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Effective Strategies for Increasing Diversity in Leadership to Strengthen Organizational Success

Shamirah D. Hughes
Walden University

Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Shamirah Hughes

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

Review Committee
Dr. Kim Critchlow, Committee Chairperson, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Dr. Annie Brown, Committee Member, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University
2025

Abstract

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by

Shamirah Hughes

MBA, University of Phoenix 2007

BS, Grambling State University, 2003

Research Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Ineffective diversity strategies for leadership roles that represent the customer base can negatively impact organizational success. Retail business leaders who struggle with achieving effective diversity in these roles risk impeding organizational performance, making it crucial for them to identify successful approaches. Grounded in the balanced scorecard theory and stakeholder theory, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry project was to identify and explore the practical strategies employed by some retail business leaders to enhance diverse representation in leadership roles, thereby strengthening organizational success. The participants comprised seven retail business leaders with demonstrated success in implementing such strategies. Data were collected using semistructured interviews, public websites, and public archival documents. Using thematic analysis, six key themes were identified: (a) strategic recruitment and hiring, (b) leadership commitment and visibility, (c) overcoming resistance to diversity, (d) strategic use of data, (e) advocating for diversity, and (f) diversity as a driver. A key recommendation is for retail business leaders to establish structured development pipelines for underrepresented employees, including mentorship programs, leadership training, and sponsorship opportunities The implications for positive social change include the potential for retail business leaders to advance equity in leadership, thereby increasing employee trust and retention while enabling organizations to better reflect and serve diverse communities.

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Dedication

First and foremost, I give all the honor and glory to God, the source of my strength, wisdom, courage, and endurance. Through every challenge and triumph, your presence sustained me, and your love and grace carried me forward. I am nothing without you, forever indebted to you.

To my beloved husband, George Hughes. Your unwavering love, support, and belief in me have been the anchor throughout this doctoral journey. In moments of doubt, you reminded me of my purpose and didn't allow me to give up. In seasons of exhaustion, you lifted my spirit. You sacrificed time, offered encouragement, and stood by me as my greatest champion. This achievement is as much yours as mine. Thank you for your patience, prayers, and your partnership. I could not have done this without you.

To my children, Savannah, Stellah, Ayden, and Mia, you are my greatest inspiration and the reason I strive for more. Your love, laughter, and resilience reminded me daily of what truly matters. During the late nights and long weekends, your hugs and encouragement gave me strength. I hope this accomplishment shows you that with faith, perseverance, and determination, anything is possible. Always dream big and never stop believing in yourselves!

To my parents, Merlinda and Jeffery Rhodes, your sacrifices, prayers, and unwavering belief in me laid the foundation for this journey. You instilled in me values of faith, hard work, and perseverance. Your love has been my constant guide, and your words of encouragement carried me through every challenge. This achievement reflects

your dedication and the seeds you planted in me long ago. Thank you for always believing in who I am and who I could become.

Acknowledgments

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future- Jeremiah 29:11"

To my Pastor, Calvin Nelson Sr., and church family, and ladies of Inspiring Her, thank you for covering me in prayer, encouraging me with your words, and reminding me of God's purpose in every step of this journey. I am grateful for a community that nurtures faith, uplifts hearts, and walks in love. This accomplishment is a testament to the power of prayer, fellowship, and unwavering belief in what God can do.

To my committee chair, Dr. Kim Critchlow, thank you for your steadfast guidance, thoughtful feedback, and unwavering support throughout this doctoral journey. Your commitment to excellence, encouragement through challenges, and belief in my research helped shape this work and my growth as a scholar. I am deeply grateful for your mentorship, patience, and dedication to my success. Your energy is contagious, and I am better because of you.

To my second committee member, Dr. Annie Brown, thank you for your valuable insights, constructive feedback, and support throughout this journey. I am truly grateful for your time, attention, and dedication to my academic growth.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Project

Background of the Problem

Many of the 21st century's dynamic business environments rely on diversity in leadership as a strategic imperative linked to innovation, customer insight, and competitive advantage (Hunt et al., 2018). Despite the growing dialogue on the value of inclusive leadership, many retail organizations continue to struggle with translating diverse goals into measurable outcomes. Research indicates that diverse leadership teams are more likely to outperform less varied counterparts (Deloitte, 2019), yet underrepresentation of minority groups in leadership roles remains a persistent issue across the retail sector (Catalyst, 2020).

The retail industry, which serves a multicultural and multigenerational consumer base, is uniquely positioned to benefit from diverse leadership that reflects the demographics of its customers and workforce, both domestically and internationally. Nevertheless, studies reveal that retail business leaders often lack clearly defined, evidence-based strategies for identifying, developing, and retaining diverse leadership talent (Byrd, 2018). This leadership gap not only limits equitable advancement opportunities but may also undermine organizational performance, brand trust, and employee engagement (Thomas, 2020). As a result, some retail business leaders lack the knowledge to effectively increase diverse representation in leadership roles, resulting in a weakened organizational position and suboptimal performance outcomes.

Business Problem Focus and Project Purpose

The specific business problem was that some retail business leaders lack effective strategies to ensure diverse representation in leadership roles, thereby weakening organizational success. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry project was to identify and explore the practical strategies employed by some retail business leaders to enhance diverse representation in leadership roles, thereby strengthening organizational success. The specific population group for the project consisted of HR leaders who had developed effective strategies to mitigate the lack of diversity within their hiring practices and promotional structures, thereby improving performance. I used purposive sampling to select at least seven HR leaders in the contiguous United States, utilizing both my professional and personal networks. I used social media to invite those who met the eligibility criteria. The conceptual framework for this project was guided by Kaplan and Norton's (1996) balanced scorecard theory and supported by Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory.

Research Question

What effective strategies did retail business leaders use to improve diverse representation in leadership roles to strengthen organizational success?

Assumptions and Limitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are an inherent part of the research process. Assumptions are ideas considered to be factual (Sebele-Mpofu & Serpa, 2020). Assumptions are ideas that are taken as accurate but cannot be fully verified. I assumed that the participants would

engage honestly in responding to the interview questions about internal strategies utilized to aid in fostering a diverse and inclusive environment. Additionally, I assumed that participants possessed sufficient knowledge about the challenges their organizations faced regarding diversity in leadership and promotable positions. Acknowledging assumptions was essential to ensuring transparency and provided a foundation for interpreting the project's findings within the context of its limitations.

Limitations

Limitations in research refer to inherent weaknesses or constraints that impact the validity, reliability, or generalizability of the project's findings. According to Theofanidis and Fountouki (2018), the limitations of any study concern potential weaknesses that are usually beyond the researcher's control and closely associated with the chosen research design, statistical model constraints, funding constraints, and other factors.

Within qualitative research, limitations can arise from numerous factors. Potential project limitations include assumptions regarding underlying theories, causal relationships, measurement errors, project setting, population or sample, data collection/analysis, result interpretations, and corresponding conclusions (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018).

One limitation within this research was the sample size's ability to represent the broader industry accurately. Another limitation concerned the integrity of participants' responses, as they had been influenced by personal or unconscious biases stemming from prior experiences. Researchers have an obligation to the academic community to present complete and honest limitations of a given study (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019).

Acknowledging limitations was essential, as it provided critical context for interpreting the results, demonstrated the researcher's awareness of potential constraints, and highlighted areas for future research to address unresolved questions or gaps. Transparency in discussing limitations ensured the project's contributions were understood within its boundaries.

Transition

In Section 1, I established the foundational elements of this project, including the background of the problem, the specific business problem, the project's purpose, research question, assumptions, and limitations. The section highlighted the persistent gap in effective, evidence-based strategies to increase leadership diversity in the retail sector, underscoring the need for targeted inquiry into practices that can drive equitable and sustainable organizational success. Building on this foundation, in Section 2, I examine the existing academic and professional literature related to leadership diversity, with particular emphasis on the retail industry. I explore conceptual frameworks, empirical findings, and theoretical perspectives that inform the understanding of diverse leadership and its influence on innovation, organizational performance, and stakeholder engagement.

In Section 3, I outline the project methodology, covering the project's nature, population, sampling strategy, participant selection, data collection procedures, interview questions, data organization, analysis techniques, and reliability and validity considerations. In Section 4, I present the projects' findings, discuss business

contributions, provide recommendations for professional practice, explore implications for social change, suggest directions for future research, and offer a conclusion.

Section 2: The Literature Review

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The professional and academic literature review focused on the project's research question, aiming to identify and explore successful strategies used by retail business leaders to ensure diverse representation in leadership roles to strengthen organizational success. As part of my comprehensive doctoral research, I conducted a keyword-based search using terms such as diversity, diversity management, diversity in the workplace, diversity equity, and inclusion (DEI), intersectionality, unconscious bias, promotability, hiring practices, hiring patterns, diversity initiatives, diversity strategies, leadership strategies, underrepresentation, career planning, Balance Scorecard Theory (BSC), retail diversity, and wage disparity amongst groups. Databases including EBSCOhost, ERIC, ProQuest, Research Gate, and SAGE Journals were utilized to search academic journals, articles, and relevant resources.

I referenced a total of 91 sources and 65 peer-reviewed journals. Among these sources, 54 were published within the last 5 years, with the remaining 37 published over 5 years ago. Seventy-five percent of the used sources were peer-reviewed articles. Table 1 provides the article count for the literature review.

Table 1

Research References Breakdown

	Total sources	Peer reviewed	Non-peer reviewed	< 5 years	> 5 years

Journal articles	91	65	26	54	37
Books	14	14	0	1	13
Percentage	100%	75.2%	24.8%	52.4%	47.6%

Application to the Applied Business Problem

Conceptual Framework

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore successful strategies used by retail business leaders to improve diverse representation in leadership roles to strengthen organizational success. The conceptual framework for this research project was the balance scorecard theory (Kaplan & Norton, 1996). The balanced scorecard (BSC), introduced by Kaplan and Norton (1996), represented a paradigm shift in performance measurement and strategic management.

Moving beyond traditional financial metrics, the BSC integrates financial and non-financial perspectives to provide a comprehensive view of organizational performance. Its core theoretical foundation lies in aligning business activities with the organization's vision and strategy by evaluating performance through four primary dimensions: financial, customer, internal business processes, and learning and growth.

The financial perspective of the BSC emphasized the extent to which strategic objectives influenced organizational profitability and stakeholder value. While financial performance remains a critical indicator of organizational sustainability, it alone is insufficient for assessing long-term success (Kaplan & Norton, 1996). The customer—or stakeholder—perspective evaluated how effectively an organization identified,

understood, and responded to the needs of its key constituencies, thereby contributing to enhanced satisfaction and loyalty.

The internal business processes perspective focused on the efficiency, consistency, and quality of operations that underpin both customer outcomes and financial performance. The learning and growth perspective—sometimes referred to as the infrastructure or human capital dimension—serves as the foundation of the BSC framework. It supported the other perspectives by cultivating intangible assets such as employee competencies, organizational culture, and leadership capabilities, all of which are essential for sustained strategic execution and innovation.

The four dimensions, also known as perspectives, financial, customer, internal business processes, and learning and growth, are interconnected, forming a cause-and-effect relationship that helps organizations link strategic objectives with performance outcomes (Kaplan & Norton, 1996). BSC is based on the idea that financial measures alone are insufficient for evaluating an organization's overall performance. Traditional financial indicators, such as revenue growth and profitability, focused on past performance and do not provide insights into the drivers of future success (Kaplan & Norton, 1996).

Since its inception, the BSC has been widely adopted and expanded upon in scholarly literature, with research supporting its utility as both a performance measurement tool and a strategic management system. The multidimensionality of the tool allowed organizations to translate strategic objectives into measurable outcomes, making the BSC a dynamic and integrative framework. Scholars have since advanced this

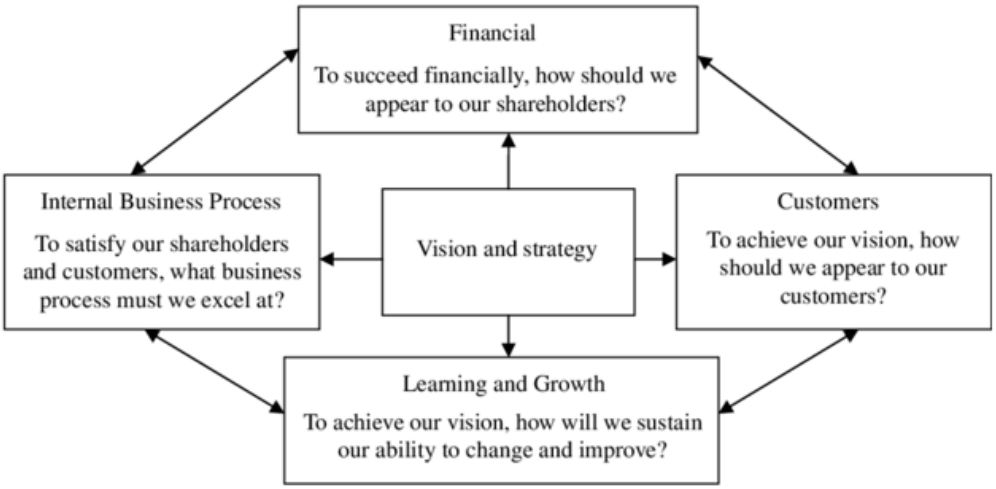
concept, highlighting the BSC's role in facilitating strategic alignment across all organizational levels (Niven, 2006).

A key theme is the BSC's capacity to function as a strategic implementation tool. Research by Malina and Selto (2001) found that the BSC enhances organizational communication, increases employee understanding of strategic goals, and clarifies accountability. Furthermore, the BSC helped bridge the gap between strategy formulation and execution, a challenge that has historically hindered organizational effectiveness (Kaplan & Norton, 2004; Niven, 2006). By cascading strategic objectives into departmental and individual goals, the BSC fostered alignment and coherence, leading to improved organizational performance (Kaplan & Norton, 2004). The BSC's ability to translate vision into operational terms not only strengthened performance monitoring but also supported cultural and strategic alignment across all levels of the organization (De Geuser et al., 2009; Kaplan & Norton, 1996).

BSC has evolved from a performance measurement innovation to a holistic strategic management framework. The BSC approach ensured that organizations not only track historical success but also anticipate future challenges and opportunities (Kaplan & Norton, 2004). By linking strategic alignment, performance measurement, and continuous improvement, the BSC remained a key framework for organizations seeking to enhance their strategic execution and long-term sustainability.

Figure 1

Balance Scorecard Theory



Note. Conceptual view of the Balance Scorecard model. Adapted from *Journal of Management Development* (pp. 393-406), by Chavan (2009). In the public domain.

The BSC applied to my research project, to aid in identification and exploration of effective strategies that some retail business leaders used to improve diverse representation in leadership roles to strengthen organizational success. BSC provided a way for small retail business leaders to link strategic alignment, performance measurement, and continuous improvement to enhance their strategic execution and long-term sustainability.

Supporting Conceptual Framework – Stakeholder Theory

Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory supported the BSC. Stakeholder theory, initially proposed by Freeman , redefined the purpose of a business by expanding its responsibility beyond shareholders to include a wide array of individuals and groups who

are affected by or can affect the organization's operations. These stakeholders included employees, customers, suppliers, communities, regulators, and investors. The theory asserted that long-term business success is contingent upon managing relationships with all stakeholders rather than prioritizing shareholder value alone.

At its core, stakeholder theory challenged the traditional shareholder primacy model, which holds that a firm's main responsibility is to maximize shareholder value (Friedman, 1970). Instead, stakeholder theory promoted a more inclusive and ethical view of business that considers the interests and well-being of various stakeholder groups, including employees, customers, suppliers, communities, and regulators. Donaldson and Preston (1995) advanced the theory by articulating its threefold nature: descriptively, it reflects how organizations function by interacting with stakeholders; instrumentally, it proposes that firms that attend to stakeholder interests are more likely to succeed; and normatively, it argues that stakeholder consideration is a moral obligation. The stakeholder theory's multidimensionality has allowed it to be both practically relevant and ethically robust. These perspectives highlighted stakeholder theory's dual strength as both an ethical philosophy and a strategic management tool.

Critics, such as Jensen (2002), have questioned the theory's practicality, particularly when stakeholder interests conflict. However, scholars have responded with frameworks to assess stakeholder salience and prioritize competing claims (Mitchell et al., 1997). Furthermore, contemporary research emphasized stakeholder engagement as a dynamic process involving dialogue, transparency, and co-creation of value (Parmar et al., 2010). In this view, stakeholder theory is aligned closely with corporate social

responsibility and sustainability initiatives, offering a foundation for ethically grounded and strategically effective decision-making. I anticipated that Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory which promotes a holistic view of business that integrates ethical responsibility with strategic alignment combined with Kaplan and Norton's (1996) BSC theory with the four dimensions, financial, customer, internal business processes, and learning and growth, interconnected, forming a cause-and-effect relationship that helps organizations link strategic objectives with performance outcomes will aid me in answering the overarching research question of what effective strategies do retail business leaders use to improve diverse representation in leadership roles to strengthen organizational success. As global expectations of corporate accountability grow, BSC and stakeholder theory remain essential frameworks for guiding responsible and resilient organizational outcomes.

Analysis and Synthesis of Literature Pertaining to Themes and Phenomena

The Leadership Diversity Gap in Retail

Retail organizations have faced a persistent and consequential gap in executive leadership diversity. Despite notable advancements in diversifying frontline and mid-level positions, the upper echelons of leadership remained overwhelmingly homogenous, predominantly occupied by White, male leaders (Catalyst, 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2020). This lack of representation was more than a moral or ethical issue; it constitutes a core business problem that adversely affects strategic direction, operational efficiency, and long-term competitiveness.

The persistent underrepresentation of diverse talent within senior leadership positions not only perpetuated systemic inequities but also undermined core dimensions of organizational performance. A growing body of literature revealed that homogeneity at the executive level correlated with diminished revenue generation, misalignment with an increasingly diverse consumer base, inefficient talent utilization, and erosion of institutional credibility. In an industry as dynamic, competitive, and consumer-centric as retail, the failure to mirror the demographic realities of the broader marketplace within leadership structures critically impaired both innovation capacity and long-term profitability (Roberson, 2019).

Market Share Decline from Cultural Misalignment

The evolving demographics of the consumer marketplace underscored the importance of representation within retail leadership. Multicultural and younger consumer groups increasingly influence purchasing power and brand loyalty (Nielsen, 2020). Retail organizations lacking diverse leadership are often disconnected from these groups' values, preferences, and expectations, resulting in diminished brand relevance and compromised customer engagement (Thomas & Ely, 1996).

As consumer influence became increasingly intersectional and value-driven, the absence of diverse decision-makers possessed a material risk to market alignment and brand loyalty. Deloitte (2019) reported that organizations with inclusive leadership teams are 70% more likely to capture new markets. Similarly, companies without diverse representation in leadership are more prone to overlook cultural nuances, resulting in products, services, and marketing strategies that fail to resonate with key demographics.

This lack of alignment ultimately led to market share erosion, particularly among populations that prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in their brand loyalty decisions.

Innovation and Organizational Leadership

Innovation served as a cornerstone for sustainable growth and competitive differentiation within the retail industry. However, this critical function is often stifled in organizations where leadership remains demographically and cognitively homogeneous. Such uniformity frequently gives credence to *groupthink*, a psychological phenomenon in which the desire for consensus overrides the motivation to evaluate alternative viewpoints or challenge prevailing assumptions (Janis, 1972). As a result, homogenous leadership environments inadvertently suppress creativity, limit strategic foresight, and constrain organizational learning. In contrast, diverse leadership teams—comprising individuals with varied backgrounds, experiences, and cognitive styles—enhanced the capacity for ideation, innovation, and adaptive problem-solving (Chin et al., 2017). These teams are more likely to recognize emerging opportunities, challenge conventions, and drive new solutions in response to complex and evolving consumer demands.

Cognitive diversity within leadership teams has emerged as a vital asset in fostering innovation and enhancing problem-solving efficacy. Page (2007) highlighted that groups composed of individuals with diverse cognitive frameworks outperform more homogeneous teams, even when the latter include members with higher individual ability, due to their capacity to approach challenges from multiple perspectives.

Similarly, Hewlett et al. (2013) found that organizations with inclusive leadership structures were 45% more likely to experience market share growth and 70% more likely to enter new markets. These findings point to a strong correlation between diverse leadership and strategic adaptability. Without diverse representation, organizations limit their capacity to anticipate evolving consumer demands or navigate disruption effectively, which stifles innovation and reduces the adaptability necessary in dynamic retail environments. This lack of adaptability is detrimental in the rapidly evolving retail sector, where consumer behaviors are increasingly dynamic and value-driven (Ostergaard et al., 2011).

Competitive Advantage and Strategic Agility

The ability to maintain a competitive advantage in retail hinged on an organization's responsiveness to both internal and external changes. Diverse leadership teams enhance strategic agility by bringing a multiplicity of perspectives, lived experiences, and decision-making styles to the executive table (Hunt et al., 2018). This broadens the organization's capacity to assess risks, recognize opportunities, and engage with a wider spectrum of stakeholders.

Kaplan and Norton's (1996) BSC framework supported this claim, emphasizing that long-term organizational success requires strategic alignment across financial, customer, internal process, and learning and growth perspectives. The absence of diversity undermined strategic learning, weakens cross-functional collaboration, and hinders the development of human capital—three essential enablers of sustained competitive performance.

Financial Consequences of Leadership Homogeneity

An expanding body of empirical evidence linked diverse leadership with superior financial performance. McKinsey & Company (2020) revealed that organizations in the top quartile for gender and ethnic diversity on executive teams were significantly more likely to outperform on profitability. The Boston Consulting Group (2018) further found that companies with above-average diversity generated 19% more innovation revenue than those with below-average diversity. These findings underscore the direct cost of underrepresentation in leadership.

Retail businesses that failed to implement effective diversity strategies risk not only stagnating growth but also losing investor confidence and stakeholder trust. The financial implications included lower productivity, underperformance relative to peers, and increased vulnerability to economic and reputational shocks.

Talent Drain and Organizational Inefficiency

The inability to advance underrepresented talent into leadership roles results in the loss of high-potential individuals, diminished employee morale, and elevated turnover rates. Preferential hiring and promotion practices often served as barriers to advancement for diverse employees, contributed to disengagement and a lack of trust in organizational systems (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Rivera, 2012). Chrobot-Mason and Aramovich (2013) found that affirming climates for diversity contribute to greater retention, engagement, and productivity. Conversely, environments where inclusion was performative or absent exacerbated employee dissatisfaction and lead to talent attrition,

particularly among groups already underrepresented in leadership. These dynamics drain organizational resources, disrupt continuity, and weaken institutional capacity.

Reputational Damage and Stakeholder Distrust

Retail organizations that lack representative leadership increasingly face reputational risk in a socially conscious market. Consumers and investors are more likely to align with brands that reflect their values, including commitments to equity and inclusion (Nielsen, 2020). When leadership remained unrepresented or when diversity efforts are symbolic rather than structural, organizations risk public criticism, boycotts, and diminished brand loyalty.

Target and Sephora have demonstrated that transparent and intentional DEI efforts, coupled with accountable leadership structures, can enhance stakeholder trust and strengthen brand equity. These examples contrasted sharply with organizations that adopted superficial diversity initiatives without meaningful leadership engagement, often resulting in reputational decline and revenue loss.

The absence of effective strategies to advance leadership diversity manifested in a variety of detrimental ways. Internally, it resulted in limited innovation, inefficient use of human capital, and weakened employee engagement. Externally, it reduced market relevance, weakened competitive positioning, compromised financial outcomes, and damaged stakeholder trust. These manifestations reflected a strategic misalignment that undermined organizational performance across every major dimension of the BSC.

Different Points of View and Relating to Leadership Diversity in the Retail Industry

The discourse surrounding leadership diversity in the retail sector has gained increasing prominence as organizations confront demographic shifts, heightened consumer expectations, and the imperative for innovation. Retail, a sector highly dependent on consumer engagement and dynamic market responsiveness, offers a compelling context to explore the strategic value of diverse leadership (McKinsey & Company, 2020). Leadership diversity—encompassing race, gender, ethnicity, and cognitive diversity—has been widely associated with improved organizational outcomes, including increased innovation, enhanced decision-making, stronger financial performance, and improved stakeholder engagement (Catalyst, 2020; Page, 2007). Despite this consensus, scholarly literature reveals contrasting views on the magnitude and mechanisms of these effects, particularly when examined through the lens of industry-specific variables, organizational structures, and regional contexts Thomas & Ely, 1996; Roberson, 2019).

In the retail environment, leadership diversity is not only a social imperative but also a strategic lever for market differentiation and consumer alignment. Given the industry's broad consumer base and multicultural clientele, diverse leadership teams were uniquely positioned to interpret market trends, design inclusive products, and foster cultural intelligence across operations (Hunt et al., 2018). However, previous studies present mixed findings regarding the extent to which leadership diversity translates into measurable business outcomes. While some empirical evidence strongly correlated leadership diversity with innovation and financial performance (Díaz-García et al., 2013;

Hewlett et al., 2013), other research highlighted the limitations of diversity when it is not embedded within inclusive organizational cultures or aligned with governance mechanisms (López & Rodríguez, 2020; Mannix & Neale, 2005).

The Role of Diversity in Enhancing Organizational Innovation

Supporters of leadership diversity argued that heterogeneous teams are more likely to challenge prevailing norms, propose creative solutions, and respond effectively to complex challenges. Page (2007) suggested that diverse perspectives improve problem-solving and adaptive capacity, particularly in sectors requiring rapid innovation such as retail. Hewlett et al. (2013) reinforced this view by asserting that inclusive leadership unlocks the potential of diverse teams, leading to higher levels of innovation and market competitiveness. Their findings, based on surveys of large global retailers, reveal a strong association between diversity and the successful launch of new products.

Conversely, critics warned that diversity may hinder group cohesion and slow decision-making if not effectively managed. Ely and Thomas (2001) distinguished between different diversity paradigms, noting that unless diversity is framed as a learning opportunity and managed through inclusive practices, it can generate intergroup conflict and reduce performance. Mannix and Neale (2005) similarly argued that while diverse groups have the potential for superior outcomes, they also face higher coordination costs. Therefore, diversity alone is not a remedy and must be complemented by inclusive leadership and organizational alignment.

A more nuanced perspective suggests that diversity must be integrated with organizational culture to realize its benefits. Hunt et al. (2018) emphasized the

importance of inclusive environments where individuals feel valued and empowered to contribute. In retail organizations, this might involve leadership development programs for underrepresented groups, mentorship initiatives, and accountability structures that reinforce inclusion as a strategic organizational priority. Notably, Walmart's Women's Resource Council and Target's Diversity and Inclusion Council have contributed to increasing the number of women and people of color in senior leadership roles, demonstrating the effectiveness of institutional support in transforming leadership pipelines (Catalyst, 2020).

Leadership Diversity and Financial Performance

Empirical studies have increasingly demonstrated a positive link between leadership diversity and financial performance. McKinsey & Company (2020) reports that companies in the top quartile for ethnic and gender diversity on executive teams were 36% more likely to outperform peers on profitability. This correlation was especially pronounced in the consumer and retail sectors, where alignment with diverse customer bases drives sales and brand loyalty.

Best Buy has made measurable progress in enhancing leadership diversity, earning recognition on DiversityInc's Top 50 Companies for Diversity list, with notable increases in customer satisfaction, employee engagement, and retention metrics as outlined (Best Buy Corporate, 2023). These developments suggested a potential link between leadership diversity and improved organizational outcomes. However, the strength and consistency of this relationship remained contested in the literature. López and Rodríguez (2020), in a systematic review, found that while many studies report a

positive correlation between leadership diversity and business performance, others present neutral or inconclusive findings. The authors attributed these discrepancies to methodological variations, including differences in sample size, industry context, and geographic scope. For instance, the financial and operational benefits of leadership diversity may be more pronounced in large multinational retailers than in smaller, regionally focused chains with limited customer diversity or market reach. However, the strength of this relationship remains contested apparent in large multinational retailers than in smaller regional chains with limited market reach.

Moreover, diversity alone does not guarantee improved financial outcomes. As noted by Roberson (2019), leadership diversity must be embedded within broader systems of accountability, resource allocation, and organizational strategy. This holistic approach ensures that diverse perspectives influence decision-making processes and outcomes at all levels within the organization. Home Depot's intentional recruitment of diverse talent for executive positions, combined with leadership accountability mechanisms, exemplified how an integrated approach can yield both inclusive leadership and sustained business performance (Hunt et al., 2018).

Success Stories in Advancing Diverse Leadership Representation in Retail

Retail organizations are increasingly recognizing the strategic value of cultivating diverse leadership. The push for inclusivity at the executive level not only addresses historical inequities but also enhanced organizational performance by fostering innovation, improving decision-making processes, and strengthening connections with diverse consumer bases (Hunt et al., 2018; Page, 2007). There are several retail

organizations that have significantly improved diverse representation in leadership roles. These cases are supported by empirical data and peer-reviewed studies to demonstrate how strategic diversity initiatives translate into measurable business success.

Target Corp.: Advancing Diversity Through Strategic Initiatives

Target has demonstrated a sustained commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) by embedding inclusive values into its business strategy and workplace culture. Under the guidance of executive leadership, Target has implemented initiatives such as mandatory inclusive leadership training, supplier diversity programs, and strategic partnerships with diverse-owned businesses. Target's establishment of numerous Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) fostered community among underrepresented employees while informing company policies and practices. These efforts reflected the findings of Nishii and Mayer (2009), who emphasized the role of inclusive leadership in enhancing organizational commitment and employee engagement. Target's intentional focus on transparency, representation, and accountability is further evidenced through publicly shared DEI goals and progress metrics, aligning with Sabharwal's (2014) assertion that visible, modeled leadership behavior is essential for sustainable DEI outcomes.

Sephora: Championing Equity Through Industry Leadership

Sephora has positioned itself as an industry leader in DEI by launching comprehensive strategies that addressed both internal culture and customer experience. Through its We Belong to Something Beautiful campaign and the Racial Bias in Retail study, Sephora identified critical gaps in inclusive practices and responded by

implementing actionable reforms. These included mandatory unconscious bias training, diverse hiring commitments, and a 15% pledge to dedicate shelf space to Black-owned brands. Additionally, Sephora established internal Inclusion Councils and Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) to amplify underrepresented voices and influence organizational decision-making. These initiatives aligned with Sabharwal's (2014) emphasis on inclusive leadership as a foundation for effective DEI implementation. Sephora's 2021 DEI Progress Report further highlighted measurable outcomes and public accountability as central to sustaining meaningful change (Sephora, 2021).

Neiman Marcus Group: Integrating Structural Equity Measures

The Neiman Marcus Group (NMG) has emerged as a leading example of how deliberate diversity strategies can reshape leadership demographics and organizational culture. Employing a "bias interruption" strategy, NMG focused on structural interventions, including inclusive job descriptions, diverse hiring panels, and equitable promotion pipelines. According to Shoaib (2024), the NMG exceeded its goal of 21.4% racial and ethnic representation in leadership roles, setting a revised goal of 28% by 2030. These outcomes aligned with research suggesting that organizational systems and processes must be reengineered to facilitate the advancement of underrepresented groups (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Furthermore, NMG's initiatives are consistent with the findings of Nishii (2018), who emphasized the need for inclusive climates that support psychological safety and participation across demographic lines.

Macy's Inc.: Cultural Embedding of Inclusion Practices

Under CEO Jeff Gennette's leadership, Macy's has embedded diversity and inclusion into its organizational DNA, with an emphasis on authenticity, representation, and supplier diversity. Through initiatives such as "Mission Every One," Macy's supports underrepresented business owners and emphasizes the inclusion of diverse perspectives at strategic decision-making levels. Macy's efforts reflect findings by Sabharwal (2014), who argued that organizational leadership must model inclusive behavior for D&I initiatives to succeed. Moreover, Macy's approach aligned with research by Nishii and Mayer (2009), demonstrating that inclusive leadership practices directly correlated with employee engagement and organizational commitment.

Walmart: Addressing Unintended Diversity Outcomes

Walmart made strides in gender diversity; its experience underscores the complexity of diversity implementation. A Bloomberg-reported case revealed that a well-intentioned push for gender diversity led to adverse outcomes for male employees in certain units, prompting a reassessment of the strategy. This example illustrated Ely and Thomas's (2001) argument that diversity must be managed through learning-and-integration paradigms rather than compliance-based frameworks. The incident at Walmart also reflected the need for adaptive leadership practices, as recommended by Uhl-Bien et al. (2007), which enable organizations to navigate the unintended consequences of transformational change initiatives.

DoorDash: Internal Talent Development through Elevate

DoorDash's Elevate program represented a best practice in internal leadership pipeline development for women of color. The program combined mentorship, executive sponsorship, leadership training, and performance coaching to support career advancement. Notably, 35% of program alumni have received promotions, a success rate consistent with findings by Ibarra et al. (2013), who emphasize that formalized developmental relationships and visibility-enhancing experiences are critical for advancing women and minorities. Elevate's success also mirrored recommendations by Thomas and Ely (1996), who argued that leveraging diversity requires intentional efforts to empower marginalized voices and integrated their perspectives into strategic agendas.

Industry-Wide Observations and Empirical Support

Despite the progress in these cases, the retail industry continued to grapple with systemic underrepresentation in senior leadership. According to McKinsey & Company (2023b), while entry-level diversity has improved, the pipeline to executive roles remained disproportionately homogeneous. This stagnation underscored the importance of structural transformation rather than episodic interventions (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Retail organizations that have sustained success—such as Target and Sephora—combined diversity metrics with leadership accountability and transparent reporting practices, yielding stronger organizational outcomes.

Empirical studies consistently supported the connection between diverse leadership and enhanced business performance. For instance, Hunt et al. (2018) found that companies in the top quartile for ethnic and gender diversity on executive teams were

36% more likely to outperform peers on profitability. Similarly, Roberson (2019) emphasized that inclusive leadership acts as a mediating factor in translating demographic diversity into innovation and productivity gains. These findings lent robust scholarly support to the practical successes observed in leading retail firms.

Together, the success stories of Neiman Marcus, Macy's, DoorDash, Walmart, and Ulta Beauty demonstrated that increasing diversity in leadership is not merely a moral imperative but a strategic lever for organizational excellence. By aligning their practices with scholarly research on inclusive leadership, structural equity, and stakeholder engagement, these organizations have fostered sustainable pathways for underrepresented leaders. As this research moves forward, these cases will serve as both a theoretical foundation and a practical roadmap for embedding diversity into the strategic core of retail organizations.

Business leaders seeking to improve diverse representation in leadership roles to strengthen organizational success can effectively apply the BSC framework. BSC expands performance management beyond financial outcomes to include four interrelated perspectives: financial, customer, internal business processes, and learning and growth. Embedding diversity objectives into each perspective, learning and growth, internal business practices, customer perspective, and the financial perspective, facilitates the process of the leader taking a systemic, systematic, and measurable approach to improving and fostering diverse representation in leadership roles to strengthen organizational success.

The learning and growth aspect of the BSC was useful when the organization's focused is on cultivating internal capabilities to support a diverse leadership pipeline. Organizations can track the development of underrepresented employees through succession planning, mentorship programs, and inclusive leadership training (Niven, 2006). Organizations with formalized career development structures for minority groups are more likely to see improvements in leadership diversity (Ng & Burke, 2005). Paying attention to ensuring the development of their employees is vital to the viability and sustainability of the organization.

The internal business processes aspect of the BSC enabled organizations to examine the fairness of their recruitment, promotion, and evaluation systems. By auditing these processes for bias and instituting checks—such as diverse hiring panels or structured promotion criteria—create more equitable pathways to leadership (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). These practices helped dismantle systemic barriers that hinder the improvement of diverse representation in leadership roles to strengthen organizational success.

The customer perspective underscored the importance of diverse leadership in enhancing organizational responsiveness to diverse markets. Leaders from varied backgrounds contribute broader perspectives, driving innovation and strengthening relationships with multicultural consumers (Richard et al., 2013). According to Hunt et al. (2018), companies in the top quartile for ethnic and gender diversity on executive teams were more likely to achieve above-average profitability. Ignoring the value of

diverse leadership adversely impacted the extent to which a business can achieve a competitive advantage.

Finally, the financial perspective tied diversity to bottom-line results. Studies showed that inclusive leadership correlates with stronger financial performance, higher employee engagement, and lower turnover (Herring, 2009; McKinsey & Company, 2020). Integrated DEI metrics into BSC scorecards—such as leadership diversity ratios or retention rates of underrepresented leaders—implies accountability to improve diverse representation in leadership roles to strengthen organizational success. By applying the BSC as a strategic management tool, business leaders can move from fragmented diversity initiatives to comprehensive, outcome-driven approaches that support inclusive excellence and long-term organizational success.

Geographical and Contextual Variations in Findings

Geographic and cultural context significantly shaped the relationship between leadership diversity and organizational performance. Studies based in North America and Western Europe consistently found positive outcomes associated with diversity, likely due to mature regulatory frameworks, public expectations, and organizational readiness (Catalyst, 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2020). In contrast, research conducted in emerging markets reveals more variable effects. Yousaf et al. (2017) found that in some regions, cultural norms and institutional barriers constrain the effectiveness of diverse leadership teams, suggesting that context-specific strategies are essential.

Sample size and industry characteristics also affected the robustness of findings. Large-scale, cross-industry studies tend to support a general positive relationship between

diversity and performance (Roberson, 2019). However, smaller, retail-specific studies often yielded mixed results, underscoring the need for more targeted research. For instance, fashion retailers benefited more from gender-diverse leadership due to their consumer base, while electronics retailers may see less immediate impact.

Previous Research and Findings

Built upon foundational studies in organizational behavior and diversity management, including seminal works by Ely and Thomas (2001), Page (2007), and Hunt et al. (2018). Unlike prior research that often focused on large, multinational firms, this project concentrated on mid-sized retail organizations to assess how leadership diversity affects innovation and financial performance in more localized contexts. It also extended the literature by exploring sub-sectoral differences within retail and examining how regional factors mediate diversity outcomes.

Furthermore, the project integrated stakeholder theory to understand how leadership diversity affected relationships with internal and external stakeholders, including employees, customers, and community partners. This approach aligned with Doldor et al. (2012), who highlighted the importance of equitable feedback and development opportunities in advancing diverse leadership. By connecting leadership diversity to stakeholder engagement, this research provided a more holistic understanding of organizational success in the retail sector.

The academic discourse on leadership diversity in retail organizations revealed both convergence and divergence in scholarly perspectives. While there is broad agreement on the potential benefits of diversity, there is less consensus on the conditions

under which these benefits are realized. Differences in geographical location, sample size, organizational culture, and industry characteristics contributed to the complexity of findings. By comparing these viewpoints and situating the project within broader literature, this research aimed to clarify the strategic role of leadership diversity and inform evidence-based practices for enhancing performance in the retail sector.

Transition

In Section 2, the literature review provided a comprehensive analysis of existing academic and professional perspectives on leadership diversity, particularly in the context of retail organizations. Additionally, the literature review explored the significant role that diverse leadership teams play in driving organizational success, particularly through enhanced innovation, financial performance, and stakeholder engagement. The review examined various theoretical frameworks and empirical studies, highlighting both the benefits and challenges of leadership diversity.

Section 3 explores the research methodology that will guide the project. This outlines the project's design, detailing the population, sampling strategy, and participant selection. It also explains the data collection process, interview questions, and analysis techniques that will be employed. The methodology section ensures that the research process is transparent, systematic, and rigorous.

In Section 4, I present the findings of the project. This section will not only discuss the results but also provide insights into their practical implications for business practice. Additionally, it explores the social impact of the findings, proposes

recommendations for future research, and concludes by connecting the project's contributions back to the overarching business problem and research question.

Section 3: Research Project Methodology

Project Ethics

As the researcher for this qualitative project, I served as the primary instrument for data collection, analysis, and interpretation. I conducted all interviews, managed all communications with participants, and ensured the integrity and confidentiality of all data collected. Qualitative researchers function as instruments in the research process, navigating their role with intentional self-awareness (Collins & Stockton, 2022).

As a human resources (HR) professional, I recognized the pivotal role that leadership diversity plays in shaping inclusive, innovative, and high-performing organizations. Despite growing discourse around DEI, leadership teams across many industries remained demographically homogeneous (Hewlett et al., 2013; McKinsey & Company, 2020). This imbalance not only reflected systemic inequities but also limited organizations' ability to fully leverage diverse talent and perspectives essential for innovation and global competitiveness. Diverse leadership is not merely a matter of representation; it is a strategic asset. Research revealed that organizations with diverse leadership teams outperformed their peers in profitability, innovation, and employee engagement (Hunt et al., 2018; Rock & Grant, 2016). Leaders from varied racial, gender, and cultural backgrounds brought unique cognitive frameworks and lived experiences that informed better decision-making, enhanced adaptability, and fostered stronger alignment with diverse consumer markets (Chin et al., 2017).

From an HR standpoint, systemic barriers often obstructed the advancement of underrepresented groups into leadership roles. These barriers included implicit bias in

promotion decisions, inequitable access to development opportunities, and the lack of sponsorship and mentorship at senior levels (Ibarra et al., 2013). Addressing these challenges required HR professionals to function as change agents, developing inclusive leadership pipelines by integrating DEI into performance metrics and holding organizations accountable for equity outcomes (Eshete & Birbirssa, 2024).

My motivation to pursue doctoral research in this area was grounded in both professional observation and a deep commitment to social and organizational justice. As an HR practitioner, I had the advantage of critically examining how talent strategies, leadership behaviors, and organizational culture can either reinforce or dismantle inequities. This research aimed to identify actionable, evidence-based practices that enable HR professionals to support the emergence and sustainability of diverse leadership at all organizational levels.

The project is underpinned by ethical principles derived from the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects in Biomedical and Behavioral Research [NCPHSBBR], 1979), including respect for people, beneficence, and justice. I ensured that informed consent, voluntary participation, and equitable treatment were obtained from all research participants, reflecting the same ethical commitment to inclusion that I advocated for in professional practice. Ultimately, this research contributed to the evolving role of human resources as a strategic partner in organizational transformation.

Throughout the research process, I adhered to the ethical standards set forth by Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). I maintained alignment with

ethical research practices as outlined in the Belmont Report (NCPHSBBR, 1979), which emphasizes respect for people, beneficence, and justice. Before collecting any data, I secured formal approval from the Walden University IRB. The Walden University IRB approval number is 05-29-25-1022781.

Informed consent was a foundational ethical and legal principle in research. It refers to the process by which individuals are provided with clear, comprehensive, and understandable information about a procedure, study, or intervention, enabling them to make a voluntary and informed decision about whether to participate or proceed. This process typically included a discussion of the purpose, risks, benefits, and potential alternatives, as well as the individual's right to decline or withdraw at any time without penalty.

Ensuring informed consent respected an individual's autonomy and promoted trust, transparency, and accountability in professional practices. It is not merely a signed form, but an ongoing dialogue that upholds the dignity and rights of participants or patients (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019). Informed consent was obtained from each participant before their participation. The informed consent form outlined the purpose of the project, procedures involved, potential risks and benefits, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time without penalty for the prospective participants' information. Participants were informed that they could discontinue their involvement at any point in the process, either verbally or in writing, with no consequences.

Recognizing the ethical imperative to uphold confidentiality, I implemented rigorous measures to protect the privacy of all research participants. To ensure

anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to everyone, thereby preventing the disclosure of real names in any documentation, dissemination, or scholarly discussion. Identifiable details—such as geographic locations, organizational affiliations, or personal characteristics—were carefully excluded from research outputs to mitigate the risk of deductive disclosure. All research data will be encrypted and stored in a secure digital environment with strict access controls, limiting availability exclusively to authorized research personnel. I pledged to maintain this secure storage for 5 years following the completion of my research, thereby ensuring the continued protection of participant confidentiality (see British Psychological Society, 2021). During academic presentations and scholarly exchanges, I intentionally employed general descriptions and abstract language to avoid inadvertently revealing participant identities.

No financial or material incentives were offered to participants. Participation in the research project was entirely voluntary and did not result in any form of compensation. Each participant was reminded that their responses would remain confidential and that all identifying details, including the names of individuals or organizations, would be removed from all documentation, recordings, and reports to protect anonymity. All interview data was recorded and transcribed. Digital files and any physical documentation will be retained for a minimum of 5 years, after which they will be securely destroyed by Walden University's data retention policy and ethical research standards. The project did not include names or identifiable details of participants or organizations, ensuring that confidentiality and ethical protection remain central throughout the research process.

Nature of the Project

I selected the qualitative method for this research because it allowed the researcher to gather in-depth insights into people's thoughts, behaviors, and experiences through interviews, focus groups, and case studies, among other methods. Qualitative research is highly valuable in exploring diversity because it enabled an in-depth understanding based on people's lived experiences, particularly those from underrepresented or marginalized groups. Researchers utilized the qualitative method to investigate the study's issue and the reason(s) for its existence to answer complex questions, such as how and why employing the best procedures might triumph or fail (Hamilton & Finley, 2019). The value of qualitative research lied in explaining and recognizing social phenomena in terms of the significance people attribute to them.

This research project was guided by a pragmatic inquiry research design, which focuses on practical problem solving and real-world applications. Pragmatism emphasized the use of methods best suited to address the research problem, allowing for flexibility and responsiveness to the research's evolving context. This approach was especially relevant when investigating complex issues, such as diversity in leadership, where understanding stakeholder perspectives and contextual influences was critical to identifying actionable solutions. The pragmatic design supported my goal of generating findings that are both meaningful to participants and applicable to organizational practice (Patton, 2015).

Population, Sampling, and Participants

The population for this qualitative research consisted of seven HR business leaders within the retail industry who have experience with or insights into leadership diversity. Participants included business leaders who demonstrated effective strategies for improving diverse representation in leadership roles, thereby strengthening organizational success. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify and select participants who possessed specific knowledge and experience relevant to the research problem. This approach was appropriate for qualitative studies where the goal was to gain a deep understanding rather than generalize findings (Palinkas et al., 2015).

According to Saunders et al. (2018), data saturation is met when additional data no longer contributed new insights or themes. In this project, data saturation was met after six interviews, as no new codes or substantive information emerged during the coding and thematic analysis process. To confirm saturation, a seventh interview was conducted, which reinforced the existing themes and introduced no additional meaningful variation. This approach is aligned with best practices in qualitative research to enhance credibility and confirm the adequacy of the sample size.

Data Collection Activities

As a researcher, I served as the primary data collection instrument, responsible for gathering and analyzing the data. The data collection process for this project involved semistructured interviews, with the researcher serving as the primary instrument for data collection. This method facilitated the systematic collection of rich, in-depth data, allowing for flexibility to probe emergent themes that align with the project's objectives.

Before each interview, participants received a detailed overview of the project, informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality protocols were reviewed by ethical research standards (Patton, 2015). Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams and Zoom, secure video conferencing platforms. A standardized interview protocol guided each session to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing for adaptive follow-up questions to explore participant responses more deeply. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim to preserve the accuracy and integrity of the data. Keeping field notes and producing analytic memos aided the researcher in capturing contextual observations and ongoing reflections (Lotto et al., 1986). As the researcher, I maintained notes on each interview. I created analytic memos to aid me in gaining contextual insights from the participants' responses and for ongoing reflections throughout the interview process.

Member checking was vital to enhancing the reliability and validity of the data collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I employed member checking to improve reliability and validity by providing research participants with the opportunity to review their transcripts and my interpretations of their responses, ensuring accuracy and resonance with their professional experiences. I followed the interview protocol to guarantee consistency during the interview process. A detailed, step-by-step interview protocol can be found in Appendix B and is referenced in the project's Table of Contents.

Interview Questions

1. What effective strategies did you use to improve diverse representation in leadership roles to strengthen organizational success?

2. What steps did you take to consider the interests and well-being of various stakeholder groups when you implemented strategies to improve diverse representation in leadership roles to strengthen organizational success?
3. What challenges did you encounter when implementing strategies to improve diverse representation in leadership roles to strengthen organizational success?
4. How did you overcome the challenges?
5. How did you measure the success of the strategies you used to improve diverse representation in leadership roles to strengthen organizational success? What additional information regarding your successful strategies to improve diverse representation in leadership roles to strengthen organizational success would you like to share that we have not already discussed?

Data Organization and Analysis Techniques

Data organization techniques, including maintaining research logs, keeping reflective journals, utilizing cataloging and labeling systems, and establishing file naming conventions and folder structures, were essential for practical qualitative data analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As the researcher, I organized and maintained the data in research logs, labeling and cataloging it using a naming convention for the filing system that ensured participant anonymity. I used a reflective journal to capture my thoughts and reflections during the data collection process. All interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams and Zoom were transcribed verbatim and stored in a secure, password-protected digital format. The data collected from semistructured interviews was organized and managed using Microsoft Word.

I used Braun and Clarke's data analysis techniques to analyze data and identify emergent themes. This approach involved a systematic process of familiarization with the data, coding, theme development, and refinement to identify patterns and relationships (see Niven, 2006). The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and alignment with the project's purpose and theoretical frameworks. Throughout the process, I maintained analytic memos and a reflexive journal to document decisions, track emerging insights, and minimize potential researcher bias.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

Reliability in qualitative research refers to the consistency, dependability, and transparency of the research process, ensuring that findings are grounded in the data and can be reproduced in similar contexts. It involved demonstrating that the methods used for data collection and analysis are clearly documented, logically coherent, and systematically applied. A reliable qualitative study allows others to trace the researcher's process and confirm that the results are not idiosyncratic or biased, thus reinforcing the trustworthiness of the study (Levitt et al., 2018). Reliability ensured that if the survey were conducted again under similar conditions, the outcomes would remain stable and consistent, demonstrating the dependability of both the process and the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Establishing reliability in qualitative research strengthened the credibility and rigor of the project, ensuring that findings are both trustworthy and transferable to similar contexts.

Dependability required clear documentation, rigorous protocols, and reflection on the research process to ensure that the findings were trustworthy and, to some degree, replicable by other researchers (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reflexive journaling was used to acknowledge and examine the researcher's positionality, assumptions, and potential influence on the data (Berger, 2015).

To establish reliability and dependability in this project, an interview protocol was employed to ensure uniformity in questioning across all participants, while allowing for flexibility in probing context-specific experiences. Detailed documentation, including audit trails, reflexive memos, and coding logs, was maintained to promote transparency and procedural consistency throughout the data collection and analysis process. I used member checking to further enhance reliability by allowing participants to review their transcripts and confirm the accuracy of the data. The use of an interview protocol and conducting member checking strategies ensured methodological integrity, grounding the findings in a systematic and traceable process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Webster et al., 2020). By upholding these practices, the research outcomes were credible and trustworthy, contributing meaningful insights to the field.

Validity

Validity in qualitative research was achieved when the findings accurately represent participant responses, and the interpretations were firmly grounded in the data. I employed member checking to ensure credibility, allowing participants to review their transcripts and my understanding of their responses to verify accuracy. The researcher must maintain an active role in reflecting their own potential biases and subjectivity

throughout the process, ensuring that the interpretations remain true to the participants' perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Triangulation was achieved by integrating data from multiple sources—interviews, organizational documents, and public statements—to corroborate key themes and ensure convergence (Patton, 2015). I employed triangulation by incorporating multiple data sources to cross-verify the findings, thereby enhancing the robustness of the results.

Transferability is achieved when others determine that the research findings can be applied to other settings or populations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Rich, thick descriptions provide contextual depth and enhance the transferability of the findings to similar settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability was addressed by giving thorough context and a detailed description of the research process, enabling readers to assess how the findings might be applied to other settings or populations.

Future researchers are encouraged to test the applicability of the results in different contexts, contributing to the generalizability of the findings. Confirmability will be ensured by maintaining an audit trail of the research process, including data collection, analysis, and interpretation, which will allow the conclusions to be traced back to the data and minimize researcher bias (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I ensured that I maintained a clear and concise audit trail, which depicted the research process, to minimize researcher bias. Data saturation is when no new information is available or presented (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I ensured data saturation by continuing data collection until no new information

was forthcoming from the participant interviews. Once I achieved data saturation, I interviewed one more participant to ensure accuracy.

Transition and Summary

Section 3 detailed the research methodology for this qualitative, pragmatic inquiry, encompassing a comprehensive discussion of ethical considerations, research design, population and sampling strategies, data collection methods, data organization and analysis techniques, and approaches to ensuring reliability and validity. The methodology was intentionally designed to uphold rigorous academic standards, promote ethical integrity, and support a robust exploration of the strategies retail business leaders employ to enhance diverse representation in leadership roles. By adhering to the principles of qualitative inquiry and employing systematic, transparent procedures, this project seeks to generate trustworthy and transferable insights that contribute meaningfully to scholarly knowledge and practical application. In Section 4, I present the results of the project, including a detailed analysis of participant narratives, emergent thematic patterns, and an interpretation of the findings within the context of the research problem, conceptual framework, and existing literature.

Section 4: Findings and Conclusions

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry project was to identify and explore the practical strategies employed by some retail business leaders to enhance diverse representation in leadership roles, thereby strengthening organizational success. The thematic analysis of data collected from seven participants revealed six major themes: (a) strategic recruitment and hiring, (b) leadership commitment and visibility, (c) overcoming resistance to diversity, (d) strategic use of data, (e) advocating for diversity, and (f) diversity as a driver (see Table 2).

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question was "What are some effective strategies retail business leaders use to improve diverse representation in leadership roles to strengthen organizational success?" The sources for data included semistructured interviews with seven participants and one industry document from a public website. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to maintain their confidentiality. Data collected from the interviews were manually transcribed using Microsoft Word's transcription program.

Research findings indicated that effective diversity strategies are deeply rooted in intentional, system-level leadership practices that align organizational values with strategic outcomes. The thematic analysis of participant interviews revealed six core strategies consistently used by retail business leaders to improve diverse representation in leadership roles.

The alignment between the BSC and stakeholder theory suggests that strategic diversity initiatives can simultaneously enhance organizational performance and fulfill

ethical responsibilities to internal and external stakeholders. While the BSC emphasized the importance of aligning internal processes, learning and growth, customer satisfaction, and financial outcomes (Kaplan & Norton, 1996), stakeholder theory prioritized the fair treatment and inclusion of all parties affected by organizational decisions (Freeman, 1984). Together, these frameworks reinforced that advancing diverse leadership representation is not only a metric of internal operational excellence but also a reflection of stakeholder responsiveness and long-term value creation (Bourke et al., 2024; SHRM, 2022).

Organizations that embedded (DE), into their performance measurement systems signal a deep commitment to sustainable transformation and inclusive growth (Gartner Survey, 2024). For example, inclusive recruitment and leadership development practices mapped to the BSC's internal and learning domains are simultaneously aligned with stakeholder interests in equity, transparency, and opportunity. Deloitte's global human capital studies showed that leading organizations use detailed workforce representation data—including intersectional breakdowns by gender, race, and role hierarchy—to drive targeted initiatives on hiring, promotion, retention, and inclusion (Deloitte, 2023b) This integrated perspective positions diversity not as a compliance-driven initiative but as a multidimensional strategy that enhances legitimacy, resilience, and performance in complex and socially conscious market environments (Catalyst, 2021; McKinsey & Company, 2023b).

Table 2

Major Themes

Major themes	Total references to theme
Theme 1: Strategic recruitment and hiring	21
Theme 2: Leadership commitment and visibility	18
Theme 3: Overcoming resistance to diversity	17
Theme 4: Strategic use of data	15
Theme 5: Advocating for diversity	16
Theme 6: Diversity as a driver	15
Total	102

Theme 1: Strategic Recruitment and Hiring

Strategic recruitment and hiring strategies were increasingly recognized as essential to advancing diversity in retail leadership, identified by all the participants, making it the most frequently cited theme. Leading retailers were increasingly relying on structured outreach—such as diverse sourcing networks, standardized evaluation processes, and diverse interviewing panels—to reduce bias and elevate representation at leadership levels (Vogue Business, 2024). All participants in this project emphasized the deliberate use of outreach tools—such as partnerships with community-based organizations, targeted advertising through culturally relevant media channels, and inclusive job descriptions—to engage underrepresented talent. For example, P001 shared, "We put together a recruitment strategy that focused on the diversity groups that we were specifically targeting and made sure that our advertisements and jobs reached those groups," while P004 shared, "In order to diversify, you have to be intentional about where you recruit." This reflected a strategic alignment with the internal process

perspective of the BSC, where operational effectiveness is linked to broader organizational goals. Strategic recruitment and hiring practices are key mechanisms for advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion goals (McKinsey & Company, 2023a).

These strategies were not peripheral but embedded into formal recruitment processes, signaling a shift from reactive hiring to proactive talent acquisition that reflects community demographics. This industry wide shift is consistent with recent findings from the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM, 2022), which reported a sharp increase in the number of organizations embedding inclusive practices directly into recruitment and selection functions.

Additionally, the application of stakeholder theory was evident as leaders sought to meet the expectations of multiple stakeholder groups, including diverse job seekers, community leaders, and internal HR teams. Retail sector data reinforced these findings. Sephora credited its inclusive, structured recruitment overhaul with increasing leadership representation of people of color from 39% in 2020 to 52%, by leveraging partnerships with HBCUs and affinity fairs to deepen talent pipelines (Bersin, 2020; Sephora, 2021; Talivity, 2024). Broader retail industry research showed that nearly half of retailers today have a formal DEI recruitment strategy, with inclusive outreach embedded in core hiring functions, improving both application diversity and retention outcomes (Gitnux market data, 2025), improving the organizational image and bottom line.

Subtheme: Organizational Development

In addition to strategic recruitment and hiring, participants highlighted the importance of structured development programs such as leadership training, mentorship

pipelines, and individualized professional growth planning. These efforts ensured that diverse talent was not only recruited but also retained, developed, and positioned for upward mobility. Participants emphasized that without intentional internal development pathways, recruitment alone would not result in sustainable leadership diversity. Recent research supported this view, emphasizing that leadership development programs tailored to underrepresented groups significantly enhance inclusion outcomes and long-term retention in leadership roles (Roberson & Kulik, 2021).

These findings aligned with recent scholarship that underscores the role of inclusive talent development in advancing equity and representation in leadership roles (Bourke & Dillon, 2020; Deloitte, 2021; SHRM, 2022). Studies showed that mentorship and sponsorship are especially effective for underrepresented groups in navigating promotion pathways and overcoming systemic barriers (Catalyst, 2021; McKinsey & Company, 2023b). For example, P003 conveyed, “We provided a mentorship program-Future Leaders Program, that showed associates how they could improve to succeed and move up into the management ranks.” Additionally, organizations that embedded DEI goals into succession planning and leadership training programs are more likely to build a resilient pipeline of inclusive leaders (Bersin, 2020). From a BSC perspective, these initiatives reflected the learning and growth dimension, which focused on organizational capacity and employee development as precursors to performance (Kaplan & Norton, 1996). From a stakeholder theory perspective, investment in development affirmed the organization's commitment to internal stakeholders by addressing equity of opportunity and long-term advancement potential (Freeman, 1984).

Theme 2: Leadership Commitment and Visibility

Leadership and commitment and visibility were referenced by eighty-six percent of the participants, signifying their foundational role in sustaining long-term DEI transformation across retail organizations. Participants consistently described leadership not merely as a positional authority, but as a moral and strategic imperative wherein executives acted as visible champions of equity centered change. This theme reflected an understanding that organizational transformation is catalyzed and sustained through the deliberate actions, modeling, and accountability frameworks instituted by senior leadership. Participants emphasized that inclusive change required intentional communication, shared accountability, and authentic collaboration across multiple constituencies. Research has shown that stakeholder engagement is a critical driver of sustainable DEI progress, particularly when organizations co-create initiatives with employees, community partners, and other key groups (Ferdman & Deane, 2014).

Participants emphasized that an inclusive organizational culture must be cultivated from the top down, with executive leaders setting the tone through transparent communication, strategic alignment and resource prioritization. For example, P006 emphasized transparency and awareness-building: “The biggest step I took was making diversity initiatives public throughout the organization—I used educational videos and training sessions.” while P004 asserted, “In order to attract diverse talent, the organization has to reflect diverse talent intentionally.” These reflections highlighted a recognition that leadership credibility in DEI was inextricably linked to authenticity, consistency, and alignment between rhetoric and practice. This perspective is consistent

with research which confirmed that organizations that foster stakeholder alignment through inclusive communications, participatory planning, and transparency are more likely to sustain DEI gains over time (Catalyst, 2023; Deloitte, 2023a). Engaging employees, customers, suppliers, and community partners in DEI efforts build legitimacy, accountability, and trust (Freeman et al., 2019; Harvard Business Review, 2021).

The strategic visibility of leadership in DEI initiatives reinforced existing literature, which identified executive sponsorship as one of the most consequential variables in achieving and sustaining equity outcomes (Roberson & Kulik, 2021; Thomas, 2020). Leaders who centered DEI as a strategic priority influenced not only policy direction but also employee perceptions of organizational values, thereby enhancing psychological safety, trust, and engagement particularly amongst marginalized employees.

These findings mapped directly to the learning and growth perspective of the BSC, which focused on the strategic development of human capital, organizational culture, and leadership capacity as drivers of long-term success (Kaplan & Norton, 1996). Participants described how leaders operationalized inclusion through continuous learning opportunities, strategic storytelling and the implementation of DEI metrics effectively embedding equity into the organizational fabric. This theme also aligned closely with stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), which asserted that organizations must actively recognize and respond to the diverse interests of stakeholders—including employees, customers, community partners, and investors—to maintain legitimacy and foster ethical, sustainable outcomes.

Empirical evidence affirmed that the effectiveness of stakeholder-inclusive leadership approaches in promoting sustainable DEI outcomes. When leaders treated stakeholders as cocreators of strategy rather than passive recipients, organizations achieve deeper cultural buy-in, enhanced reputational capital, and stronger ethical grounding (Deloitte, 2021; SHRM, 2022). When stakeholders are treated as cocreators in shaping DEI strategy, rather than passive recipients, organizations gain both cultural buy-in and strategic alignment. Thus, stakeholder engagement is not an ancillary communications function, but a foundational element in operationalizing inclusive leadership and advancing equity in the retail sector.

Subtheme: Shared Vision

Leaders emphasized the critical importance of aligning diversity initiatives with the organization's core mission and values, thereby building consensus across stakeholder groups and reinforcing a collective commitment to inclusivity. This position was not viewed as symbolic, but as essential to embedding equity into the organizational culture and ensuring strategic coherence across business units. By positioning diversity as a shared organizational priority—rather than a siloed HR function—leaders were able to foster broader engagement and accountability across departments. This alignment reduced vertical value misalignment—differences in core values between employees and managers—that have been shown to significantly erode performance and communication effectiveness (Delfino & Espinosa, 2025). Scholars have emphasized that strategic alignment between DEI efforts and organizational goals contributed to stronger stakeholder trust and sustainable performance outcomes (Deloitte, 2021; SHRM, 2022;

Thomas & Ely, 1996).

This practice aligned with the learning and growth and internal process perspectives of the BSC (Kaplan & Norton, 1996), ensuring that inclusive practices are institutionalized within performance and culture systems. It also reflected stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), which emphasized that authentic commitment to inclusivity requires understanding and responding to the diverse values of employees, customers, shareholders, and community partners. Recent studies confirmed that organizations that embed DEI into their stated mission and operational values are more likely to sustain inclusive outcomes and improve stakeholder trust (Deloitte, 2021; McKinsey & Company, 2023b; SHRM, 2022).

Theme 3: Overcoming Resistance to Diversity

Eighty-six percent of the participants identified overcoming resistance to diversity initiatives as a significant challenge. Resistance manifested through concerns of reverse discrimination, implicit biases in hiring committees, and limited executive comprehension of systemic inequities. This resistance took multiple forms, including concerns about reverse discrimination, implicit biases embedded in hiring and promotion decisions, and limited executive-level understanding of systemic inequities and their organizational impacts. Several participants indicated that these challenges were often rooted in discomfort with change or a lack of DEI literacy amongst senior leaders. For example, P001 stated, “The biggest challenge we had was uneducated leaders in the diversity space specifically.” while P006 stated, “The biggest challenge was leadership’s definition of diversity, and defining what it means to be diverse.” Similarly, P006 noted,

“The biggest challenge was leadership’s definition of diversity, and defining what it means to be diverse,” pointing to conceptual ambiguity that hindered strategic alignment and execution.

Participants described how inconsistent or superficial understandings of diversity undermined momentum and contributed to fragmented implementation efforts. Resistance was pronounced when DEI was perceived as a compliance exercise rather than a core strategic value. These findings aligned with prior research in which suggested that without a clear and shared definition of diversity grounded in both data and lived experience- leaders may inadvertently perpetuate inequities or disengage from accountability structures (see Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Ferdman & Deane, 2014).

To counteract resistance, leaders deployed targeted interventions including unconscious bias training aimed at reducing implicit prejudices and fostering inclusive mindsets (Chang et al., 2022). For example, P003 stated, “I had to really look at what was needed, and that was information, accurate information needed to be shared to gain trust regarding diverse opportunities,” while P006 emphasized, “ I spent a lot of time with the leaders in terms of the definition of diversity, recognition of diversity, and hosting annual leadership summits on culture change.” DEI is a strategic asset essential to innovation and organizational performance, supporting this reframing with empirical evidence demonstrating positive correlations between diversity and business outcomes (Nishii & Rich, 2020). These approaches aligned with contemporary models of resistance management, which stressed education, engagement, and data-driven advocacy as effective levers for cultural change (Roberson, 2020).

The BSC framework continued to provide valuable guidance in embedding DEI metrics within organizational strategy, particularly through cultural transformation objectives that incentivize inclusive behaviors and accountability (Kaplan & Norton, 2021). Moreover, stakeholder theory underscored the necessity of engaging diverse internal stakeholders and negotiating power dynamics to shift perceptions and build coalition support for DEI initiatives (Harrison et al., 2021). By reshaping stakeholder interests and fostering shared ownership, leaders mitigated resistance and promoted sustainable diversity practices that enhanced organizational success.

Subtheme: Attitudes towards Diversity Initiatives

While several leaders embraced DEI as a strategic priority, others acknowledged that fear-based attitudes toward diversity initiatives remained a persistent barrier. Participants observed that some leaders and employees expressed anxiety over perceived threats to their professional status or advancement, reflecting concerns that DEI efforts might result in reverse discrimination or reduced opportunities for individuals from traditionally dominant groups. For instance, Participant 001 stated, “Some leaders have asked if diversity was reverse discrimination,” while others hesitated to engage in conversations about identity, fearing they might say the wrong thing. Similarly, P006 stated, “White males felt like there were going to be excluded, so they did not like the idea of diversity; they wanted to push it away.” These attitudes aligned with findings by Roberson (2020), who explained that resistance to diversity programs often stems from psychological threat, misunderstanding, or a lack of perceived personal benefit. When

individuals felt excluded from the diversity narrative or fear being replaced, they disengaged or even actively resisted implementation efforts.

Rooted in zero sum thinking, these perceptions have been well documented in DEI literature, where scholars note that resistance often stemmed from a belief that gains for underrepresented groups come at the expense of others (Dover et al., 2016). Fear base responses have undermined organizational cohesion and obstructed meaningful progress, unless addressed through education, transparent communication, and inclusive leadership development. Leaders must foster psychologically safe environments where concerns can be expressed and reframed through data, dialogue, and shared organizational values. This approach is supported by Shore et al. (2020), who argued that inclusive climates are built when organizations explicitly address discomfort and empower all stakeholders to see themselves as part of the diversity journey.

From a BSC perspective, efforts to minimize fear and resistance fall within the learning and growth perspective, enhance organizational culture and internal capability. Likewise, stakeholder theory supported the ethical obligation to engage all internal stakeholders, including those with concerns, ensuring that DEI strategies are inclusive not only in outcome but also in process (Harrison et al., 2021). Leaders who acknowledged and strategically addressed fear-based attitudes are more likely to build trust, foster buy-in, and embed DEI as a shared enterprise rather than a divisive initiative.

Theme 4: Strategic Use of Data

Eighty-six percent of the participants referenced the strategic use of data, emphasizing its critical role in diagnosing representation gaps, tracking diversity

progress, and informing evidence-based hiring decisions. Participants reported employing tools such as interactive dashboards, demographic analytics, and compliance tracking to promote transparency and accountability. For example, P002 stated,

> I would partner with our EEO department, because they were the gatekeepers of demographics, it was easier for me to partner within our organization to see what shape we were in based on ethnicity and ensure we had a group of diverse individuals in certain departments and roles.

Participant 005 stated, “We would run labor reports and in-house demographic reports” to ensure diversity compliance. Dobbin & Kalev (2022) emphasized that organizations that institutionalized diversity metrics and held leaders accountable for progress are better positioned to achieve long-term equity goals.

The integration of diversity, equity, and inclusion into an organizational performance metric was deemed essential for driving meaningful change. These findings reflected the central tenets of the BSC framework, particularly its performance measurement component, which integrates non-financial metrics—including diversity indicators—into strategic oversight (Kaplan & Norton, 2021). By embedding DEI metrics into scorecards, organizations transitioned from aspirational statements to measurable outcomes, fostering a culture of evidence-based decision making and continuous improvement (Ghosh, 2022).

From a stakeholder theory perspective, data transparency played a vital role in addressing stakeholder expectations and ensuring ethical accountability. Publishing internal and external diversity metrics enables organizations to signal their commitment

to equitable practices and respond to the evolving demands of employees, regulators, investors, and communities (Harrison et al., 2021). Moreover, leveraging demographic data allowed organizations to align strategic objectives with the interests of marginalized groups, reinforcing trust and legitimacy in the change process (Shore et al., 2020).

Overall, the strategic use of data helped shift DEI efforts from rhetoric to measurable results, which reinforced performance management systems while deepening stakeholder trust. By embedding analytics into decision making processes, organizations not only diagnosed representation gaps but also activated sustainable change, positioning data as both a diagnostic instrument and a catalyst for long term transformation in leadership diversity.

Subtheme: Organizational Barriers

Participants emphasized that strategic data use not only enabled performance tracking but also illuminated deeply embedded structural inequities within leadership pipelines. Several leaders described how demographic analytics and disaggregated workforce data uncovered patterns of underrepresentation and bottlenecks in promotion pathways—insights that had previously been overlooked or dismissed. As one participant explained, data served as "a mirror," revealing disparities that were systemic rather than incidental. This finding aligned with research that suggested data disaggregation was essential to uncovering hidden inequities and driving evidence-based interventions to address institutional bias (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016).

These data-driven revelations functioned as diagnostic tools that guided leadership in identifying root causes of exclusion, such as inequitable succession

planning, homogeneous selection committees, and opaque advancement criteria. Participant 007 conveyed, “I measured the work programs through baseline assessments, to provide the data and make sure we capture hiring, training programs, and outcomes.” This approach aligned with recent scholarship highlighting how organizations can use workforce analytics to dismantle hidden biases and re-engineer more equitable systems (see Ghosh, 2022; Nishii & Rich, 2020).

From a BSC perspective, this diagnostic capability supported internal process improvement and learning metrics—key components in driving cultural transformation (Kaplan & Norton, 2021). By institutionalizing diversity indicators and linking them to leadership development metrics, organizations gained actionable insights that informed more inclusive succession and talent strategies (Roberson, 2020).

Through the lens of stakeholder theory, exposing and addressing organizational barriers was essential to maintaining legitimacy and trust with internal stakeholders, particularly those historically marginalized within organizational systems (Harrison et al., 2021). When systemic inequities surfaced and were remediated, organizations not only fulfilled ethical obligations but also reinforced their accountability to a diverse and evolving stakeholder environment (Shore et al., 2020). Ultimately, data-driven identification of structural barriers marked a pivotal shift from surface-level inclusion efforts to a deeper organizational reckoning, laying the foundation for sustainable change in leadership representation.

Theme 5: Advocating for Diversity

Eighty-six percent of the participants referenced advocacy efforts undertaken at the leadership level, illustrating that effective diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategies depend heavily on visible and sustained leadership engagement. Advocacy took multiple forms, including mentoring underrepresented employees, sponsoring employee resource groups (ERGs), and publicly committing to diversity goals. P001 remarked, “I had to be the visible face of DEI—internally and externally—so others knew we were serious,” emphasizing the symbolic power of executive sponsorship in signaling organizational commitment. Recent studies supported this view, suggesting that inclusive leadership behaviors—such as role modeling, mentoring, and psychological safety—positively influence organizational climates and employee engagement, particularly for marginalized groups (Javed et al., 2023; Shore et al., 2020).

Beyond individual support, advocacy extended to strategic decision-making, such as influencing board-level policy, embedding DEI targets in strategic planning, and allocating dedicated resources for DEI initiatives. Participants described how advocacy efforts resulted in tangible organizational shifts, including changes to succession planning criteria, diversity-focused recruitment processes, and performance evaluations linked to inclusive leadership behaviors. These practices aligned with findings from Banks et al. (2016), who concluded that advocacy from top leaders directly contributes to increased innovation, retention, and trust across diverse teams. Similarly, research by Nishii and Rich (2020) and Sabharwal (2014) emphasized that top-down commitment to inclusion through goal setting, policy integration, and accountability metrics created the

infrastructure necessary for lasting DEI outcomes. Without leadership-driven structural alignment, DEI efforts risk remaining performative rather than transformative.

Within the BSC framework, such advocacy reflected the leadership and human capital dimensions, which emphasized the importance of leadership behavior, talent development, and employee alignment with organizational goals (Kaplan & Norton, 2021). Participants highlighted that integrating advocacy metrics into leadership evaluations and scorecards elevated DEI from an HR initiative to a strategic imperative. This formalization of accountability reinforced a performance-driven culture that supports inclusive outcomes.

From the perspective of stakeholder theory, leadership advocacy fostered trust, legitimacy, and alignment with stakeholder expectations by actively addressing the needs and concerns of both internal (e.g., employees, ERGs) and external (e.g., investors, communities) groups (Harrison et al., 2021). Participants emphasized that advocating for diversity enhanced transparency, equity, and responsiveness—key principles in building stakeholder relationships. When leaders visibly championed DEI, they reshaped organizational values and power dynamics in ways that acknowledged the voices of historically marginalized stakeholders (Shore et al., 2020).

In sum, advocacy was not limited to symbolic gestures; it was deeply embedded in strategic action and organizational transformation. When leaders actively promoted DEI both in words and through policy influence, resource allocation, and role modeling, they cultivated inclusive climates that supported long-term organizational success. These

efforts, supported by frameworks such as the BSC and stakeholder theory, demonstrated how advocacy can move diversity from aspiration to integrated strategy.

Subtheme: Legislative Impact

Several leaders expressed growing concern over how shifting political climates and regulatory uncertainties have impacted DEI efforts within their organizations. Participants cited legislative reversals and fluctuating compliance requirements—such as those related to affirmative action, ESG disclosures, or anti-DEI state legislation—as external pressures that complicated implementation and long-term planning. These concerns reflected broader trends noted in recent research, which founds that pollical polarization and legal challenges have created significant barriers to sustaining organizational diversity initiatives (Kwoh, 2023; Williams, 2023).

These changes, rather than diminishing commitment, often prompted stronger internal advocacy as leaders sought to safeguard and institutionalize inclusive practices. In response, some organizations embedded DEI goals more firmly within strategic frameworks and performance metrics, using tools such as scorecards and accountability dashboards to reinforce internal alignment regardless of external volatility. This aligned with the BSC's emphasis on sustaining strategic objectives through internal performance drivers, such as cultural transformation and leadership behavior (Kaplan & Norton, 2021). Moreover, stakeholder theory highlighted that organizations must maintain trust and legitimacy with a broad array of stakeholders, especially when navigating contentious political environments (Harrison et al., 2021).

As leaders reaffirmed DEI priorities internally, they not only protected

organizational values but also reinforced their ethical responsibility to marginalized employees and communities. In this context, political uncertainty became a catalyst for deeper institutional commitment, rather than a deterrent, demonstrating the adaptive resilience of values-driven leadership.

Theme 6: Diversity as a Driver

The final theme, referenced by 85.7% of participants, emphasized the strategic role of diversity as a driver of business success rather than a compliance obligation. Participants described DEI initiatives as directly contributing to core business outcomes, including customer satisfaction, market growth, and team innovation. P001 explained, “It is really important for leaders to understand that you have to mirror your customer, when you target one population, you’re missing sales from other populations,” illustrating how representational leadership impacted organizational performance. This perspective aligned with prior research that demonstrated that diverse leadership teams are better positioned to understand varied consumer needs, enter new markets foster innovation (Hewlett et al., 2013; Hunt et al., 2018). Furthermore, studies have shown that companies with inclusive cultures and leadership are more likely to outperform peers on profitability, employee engagement and brand reputation (Bourke & Dillon, 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2020). These findings reinforced the view that DEI, when embedded strategically, serves as a competitive differentiator and a business imperative.

This perspective is supported by recent empirical evidence. For example, McKinsey & Company (2023a) found that organizations with greater ethnic and gender diversity on executive teams were significantly financially outperformed their peers.

Participant 4 stated, “ As we move forward, we have to find ways to make sure that everybody is being treated equally and at the table at the same time, because if not, you’re going to go backwards in your organization before going forward, and it will affect your bottom line.” Additionally, meta-analytical research confirmed that inclusive leadership fostered higher levels of innovation, employee engagement, and customer responsiveness (Rosenbusch et al., 2021).

These findings aligned with the BSC framework, particularly its financial and customer perspectives, which emphasized linking non-financial indicators such as leadership diversity to broader organizational success (Kaplan & Norton, 2021). Participants described using diversity-related metrics—such as diverse hiring targets, inclusive leadership evaluations, and employee sentiment scores—to monitor progress and tie DEI efforts to measurable business value.

From the lens of stakeholder theory, aligning leadership demographics with those of key external stakeholders—particularly customers and communities—strengthened organizational legitimacy, trust, and ethical governance (Harrison et al., 2021). As stakeholder expectations increasingly reflected calls for transparency, equity, and accountability, organizations that embedded DEI into strategic priorities positioned themselves for sustainable, inclusive growth. Leaders in the project emphasized that DEI became most impactful when fully integrated into strategic planning, resource allocation, and market positioning. In this sense, diversity evolved from a compliance narrative into a repeatable driver of innovation, ethical practice, and competitive advantage.

The BSC and stakeholder theory offered complementary perspectives to assess how organizations embedded diversity into strategy and practice. While the BSC focused on internal performance, stakeholder theory emphasized external expectations and ethical responsibility. Together, these frameworks, demonstrated how diverse strategies could simultaneously strengthen organizational performance (see Table 3).

Table 3
Relationship Between Themes and Conceptual Frameworks

Theme	Balanced scorecard alignment	Stakeholder theory alignment
1. Strategic recruitment and hiring	-internal process perspective - learning and growth perspective	- addresses internal stakeholder expectations (e.g., diverse talent) - community engagement
2. Leadership commitment and visibility	- leadership development metrics - cultural transformation initiatives	- builds trust through visible leadership - reinforces accountability to internal/external stakeholders
3. Overcoming resistance to diversity	- employee engagement and change management indicators	- reframes stakeholder perceptions - promotes education and inclusion of resistant groups
4. Strategic use of data	- metrics, performance dashboards, and reporting - data-driven decision-making	- promotes transparency and ethical reporting - satisfies internal and external stakeholder accountability
5. Advocating for diversity	- human capital development - leadership behaviors tied to performance outcomes	- aligns values with stakeholder expectations - enhances legitimacy through visible advocacy
6. Diversity as a driver	- financial and customer perspectives - market responsiveness and innovation tracking	- aligns leadership demographics with consumer/stakeholder demographics

	- drives ethical, profitable growth

Business Contributions and Recommendations for Professional Practice

The findings of the research project offered valuable contributions to professional business practice by highlighting effective strategies retail leaders can use to improve diverse representation in leadership roles and thereby enhance organizational success. Contemporary research emphasized that diversity is a strategic asset that drives innovation, financial performance, and competitive advantage (Nishii, 2018; Shore et al., 2018). The research project addressed existing gaps by providing actionable approaches. Addressing existing professional gaps—such as leadership commitment, inclusive recruitment practices, mentorship programs, and strategic integration of diversity goals enable organizations to cultivate sustainable pipelines of diverse leaders (Roberson & Kulik, 2021).

For business leaders, it was essential to institutionalize diversity by establishing clear, measurable objectives and embedding accountability mechanisms such as diversity metrics in leadership performance evaluations (Dobbin & Kalev, 2022). Inclusive recruitment techniques, including structured interviews and diverse hiring panels, proved to mitigate bias and promote equitable opportunities (Avery et al., 2019). Additionally, formal mentorship and sponsorship initiatives that supported underrepresented employees contributed significantly to leadership development and retention (Thomas & Gabarro, 2020). Integrating diversity within the broader business strategy ensured alignment with

organizational goals, such as innovation and market responsiveness, thereby strengthening long-term success (Kochan et al., 2018).

Key stakeholders who should attend the findings include senior executives, board members, HR professionals, middle managers, and diversity officers, as their collaborative efforts are critical for driving inclusive leadership practices. Dissemination of the results through academic journals, industry conferences, leadership training programs, and digital platforms may maximize reach and practical application (Shore et al., 2018). By moving beyond surface-level diversity initiatives to systemic, evidence-based practices, business leaders enhanced diverse representation in leadership roles and ultimately improve organizational effectiveness in the dynamic retail sector.

Implications for Social Change

The findings of the research revealed significant implications extended beyond organizational performance to foster significant positive social change by promoting the worth, dignity, and development of individuals, communities, and institutions within the retail industry. By identifying effective strategies to improve diverse representation in retail leadership, the project may contribute to dismantling systemic barriers that have historically limited access for underrepresented groups to decision-making roles in this sector. Enhancing diversity in retail leadership empowers individuals through equitable opportunities for advancement while fostering inclusive workplace cultures that value multiple identities and perspectives, which in turn may improve employee engagement and retention in an industry characterized by diverse customer bases and high turnover rates. Shore et al. (2018) emphasized that inclusive workplace environments where

employees feel both valued for their unique attributes and a sense of belonging are essential for sustaining engagement, reducing turnover, and maximizing the benefits of workforce diversity.

At the community and societal levels, retail organizations with inclusive leadership may be better equipped to understand and meet the needs of heterogeneous consumer populations, thus advancing social equity and economic empowerment within the markets they serve (Roberson & Kulik, 2021). Inclusive leadership in retail promotes policies and practices aligned with social justice, thereby increasing institutional legitimacy and contributing to stronger community ties (Kochan et al., 2018). Furthermore, by creating visible and accessible pathways to leadership for marginalized groups in retail, this research supports role modeling and mentorship that encourage social mobility and sustained workforce diversity, amplifying positive social outcomes beyond organizational boundaries. Thomas and Gabarro (2020) emphasized that intentional mentorship and sponsorship from senior leaders are critical for breaking systemic barriers and accelerating the advancement of underrepresented talent leadership roles.

Overall, promoting diverse leadership within the retail industry not only drove business innovation and competitive advantage but also aligned with broader societal goals of dignity, equity, and inclusion. This research supported a cultural transformation in retail organizations toward valuing diversity as a critical component of ethical and effective leadership, by advancing human development and positive social change across communities and society at large. Research by Nishii (2018) and Shore et al. (2018)

supported this view, highlighting that inclusive organizational climates enhance individual well-being and collective performance by affirming employees' unique identities while fostering a sense of belonging.

Recommendations for Further Research

Future research aimed at improving business practice should prioritize expanding sample sizes and ensuring greater diversity among participants to enhance the representativeness and generalizability of findings across multiple industries and geographic regions. Roberson and Kulik (2021) emphasized that inclusive research designs are essential for capturing the full complexity of diversity dynamics and for developing evidence-based strategies that are applicable across varied organizational contexts. The current project's limited sample size constrained the extent to which results could be confidently applied beyond the retail sector or specific demographic groups. Therefore, recruiting larger, stratified samples that reflect varied organizational sizes, sectors, and cultural contexts was essential for advancing the field. Employing mixed methods approaches, which integrate qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis, would enrich the depth and breadth of understanding regarding diversity initiatives while reducing reliance on self-reported data prone to bias (Avery et al., 2019). Specifically, triangulating data from interviews, surveys, organizational records, and direct observations can strengthen validity and provide a more multifaceted picture of the effectiveness of diversity strategies.

Longitudinal research designs are particularly important for capturing how diversity initiatives influenced leadership representation, organizational culture, and

business outcomes over extended periods. This approach addressed a key limitation of cross-sectional studies, which provided only a temporal snapshot and are limited in establishing causal relationships. Dobbin & Kalev (2022) contended that longitudinal studies are essential for understanding the sustained impact of diversity programs and for identifying which practices lead to meaningful and lasting organizational change. Additionally, future studies should explore the complex intersectionality of identities, such as race, gender, age, and socioeconomic status, to understand how overlapping social categorizations create unique experiences and barriers in leadership. This will allow organizations to design more inclusive and tailored strategies that account for these multifaceted challenges.

Furthermore, examining how organizational culture and climate moderate the success of diversity efforts is critical, as certain cultural contexts may either facilitate or hinder the effectiveness of inclusion practices. Expanding research to include multiple industries and countries will also offer insights into how local legal frameworks, cultural norms, and market conditions shape diversity initiatives, thereby informing context-sensitive best practices. Roberson and Kulik (2021) emphasized that understanding these contextual factors is crucial for developing adaptable strategies suited to diverse organizational environments and global markets.

Finally, future research should focus on designing, implementing, and rigorously evaluating targeted leadership development and mentorship programs aimed at underrepresented groups. Experimental and quasi-experimental studies in this area can identify best practices and scalable models for fostering diverse leadership pipelines and

reducing turnover among diverse employees. Thomas and Gabarro (2020) highlighted that rigorous evaluation of mentorship and sponsorship programs is essential to ensure their effectiveness in advancing diverse talent within organizations.

Addressing the limitations highlighted in Section 1, such as sample size, reliance on self-reported data, cross-sectional designs, and narrow geographic focus, is essential for strengthening the rigor, reliability, and applicability of future findings. By leveraging larger and more representative samples, employing multi-method data collection, adopting longitudinal designs, and incorporating broader contexts, researchers can produce actionable insights that better inform business leaders and practitioners committed to advancing diversity and inclusion in leadership.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this project highlighted the pivotal role that diverse leadership representation played in driving not only organizational success but also meaningful social transformation. The findings affirmed that diversity and inclusion are far more than compliance checkboxes; they are strategic imperatives that cultivated innovation, enhanced decision-making, and improved employee engagement in increasingly competitive and complex business landscapes such as the retail industry. Nishii (2018) emphasized that inclusive practices not only foster psychologically safety but also build the trust necessary for diverse teams to thrive and deliver superior performance.

By addressing entrenched systemic barriers through comprehensive strategies to include but not limited to; committed leadership accountability, inclusive recruitment and

hiring practices, robust mentorship and sponsorship programs, and the integration of diversity objectives with overarching business goal, —organizations built sustainable leadership pipelines that reflected the rich diversity of the workforce and the customers they serve. Such efforts not only improved organizational agility and market responsiveness but also contributed to creating equitable workplaces where all employees feel valued and empowered (Dobbin & Kalev, 2022; Shore et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the broader implications of advancing diverse leadership extended well beyond corporate walls, contributing to social equity, dignity, and inclusion at community and societal levels. By promoting fair access to leadership opportunities, organizations helped dismantle historic patterns of exclusion and marginalization, inspiring future generations and fostering social mobility for underrepresented populations (Thomas & Gabarro, 2020). This alignment of business success with social justice underscored the transformative potential of diverse initiatives, making them a moral and practical necessity in today's global economy. The findings of this project called on business leaders, human resource professionals, and policymakers to sustain and deepen their commitment to diversity as a catalyst for both organizational excellence and positive social change.

Ultimately, embracing evidence-based diversity strategies will position organizations not only to thrive economically but also to contribute meaningfully to a more inclusive and equitable society, fulfilling the promise of diversity as a driver of human development and societal progress.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol	
Introduce the interview and set the stage. Introduce myself and the purpose of the interview, thereby setting the stage.	Hello, my name is (First/Last Name). I am a Doctoral Candidate at Walden University. The purpose of this interview is to identify and explore effective strategies that some retail business leaders use to improve diverse representation in leadership roles to strengthen organizational success. I am going to ask you six questions to which I would like your responses. Then, I will conclude the interview. Do you have any questions?
Watch for nonverbal cues. Paraphrase the participant's response. Ask follow-up probing questions to get more in-depth	Interview Questions: 1. What effective strategies did you use to improve diverse representation in leadership roles to strengthen organizational success? 2. What steps did you take to consider the interests and well-being of various stakeholder groups when you implemented strategies to improve diverse representation in leadership roles to strengthen organizational success? 3. What challenges did you encounter when implementing strategies to improve diverse representation in leadership roles to strengthen organizational success? 4. How did you overcome the challenges? 5. How did you measure the success of the strategies you used to improve diverse representation in leadership roles to strengthen organizational success?

	6. What additional information regarding your successful strategies to improve diverse representation in leadership roles to strengthen organizational success would you like to share that we have not already discussed?
Wrap up the interview thanking the participant for their time.	Thank you for participating in the interview, an integral part of my research project.
Schedule a follow-up interview to perform member checking with the participant.	I will contact you in a week to schedule a time for us to review the accuracy of my interpretations of your interview responses.