciprocal obligations, as articulated by Emerson (1976). These interactions are perceived as interdependent and contingent on the actions of another person, aligning with the insights of Blau (1964). SET's explanatory prowess extends across various domains, including leadership (Liden, Sparrowe, & Wayne, 1997) and networks (Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve, & Tsai, 2004).

A fundamental tenet of SET posits that relationships evolve over time, fostering mutual trust, loyalty, and commitments. Trust, identified as a promising relational construct by Dirks & Ferrin (2002), emerges as a key outcome of favorable social exchanges, as highlighted by both Blau (1964) and Holmes (1981). Aryee, Budhwar, and Chen (2002) delved into the influence of trust, both in the supervisor and the organization. Their findings demonstrated that trust in the organization played a mediating role in the connection between justice (distributive,

procedural, and interactional) and key outcomes such as job satisfaction, turnover intentions, and organizational commitment. Moreover, trust serves as the foundation for establishing mutual values within social relationships, forming a crucial part of the impact mechanism of women's personal networks on the construction of leadership identity.

This research seeks to address these gaps by providing a more nuanced understanding of the leadership identity construction process, particularly for women in Vietnam. In doing so, I build on the model proposed by DeRue and Ashford (2010), which focuses on the claiming and granting of leadership identity. However, these findings reveal additional complexities that go beyond the original model, particularly in non-Western and developing country contexts. We believe that, with the present research, we contribute to enlighten the mechanism of interaction between personal networks and women leadership identity construction, in the model proposed by DeRue & Ashford (2010).

### **I. Personal and contextual attributes influencing Vietnamese women perception of leadership identity**

The process of building women's leadership identity is inherently fluid, shaped not only by the women themselves but also by key individuals within their personal networks and the broader contextual framework in which these identities emerge. The effectiveness of this process is highlighted by the value these identities create within the women's specific networks. As a result, women actively identify the key figures in their personal networks to garner support for their leadership goals, using targeted relationship management strategies tailored to different types of networks. A distinctive feature of women's approach to managing these personal networks is their deliberate focus on embedding values into their actions, with a strong emphasis on sincerity in their interactions.

In the preceding chapter, the author identified the personal and contextual attributes that participants deemed to exert the most significant influence on their progression in constructing a leadership identity. Specifically, the personal dimensions encompass “born” and “acquired” attributes, representing inherent qualities and virtues cultivated throughout the trajectory of ascending to higher levels of leadership within the organization. Notably, they adeptly employ a combination of communal and agentic traits to navigate various situations flexibly, aiming to exert effective influence on others. Numerous previous studies (Abele, 2003; Rosette and Tost, 2010; Ezzedeen and Ritchey, 2009) have demonstrated that women are frequently linked with communal behaviors, whereas agentic attributes are often associated with men in terms of gender stereotypes.

One of the qualities that notably influences participants is self-leadership. The cultivation of self-awareness skills and the practice of self-leading emerge as pivotal elements in shaping the leadership identity of women. They contend that a thorough comprehension of their strengths, weaknesses, competencies, and personality is indispensable to highlight relevant aspects effectively. A robust self-awareness ability is emphasized as a critical success factor in their leadership journey, especially when fostering relationships within personal networks. Women acknowledge the importance of humility, emotional management, and prioritizing mutual benefits in these relationships. Overall, women leaders collectively understand that their ability to bring benefits to others hinges on their happiness, self-awareness, and self-leading capabilities. Prioritizing self-leadership before leading others is considered a fundamental “meta-competency,” as coined by Hall (2004). In today’s dynamic organizational landscape, successful leaders require the “meta-competencies” of self-awareness (or identity) and adaptability to navigate changing demands and develop new skills effectively.

In their managerial roles, many women leaders recognize the impossibility of achieving perfection in every specialization and understand that their team members may excel in specific

areas. Acknowledging their own strengths and weaknesses enables them to strategically delegate tasks among subordinates, creating an environment conducive to their development. Women leaders willingly allow subordinates to take the lead in areas where they lack expertise, fostering a positive work environment that boosts employees' self-confidence and enhances their leadership capabilities.

Moreover, in addition to their individual traits, Vietnamese female leaders are significantly influenced by cultural and societal norms, particularly **moral perceptions** associated with the characteristics of Asian women. As previously discussed, in the realm of relationship management, most women instinctively offer their commitment rather than expecting others to be committed to their situations. Some participants acknowledge that, residing and working in a Confucian culture like Vietnam, they have been influenced by certain cultural philosophies concerning women's responsibilities. Since their early years, they have been taught the values of tolerance and caregiving. Consequently, their inclination is to contribute willingly and enthusiastically rather than focusing on how to gain benefits from others. In any relationship, women are expected to bring about advantages for others, such as their partners, friends, managers, and especially subordinates.

Indeed, moral principles and ethical standards are fundamental in shaping the leadership identity of Vietnamese female leaders, especially in how they navigate and foster relationships in both their personal and professional lives. In Vietnam, where Confucian values heavily influence societal expectations, **sincerity and ethical conduct** are deeply embedded in leadership practices, particularly for women who are expected to balance their roles as both family caretakers and professionals.

For Vietnamese female leaders, sincerity is not just an abstract ideal, but a tangible element actively expressed through thoughts and actions, both in their interpersonal relationships and in

their approach to leadership. This sincerity is seen in the way they maintain trust, transparency, and empathy in their interactions with colleagues, subordinates, and external partners. These leaders often prioritize ethical considerations when making decisions, ensuring that their actions align with broader social and cultural expectations of integrity and fairness. The sincerity that Vietnamese women display in leadership is essential in the reciprocal process of identity construction, where they both claim and are granted leadership roles. Their authenticity and adherence to ethical behavior help them build respect and credibility in their professional networks. Moreover, as their leadership identity is intertwined with their roles in the family, their leadership actions must also reflect a sense of moral responsibility towards their families, reinforcing the holistic view of leadership in Vietnamese culture.

As highlighted by Drummond & Rydstrøm (2004) and Rydstrøm & Trinh (2008), the ethical dimensions of leadership among Vietnamese women are pronounced in how they manage and balance their family and work responsibilities. These studies underscore the importance of ethical decision-making, particularly in how women navigate their multiple roles and responsibilities. Vietnamese female leaders often engage in strategic balancing, where they must make decisions that reflect both their professional ambitions and their familial obligations. In Vietnamese culture, the boundary between personal and professional lives is often blurred, and a leader's moral standing is observed both in the workplace and at home. Thus, ethical leadership for women is not limited to how they perform at work but also includes how they manage their responsibilities as wives, mothers, and daughters. This dual focus on ethics in both realms further influence their leadership identity, as they continuously seek to uphold moral standards in every aspect of their lives.

In conclusion, moral principles and ethical standards formed in Confucian culture play a pivotal role in shaping how Vietnamese female leaders construct their leadership identity. Through the expression of sincerity in both thought and action, and the ethical balance they maintain

between family and work, these leaders not only proactively navigate the complexities of leadership but also uphold cultural expectations of moral integrity.

## **II. Key actors in personal networks influencing Vietnamese women leadership identity construction**

The primary influencers identified by the female leaders interviewed are ranked in descending order as follows: Family, Professional community, Managers, Subordinates, and Buddhism. It is apparent that family dynamics and professional networks, including partners, clients, professional associations, and social circles, exert the most significant impact on female leaders. While family factors provide them with trust and emotional support, other professional communities serve as environments where they both contribute to and derive professional values, refine their skills, cultivate trust, and consequently enrich their leadership identity.

In their personal networks, women derive their energy from moral/spiritual communities, understanding the principles of thinking and behavior. Individuals who establish ethical connections based on justice, bonds of compassion, or a sense of obligation can form a network referred to as a “moral/spiritual community”. This community is distinguished by social integration, involving profound and close-knit connections, and moral integration, characterized by shared beliefs regarding morality and behavior. In modern terms, any small group exhibiting these attributes, whether it be a religious sect or military unit, may be identified as a moral community. These communities encompass both cultural and inherent psychological elements.

As supported by William (1996), one’s perception of a moral community is frequently shaped by the images that influence their emotions and perspectives. Our moral perspective is largely shaped by images derived from common discourse and social customs. These lenses of perception are not morally impartial. It not only molds our perceptions and the moral

community but also solidifies specific emotions and inspires people to engage in particular behaviors. Sometimes, in certain situations in life and work, female leaders don't need to seek opinions from their moral/spiritual communities; instead, they just contemplate their thoughts and philosophies. In doing so, they feel as if they gain additional strength and energy to move forward.

### **III. Personal networks as a leverage for Vietnamese women leadership identity construction process**

#### **1. Personal networks mechanism**

The process of establishing and nurturing relationships among female leaders is driven by internal factors, particularly the value of trust. They hold the belief that through genuine and heartfelt efforts, others will gradually understand and reciprocate. The underlying principle in this approach aligns with Blau's (1964) networking mechanism in social exchange, emphasizing the Giving and Receiving principle. Essentially, it involves giving without expecting immediate returns, creating a space to receive more valuable things from various sources, not solely from the individuals to whom they initially gave. This philosophy leads to self-development, as the improvement of oneself enhances the ability to connect with people within their community.

This philosophy embraces the notion that the act of giving, without attaching strings or expectations, creates a virtuous cycle. By emptying oneself through genuine giving, female leaders open up the opportunity to receive diverse insights, support, and value from unexpected sources. This reciprocal exchange is not confined to a one-to-one relationship; instead, it extends to a broader community. The emphasis is on contributing to the collective growth and well-being, fostering a collaborative environment where everyone is motivated to share and contribute.

In essence, female leaders view relationships as dynamic ecosystems where the Giving and Receiving principle fuels a continuous cycle of personal and communal development. Their commitment to self-improvement aligns with the belief that the stronger they become individually, the more effectively they can connect with and positively influence others in their community. This approach emphasizes the interconnectedness of personal growth, relationship-building, and community development, creating a harmonious and supportive network that extends beyond individual interactions.

## **2. Women leaders construct leadership identity via personal networking**

The formation of a collective leadership identity is embedded within the broader social context, representing a distinctive social group. The process of constructing leadership identity reaches completion when an individual internalizes their perception of leadership and gains collective endorsement from others as a leader. This initiation of the construction process occurs when individuals actively present themselves as leaders, a presentation that must be both relationally and collectively acknowledged by relevant individuals. The prevalent conceptualization of leadership identified in this analysis revolves around an individual who exerts influence or motivation over others, often with the aim of accomplishing a specific goal (as supported by Rather, Saal and Knight, 1988). Leadership necessitates that leaders possess a repertoire of knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics. In another study, leadership is characterized as a set of influential activities wherein a leader selects, prepares, educates, and guides one or more followers with diverse gifts, abilities, and skills. The leader directs the followers toward the organization's mission and objectives, prompting them to expend spiritual, emotional, and physical energy willingly and enthusiastically in a coordinated effort to achieve the organizational mission and objectives. Based on responses from 33 interviews, it has been observed that women leaders exhibit a willingness to mentor (not just train) their followers.

Moreover, they actively seek new opportunities for the development of their subordinates, employing a subtle approach that unintentionally asserts their identity.

Female leaders exhibit a distinctive approach to leadership identity construction, characterized by an autonomous and subtle progression. Rather than overtly asserting their identity, they engage in a continuous process of self-strengthening and positive self-development. This internal renewal, guided by a set of values, is not a deliberate attempt to showcase a specific identity but rather a natural evolution of their authentic selves. This unique leadership identity construction occurs autonomously, with women leaders focusing on self-renewal and internal growth. The absence of intentional influence on others sets this process apart. Instead, it emanates from a moral community, generating a shared energy field among individuals with similar values and frequencies. This autonomous process unfolds as a continuous, interactive journey, lacking a distinct starting or ending point. It is fundamentally a process of ongoing self-development, delicately shaping an external position over time.

In this research, female leaders have clearly demonstrated how they spread the values they've accumulated from personal development and achievements. These values are not just for their own enrichment but are also shared with those around them through various means. With direct methods, female leaders act as trainers, mentors and coach, or are willing to participate in communities where they can exchange experiences, knowledge, and values with those in need. This is not just about sharing knowledge but also about building stronger communities by sharing knowledgeable experiences they've achieved. Through these direct interactions, they don't just transfer knowledge but also create environments where collective growth becomes possible. On social media platforms like Facebook, they tend to share important events they attend, personal achievements, or life moments that reflect positivity, love for life, and connection with work. These posts not only portray who they are but also carry a clear message of their willingness to spread good values to anyone who might need them. In this way, they

communicate their personal achievements to a broader community, without actively seeking acknowledgment or validation from others. This approach embodies the Vietnamese proverb “Hữu xạ tự nhiên hương” meaning those with true value will naturally be recognized and honored by others.

What stands out in their personal networking approach is that they don't focus solely on typical social activities like dinners or business meetings. Instead, they are always prepared to share the values they can bring to others. For them, networking is about meaningful and sincere exchanges, where good values are naturally “broadcasted,” allowing those who are aligned with these values to access and benefit from them. This shows the subtlety and depth in how female leaders build and expand their networks, not just through social interactions but by consistently offering what they've learned and achieved throughout their development. This analysis highlights the refined and profound way in which female leaders construct and develop their networks. They construct it not only through social relationships but also by being willing to share the lessons and successes they've gained. This approach contributes to strengthening the community around them while helping them build a leadership identity that is both humane and sustainable.

### **3. Women leaders proactively constructing their leadership identity**

Most participants in my research express their values by asking questions that encourage their followers to develop self-awareness and determine the next steps themselves. By promoting self-reflection and problem-solving, followers are able to overcome their own resistance to managerial guidance. As a result, they become skilled at finding optimal solutions within the constraints of their available resources. The leadership style often adopted by women leaders is on fostering collaboration, self-management, and mutual accountability rather than coercion. By highlighting the interconnectedness of tasks, women leaders educate their subordinates on

how individual performance affects the entire team's outcomes. This approach encourages a culture of self-leadership and shared responsibility, which supports the development of independent, adaptable team members. Participants in this study frequently described success as their ability to coach subordinates to become self-reliant contributors, aligning with findings that suggest women leaders are more likely to promote team cohesion and empowerment over strict control (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Moreover, women leaders take on the role of a mentor or coach, helping to shape their teams by serving as role models who are responsible for the organization's successes and failures. This responsibility-driven approach reflects the principles of transformational leadership, which seeks to inspire others to achieve their full potential while fostering an environment of mutual respect and growth (Bass & Avolio, 1993). Furthermore, this model of leadership underlines the importance of emotional intelligence and empathy, qualities often associated with female leadership styles, which prioritize understanding the needs of subordinates and guiding them to success through support rather than control (Goleman, 1995).

The leadership approach of women leaders in this study emphasizes the development of collaborative relationships with subordinates to establish common goals that align with both the company's objectives and personal fulfillment. In doing so, participants in my research encourage their teams to focus not only on financial gain but also on contributing positively to others, which is seen as a source of personal happiness and long-term success. This strategy suggests a deeper understanding of leadership beyond positional authority and underscores the importance of personal influence and empowerment in fostering a productive and loyal workforce.

The approach aligns with Social Exchange Theories (Blau, 1964; Jones et al., 1997), which emphasize the reciprocal nature of relationships where mutual benefits encourage loyalty and

performance. By cultivating interdependent relationships with their subordinates, women leaders can tap into a form of personal power, based on influence and support, that motivates and elevates employee productivity. This relational style contrasts with more traditional, authoritarian models of leadership; instead, focusing on trust, support, and the development of long-term, loyal relationships between leaders and their teams.

Coaching skills, particularly the method of continuous questioning to involve employees in decision-making, are a common technique used by women leaders to develop their teams. Many participants in this research indicated that when receiving reports from subordinates, they often challenge their team members to propose better alternatives. This method encourages subordinates to think critically and prepare backup plans in case their initial approach is not approved. By using these coaching techniques, women leaders guide their subordinates through challenges, promoting independence and self-reliance in problem-solving. Moreover, some women leaders acknowledge the gap between job requirements and the competencies of their subordinates, understanding that employees might need additional support. In such situations, these leaders step in as role models, using their experience and expertise to build trust and confidence in their ability to coach their team members. This approach enhances subordinates' learning experiences and development while instilling a sense of responsibility and empowerment in tackling tasks independently.

In conclusion, women leaders generally recognize the importance of approaching subordinate issues with sensitivity, aiming to reduce rigidity in their leadership and minimize resistance from employees. A common principle acknowledged by the participants is that when employees possess intrinsic motivation, they are more likely to follow their manager's leadership. Consequently, women leaders often employ soft tools such as organizational culture, informal relationships, and their expertise to tap into their employees' intrinsic motivation. This approach enables them to gently guide their subordinates, fostering a sense that decisions and activities

are self-generated rather than imposed by the managers. This, in turn, promotes a greater sense of responsibility for outcomes and flexibility in finding solutions during emergencies. In essence, women leaders consider themselves successful in constructing their leadership identity when they can coach and guide employees toward a career development path that aligns with their values and garners respect and followership.

In addition to coaching their employees, women leaders actively create opportunities for their subordinates to showcase their competencies. They believe that if their subordinates receive recognition for outstanding achievements, it reflects their own success and honors. Allowing employees to implement their proposals is seen as a developmental strategy, providing subordinates with opportunities to explore new initiatives and learn from both successes and failures. Women leaders emphasize that team success is a collective achievement, fostering a sense of engagement and commitment among employees to contribute to the team's development.

To encourage their employees' participation in development and innovation, the women in my sample often utilize informal activities that foster intrinsic motivation. They may invite employees to informal meetings in a cafeteria, creating a relaxed environment that eliminates the rigid boundary between managers and employees. This approach aims to enhance open communication, allowing employees to freely share their authentic opinions. Additionally, women leaders not only organize training courses to address competency gaps but also encourage their subordinates to participate in events beyond their regular work scope. This motivates employees to develop their competencies, expand their knowledge, and exceed their limits.

The key emphasis lies in empowering employees to see themselves as authors of their own activities and achievements, contributing to their lifelong development rather than merely

complying with the manager's requirements. Many women leaders highlight that the true measure of their contribution is evident when former employees, even after moving to other organizations, continue to seek their advice and assistance. Furthermore, these women leaders are often perceived as big sisters rather than authoritative figures or ex-managers. They take pride in cases where ex-employees maintain positive connections and regularly return to engage in discussions, share experiences, and seek advice, viewing this ongoing relationship as a testament to their successful leadership.

## **CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION**

To be more specific, women can generate collective leadership identity by caring key actors in their personal networks with some specific mechanisms. The significant factor connecting women's personal networks, and their leadership identity is mutuality. The approach taken by female leaders is characterized by a subtle and continuous process of self-renewal, focusing on positive self-building and the delivery of trust and values. They don't actively proclaim their leadership identity but rather excel in their daily endeavors.

Central to their relationship-building philosophy is the Give and Take principle, where they give without expecting immediate returns. This act of giving creates an internal space, allowing for the reception of positive outcomes from various sources, not just the individuals to whom they extended their generosity. This process contributes to their ongoing self-development, making it easier for them to connect with like-minded individuals in their community.

The natural creation of a harmonious energy field among individuals sharing similar frequencies is an automatic outcome of this continuous and interactive self-development process. This journey lacks a distinct starting or ending point, as it is fundamentally a process of internal growth that organically manifests as an external presence in a gentle and unforced manner. It's akin to a fragrant flower delicately floating on the water's surface, resilient against the buffeting winds, maintaining its grace above the tumultuous currents.



**CHAPTER 8:**

**CONCLUSION**

## **I. Answering the research questions**

If we return to our research questions, outlined at the beginning of the thesis, we can make the exercise of discussing how this research contributed to enlightening them. Below we recall the four main research questions and develop our argument on how we contributed to enlightening them.

*Question 1: What is the perception of Vietnamese women regarding the significance of personal networks and leadership identity in their professional journeys?*

*Question 2: Which personal and contextual attributes influence how Vietnamese women perceive the construction of leadership identity?*

*Question 3: Who are the key actors in the personal networks of Vietnamese women that influence their leadership identity?*

*Question 4: How do Vietnamese women construct their collective leadership identity by leveraging their personal networks?*

The definition of leadership employed in this study draws inspiration from the work of Kouzes and Posner (2006), who emphasize the reciprocal nature of leadership as a dynamic relationship. In alignment with the research conducted by DeRue and Ashford (2010), which advocates for a shift from static and hierarchical views of leadership to a more dynamic, social, and relational perspective, this study explores the evolving nature of leadership development processes.

Adopting the framework of leadership identity, conceptualized across three levels, individual, relational, and collective (Brewer and Gardner, 1996), the author provides an overview of how women perceive their leadership identity. Derived from insights gathered through 33

interviews, it becomes evident that women, rather than deliberately seeking collective endorsement, naturally construct their leadership identity through qualities such as consistency, trust, sincerity, and commitment.

The construction of women's leadership identity unfolds organically, with women eschewing overt displays of their leadership roles. Instead, they showcase their identity through achievements, value creation, and the pursuit of development opportunities for others. An increasingly popular avenue for this expression is the online social network, viewed as a personal platform to highlight their values. This subtle approach to claiming leadership identity reflects women's nuanced perceptions in this realm.

Exploring the factors contributing to leadership identity construction, the author delves into individual aspects that determine a woman's inclination toward or reluctance in assuming leadership positions. The interplay of inherent and nurtured factors becomes pivotal, with personal attributes taking precedence. Considerations such as self-awareness, particularly regarding emotional tendencies, influence the need for self-leadership to effectively manage emotions and project a successful leadership identity. Another critical factor stems from women's mindset, a robust belief in their capabilities empowers them to navigate challenges and attain their goals, while a more traditional perspective can constrain them within established roles and hinder the pursuit of leadership roles in dynamic environments.

The second pivotal factor in the construction of women's leadership identity lies in their contextual attributes. The traditional viewpoints ingrained in Vietnamese women often deter them from perceiving themselves as leaders. However, pivotal moments, such as marriage issues, career development challenges, and unexpected opportunities, serve as catalysts, awakening them to their work orientation and the potential for crafting a leadership identity.

These instances prompt a newfound awareness of key actors in their personal networks and the essence of their core leadership identity.

Within the key contacts of women's personal networks, the relationships with superiors and family members offer encouragement and spiritual support. In contrast, interactions with subordinates and professional partners significantly contribute to the positive branding of women leaders. Participants note that their leadership identity becomes intertwined with the community identity they engage with. Moreover, attracting exceptional employees through succession planning enhances their leadership identity, as their subordinates' success reflects positively on their leadership. Notably, many women incorporate Buddhist philosophy into their life and work ethos, considering Buddha as a crucial influence on their mindset, behaviors, and significant life decisions. Meditation emerges as a valuable tool for maintaining calmness and finding inner peace, with women perceiving Buddha as a spiritual guide during challenging situations.

In the realm of network management, women, often influenced by the Laws of Cause and Effect in Buddhism, embody the principles of Giving and Receiving when nurturing relationships. Their approach involves honest dedication to others in their personal networks, recognizing that genuine giving paves the way for receiving in return. Preferring not to directly showcase themselves, women turn to online social media as a platform to exhibit their leadership identity, allowing them to highlight potential values that contribute to their personal networks. They are cognizant of the importance of mutual value exchange and trust in building and sustaining relationships, emphasizing the significance of sincere interactions.

When asked about the primary influencers in their leadership identity construction, women consistently point to their family members. Children particularly play a pivotal role in their career development success. For my participants, success is defined not solely by work

achievements but also by achieving a harmonious balance between work and family responsibilities, the pinnacle of their career development. In this research, on the other hand, some participants lean towards nurturing relationships by establishing value exchange. For them, the foundation of a long-term relationship lies in both parties contributing value to each other, whether they are partners, subordinates, or superiors. Particularly, when engaging in professional networks, women grasp the essence of identity co-creation. They actively participate in communities that align with the identities they aim to construct. To co-create identities within these professional associations, they proactively enhance their competencies, nurture their knowledge, and pay attention to their appearance—an intrinsic aspect for many women, though not their primary concern in the process of constructing their leadership identity.

In networking, women adeptly build personal relationships by attentively considering personal interests and addressing them with sincerity. They believe in maintaining consistency in both work and life, viewing it as a steadfast foundation for constructing their leadership identity.

Among the younger generations, women are inclined to utilize online social networks to showcase their identities. Some may feel hesitant discussing their leadership roles in offline networks, leading them to prefer online platforms for a more subtle expression of their identities. Nevertheless, almost participants recognize the crucial aspect of maintaining identity consistency across both online and offline spheres. They emphasize the importance of authenticity in online networks, avoiding exaggeration to ensure that their true selves align with the expectations of their personal online connections during face-to-face encounters.

## **II. Contributing to DeRue and Ashford (2010)**

In contemporary management research, the most explored aspect of SET is the concept of workplace relationships. This model posits that certain workplace antecedents lead to

interpersonal connections, forming social exchange relationships. Social exchange relationships develop when leaders care for their followers, leading to positive consequences. In other words, social exchange relationships act as mediators, where fair and advantageous transactions within strong relationships result in effective work behavior and positive employee attitudes. Resources in exchange are categorized into six types: love, status, information, money, goods, and services (Foa and Foa, 1974, 1980), often collapsed into economic and socioemotional outcomes within organizational sciences. Economic outcomes address financial needs and tend to be tangible, while socioemotional outcomes fulfill social and esteem needs, often symbolically and in a particularistic manner. (Shore, Tetrick, & Barksdale, 2001). Blau's (1964) framework supports this idea by distinguishing between economic and social exchanges. Social exchanges, according to Blau, generate feelings of personal obligations, gratitude, and trust, creating enduring social patterns. Blau also noted that successful exchanges could lead to commitment between individuals, implying that value creation and exchange might impact a relationship. This holds true for the construction of women's leadership identity. When researchers discuss relationships, they typically refer to associations between interacting partners, whether individuals or institutions. Management research has extensively explored various forms of interpersonal exchange, with a focus on relationships with immediate supervisors, coworkers, and employing organizations. These distinct relationships have behavioral implications, as individuals are likely to reciprocate goodwill and helpfulness toward the party with whom they share a social exchange relationship.

The interaction between women's personal networks and leadership identity, thereby, has some following characteristics.

Firstly, this mechanism operates **autonomously**, with women not actively projecting their leadership identity. Instead, their leadership identity construction is influenced by personal and contextual attributes, as supported by Stogdill (1974), Bentz (1990), Bass and Stogdill (1990),

and Fiedler and Chemers (1974). Personal personality traits and contextual factors collectively contribute to the development of unique characteristics that distinguish female leaders from their followers and other male leaders within and beyond their organizations. These attributes extend beyond individual personalities to influence personal relationships, thereby amplifying the expression of leaders' identity. This is consistently reinforced in the content shared by participants. My findings suggest that women leaders in Vietnam do not passively conform to Confucian gender norms; instead, they find ways to adapt, challenge, and navigate these norms to construct their leadership identity. This is a crucial extension of DeRue and Ashford's model, which does not fully account for the cultural negotiation that is required in contexts like Vietnam.

Secondly, this relationship arises from women's **intra-personal** processes, focusing on their continuous self-strengthening and development. Rather than striving to define a specific leadership identity, they emphasize an internal process of self-renewal, actively cultivating positive personal values. Vietnamese female leaders commonly employ diverse strategies to address both business and life challenges, choosing solutions that align with their deep understanding of their capabilities. They acknowledge that robust self-awareness and self-leading capabilities are essential. Their intention is not to intentionally influence others but to engage in a developmental process that often originates from a moral community, creating a shared energy field among individuals with similar frequencies.

*Recognizing the need for success, I understood the importance of swift learning, adaptability, a skilled professional team, and, most importantly, a high level of self-learning capability...(P4)*

Thirdly, this process is **continuous**, lacking a distinct starting or ending point, illustrating the interconnectedness between women's self-leading and self-development and their exposure.

Every day, female leaders consistently endeavor to develop internally and foster personal relationships, primarily driven by their own motivation to enhance themselves. Their ongoing development of skills not only solidifies their position but also garners recognition from others. I extend the notion of claiming and granting leadership to include a mutual influence process. Rather than viewing these processes as one-way actions, I show how women leaders and their networks engage in reciprocal recognition, where leadership claims are continuously negotiated and redefined in both formal and informal settings. I argue that informal personal networks play a critical and reciprocal role in leadership identity construction, particularly in Vietnamese society. My research shows that while informal networks provide essential resources and support, they are also shaped by the leader's influence, particularly in terms of maintaining trust, reciprocity, and social capital.

Lastly, the interaction is **reciprocal**. I demonstrate that the process of leadership identity construction involves continuous and reciprocal interaction between individual traits, personal networks, and cultural context. Women leaders are not merely shaped by their networks or their environment; they actively participate in shaping those networks and negotiating cultural expectations. In essence, the interaction between women's personal networks and leadership identity adheres to the principles of SET. This involves following specific "rules and norms" within the exchange processes, primarily categorized into Reciprocity and Negotiation. Reciprocity, a well-known exchange rule, represents a transactional pattern characterized by interdependent exchanges (Russell C. and Marie S. M., 2005). Interdependence, highlighting mutual and complementary arrangements, stands out as a defining feature of social exchange (Molm, 1994). This reciprocal interdependence underscores contingent interpersonal transactions, where one party's action prompts a response from another, thereby reducing risk and fostering cooperation (Molm, 1994). SET posits that these interdependent transactions hold the potential to cultivate high-quality relationships. The process initiates when at least one

participant takes a “move” and if reciprocated, new rounds of exchange ensue. Once set in motion, each consequence can establish a self-reinforcing cycle, creating a likely continuous sequence. Parties engaged in exchange may also negotiate rules with the aim of reaching mutually beneficial arrangements (e.g., Cook & Emerson, 1978; Cook, Emerson, & Gillmore, 1983). In contrast to reciprocal exchanges, negotiated agreements are typically more explicit and involve a quid pro quo arrangement. Generally, reciprocity proves more conducive to positive work relationships than negotiations, as it cultivates trust and commitment among individuals (Molm, Takahashi, & Peterson, 2000).

Regarding leadership, women utilize personal networks not only to construct their leadership identity but also to communicate their social position. Deploying personal networks allows participants to refine their personal brand and reposition themselves based on the network they engage with. Conversely, once women successfully construct their leadership identity aligned with their values, they can attract individuals with similar value schemes.

*When our actions consistently aim to maximize benefits for our employees, they can perceive and reciprocate. It's a persistent and repetitive process. (P24)*

The preceding information has essentially addressed the research aims and questions. Accordingly, through the establishment of mutual trust and the creation of shared value, women can effectively employ their personal networks to shape their collective leadership identity. As we delve into the elements contributing to their personalized internalization and relational acknowledgment of women's leadership identity, it becomes evident that women's collective leadership identity is shaped by their expertise and efforts.

In the interviews, women also discuss their personal challenges stemming from societal stereotypes and norms related to women's roles. These obstacles largely emanate from the fundamental ideologies of Confucian culture that have long prevailed in Vietnamese society

(argued in Rydstrom’s work (1998)). There is a noticeable correlation between how women articulate their values, and their perceptions shaped by societal norms rooted in Confucian and Feudalistic ideologies over an extended period.

The comprehensive findings will be condensed into the revised model outlined below. In this model, personal and contextual attributes form the basis for the construction of women’s leadership identity. Key connections and the mechanisms within their networks can foster mutual trust and the collaborative creation of value in women’s personal networks, ultimately culminating in the development of women’s collective leadership identity.

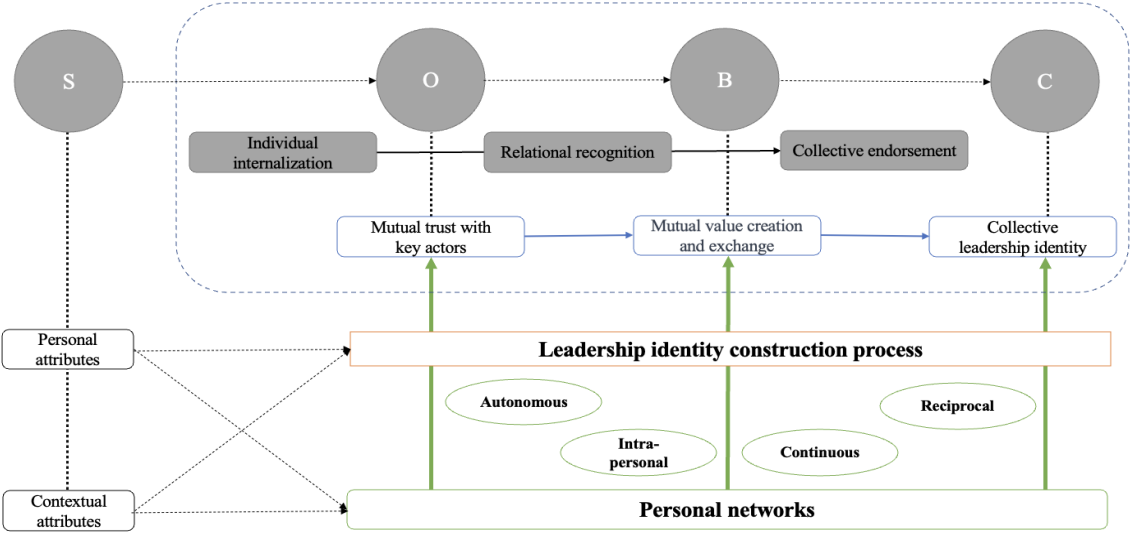


Figure 5.1: Adjusted conceptual model (the author)

**III. Limitations and suggestions for further research**

Research endeavors are not without their set of limitations, and this study is no exception. Firstly, heeding DeRue’s (2010) suggestion, a comprehensive exploration of the leadership identity construction process demands a longitudinal examination. Understanding the causality and reciprocal nature of claiming and granting leadership identities over time is crucial. The

absence of a temporal dimension in this study limits a nuanced understanding of the evolving process.

Secondly, the acceptability of claims or grants of a particular identity is context dependent. What may be embraced in one context might face resistance in another. This research operates within specific participant contexts, and extrapolating the model's reliability and identifying gaps may prove challenging for researchers exploring different settings.

Thirdly, the research was conducted with Vietnamese women, so it does not clarify the dynamics between personal networks and leadership identity construction in countries with Confucian cultural roots, such as China, Korea, and Japan, and whether there are similarities or differences compared to Vietnam. One suggestion for further research would be to explore the differences and similarities of this mechanism in other countries with similar cultural contexts. This will help to better understand how Confucian culture influences the process of leadership identity construction and personal networks for women in different contexts. Additionally, it would be beneficial if the research could be conducted with male samples to compare the similarities and differences in the leadership identity construction process between men and women. This could help uncover unique aspects of this process specific to women, while also shedding light on the role of gender in the formation and development of leadership identity.

Finally, I used qualitative methods to better understand the construction of women leadership identity. Given the present research's aims, I believe that semi-structured interviews accompanied by 4 samples of netnography were the most appropriate method to collect data. Nevertheless, if I have more time to investigate the longitudinal case studies, I believe more in-depth interaction between personal network and leadership identity could be sufficiently observed and analyzed.

In conclusion, my research fills a significant gap in the literature by exploring the reciprocal interaction between key factors involved in women's leadership identity construction, particularly in the Vietnamese context. By doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamic processes involved in leadership identity construction and provides new insights into how women leaders navigate and reshape their personal networks, cultural contexts, and leadership roles. This extension of the DeRue and Ashford (2010) model highlights the need for future research to explore the contextual complexities of leadership identity construction, particularly in developing countries with distinct cultural influences like Vietnam.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR BASIC INFORMATION

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Work sectors</i>	<i>Main responsibilities</i>	<i>Education level</i>	<i>Educational major</i>	<i>Marital status</i>	<i>Year of birth</i>
<i>P1</i>	CEO	Distribution	Finance and Investment management	Bachelor	Business Administration	Married	1965
<i>P2</i>	Chief Finance Officer	Financial Investment	Finance and Investment management	Master	Financing and Accounting	Married	1980
<i>P3</i>	CEO and Founder	Financial Investment	Finance and Investment management	Master	Business Administration	Married	1972
<i>P4</i>	CEO	Retailing	Finance and Investment management	Master	Business Administration	Married	1975
<i>P5</i>	Human Resource Director	Information Technology	Management	Master	Human Resource Management	Married	1984
<i>P6</i>	Global Recruitment Director	Information Technology	Management	Master	Business Administration	Married	1984
<i>P7</i>	Human Resource Director	Real Estate	Management	Bachelor	Human Resource Management	Married	1984
<i>P8</i>	Marketing Manager	Distribution	Marketing	Master	Business Administration	Married	1985

<i>P9</i>	Head of Student Services	Education	Marketing	Master	Business Administration	Married	1984
<i>P10</i>	Marketing Manager	Distribution	Marketing	Bachelor	Marketing	Single	1992
<i>P11</i>	Marketing Manager	Information Technology	Marketing	Master	Marketing and Communication	Married	1982
<i>P12</i>	CEO	Distribution	Marketing and Management	Master	Business Administration	Married	1984
<i>P13</i>	Training Director	Distribution	Marketing and Management	Master	Business Administration	Married	1982
<i>P14</i>	Dean	Education	Marketing and Management	Master	Language and Culture	Married	1984
<i>P15</i>	Marketing Manager	Education	Marketing and Management	PhD	Marketing	Divorced	1981
<i>P16</i>	CEO and Founder	Education	Marketing and Management	Master	Business Administration	Married	1981
<i>P17</i>	General Director	Information Technology	Marketing and Management	Master	Business Administration	Married	1983
<i>P18</i>	Public Communication Manager	Information Technology	Marketing and Management	Master	Marketing and Communication	Married	1972
<i>P19</i>	CEO and Founder	Financial Investment	Marketing and Management	Master	International business	Divorced	1985
<i>P20</i>	CEO and Founder	Marketing and Communications	Marketing and Management	Master	Marketing and Communication	Married	1984
<i>P21</i>	CEO	Education	Social contribution	PhD	Business Administration	Divorced	1980
<i>P22</i>	CEO and Founder	Education	Social contribution	Master	Coaching and Consulting	Married	1975
<i>P23</i>	Executive Director	Social enterprise	Social contribution	Master	Business Administration	Married	1972
<i>P24</i>	Dean	Education	Strategy for Startup	PhD	Business Administration	Married	1969

<i>P25</i>	Marketing Manager	Manufacturing and Distribution	Strategy for Startup	Master	Marketing and Communication	Married	1979
<i>P26</i>	CEO and Founder	Marketing and Communications	Strategy for Startup	Master	Marketing and Communication	Married	1980
<i>P27</i>	CEO and Founder	Transportation	Strategy for Startup	Master	Business Administration	Married	1975
<i>P28</i>	CEO	Education	Training and coaching for employees	Master	Leadership	Married	1971
<i>P29</i>	Academic Head - Literacy Faculty	Education	Training and coaching for employees	Master	Language and Culture	Married	1975
<i>P30</i>	CEO and Founder	Education	Training and coaching for employees	Bachelor	Training	Divorced	1974
<i>P31</i>	CEO	Retailing	Training and coaching for employees	Master	Business Administration	Married	1975
<i>P32</i>	CEO and Founder	Manufacturing and Distribution	Concern for women development	Bachelor	Pharmaceutical	Divorced	1956
<i>P33</i>	CEO and Founder	Social enterprise	Concern for women development	Master	Business Administration	Married	1975

## Réseau personnel et construction de l'identité de leadership chez les femmes

### RÉSUMÉ

Cette thèse explore les dynamiques entre les réseaux personnels et la construction de l'identité de leader chez les femmes, dans le contexte culturel vietnamien. D'un point de vue empirique, elle s'appuie sur 33 entretiens semi-directifs et 4 études de cas netnographiques. En s'appuyant sur le cadre théorique de DeRue et Ashford (2010), l'étude révèle que les femmes dans des contextes informels développent leur leadership grâce à des interactions de type « donner et recevoir », établissant des dynamiques réciproques leader-suiveur. Pour analyser cette construction identitaire dans le cadre culturel confucéen, une typologie est proposée, mettant en lumière l'interaction entre des attributs innés (confiance en soi, courage, sincérité) et acquis (cohérence, autonomie, accomplissements). En développant des relations authentiques et en laissant leur identité évoluer à travers elles, les femmes renforcent leur influence, instaurent la confiance et bâtissent des réseaux qui soutiennent leur leadership. Enfin, des recommandations pratiques sont formulées en termes de développement du leadership féminin dans un contexte vietnamien: prendre des initiatives, incarner la confiance, se conduire de manière autonome, faire preuve de courage et cultiver la sincérité, pour construire une identité de leader intégrant des forces naturelles et une adaptabilité fondée sur les échanges relationnels.

**Mots clefs français:** *identité, construction de l'identité de leadership, construction de l'identité de leadership chez les femmes, réseau personnel informel, culture confucéenne.*

### Personal network and women leadership identity construction

#### ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the dynamics between personal networks and the construction of women's leadership identity within the Vietnamese cultural context. Empirically, it is based on 33 semi-structured interviews and 4 netnographic case studies. Drawing on the theoretical framework of DeRue and Ashford (2010), the study reveals that women in informal contexts develop their leadership through "giving and receiving" interactions, establishing reciprocal leader-follower dynamics.

To analyze this identity construction within the Confucian cultural framework, a typology is proposed, highlighting the interaction between innate attributes (self-confidence, courage, sincerity) and acquired ones (consistency, autonomy, achievements). By fostering authentic relationships and allowing their identity to evolve through these relationships, women enhance their influence, build trust, and establish networks that support their leadership.

Finally, practical recommendations are provided for the development of women's leadership in the Vietnamese context: taking initiative, embodying confidence, acting autonomously, demonstrating courage, and cultivating sincerity to construct a leadership identity that integrates natural strengths with adaptability grounded in relational exchanges.

**Key words:** *identity, leadership identity construction, women leadership identity construction, informal personal network(s), Confucian culture*

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