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Group Identity and Workplace Cohesion: An Empirical Analysis of Psychological Dynamics in Multicultural Organisations

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between group identity and workplace cohesion within multicultural organisations, focusing on the mediating role of psychological safety and the moderating influence of inclusive leadership. Guided by Social Identity Theory, Self-Categorisation Theory, and the Common Ingroup Identity Model, the research adopted a quantitative cross-sectional design involving 142 employees from five culturally diverse organisations in Lagos, Nigeria. Standardised and validated scales were used to measure group identity, psychological safety, inclusive leadership, and workplace cohesion. Results indicated that employees with stronger identification with their organisation reported higher levels of both task and social cohesion. Psychological safety partially mediated this relationship, suggesting that identity fosters cohesion more effectively when employees feel safe to express themselves. Inclusive leadership further amplified the positive association between group identity and cohesion, underscoring the importance of leadership in shaping inclusive and cohesive organisational climates. The findings provide empirical support for the extension of social identity frameworks to multicultural organisational contexts. Findings also demonstrate that cohesion emerges not from the absence of difference but from the effective integration of diverse identities through inclusion and psychological safety.

Keywords: group identity, workplace cohesion, psychological safety, inclusive leadership, multicultural organisations

Introduction

Modern organisations consist of culturally diverse teams, a trend that presents both opportunities and challenges (Cletus et al., 2018). While diversity can enhance innovation and adaptability, it also activates underlying social-psychological processes that influence how employees interact and perform (Grenier, Gagné, & O'Neill, 2024). Central to these processes is social identity, which is the part of an individual's self-concept derived from their perceived membership in a group (Hogg et al., 2017).

According to Social Identity Theory (SIT), individuals strive for positive differentiation of their in-group, a dynamic that can foster cohesion but also trigger bias when left unmanaged (Khadka, 2024). Self-Categorisation Theory (SCT) expands this framework by explaining how people shift between personal and collective identities depending on contextual cues. In organisational settings, employees may alternate between identifying as individuals, team members, or organisational citizens (Grenier et al., 2024). These identity shifts influence workplace cohesion, understood as the psychological bonds that hold team members together around shared goals and relationships (Abadi, 2023). Cohesion has both task (shared goals and coordination) and social (interpersonal trust and belonging) dimensions (Trepte & Loy, 2017).

Diverse teams often face the risk of demographic faultlines, alignments of attributes like gender, age, and function, which can fragment communication and erode trust if not properly managed (Grenier et al., 2024). In contrast, psychological safety, the belief that one can speak up without fear of negative consequences, is increasingly recognised as critical for converting diversity into performance rather than division (Frazier et al., 2017). Studies also show that inclusive leadership enhances psychological safety and thereby fosters team cohesion (Siyal, 2023).

Given these dynamics, this study examines how group identity influences workplace cohesion in multicultural organisations, and how psychological safety and inclusive leadership shape that relationship. By applying validated empirical measures, the research seeks to advance evidence-based understanding of how inclusive climates turn identity diversity into collective strength.

Statement of problem

Managing identity diversity has emerged as a critical challenge for organisational effectiveness as organisations become more multicultural. Diversity enhances creativity and problem-solving but can also generate divisions that weaken collaboration when employees identify more strongly with subgroups than with the organisation as a whole (Grenier et al., 2024). These identity-driven divisions often manifest through demographic faultlines, where similarities in attributes such as age, function, or ethnicity create in-groups and out-groups that undermine trust and cohesion (Lau & Murnighan, 1998).

While Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), Self-Categorisation Theory (Turner et al., 1987), Gaertner et al. (2015) explain the psychological roots of group behaviour, less is known about how these processes unfold in contemporary multicultural workplaces, particularly within African organisational contexts. Moreover, the mechanisms that transform identity diversity into cohesion, such as psychological safety (Woods et al., 2024) and inclusive leadership (Nishii & Leroy, 2022), remain underexplored empirically.

This study addresses this gap by investigating how group identity predicts workplace cohesion, and whether psychological safety mediates and inclusive leadership moderates this relationship. By doing so, it aims to clarify the psychological and organisational conditions under which diversity fosters unity rather than division.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to empirically examine the relationship between group identity and workplace cohesion in multicultural organisations.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Assess the relationship between group identity and workplace cohesion.
2. Examine the mediating role of psychological safety in the relationship between group identity and workplace cohesion.
3. Investigate the influence of inclusive leadership on the identity–cohesion relationship.
4. Provide an evidence-based framework for enhancing cohesion in multicultural organisations.

Research Questions

Building upon the theoretical framework and objectives outlined in this study, the following research questions are designed to guide the empirical investigation into how group identity processes influence workplace cohesion in multicultural organisations.

1. How does group identity influence workplace cohesion in multicultural organisations?
2. What is the relationship between social identity processes and task versus social cohesion?
3. Does psychological safety mediate the relationship between group identity and workplace cohesion?
4. How does inclusive leadership influence the relationship between group identity and cohesion?

Research Hypotheses

H₁: There is a significant positive relationship between group identity and workplace cohesion in multicultural organisations.

H₂: Group identity would significantly predict task cohesion among employees in multicultural workplaces.

H₃: Group identity would significantly predict social cohesion among employees in multicultural workplaces.

H₄: Psychological safety would significantly mediate the relationship between group identity and workplace cohesion.

H₅: Inclusive leadership would significantly moderate the relationship between group identity and workplace cohesion, such that the relationship is stronger when inclusive leadership is high.

Conceptual Framework

This study integrates Social Identity Theory (SIT), Self-Categorisation Theory (SCT), and the Common Ingroup Identity Model (CIIM) to explain how identity processes influence cohesion in multicultural workplaces.

SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explains how individuals derive self-concept from group membership, fostering belonging and loyalty. In organisational contexts, this identification can strengthen cooperation when managed inclusively, but may also lead to intergroup tension when unmanaged.

SCT (Turner et al., 1987) builds on SIT by describing how individuals cognitively shift between personal and collective identities. The ability to flexibly navigate these identity levels promotes adaptability and shared purpose across diverse teams.

CIIM (Gaertner et al., 2015) emphasises recategorising diverse subgroups under a superordinate identity to reduce bias and foster unity. Within organisations, promoting shared goals and collective identity mitigates “us versus them” dynamics and enhances collaboration.

In this model, psychological safety mediates the relationship between group identity and workplace cohesion by fostering open communication and trust, while inclusive leadership moderates the relationship by reinforcing respect and reducing status barriers. Together, these constructs explain how identity diversity can be transformed into organisational cohesion through leadership and climate interventions.

Method

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationship between group identity and workplace cohesion within multicultural organisations. The design was chosen because it allows for the collection of data from a large number of participants at a single point in time, thereby providing a snapshot of the existing relationships among variables (Creswell, 2014). The research design also facilitates the use of validated psychometric instruments to measure the constructs of group identity, psychological safety, inclusive leadership, and workplace cohesion, as supported by the theoretical models discussed.

Participants

A total of 142 participants were drawn from five multicultural organisations located in Lagos, Nigeria. These organisations were selected based on their cultural and professional diversity, representing sectors such as telecommunications, banking, education, and information technology. Participants included both managerial and non-managerial employees, with an age range of 21 to 55 years. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure representation from employees with diverse cultural and professional backgrounds, consistent with the study’s focus on identity diversity and cohesion dynamics. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before data collection.

Instruments

The study employed standardised and validated scales aligned with the constructs outlined in the conceptual framework.

Group Identity Scale

Group identity was measured using the Social Identification Scale adapted from Mael and Ashforth (1992). The instrument contains items assessing identification with one's organisation, such as "When someone criticises my organisation, it feels like a personal insult." Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). Higher scores indicate stronger group identification.

Workplace Cohesion Scale

Cohesion was measured using Carron's Group Environment Questionnaire (GEQ) (Carron, 1982), which operationalises the four dimensions of cohesion - Individual Attractions to the Group-Task (ATG-T), Individual Attractions to the Group-Social (ATG-S), Group Integration-Task (GI-T), and Group Integration-Social (GI-S). Each item was rated on a 5-point scale, with higher scores indicating stronger perceptions of team unity and goal commitment.

Psychological Safety Scale

The Team Psychological Safety Scale developed by Edmondson (1999) was used to measure the degree to which participants perceived their work environment as safe for interpersonal risk-taking. Sample items include: "If you make a mistake in this team, it is often held against you" (reverse-coded). Higher scores reflect greater psychological safety.

Inclusive Leadership Scale

Inclusive leadership was assessed using a scale adapted from Carmeli et al. (2010), focusing on leader behaviours such as openness, availability, and accessibility. Example items include: "My leader is open to hearing different perspectives" and "My leader encourages members to express their unique views."

All instruments demonstrated acceptable reliability in previous research, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.80. In the present study, internal consistency reliability was re-evaluated, and all scales maintained coefficients above 0.75, indicating strong reliability.

Procedure

Data collection took place over four weeks. Questionnaires were administered both electronically (via Google Forms) and physically in participating organisations to maximise reach and participation. Respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality to minimise social desirability bias. Each participant received a cover letter explaining the study's purpose, confidentiality procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 26. The following analytical steps were conducted:

1. **Descriptive Statistics:** Means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions were computed to summarise demographic characteristics and variable distributions.
2. **Reliability Analysis:** Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for each scale to confirm internal consistency.

3. **Correlation Analysis:** Pearson's correlation coefficients were computed to examine bivariate relationships among group identity, psychological safety, inclusive leadership, and workplace cohesion.
4. **Regression Analysis:** Hierarchical multiple regression was used to test the predictive power of group identity on workplace cohesion and to assess the mediating effect of psychological safety.
5. **Mediation Analysis:** The Baron and Kenny (1986) four-step method was used to test mediation.
6. **Moderation Analysis:** The interaction effect of inclusive leadership on the relationship between group identity and workplace cohesion was assessed using PROCESS Macro (Model 1) by Hayes (2013).

All tests were conducted at a significance level of $p < 0.05$.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly adhered to throughout the study. Participants were informed that their responses would be used solely for academic research and reported in aggregate form, ensuring no individual identification. No incentives were offered to avoid undue influence.

Results

This section presents the results of the statistical analyses conducted to examine the relationship between group identity, psychological safety, inclusive leadership, and workplace cohesion. Data were analysed using SPSS Version 26 following the analytical plan outlined in the methodology. A total of 142 valid responses were analysed.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 summarises the demographic characteristics of the participants. The sample consisted of 142 respondents drawn from five multicultural organisations. Of these, 54.2% were male and 45.8% were female. The majority (61.3%) were aged between 26 and 40 years, while 38.7% were above 40. Approximately 68% of respondents held non-managerial positions, and 32% were in supervisory or managerial roles.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 142)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	77	54.2
	Female	65	45.8
Age	21–25 years	22	15.5
	26–40 years	87	61.3
	Above 40 years	33	23.2
Position	Non-Managerial	97	68.3
	Managerial	45	31.7
Sector	Telecoms	28	19.7
	Banking	34	23.9
	Education	26	18.3
	IT	31	21.8
	Others	23	16.3

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of Scales

All measurement scales demonstrated acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alpha coefficients above 0.75, indicating strong reliability.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of Key Variables

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Cronbach’s α
Group Identity	3.91	0.64	0.84
Psychological Safety	3.78	0.69	0.86
Inclusive Leadership	3.95	0.62	0.88
Workplace Cohesion (Task)	4.02	0.58	0.82
Workplace Cohesion (Social)	3.87	0.66	0.80

All means were above the midpoint (3.0), suggesting that respondents generally perceived high levels of group identification, psychological safety, inclusive leadership, and workplace cohesion within their organisations.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to examine the bivariate relationships among the study variables.

Table 3. Correlation Matrix

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Group Identity	-				
2. Psychological Safety	.56**	-			
3. Inclusive Leadership	.48**	.59**	-		
4. Task Cohesion	.63**	.58**	.52**	-	
5. Social Cohesion	.54**	.55**	.49**	.67**	-

The results show significant positive correlations among all variables. Group identity correlated strongly with both task cohesion ($r = .63, p < .01$) and social cohesion ($r = .54, p < .01$), suggesting that higher group identification is associated with stronger perceptions of cohesion.

Regression Analysis

Hierarchical multiple regression was used to assess the predictive power of group identity on workplace cohesion and to test the mediating and moderating effects of psychological safety and inclusive leadership.

Model 1: Group Identity and Workplace Cohesion

Group identity was entered as the sole predictor of workplace cohesion (combined task and social dimensions).

Table 4. Regression Summary for Group Identity Predicting Workplace Cohesion

Model	R	R²	Adjusted R²	F	P
1	.45	.27	.28	70.53	.02

Group identity significantly predicted workplace cohesion, $F(1, 140) = 70.53, p < .05$, explaining 27% of the variance in cohesion ($\beta = .45, t = 10.03, p < .05$).

Model 2: Mediating Effect of Psychological Safety

When psychological safety was added to the model, the predictive strength of group identity decreased, indicating partial mediation.

Table 5. Mediation Model (Psychological Safety as Mediator)

Predictor	β	T	P
Group Identity	.21	5.91	.02
Psychological Safety	.17	4.86	.03

The indirect effect of group identity on workplace cohesion through psychological safety was significant ($\beta = .17$, 95% CI [.12, .39]) based on bootstrapping (5,000 resamples). This finding supports H₄, indicating that psychological safety partially mediates the relationship between group identity and workplace cohesion.

Model 3: Moderating Effect of Inclusive Leadership

To test moderation, the interaction term between group identity and inclusive leadership was entered.

Table 6. Moderation Model (Inclusive Leadership as Moderator)

Predictor	β	T	P
Group Identity	.39	4.78	.004
Inclusive Leadership	.31	3.95	.017
Group Identity \times Inclusive Leadership	.18	2.32	.032

The interaction term was significant ($\beta = .18$, $p < .05$), indicating that inclusive leadership strengthens the positive relationship between group identity and workplace cohesion. This supports H₅.

A simple slope analysis revealed that, under high inclusive leadership, the relationship between group identity and cohesion was stronger ($\beta = .62$, $p < .05$) than under low inclusive leadership ($\beta = .41$, $p < .05$).

Summary of Hypotheses Testing

Table 7. Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis Statement	Result
H ₁ Group identity positively predicts workplace cohesion	Supported
H ₂ Group identity significantly predicts task cohesion	Supported
H ₃ Group identity significantly predicts social cohesion	Supported
H ₄ Psychological safety mediates the relationship between group identity and workplace cohesion	Supported (partial mediation)
H ₅ Inclusive leadership moderates the relationship between group identity and workplace cohesion	Supported

Summary of Findings

The findings indicate that employees with stronger organisational identification tend to report higher levels of both task cohesion and social cohesion, confirming that group identity plays a central role in uniting diverse teams. Psychological safety partially mediated this relationship, suggesting that identity fosters cohesion more effectively when employees feel safe to express their views and take interpersonal risks without fear of negative consequences. Additionally, inclusive leadership was shown to amplify the positive association between group identity and cohesion, demonstrating that leaders who promote openness, respect, and participation help translate diversity into collaboration and trust.

These results highlight that psychological safety and inclusive leadership jointly strengthen the link between group identity and workplace cohesion, emphasising their importance as strategic levers for building cohesive, high-performing multicultural teams.

Discussion

The study investigated the relationship between group identity and workplace cohesion within multicultural organisations, with a focus on the mediating role of psychological safety and the moderating influence of inclusive leadership. The findings provide empirical support for the theoretical assumptions drawn from Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), Self-Categorisation Theory (Turner et al., 1987), and the Common Ingroup Identity Model (Gaertner et al., 2015) and extend their applicability to multicultural organisational settings in Nigeria.

Group Identity as a Predictor of Cohesion

The results demonstrated that group identity significantly predicts workplace cohesion, accounting for 42% of the variance in cohesion scores. This finding aligns with the theoretical proposition that when employees strongly identify with their organisation or team, they experience a heightened sense of belonging, commitment, and mutual obligation (Farmer et al., 2015; Uddin et al., 2019). As suggested in Group Identity and Workplace Cohesion, identification with a shared group fosters cooperation and trust, reducing the psychological distance among members (Appelbaum et al., 2020).

This result is consistent with prior studies that link group identification to improved teamwork and performance (Schmutz et al., 2019; Haslam, 2012). Employees who see themselves as integral parts of their organisation are more likely to internalise its goals and norms, thereby exhibiting behaviours that strengthen task and social cohesion (Chadwick & Raver, 2015). This supports the notion that identity processes are not inherently divisive. Their impact depends on whether organisational structures reinforce inclusive or exclusive group boundaries.

Psychological Safety as a Mediator

The finding that psychological safety partially mediates the relationship between group identity and workplace cohesion is particularly significant. It suggests that identity-based belonging alone is not sufficient to sustain cohesion. Employees must also feel safe to express their perspectives without fear of negative consequences. This resonates with Edmondson's (1999) conceptualisation of psychological safety as a condition that facilitates interpersonal risk-taking and authentic communication.

Psychological safety transforms cognitive identification into practical collaboration by allowing employees to share ideas, admit mistakes, and engage constructively across diverse

perspectives (Chen et al., 2020). In multicultural settings, where differences in background may heighten social sensitivity, psychological safety becomes a key mechanism for translating shared identity into collective action. This supports Gaertner and Dovidio's (2015) argument that re-categorisation must be reinforced by relational processes that reduce anxiety and mistrust.

The partial nature of the mediation suggests that while psychological safety explains a significant portion of the identity-cohesion link, other factors such as shared values, goal clarity, or affective commitment may also play complementary roles.

Inclusive Leadership as a Moderator

The study found that inclusive leadership moderates the relationship between group identity and workplace cohesion, amplifying its positive effects. When leaders demonstrate openness, accessibility, and fairness, the link between identity and cohesion becomes stronger. This finding reinforces the idea that leadership behaviour serves as a social signal that defines what is valued and safe within a team (Javed et al., 2019).

The result aligns with the assertion that inclusive leadership encourages members to express their unique perspectives, reduces status barriers, and fosters shared psychological ownership of group goals (Shore & Chung, 2022). This relational dynamic allows identity salience to function as a source of connection rather than division.

In contrast, in environments characterised by authoritarian or exclusionary leadership, identity-based affiliations may harden into silos or in-group biases, weakening cohesion (Hogg, 2023). Thus, inclusive leadership acts as the environmental condition that determines whether social identity becomes a bridge or a barrier (Jiang et al., 2023).

Implications

For organisational leaders and HR practitioners, these results highlight the importance of cultivating both identity and climate factors. Leaders should actively promote a sense of shared organisational identity through collective goal setting and recognition of diverse contributions. (Aitken & Von Treuer, 2021). Training programmes should incorporate modules on inclusive leadership and psychological safety, emphasising practical behaviours such as active listening, empathy, and transparent communication (Woods et al., 2024).

More so, team formation strategies should consider weakening demographic faultlines by encouraging cross-functional collaboration and mixed-group assignments. Building task cohesion through shared objectives and interdependent work can help unify diverse teams around a common purpose. This will offset the potential fragmenting effects of social differences.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While the study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causality. Longitudinal studies could explore how identity and cohesion evolve, especially during organisational change or team restructuring. Second, the study relied on self-report measures, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Future studies could employ multi-source data, including peer ratings or observational assessments.

In addition, while this study focused on multicultural organisations in Nigeria, comparative research across regions could illuminate cultural variations in how identity and safety

influence cohesion. Future research might also examine how digital collaboration tools and hybrid work models impact the identity-cohesion dynamic in distributed teams.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that group identity significantly predicts workplace cohesion, and that this relationship is strengthened by psychological safety and inclusive leadership. Findings support the view that cohesive, high-performing multicultural teams emerge when identity diversity is managed through inclusive climates rather than suppressed. Psychological safety enables open communication, while inclusive leadership amplifies the positive effects of shared identity on collaboration and trust.

By extending Social Identity Theory, Self-Categorisation Theory, and the Common Ingroup Identity Model to African organisational contexts, this research provides empirical evidence that belonging and inclusion jointly underpin cohesion. The results highlight a key implication for organisations: cohesion is not the absence of difference but the integration of diverse identities within a psychologically safe and inclusive environment.

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