

How identity leaders foster team innovation: a multilevel investigation

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Abstract

Purpose – This research examines how identity leadership, which is considered a leadership approach that unites members under a shared identity and purpose, influences team innovation. Based on the social identity theory of leadership, we developed a multilevel model that suggests the mediating effects of social identification and team flexibility in the identity leadership-team innovation relationship. Furthermore, we examined the moderating role of leader-member exchange (LMX) ambivalence in this relationship to provide critical insights into the relational dynamics between leadership and innovation.

Design/methodology/approach – We tested our hypotheses using a sample of 92 managers and 294 employees nested within 92 teams. The multilevel model was analyzed using Mplus.

Findings – Results indicate that identity leadership fosters team innovation through the dual processes of social identification and team flexibility. However, while team LMX ambivalence dampens the positive effect of team flexibility on innovation, LMX ambivalence does not moderate the relationship between social identification and team innovation.

Originality/value – This study pioneers the exploration of identity leadership's influence on team innovation through a multilevel framework. Our findings provide valuable insights for organizations and managers seeking to cultivate a shared identity that enhances innovation amidst complex team dynamics.

Keywords Identity leadership, Team innovation, Social identification, Team flexibility, LMX ambivalence, Multilevel

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Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving business landscape, organizations face an ongoing challenge of sustaining innovation to remain competitive and ensure their survival (Acar *et al.*, 2024). Yet many struggle to translate new ideas into practice, often due to a lack of cohesion and flexibility within teams, which are essential for fostering collective innovation (Grossman *et al.*, 2022; Huang *et al.*, 2022). To overcome these challenges, organizations must develop teams that can swiftly adapt to changing environments while fostering a strong sense of unity to leverage collective strengths (Meyers *et al.*, 2023). Achieving this balance is complicated by the tendency of members to operate in isolation, where individual interests may overshadow shared goals, leading to fragmentation rather than collaboration (Wu *et al.*, 2021). Researchers seeking solutions for these issues have identified effective leadership as a critical driver that shapes team dynamics and unites members to motivate team innovation (Hughes *et al.*, 2018).

The existing literature has examined the impact of various leadership styles on innovation, such as transformational, charismatic, authentic, and humble leadership (Born *et al.*, 2025; Leblanc *et al.*, 2022; Lei *et al.*, 2020; Salloum *et al.*, 2023). While these styles offer valuable insights, they often emphasize leaders' traits or individual followers as target of influence rather than the collective nature of team dynamics (Haslam *et al.*, 2023b). In contrast, *identity*

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leadership offers a promising framework for fostering team innovation by highlighting how leaders cultivate a shared identity that aligns team members around common goals (Haslam *et al.*, 2023b). Identity leadership involves behaviors through which leaders represent, advance, create, and embed a shared sense of “us” within teams (Haslam *et al.*, 2026). To date, research has begun to explore the relationship between identity leadership and innovation (e.g. Bracht *et al.*, 2023; Smith *et al.*, 2018). However, our understanding of how and when identity leaders drive members to innovate collectively remains far from complete (Lê and Hoang, 2025). Addressing this gap requires deeper exploration of the mechanisms underlying this relationship.

Grounded in the social identity theory of leadership (SITL), which explains how social identity processes enable leaders to create social change by engaging with a shared identity of the group they lead (Haslam *et al.*, 2026; Hogg *et al.*, 2012), our study proposes a theoretical framework wherein identity leadership enhances team innovation through the dual mediating mechanisms of *team flexibility* and *social identification*. Team flexibility emerges as a vital characteristic that enables teams to respond effectively to shifting external demands (He *et al.*, 2014). This adaptive capability allows teams to identify new perspectives and improve their collaborative processes (Li *et al.*, 2010; Liu and Lin, 2021). However, for teams to be flexible requires a strong sense of social identification among team members, wherein individuals perceive their teams as integral to their self-concept (Postmes *et al.*, 2013). Such identification is essential for advancing collective goals rather than pursuing individual preferences (Haslam *et al.*, 2013). By taking a multilevel perspective, our study takes a further step from prior single-level studies (e.g. Clarke *et al.*, 2025; Figgins *et al.*, 2024) and advances the current literature by explaining how multilevel social identity processes jointly translate identity leadership into team innovation outcomes (Carminati and Héliot, 2023; Islam, 2020).

Moreover, we incorporate *leader-member exchange (LMX) ambivalence* as a moderating factor at both individual and team levels to capture the complexities of social identity processes (Carminati and Héliot, 2023; Johns, 2017). While SITL posits that leaders and followers co-produce shared identity (Haslam *et al.*, 2026; Hogg *et al.*, 2012), this process is shaped by the dynamics of their interactions. LMX ambivalence reflects the conflicting feelings team members may have toward their leader, which can affect how strongly they identify with the group and collaborate (Lee *et al.*, 2019; Zentgraf, 2023). Therefore, LMX ambivalence is examined as a moderator of the relationship between social identification and team innovation, and team-level LMX ambivalence as a moderator of the link between team flexibility and team innovation to explain the mechanism underpinning identity leadership-team innovation relationship.

This study makes significant contributions to the literature on innovation and leadership. First, we propose a multilevel model showing that identity leadership fosters team innovation through social identification and team flexibility. By examining these mediators, our study clarifies how identity leadership helps teams translate new ideas into practical outcomes by strengthening shared commitment and adaptability. Furthermore, we extend prior research by examining LMX ambivalence at both team and individual levels, moving beyond the dominant view of LMX as singular and stable (e.g. Ahmed *et al.*, 2024; Zhao and Kamil, 2025). This perspective clarifies how ambivalent leader-member relationships can hinder team innovation. Additionally, our study contributes to SITL by demonstrating that identity leadership supports both continuity and change within teams. We show how leaders foster team innovation by mobilizing dynamic social identities that remain meaningful under changing social conditions, thereby clarifying how and when identity leadership operates through evolving social identity processes (Haslam *et al.*, 2026).

The findings of this study also highlight the practical importance of developing identity leaders. For managers, this research suggests focusing more on creating and embedding shared identity within teams to help employees commit and work flexibly toward collective goals. For organizations, our study emphasizes selecting and developing leaders who are aware of shared identity and can unite members around common goals. For policymakers, it underscores the broader value of supporting identity leadership development initiatives across sectors.

Theory and hypotheses development

Social identity theory of leadership and identity leadership

Our study is grounded in SITL (Hogg *et al.*, 2012), which extends and applies the broader Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and Self-Categorization Theory (Turner *et al.*, 1987) to explain leadership as a social influence process. SITL builds on the social identity analysis of social influence by emphasizing that people's social identity is shaped through their membership in meaningful groups, which influences how they see themselves and connect with others (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Hogg *et al.*, 2012). A core premise of SITL is that leadership effectiveness depends on leaders and followers perceiving themselves as part of a shared social identity of "we" and "us" rather than as just a personal identity of "I" and "you" (Hogg *et al.*, 2012; Steffens *et al.*, 2021). According to Hogg *et al.* (2012), group members who are most prototypical, meaning they best represent the group's shared identity, tend to be especially influential and are more likely to emerge as leaders.

Building on this idea, identity leadership, as conceptualized by Haslam *et al.* (2026), extends SITL beyond group identity prototypicality highlights a broader range of leader behaviors that shape and sustain shared social identity. Rather than focusing solely on being a group prototype, identity leadership emphasizes how leaders actively engage in shaping the meaning of the group to foster sense of belonging (Haslam *et al.*, 2026). In other words, identity leadership is what leaders do to craft group social identity and make such identity matter for group members (Haslam *et al.*, 2022; Krug *et al.*, 2021a). In practice, this leadership approach emphasizes mutual influence between leaders and followers while advocating for debate and dialog within the group to define their shared identity and goals (Haslam *et al.*, 2026). Evidence for the effectiveness of identity leadership is provided in a recent systematic literature review, which highlighted that identity leadership is consistently associated with positive outcomes across levels, including improved performance, engagement, trust, well-being, morale, and cohesion (Lê and Hoang, 2025).

Taken together, SITL provides a useful lens to understand how identity leadership can foster team innovation as it highlights the power of shared group identity in aligning individual behaviors with collective goals. Through its emphasis on "we-ness," SITL explains why groups develop a common purpose and how this sense of belonging spurs members to advance group interests through innovative behaviors. Moreover, SITL helps explain the mechanisms by which identity leadership shapes and coordinates shared identity within groups (Haslam *et al.*, 2022), and how this, in turn, drives innovation through the mediating processes of social identification and team flexibility. Furthermore, the moderating effects of individual- and team-level LMX ambivalence help illuminate relational dynamics within these identity processes. In short, through SITL, we offer a more nuanced picture of how leaders can deliberately shape and harness a shared social identity embedded in individual and team processes to drive team innovation.

Identity leadership as a group process

Given that "leadership is by nature a multiple-level phenomenon" (Chun *et al.*, 2009, p. 689), it is essential to view identity leadership as a group process that shapes both individual and group behaviors. Treating the group as a meaningful entity is also important when research involves individuals nested in groups such as work teams (Braun *et al.*, 2013). By fostering a shared sense of "we," identity leadership shapes how members collectively interpret goals and coordinate their efforts. Leaders who actively engage with and manage this shared identity are therefore better able to align the majority of members' behaviors and guide them toward actions that serve the group's interests (Haslam *et al.*, 2022).

Despite growing evidence that identity leadership can enhance a range of individual outcomes – such as well-being (Cárdenas *et al.*, 2024), organizational citizenship behavior (Mühlemann *et al.*, 2022), and performance (Fransen *et al.*, 2022) – scholars have called for more attention on how it produces outcomes at the group level (Butalia *et al.*, 2025; Hou *et al.*, 2021).

While some recent studies suggest that identity leadership can strengthen team performance (Krug *et al.*, 2021b) and teamfulness (Haslam *et al.*, 2023b), these studies have only begun to uncover its broader group-level effects. Understanding how identity leaders shape group processes and outcomes remains an important focus (Lê and Hoang, 2025). To better understand this group process, there is a need to examine the multilevel pathways through which identity leadership influences team functioning and outcomes. Building on these considerations, our research contributes to the literature by investigating how identity leadership operates as a group process to influence group-level outcomes, specifically focusing on team innovation and the multilevel mechanisms that connect leaders, individuals, and the team as a whole.

The impact of identity leadership on team innovation

Team innovation refers to the outcome of collective efforts to generate and implement new and improved ways of working (Acar *et al.*, 2024; van Knippenberg, 2017). Team innovation involves leveraging members' diverse knowledge, skills, and perspectives to generate novel ideas and to secure the support and resources necessary for their implementation (Han and Ni, 2025; Li *et al.*, 2018; van Knippenberg, 2017). Due to this collective effort, leadership is usually needed to coordinate the group to achieve successful team innovation (van Knippenberg, 2017).

In light of SITL, identity leadership emphasizes the role of leaders in creating a shared sense of "us" within the team, which can be a powerful driver of team innovation. Bracht *et al.* (2023) found that identity leadership positively influences individual innovative behavior through social identification, as individuals who identify strongly with their team are more likely to support its innovation efforts. At the group level, identity leaders can foster a shared identity that shifts team members' focus from individual behaviors to group actions (Haslam *et al.*, 2022). By encouraging team members to define themselves as part of a meaningful ingroup, identity leaders motivate them to work toward the shared success of the group, often being willing to prioritize group goals over personal interests (Haslam *et al.*, 2026). Considering this insight, we hypothesize the following.

H1. Identity leadership positively influences team innovation.

The mediating role of social identification

Social identification refers to the process by which individuals define themselves as members of a group, adopting the group's norms, values, and goals as part of their self-concept (Postmes *et al.*, 2013; Younis and Hammad, 2021). When people identify with a group, they are more likely to align their behavior with the collective good of that group (Butalia *et al.*, 2025).

Identity leadership plays a pivotal role in fostering social identification. Drawing from SITL, we argue that when leaders articulate and represent what makes the group distinct, they enhance members' sense of belonging and strengthen the salience of group identity (Haslam *et al.*, 2026; Hogg *et al.*, 2012). By representing and advancing what the group stands for, leaders can encourage members to integrate the group's identity into their sense of self and strengthen individuals' commitment to the group (Haslam *et al.*, 2022; Krug *et al.*, 2021a). Supporting this mechanism, a meta-analysis by Steffens *et al.* (2021) shows a reliable association between leaders who represent shared identity and followers' commitment and team cohesion.

From a SITL perspective, when individuals identify with their group, they are motivated to advance the group's interests by generating new ideas and working with others to put those ideas into practice (Bracht *et al.*, 2023). Social identification leads individuals to internalize the group's goals and values, making the group's identity part of their own self-concept (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). This identification, in turn, motivates members to work with others to put new ideas into practical outcomes, as doing so enhances both the group's status and their own sense of self-worth (Haslam *et al.*, 2013). This view is supported by Hirst *et al.* (2009), who found that social identification with a work team fuels creative effort and persistence, which in

turn helps individuals solve problems creatively to protect and enhance the group's standing. Similarly, [Bracht et al. \(2023\)](#) argue that individuals who identify strongly with their team are especially motivated to search for and develop ideas that benefit the group as a whole, as a way to sustain their group membership and positive relationships at work.

Extending this logic, we argue that individuals do not stop at developing new ideas on their own; rather, they actively seek endorsement and support from others in the group to ensure these ideas are recognized as useful and worth implementing. This group endorsement is crucial because what counts as novel and useful is shaped by group norms and shared values ([Adarves-Yorno et al., 2008](#); [Haslam et al., 2013](#)). By engaging others in the group, individuals increase the likelihood that their ideas align with the group's identity and goals, making implementation more feasible. Therefore, individual social identification motivates group members to innovate together.

Taken together, these arguments suggest that social identification is an important mediator that translates identity leadership into team innovation. Thus, we hypothesize the following.

- H2. Social identification mediates the relationship between identity leadership and team innovation.

The mediating role of team flexibility

Team flexibility refers to a team's ability to effectively adapt to environmental changes and uncertainties ([Li et al., 2010](#); [McComb et al., 2007](#)). Flexibility in a team involves changing the behavioral and cognitive structures of team members, allowing the entire team to respond to external pressures rather than relying on rigid routines ([Ling et al., 2021](#); [Tomer, 1995](#)). Team flexibility plays a crucial role in achieving organizational benefits such as increased productivity, competitiveness, and profitability ([Annosi et al., 2025](#); [He et al., 2014](#); [Li et al., 2010](#)).

Drawing on SITL, we propose that teams led by identity leaders are likely to exhibit higher levels of flexibility. First, identity leaders often need to adjust the shared identity of the team they lead by redefining group boundaries in response to changes in social reality ([Haslam et al., 2026](#)). This social identity process can disrupt fixed ideas about who "we" are and open the way for members to question the status quo. In this way, identity leadership supports team flexibility by making group norms open to change. Second, [He et al. \(2014\)](#) argue that team flexibility is fostered when members feel empowered to make decisions and coordinate effectively in response to changing conditions. Identity leadership is associated with higher team cohesion ([Butalia et al., 2025](#)) and psychological safety ([Clarke et al., 2025](#); [Fransen et al., 2020](#)). Such a cohesive and psychologically safe environment can encourage team members to challenge established norms and practices ([Dar et al., 2022](#)) and empower team members to adapt their work together.

This enhanced team flexibility, in turn, is expected to positively impact team innovation. Flexible teams tend to have a flatter hierarchy, where input flows freely and each member feels included and recognized ([Dar et al., 2022](#); [Tomer, 1995](#)). Indeed, research has shown that such flexibility supports outcomes such as higher team performance ([Günsel and Açıkgöz, 2013](#); [Lin et al., 2015](#)) and organizational citizenship behavior ([Liu and Lin, 2021](#)). Furthermore, flexibility helps team members break through impasses, see problems from new perspectives, and even spot new problems that need solving ([Georgsdottir and Getz, 2004](#)). Through the lens of SITL, when members see themselves as part of the group, they support and build on each other's ideas. This shared identity makes teams more receptive to new ideas that extend group norms in valuable ways, giving unusual ideas a chance to be recognized and implemented ([Adarves-Yorno et al., 2008](#); [Haslam et al., 2013](#)). Together, flexibility helps members implement creative ideas collectively to advance the group's goals.

Building on these relationships, we posit that team flexibility is an essential mediating mechanism through which identity leadership enhances team innovation. Based on the discussion, we hypothesize the following.

H3. Team flexibility mediates the relationship between identity leadership and team innovation.

The moderating role of LMX ambivalence

To examine how relational dynamics shape team innovation, we focus on LMX ambivalence as a moderator. While SITL emphasizes identification with the group as a whole (Hogg *et al.*, 2012), Zentgraf (2023) argues that a relational perspective can shed light on how interpersonal exchanges influence social identification processes. In practice, leader-follower relationships are often ambivalent, with individuals experiencing mixed or conflicting feelings about their leader (Lee *et al.*, 2019; Pratt, 2000). Such ambivalence may arise when leaders juggle multiple roles, send inconsistent signals (Bass and Bass, 2008), or provide uneven support across team members (Lee *et al.*, 2019). LMX ambivalence captures this reality by reflecting the conflicting perceptions team members hold about their relationship with the leader (Lee *et al.*, 2019). We argue that high ambivalence in relationships between the leader and individual members, or with the majority of members, may weaken the extent to which social identification or team flexibility translates into team innovation.

Individual-level LMX ambivalence refers to the mixed or conflicting perceptions an individual holds about their relationship with the leader (Lee *et al.*, 2019). Social identification motivates members to generate ideas and work with others to implement them, but this process can be disrupted if members have ambivalent feelings about their leader. Huang *et al.* (2022) argue that LMX ambivalence can create uncertainty and anxiety for team members. From the SITL perspective (Hogg *et al.*, 2012), this uncertainty makes it harder for individuals to trust the leader's role in shaping the group's shared identity or to see the leader as a prototypical member. As such, high LMX ambivalence can reduce individual members' motivation to work for the group's interests, such as implementing new ideas. In contrast, when LMX ambivalence is low, individuals are more likely to trust in the shared identity mobilized by the leader and to work with others toward group goals. Based on this discussion, the following hypothesis is formulated.

H4a. LMX ambivalence moderates the relationship between social identification and team innovation, such that this association is weaker when team LMX ambivalence is high rather than low.

In team settings, LMX ambivalence could be conceptualized at the team level because team members are often exposed to similar leadership behaviors (Hahn and Semrau, 2023). Based on the definition by Lee *et al.* (2019), we refer to team LMX ambivalence as conflicting perceptions that team members collectively share about their relationship with the leader. For example, a team looks up to their leader's innovative behaviors, which often leads to exciting projects. However, taking on many projects can create stress and negatively affect employees' psychological well-being (Aksoy, 2025). This creates ambivalence, as they value the leader's innovation but feel uneasy about the potential risks (Aksoy, 2025). Furthermore, when team members see some team members receiving consistent support and opportunities from the leader while others receive less, it can also create ambivalence (Lee *et al.*, 2019).

Huang *et al.* (2022) argue that LMX ambivalence may shape how team members interpret and respond to flexibility within their team. Prior research also suggests that leadership factors can influence whether team flexibility successfully translates into innovation (Günsel and Açıkgöz, 2013; Jia *et al.*, 2021). From an SITL perspective, when the majority of team members feel ambivalent toward their leader, their sense of shared identity can weaken. Unequal or inconsistent exchanges between the leader and various team members can exacerbate the dynamics (Chen *et al.*, 2025). As a result, high shared LMX ambivalence undermines the cohesion needed to turn flexibility into coordinated efforts to implement new ideas. In contrast, when shared LMX ambivalence is low, team members are more likely to collectively identify with the shared identity, and the resulting cohesion can support members to be flexible together for innovation. Therefore, we hypothesize as follows.

H4b. Team LMX ambivalence moderates the relationship between team flexibility and team innovation, such that this association is weaker when team LMX ambivalence is high rather than low.

Figure 1 exhibits the theoretical model and summarizes the relationships between the main constructs in this study. The following sections present the research methodology and research findings.

Method

Sample and procedure

Our study collected data from work teams within private Vietnamese hospitality companies, such as hotels and restaurants. As an emerging economy, Vietnam's hospitality industry has expanded rapidly in recent years due to rising numbers of both domestic and international tourists (Luu, 2023). In this highly competitive market, firms often rely on their teams to generate and implement innovative ideas to stay competitive (Hoang *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, as part of Confucian Asia, Vietnam's strong collectivist culture can arguably support identity leadership (Haslam *et al.*, 2022). Relational aspects such as social support and maintaining good interpersonal relationships are highly valued in Vietnamese organizations (Nguyen *et al.*, 2025). This context is suitable for studying this leadership approach, which has been limited in research from the non-Western contexts (Lê and Hoang, 2025).

Data was gathered from two sources, managers and employees, to reduce common method bias (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2024). We randomly selected 300 private companies from lists provided by a government agency and a business association. Human resource managers at these companies were contacted via phone and email to outline the study's objectives and request permission to survey their managers and employees. Out of the 300 contacted, 116 companies agreed to participate. With support from the human resource departments and CEOs of these firms, we distributed surveys to 650 employees and 210 managers in their teams. The surveys, in Vietnamese and labeled with codes for matching purposes, were distributed along with a letter describing the study, emphasizing voluntary participation, and assuring response confidentiality and anonymity.

Of the 650 employee surveys distributed, 345 were returned, with 315 usable responses retained after excluding 7 incomplete surveys and 23 without matching manager data. Among managers, 117 of the 210 distributed surveys were valid after removing incomplete responses

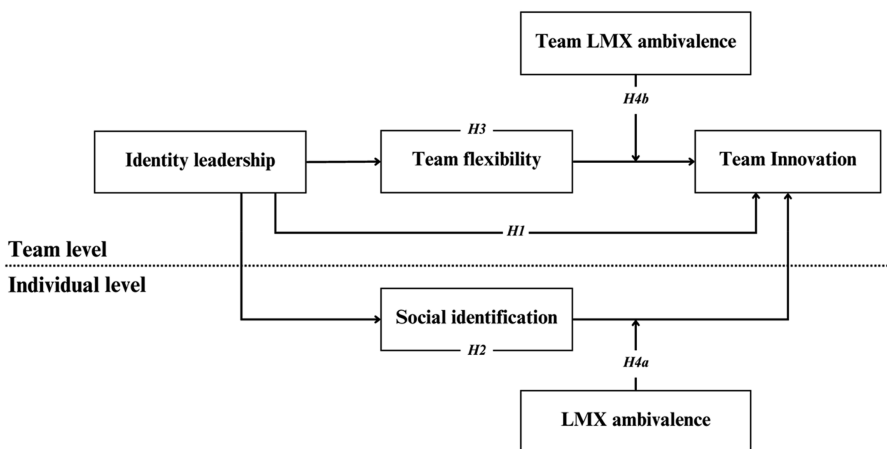


Figure 1. Research model. Source: Authors' own work

and those missing employee matches. Given the multilevel design of the study, we included teams with valid responses from the manager and at least two employees, consistent with the team-level inclusion criteria used by Wang *et al.* (2024). This approach is also consistent with prior studies (e.g. Rego *et al.*, 2025). The final sample consists of 294 employees (45.2%) and 92 managers (34.8%) across 92 teams.

Teams had an average size of 3.19 employees (ranging from 2 to 23, $SD = 2.51$). Employees were, on average, 27.4 years old ($SD = 9.6$), with 55.8% identifying as female, and 26.2% holding undergraduate or graduate degrees. Tenure distribution among team members was as follows: 63.6% with less than 2 years, 14.97% with 2–5 years, and 21.43% with over 5 years in their teams.

Measures

We employed back-translation method (Brislin, 1970) to translate the original English questionnaire into Vietnamese. First, a bilingual management researcher translated the items from English to Vietnamese. Next, another bilingual management researcher translated the Vietnamese version back into English. Additionally, a third management researcher reviewed both the English and Vietnamese translations. Any inconsistencies in the translation process were resolved through discussion. The response scale used five points with designated anchors: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree. All survey instruments can be found in the Appendix.

Identity leadership was evaluated using a four-item scale from Steffens *et al.* (2014). An exemplary item is “My manager creates a sense of cohesion within the team.”

Social identification was assessed using a four-item scale from van Der Vegt *et al.* (2003). The items included: “I would like to continue working with my team.”

Team flexibility was evaluated using a four-item scale from He *et al.* (2014). An exemplary item is “Our team members are able to make any adjustments necessary to cope with changing circumstances.”

LMX ambivalence was assessed using a seven-item scale from Lee *et al.* (2019). The items included: “I have conflicting thoughts: sometimes I think my manager recognizes my potential, while at other times I don’t.”

Team innovation was evaluated using a six-item scale adapted from Scott and Bruce (1994). A sample item is “My team develops adequate plans and schedules for the implementation of new ideas.”

We considered team size and team tenure as control variables, because they may affect innovation outcomes (Wei and Lau, 2012; Weiss and Hoegl, 2016). To measure team tenure from individual tenure ratings (1 = less than 2 years; 2 = 2–5 years; 3 = more than 5 years), we calculated an aggregate team-level measure by averaging individual tenure responses within each team.

The team-level constructs (i.e. identity leadership, team flexibility, and team LMX ambivalence) were aggregated using a direct consensus composition model (Chan, 1998), where the team-level score was aggregated from individual ratings (Li *et al.*, 2022). According to Bliese (2000), appropriate within-team agreement ($r_{wg(j)}$) is crucial before aggregating individual responses into team-level measures. We chose $r_{wg(j)}$ because it is a widely used index that assesses whether team members’ responses are similar enough to be aggregated and offers clear guidelines for interpretation (Nijstad *et al.*, 2025; Woehr *et al.*, 2015). Our data show that, at the team level, the median $r_{wg(j)}$ coefficients were 0.87 for identity leadership, 0.86 for team flexibility, and 0.84 for LMX ambivalence. All values exceed the cutoff value of 0.70 (Woehr *et al.*, 2015), indicating strong within-team agreement. We also calculated intraclass correlation coefficient ICC(1) for identity leadership (ICC(1) = 0.16), team flexibility (ICC(1) = 0.13), and team LMX ambivalence (ICC(1) = 0.006). These values indicate small to moderate between-group variance (LeBreton and Senter, 2008; Woehr *et al.*, 2015). Overall, the indices reasonably justify aggregation.

Analytical strategy

In our data, employees are nested within teams/managers, and our focal variables are located at two conceptual levels. Mplus 8 program was used for analysis (Muthén and Muthén, 2017). We placed social identification and LMX ambivalence at the individual (within) level, while identity leadership, team flexibility, team LMX ambivalence, and team innovation were analyzed at the team (between) level. To test the hypotheses, we performed multilevel path analysis within a single integrated model, using the TWOLEVEL function to account for the nested data (Muthén and Muthén, 2017).

To assess our proposed multilevel indirect effects (e.g. Hypotheses 2 and 3), we adopted the analytical strategy recommended by Preacher *et al.* (2010). Specifically, we used the single-level estimate of the association between identity leadership and team flexibility, along with the cross-level estimate of the relationship between identity leadership and social identification for the “a” paths. We then utilized the single-level estimate of the association between team flexibility and team innovation, along with the cross-level estimate of the relationship between social identification and team innovation for the “b” paths. These estimates were used to calculate the product terms (i.e. “ab”) for the hypothesized indirect effects of identity leadership on team innovation, mediated through team flexibility and social identification. In other words, in line with Preacher *et al.* (2010), the indirect effect via social identification resembles a 2-1-2 multilevel mediation path, whereas the indirect effect via team flexibility is tested at the team level.

To test the moderation effects, we modeled LMX ambivalence at the individual level (Hypothesis 4a) for the link between social identification and team innovation, and team LMX ambivalence at the team level (Hypothesis 4b) for the link between team flexibility and team innovation. For significant moderation, simple slopes analysis was used to illustrate effects at higher (above the mean) and lower levels (below the mean) of the moderators.

Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations. In terms of control variables, team tenure ($r = -0.12, p = 0.153$) and team size ($r = -0.09, p = 0.216$) were unrelated to team innovation. Therefore, following Bernerth and Aguinis (2016), we did not include these control variables in the final analysis when testing study hypotheses.

We assessed the reliability of each scale by calculating Cronbach’s alpha. As shown in Table 1, Cronbach’s alpha values ranged from 0.86 to 0.92, exceeding the recommended minimum of 0.70 (DeVellis, 2012). This indicates strong internal consistency and reliable scales. To evaluate convergent validity, we examined factor loadings, composite reliabilities (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE). Table 1 demonstrates that CR values were above the 0.60 threshold (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988) and AVE values surpassed the 0.5 cutoff (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). These results confirm convergent and discriminant validity.

We conducted a multilevel confirmatory factor analysis (MCFA) using Mplus to verify the construct validity of our study variables. The fit indices used were the comparative-fit index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis coefficient (TLI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and standardized root mean squared residual (SRMR) for both individual and team levels (Hair *et al.*, 2013). According to Hair *et al.* (2013), CFI > 0.90, TLI > 0.90, RMSEA < 0.08, and SRMR < 0.08 indicate that the model provides an acceptable fit to the data. MCFA was performed with an increased number of iterations (5,000 H1 iterations) to ensure model convergence (Muthén and Muthén, 2017). This six-factor model showed a good fit with the data ($\chi^2(212) = 335.400$; CFI = 0.951; TLI = 0.938; RMSEA = 0.044; SRMR within = 0.043; SRMR between = 0.056). The hypothesized six-factor model provided the best fit compared to alternative models (see Table 2), confirming the optimal model structure. This means that all variables are distinct, including LMX ambivalence and team LMX ambivalence. As additional variables were combined, model fit worsened, further supporting discriminant validity. These results support the distinctiveness of all six constructs, including

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations

Variable	M	SD	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Team tenure	1.42	0.49			–							
2 Team size	3.20	2.51			0.43	–						
3 Team innovation	3.69	0.79	0.918	0.620	–0.12	–0.09	(0.87)					
4 Identity leadership	4.09	0.56	0.925	0.606	0.00	–0.07	0.11	(0.89)				
5 Team flexibility	3.97	0.47	0.864	0.625	–0.05	–0.16	0.05	0.65*	(0.86)			
6 Social identification	4.06	0.72	0.918	0.737	–0.12*	–0.17**	0.06	0.40**	0.40**	(0.92)		
7 LMX ambivalence	2.88	0.72	0.897	0.580	–0.09	–0.18*	–0.04	–0.12	–0.03	–0.11*	(0.88)	
8 Team LMX ambivalence	2.88	0.44	0.896	0.538	0.11	0.05	–0.06	–0.21	–0.08	–0.11	0.56***	(0.88)

Note(s): The above values represent cross-level correlations from the studied variables whereas reliability values are in the parentheses along the diagonal lines. $N = 92$ teams comprising of 294 employees and 92 managers

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed)

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 2. Measurement models

Model	χ^2	df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR for individual level	SRMR for team level
Hypothesized six-factor model	335.400	212	0.951	0.938	0.044	0.043	0.056
Five-factor model:Identity leadership and team flexibility combined	506.334	229	0.889	0.871	0.064	0.047	0.071
Four-factor model:Identity leadership, team flexibility, and team LMX ambivalence combined	728.728	231	0.801	0.771	0.086	0.047	0.151
Three-factor model:Identity leadership, team flexibility, team LMX ambivalence, and social identification combined	1637.211	322	0.563	0.519	0.118	0.209	0.142
Two-factor model:Identity leadership, team flexibility, team LMX ambivalence, social identification, and LMX ambivalence combined	4194.358	536	0.198	0.176	0.152	0.399	0.336
One-factor model:All variables combined	4559.380	543	0.120	0.107	0.159	0.399	0.353

Source(s): Authors' own work

the differentiation between individual-level LMX ambivalence and team-level LMX ambivalence.

To address common method bias, we implemented several ex-ante procedures, such as guaranteeing respondent anonymity, using established and validated measurement scales, and collecting data from multiple sources. The multilevel nature of our model and the use of aggregated constructs also help reduce the likelihood of bias (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2024). In addition, we conducted a post-hoc test using a two-factor model that separated items based on their data sources. According to Podsakoff *et al.* (2003), a good model fit in such a structure would suggest that observed variance is largely attributable to source differences rather than construct overlap. However, the model fit as reported in Table 2 was poor: $\chi^2(536) = 4194.358$; CFI = 0.198; TLI = 0.176; RMSEA = 0.152; SRMR (within) = 0.399; SRMR (between) = 0.336. This poor fit of the two-factor model indicates that common method bias is unlikely to be a major concern in our data.

Hypotheses tests

Having determined that our six-factor measurement model is acceptable and addressing potential common method bias, we moved forward with testing our hypothesized model. Hypothesis 1 predicted that identity leadership is positively related to team innovation. As shown in Table 3, the direct effect of identity leadership on team innovation was not significant ($\beta = -1.08$, standard error (SE) = 0.75, $p = 0.054$). Hence, this finding does not support Hypothesis 1.

The results indicate that identity leadership has significant positive effects on social identification ($\beta = 0.97$, $SE = 0.17$, $p < 0.001$) and team flexibility ($\beta = 0.65$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < 0.001$). Social identification ($\beta = 1.19$, $SE = 0.50$, $p < 0.001$) and team flexibility ($\beta = 0.84$, $SE = 0.09$, $p = 0.037$) both have a significant, positive effect on team innovation. Table 4 offers a summary of our mediation results. In this table, SE refers to the standard error, and the 95% CI indicates the 95% confidence interval, with LL and UL denoting its lower and upper limits, respectively; the indirect effect is considered significant if the 95% CI does not

Table 3. Multilevel path model results

Path	β	S.E.	p
Identity leadership → Social identification (a path)	0.97	0.17	0.000
Identity leadership → Team flexibility (a path)	0.65	0.08	0.000
Identity leadership → Team innovation	-1.08	0.75	0.054
Social identification → Team innovation (b path)	1.19	0.50	0.000
LMX ambivalence → Team innovation	0.08	0.21	0.673
Social identification × LMX ambivalence → Team innovation	-0.33	1.10	0.639
Team flexibility → Team innovation (b path)	0.84	0.09	0.037
Team LMX ambivalence → Team innovation	1.19	0.28	0.072
Team flexibility × Team LMX ambivalence → Team innovation	-1.38	0.18	0.029

Note(s): Standardized coefficients are presented. $N = 92$ teams comprising of 294 employees. Significance levels are two-tailed

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 4. Indirect effect results

	Unstandardized estimate	S.E.	p	95% CI	
				LL	UL
Identity leadership → Social identification → Team innovation	1.87	0.94	0.001	0.03	3.71
Identity leadership → Team flexibility → Team innovation	3.99	1.23	0.047	1.58	6.41

Note(s): Teams $N = 92$ teams. Employees $N = 294$. Significance levels are two-tailed

Source(s): Authors' own work

include zero. As seen in the table, there was a significant, positive indirect effect of identity leadership on team innovation through social identification, (*unstandardized estimate* = 1.87, $SE = 0.94$, $p = 0.001$, 95% CI [0.03, 3.71]). There was also a significant positive, indirect effect of shared leadership on team innovation through team flexibility (*unstandardized estimate* = 3.99, $SE = 1.23$, $p = 0.04$, 95% CI [1.58, 6.41]). Consistent with our expectations, teams that had higher levels of identity leadership subsequently reported higher levels of individual social identification and team flexibility, which, in turn, led to higher team innovation. Thus, [Hypotheses 2](#) and [3](#) were supported.

[Hypothesis 4a](#) predicted that LMX ambivalence moderates the relationship between social identification and team innovation. To investigate the moderating effect of LMX ambivalence, we adopted the methodology proposed by [Byun et al. \(2018\)](#) by assessing the interaction term coefficients, along with observations from a simple slope test. As shown in [Table 2](#), social identification × LMX ambivalence did not predict team innovation ($\beta = -0.33$, $SE = 1.10$, $p = 0.639$). Therefore, [Hypothesis 4a](#) is rejected.

[Hypothesis 4b](#) predicted that team LMX ambivalence moderates the relationship between team flexibility and team innovation. As shown in [Table 2](#), interaction of team flexibility × team LMX ambivalence negatively affected team innovation ($\beta = -1.38$, $SE = 0.18$, $p = 0.029$). In addition, [Figure 2](#) visually illustrates that team LMX ambivalence weakens the positive effect of team flexibility on team innovation. Therefore, [Hypothesis 4b](#) is supported.

Discussion

Discussion of the results

First, we did not find support for [Hypothesis 1](#), which proposed a positive direct link between identity leadership and team innovation. This result is similar to [Hou et al.'s \(2021\)](#) finding of a non-significant direct effect of identity leadership on team performance. One possible reason is

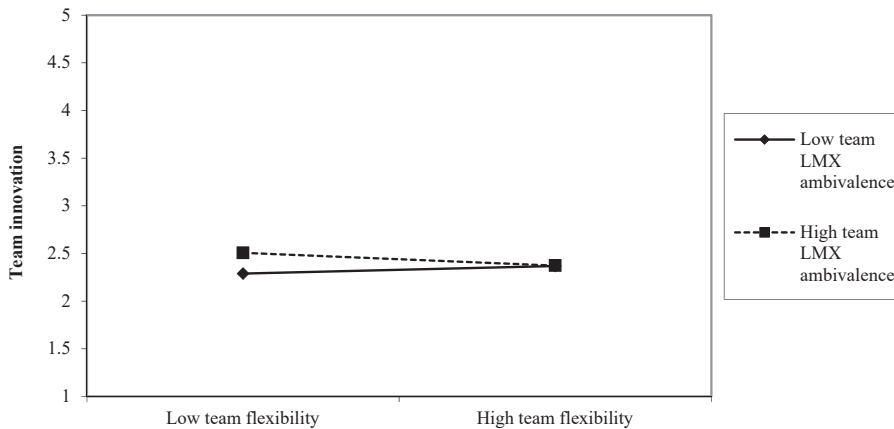


Figure 2. Moderating the effect of team LMX ambivalence. Source: Authors' own work

that while strong group identity can create cohesion and psychological safety (Clarke *et al.*, 2025; Franssen *et al.*, 2020), this same psychological safety and group cohesion may also encourage members to conform and maintain group identity rather than change (Turner and Pratkanis, 1998). This result suggests that identity leadership needs engaged followership to enact the shared social identity in ways that drive collective goals (Haslam *et al.*, 2023a). In other words, innovation emerges not from explicit instructions, but from followers' interpretation and enactment of identity leadership.

Second, *Hypothesis 2* was supported, showing that identity leadership indirectly influences team innovation through social identification, consistent with Bracht *et al.*'s (2023) finding of a similar indirect link at the individual level. We also found support for *Hypothesis 3*, showing that team flexibility mediates the relationship between identity leadership and team innovation. Although this link is not extensively examined in the literature, our results partially align with the work of Gahan *et al.* (2021), which found that leadership fosters innovation outcomes through dynamic capability. These results are consistent with prior research linking different leadership behaviors to innovation-related outcomes through both individual and team mechanisms (e.g. Han and Ni, 2025; Hoang *et al.*, 2023; Zhang *et al.*, 2025).

Finally, our results support *Hypothesis 4b*, showing that team LMX ambivalence weakens the positive link between team flexibility and team innovation. However, we did not find support for *Hypothesis 4a*, which proposed that LMX ambivalence would reduce the positive effect of social identification on team innovation. Although this link has not been explored extensively, this pattern can be understood through prior work showing that LMX ambivalence increases uncertainty and anxiety within teams (Huang *et al.*, 2022). When most team members feel ambivalent about their leader, this shared ambivalence disrupts teamwork and limits the benefits of flexibility for innovation. In contrast, team innovation may be less impacted when only a few team members feel ambivalent about their personal relationship with the formal leader (Fladerer *et al.*, 2021). This suggests that the effect of LMX ambivalence may be stronger when it reflects a shared team-level condition (consensus) rather than individual variation (dispersion). We see this distinction as a useful insight for future research to explore.

Theoretical implications

Our study offers two key implications for leadership and innovation literature. First, our findings demonstrate that identity leadership fosters team innovation through a relationally contingent social identity process. Specifically, teams innovate because identity leaders foster

members' identification with a shared sense of "us" and commitment to collective goals, while simultaneously mobilizing a dynamic shared identity that enables cohesion while allowing for flexibility. At the same time, our findings indicate that the social identity process underlying innovation is contingent on the clarity and consistency of relationships between leaders and group members. When most leader-member relationships within a team are marked by ambivalence, teams may struggle to translate flexibility into innovative outcomes. In essence, managing people for the implementation of new and useful ideas requires attention not only to instrumental processes of knowledge integration (van Knippenberg and Hoever, 2021), but also to how employees relate to their shared social identity and to their leader.

Additionally, our findings provide robust support for SITL (Haslam *et al.*, 2026; Hogg *et al.*, 2012) by demonstrating that leadership effectiveness depends upon in the capability to foster a shared social identity among group members. Leaders who engage with a shared sense of "us" can mobilize both individual members and the group as a whole to work toward collective goals, such as team innovation. Importantly, our findings are consistent with prior research which suggests that the shared identity through which leaders mobilize the group is not necessarily stable or fixed (Carminati and Héliot, 2023; Milesi, 2025). Instead, identity leadership can involve members in revising the shared identity or even producing new ones to remain relevant to evolving social realities (Haslam *et al.*, 2026). In this way, we affirm that identity leadership can both maintain a sense of continuity and induce change within groups. However, the dynamic nature of social identity processes means they can also shift in less constructive ways, such as when shaped by ambivalent leader-member relationships.

Practical implications

The findings of this study offer practical suggestions for managers, organizations and policymakers. First, the present findings highlight the practical value of developing leaders who can build and sustain a shared sense of "us." These results suggest that effective leadership is more about creating, advancing, and embedding a shared social identity within teams. In line with this, managers should focus on improving the effectiveness of their leadership by engaging directly with the groups they lead. To achieve this goal, managers could participate in leadership development programs such as the 5R Leadership Development Program (Haslam *et al.*, 2023b), which provides structured opportunities for leaders to reflect on who "we" are and to translate shared purpose into collective action. For business owners and organizations, these findings point to the benefits of selecting and developing leaders who can unite members around common goals and sustain both cohesion and flexibility during change. Embedding identity leadership principles within human resources and training systems can help organizations build cultures that innovate collectively rather than competitively. For policymakers, these findings speak to the broader social value of supporting identity leadership development initiatives. Research on identity leadership indicates that its benefits extend well beyond innovation, encompassing improved performance and well-being (Lê and Hoang, 2025; Stevens *et al.*, 2021). In line with this, national or industry programs that incorporate identity leadership development would help strengthen managerial capability across sectors and provide a practical means of realizing the wider benefits organizations and society alike.

Second, our study confirms that both social identification and team flexibility help explain how identity leadership drives team innovation. This suggests that managers should focus not only on building a shared sense of belonging but also on empowering teams to adapt and respond flexibly to new challenges. To strengthen social identification, managers can use inclusive language such as "we" and "us" and involve team members in shaping group goals and values (Butalia *et al.*, 2025; Haslam *et al.*, 2026). To enhance team flexibility, managers can encourage their teams to reflect on existing thinking and practices to support changes in shared identity in response to changing social realities (Georgsdottir and Getz, 2004; Liu and Lin, 2021).

Third, we find that when many team members have mixed feelings about their relationship with their leader, it can weaken how well flexibility leads to innovation. Managers should pay attention to these mixed feelings and try to build trust and clear expectations by being consistent and fair with team members (Lee *et al.*, 2019). Such efforts include regularly checking in with team members, addressing concerns promptly, and ensuring that expectations are upheld consistently and equally across the team (Chen *et al.*, 2025). Managing this ambivalence can help teams stay cohesive and innovative even when facing change.

Limitations and future research

This study has some limitations that offer opportunities for future research. First, although our multilevel design helps counterbalance common method bias (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2024), the cross-sectional nature of the data limits our ability to make causal claims. Future research should collect data for key variables at different time points to help address this issue.

Second, we only examined how identity leadership contributes to innovation performance at the team level. Future studies should explore how identity leadership affects innovation at the organizational level, as well as how identity leadership influences innovation outcomes for both teams and individual members.

Third, our research model was tested within a specific industry and within the Vietnamese cultural context, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. To strengthen external validity, future studies should replicate this research in other industries, such as professional services, healthcare, or manufacturing, and in different cultural settings. In these contexts, the impact of identity leadership may vary, and understanding these differences could offer valuable insights. Finally, future research could examine other factors, such as organizational culture, group norms, or aspects of leader/follower identity, that may shape the link between identity leadership and innovation. By exploring these areas, future studies can build on our findings and offer a more complete understanding of how identity leadership drives group and social change.

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Appendix

Survey items

Identity leadership (Steffens *et al.*, 2014)

- (1) My manager is a model member of the team.
- (2) My manager acts as a champion for the team.
- (3) My manager creates a sense of cohesion within the team.
- (4) My manager creates structures that are useful for team members.

Social identification (van Der Veegt *et al.*, 2003)

- (1) I strongly identify with the other members of my work team.
- (2) I would like to continue working with my team.
- (3) I like being a member of this work team.
- (4) I feel emotionally attached to this work team.

Team flexibility (He *et al.*, 2014)

- (1) Our team members are flexible with respect to our team's request for changes.
- (2) Our team members are able to make any adjustments necessary to cope with changing circumstances.
- (3) When an unexpected situation arises, our team members would prefer to amend our team agreement (or regulation) rather than to hold each other to the original terms.
- (4) Our team members are flexible when dealing with teamwork.

LMX ambivalence (Lee *et al.*, 2019)

- (1) I have conflicting thoughts: sometimes I think that my working relationship with my manager is very good, while at other times I don't.
- (2) I have conflicting thoughts: sometimes I think my manager understands my problems and needs, while at other times I don't.
- (3) I have conflicting thoughts: sometimes I think my manager would use his/her power to help to solve problems in my work, while at other times I don't.
- (4) I have conflicting thoughts: sometimes I think I know where I stand with my manager, while at other times I don't.
- (5) I have conflicting thoughts: sometimes I think that my manager would "bail me out" at his/her expense, while at other times I don't.
- (6) I have conflicting thoughts: sometimes I think my manager recognizes my potential, while at other times I don't.
- (7) I have conflicting thoughts: sometimes I think that I would defend and justify my manager's decisions if he/she were not present to do so, while at other times I don't.

Team innovation (Scott and Bruce, 1994)

- (1) My team searches out new technologies, processes, techniques, and/or product ideas.
- (2) My team generates creative ideas.
- (3) My team promotes and champions ideas to others.
- (4) My team investigates and secures funds needed to implement new ideas.
- (5) My team develops adequate plans and schedules for the implementation of new ideas.
- (6) My team is innovative.

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