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Building transformational leaders: Assessing retail leadership maturity via an HR lens

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Orientation: The retail industry in South Africa is experiencing significant transformations due to Industry 4.0 and 5.0, necessitating a focused examination of leadership development maturity.

Research purpose: To assess the application of the Leadership Development Process Maturity Index (LDPMI) within the South African retail industry, using transformational leadership as its underpinning theory.

Motivation for the study: A critical gap exists in understanding leadership development maturity as retailers navigate technological transformations, particularly in emerging markets where structured leadership development approaches are crucial.

Research approach/design and method: The study employed a qualitative, exploratory approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, involving eight Human Resource specialists from four major South African retailers representing diverse retail categories.

Main findings: Analysis revealed an overall 'emerging' maturity status of 58% across leadership tiers. Some retailers demonstrated more balanced approaches, with Retailer C showing maturity levels of 60%, 61%, and 70% across junior, middle, and senior leadership respectively. A significant industry-wide gap was identified at the middle leadership tier (50% average), indicating challenges in succession planning.

Practical/managerial implications: The study identified critical transformational leadership competencies aligned with Bass's framework: self-leadership (idealised influence), adaptability (intellectual stimulation), and interpersonal skills (individualised consideration), vital for fostering knowledge-sharing and driving technological transformation.

Contribution/value-add: The research demonstrates LDPMI's effectiveness in assessing leadership development in retail contexts while providing organisations with a framework to evaluate leadership maturity and identify competencies needed for technological transformation.

Keywords: transformational leadership; leadership development process maturity index; South African retail industry; Industry 4.0 and 5.0 transformation; interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Introduction

The global retail industry is a major driver of economic growth, generating $26.03 trillion sales revenue in 2021 and is projected to reach $31.7 trillion by 2025 (Financesonline, 2022). Recognised as one of the largest employment industries worldwide, retail supports not only direct jobs but also indirect industries such as marketing, finance and logistics, indicating its extensive reach and impact on the global economy (Hunt & Rolf, 2022; Korenyuk, 2024). The retail industry's economic contribution extends to fostering innovation and digital advancement, as evidenced by significant growth in e-commerce, which surged 32.4% in 2021 to account for 19.6% of global retail sales (Coppola, 2022; Roboticsbiz, 2021). However, the global coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic introduced transformative changes to the retail industry, impacting supply chains, shifting customer behaviour and accelerating technological adaptation (Chatterjee et al., 2021; Tănase, 2021). As retailers increasingly rely on digital marketplaces, the skills gap between current employee capabilities and evolving industry requirements widens, calling for new competencies to navigate the digital world (Bäckström et al., 2024; Simon et al., 2020).

Within this rapidly evolving retail landscape, transformational leadership (TL) has emerged as a critical theory for developing effective retail leaders (Adigwe, 2024; DeSilva, 2021).

Transformational leadership is characterised by idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration (Bass, 1985; Brown et al., 2019; Burns, 1978). Transformational leadership is particularly relevant as it enables leaders to drive innovation, manage change and maintain employee engagement during technological disruption (George, 2006; Siangchokyoo et al., 2020). Research demonstrates that TL practices significantly impact retail performance through enhanced employee motivation, improved customer service and successful change management (DeSilva, 2021; Pandia & Meilani, 2024). Furthermore, TL is especially effective in environments requiring rapid adaptation to technological change and shifting consumer behaviours (Majnoor & Vinayagam, 2024; Santoso, et al., 2022).

The South African retail industry, although situated within an emerging market, reflects global trends. As the second-largest employer in the South African economy, the industry contributes significantly to national employment, accounting for 20% of the workforce and achieving over $62 billion (R1.153 trillion) in annual sales for 2023 (South African Reserve Bank, 2023; Statistics South Africa, 2024). Like global counterparts, South African retail faces a pivotal transformation (Jacobs & Karpova, 2022; W&RSETA, 2023) as digital demands increase and technology reshapes industry operations. Nevertheless, it is argued that challenges specific to the local market intensify the need for specialised skills in technological and TL, which is critical for managing the reskilling of a predominantly unskilled or semi-skilled workforce. Mohamed and Otman (2021) and Santoso et al. (2022) argue that the application of TL principles becomes particularly crucial as organisations navigate organisational learning and workforce development brought on by technological advancement and environmental shifts.

To address these demands, there is a need for a more structured leadership development process that aligns with TL principles while considering industry-specific challenges across all tiers of retail management. The researchers argue that although various models exist for assessing leadership capabilities (Armitage et al., 2006; Kivipõld & Vadi, 2010; Joseph-Richard & McCray, 2023), the Leadership Development Process Maturity Index (LDPMI), developed by Van der Westhuizen (2020), was chosen because it offers at the least a structured, maturity-based approach that integrates TL concepts. Furthermore, the LDPMI enables the researchers to view at least which levels of leadership the retail industry currently focusses on and whether this focus aligns with where they truly intend to invest their resources. Despite its effectiveness in organisational assessments, the application of the LDPMI within the retail context remains underexplored, indicating a significant gap in both research and practical application.

Research purpose and objectives

This study responds to calls for more structured approaches to assessing leadership development in the retail industry (Hastings et al., 2018; Fernandes et al., 2023; W&RSETA, 2023), particularly as organisations navigate technological transformation and changing consumer behaviours (Bäckström et al., 2024; Chatterjee et al., 2021). By applying the LDPMI, the research aims to enhance both theoretical understanding and practical implementation of the LDPMI and its applicability to the retail industry. Specifically, the research seeks to:

RO1: Measure the leadership development maturity indexes across junior, middle and senior leadership tiers in South African retail organisations (Van der Westhuizen & Hewitt, 2021a, 2021b).

RO2: Identify critical leadership development priorities and capability gaps within the retail industry, particularly in the context of Industry 4.0–5.0 transformation (Evanschitzky et al., 2020; W&RSETA, 2023).

RO3: Assess the effectiveness and applicability of the LDPMI within the retail industry context and examine its ability to capture industry-specific leadership development requirements (Van der Westhuizen, 2020; Vogel et al., 2021).

RO4: Propose recommendations for enhancing leadership development in the retail industry, focussing on balancing development across leadership tiers and addressing critical competencies identified through the LDPMI (Van der Westhuizen & Hewitt, 2021b; W&RSETA, 2023).

The discussion examines the four dimensions of transformational leadership, explores their application in retail during Industry 4.0 and 5.0, and analyses leadership maturity models, particularly the LDPMI, as tools for evaluating leadership development across organisational tiers.

Theoretical framework

Transformational leadership in retail

Applying TL theory in retail contexts centres on four key behavioural dimensions (DeSilva, 2021; Rinawati & Sidharta, 2024). (1) Through idealised influence, transformational retail leaders model customer-centric values and innovative thinking. As Adigwe (2024) notes:

> Jeff Bezos, the visionary founder and former CEO of Amazon.com, Inc. through his distinctive leadership style and characteristics, had a customer-centric approach, unwavering commitment to long-term value creation, and willingness to embrace experimentation, which has been instrumental in Amazon's meteoric rise as a global e-commerce behemoth. (p. 76)

This exemplifies how TL in retail requires maintaining service quality while fostering organisational innovation and navigating change (Usman, 2020); (2) Intellectual stimulation enables creative problem-solving in dynamic retail environments, which is particularly crucial for store operations and customer experience enhancement (Zheng et al., 2023); (3) Individual consideration facilitates personalised development approaches, addressing the diverse skill levels

within retail organisations (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978) to improve employee satisfaction and reduce turnover, which is crucial for the retail industry; (4) An example of inspirational motivation in retail is exemplified by Howard Schultz, the former CEO of Starbucks, who articulated a compelling vision of Starbucks as a 'third place' between home and work. Through inspirational motivation, Schultz transformed his vision into organisational culture by inspiring employees to embrace the company's mission. His approach embodied two other key TL components: idealised influence through modelling customer-centric behaviours and individualised consideration by empowering employees to make decisions that enhance customer experience. This integrated application of TL principles enabled Starbucks to achieve exceptional customer service and global success (Maspul, 2024).

These theoretical dimensions provide specific mechanisms for achieving organisational transformation in retail. At the operational level, transformational leaders facilitate knowledge transfer between experienced and new staff (Putra et al., 2020; Rinawati & Sidharta, 2024), which is crucial in environments with high employee turnover (Mey et al., 2021; Naidoo, 2019). They also create psychological safety for innovation and experimentation, essential for adapting to changing consumer preferences and technological requirements (Ohlsson et al., 2020; Yin et al., 2020). The theory's emphasis on developing followers' capabilities aligns particularly well with retail's need for rapid skill development and cross-functional expertise (Putra et al., 2020; Rinawati & Sidharta, 2024).

The integration of TL principles with maturity models such as the LDPMI provides a theoretical foundation for assessing and developing retail leadership capabilities systematically. This combination enables organisations to evaluate how effectively TL behaviours are embedded across different organisational leadership level tiers and identify specific development needs aligned with the theoretical constructs (Van der Westhuizen & Hewitt, 2021a, 2021b).

Transformational leadership in retail during industry 4.0 and 5.0

The retail industry's leadership requirements have evolved significantly. Leaders must now demonstrate proficiency in traditional retail operations and emerging technological capabilities (Evanschitzky et al., 2020). Gilli et al. (2023) identified critical leadership competencies needed for digital transformation as; 'collaboration, strategic thinking skills, team leadership skills, customer orientation and communication skills' (p. 13). Gilli (2023) added 'change management and conceptual digitisation skills' (p. 68) to the list. These competencies must be developed within an industry characterised by fast-paced operations, high employee turnover and constant disruption (Naidoo, 2019). These competencies align with TL principles, particularly in retail environments where dynamic customer interactions and operational demands create complex work environments (Putra et al., 2020).

Further to this, Rinawati & Sidharta (2024) argue that TL practices foster collaborative cultures and enhance employee performance through knowledge-sharing behaviours critical to organisational success. Jacobs and Karpova (2022) postulate that these theories emphasise individual consideration and intellectual stimulation, and provide a framework for developing leaders who can address both technological and human capital challenges. They can do this, although implementing such practices consistently across all organisational tiers remains challenging in regions such as South Africa, where skill gaps and resource constraints exist.

Sonmez Cakir and Adiguzel (2020) argue that effective leaders who exhibit positive knowledge-sharing behaviours are the ones who contribute most to the organisation's strategic success. Therefore, leaders who foster a knowledge-sharing culture improve team cohesion and equip their teams to develop creative solutions (Chen et al., 2022). However, fostering such a culture requires intentional strategies and leadership training, particularly for middle management.

Together, these insights underscore the importance of TL and the need for a robust leadership development framework in the retail industry. Addressing these challenges requires a strategic approach that prioritises adaptability, resilience and knowledge-sharing while also providing targeted support to overcome skill gaps within the workforce. By doing so, the retail industry can better prepare its leaders to manage the complexities of an increasingly digital and customer-driven market environment.

Leadership maturity models and leadership development process maturity index

Maturity models, originally developed for software engineering, are based on the principle that organisations perform more effectively when processes are systematically defined, managed, measured and optimised (McCormack et al., 2009). When applied to leadership development, maturity models such as the LDPMI offer significant benefits. These models enable organisations to systematically identify critical factors that drive effective leadership initiatives, including foundational antecedents, operational processes, and measurable outcomes. Liu et al. (2021) said that such a systematic approach not only allows organisations to pinpoint areas of improvement but also supports continuous advancement in leadership competencies that align with business objectives. Therefore, by facilitating structured growth, the LDPMI aids organisations in emerging markets with a strategic tool to guide leadership development towards measurable maturity.

When the LDPMI was developed, Eurocentric statements were identified in the literature, and Afrocentric views were added. Where these perspectives overlapped, they were retained; where new insights were gained, they were incorporated. This process resulted in the LDPMI

encompassing 125 leadership development maturity areas, specifically designed to augment existing Eurocentric leadership models with Afrocentric perspectives, addressing the unique needs of organisations within the Southern African context (Van der Westhuizen & Hewitt, 2021a, 2021b). This comprehensive index assesses leadership development across the three leadership tiers, enabling organisations to identify high-impact areas for targeted investment. By integrating both Afrocentric and Eurocentric elements, the LDPMI considers regional nuances and cultural relevance, offering emerging markets a model that aligns with their specific developmental needs (Van der Westhuizen, 2020; Van der Westhuizen & Hewitt, 2021b). The LDPMI has previously been piloted in the manufacturing and financial services sectors, with this study representing its first application in the retail industry.

The LDPMI further evaluates leadership development maturity across 10 key dimensions essential for organisational leadership growth. These dimensions encompass strategic alignment, ensuring development initiatives support business objectives, continuity and evaluation for consistent assessment, cultural integration to embed leadership principles and customisable design for management tier-specific development. The index, which is not a quantitative measure, addresses feedback mechanisms for ongoing evaluation, diverse development methods, including coaching and mentorship and management support for resource allocation. In addition, the index focusses on competency development in critical areas such as adaptability and team leadership while enabling individualised growth paths that acknowledge the unique developmental needs of leaders (Van der Westhuizen & Hewitt, 2021b).

Research design and methods

The chosen methodology responded to calls for a more structured research approach as organisations navigate technological transformation and changing consumer behaviours (Chatterjee et al., 2021; Hastings et al., 2018). To address the evolving leadership challenges in the South African retail industry, this study implemented a multi-phase, qualitative exploratory research design focussing on leadership development maturity across the three organisational leadership tiers (Mik-Meyer, 2020). Phase one involved the administration of the LDPMI alongside the second phase of 90-min semi-structured, in-depth interview, enabling the researcher to develop an evidence-based set of recommendations for enhancing leadership development across the three leadership tiers within the retail industry.

The study employed purposeful sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015), selecting eight participants from four major South African retailers that collectively represent significant market share across general merchandise, grocery and technology sectors. While this represents a small sample size, it aligns with the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology, emphasising deep, interpretative analysis of participant experiences (Bartholomew et al., 2021). The selected retailers were chosen based on specific criteria: established leadership development frameworks, substantial employee bases and demonstrated commitment to leadership development initiatives. Their scale of operations and market influence made them particularly suitable for examining leadership development practices that impact the broader retail industry. Furthermore, these organisations were actively engaged in Industry 4.0–5.0 transformation initiatives, providing ideal cases for studying leadership development within the context of technological change and evolving consumer behaviours.

Primary data collection occurred in two phases. In the first phase, eight participants from four retailers completed the LDPMI, which consists of leadership-level-specific statements (24 statements for junior, 19 statements for middle and 22 statements for senior leaders, respectively). These were scored on a binary scale weighted by item criticality (Van der Westhuizen, 2020; Van der Westhuizen & Hewitt, 2021b). In the second phase, 90-min semi-structured interviews were conducted both face to face or online and recorded. The interviews aimed to explore leadership development practices, priorities and challenges, providing qualitative depth to the LDPMI data.

Human resource (HR) specialists from four major retailers participated in both phases of the study; all these HR specialists held senior positions in leadership development, training and talent management, and had between 10 years and 20 years of retail industry experience. Their strategic roles and extensive involvement in leadership development implementation made them uniquely qualified to assess maturity levels and identify competency gaps (Santos et al., 2020). Table 1 provides the participant profile details.

The data analysis followed, starting with the LDPMI; weighted scoring was given according to the criticality of each statement: two points were assigned for 'yes' responses to critical items, one point for 'no' responses to non-critical items and zero points for either responding yes to a non-critical item or no to a critical item (Van der Westhuizen & Hewitt, 2021a, 2021b). For example, one critical item was: 'Do you ensure that there is alignment between your leadership development process and the strategy of your organisation?' and a non-critical item: 'Is your leadership development process outcome-based?' Thereafter, individual scores were calculated for each management tier and then aggregated to determine organisational scores, which were combined to establish industry-wide leadership development maturity levels.

Data analysis: Semi-structured interviews

The study utilised IPA, adapting the framework developed by Smith et al. (2009, 2022), and incorporated ATLAS.ti23/24 digital analytical tools to enhance systematic data analysis. Interpretative phenomenological analysis enabled an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of HR specialists and perspectives on leadership development within their organisations (Frechette et al., 2020; Williams, 2021).

TABLE 1: Participant profile (leadership development process maturity index), $N = 8$.

Participant	Role at time of interview	Organisation	M/F	Years in the retail industry	Main retail category
1	Training and development manager	Retailer A	Male	15+	General merchandise
2	Leadership development manager	Retailer B	Male	10+	Grocery
3	Chief executor for people support HR	Retailer A	Female	14+	General merchandise
4	Talent management manager	Retailer A	Female	20+	General merchandise
5	Salespeople support manager	Retailer A	Male	10+	General merchandise
6	Senior learning manager	Retailer C	Female	15+	General merchandise
7	HR executive	Retailer D	Male	15+	Technology
8	HR officer	Retailer D	Female	20+	Technology

HR, human resource.

This data analysis process comprised of four sequential steps: Firstly, experiential statements were developed through intensive reading and annotation of interview transcripts using the ATLAS.ti23/24 commenting features, followed by initial artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted exploratory coding. Secondly, it focussed on case-level summaries, implementing multiple coding cycles, including interpretive and holistic coding, with manual verification of AI-generated codes. Thirdly, cross-case analysis was done, utilising axial coding to identify thematic relationships and develop group experimental themes (GETs), supported by the ATLAS.ti23/24 code-document and co-occurrence analysis tools. Fourthly, a linear thematic structure was created through analytical reflection, examining meaning, participant intent and experiential content documented through the ATLAS.ti23/24 concept mapping and memo features. This systematic approach enabled a comprehensive analysis of leadership development maturity while maintaining phenomenological rigour through each analytical stage.

Strategies to ensure data quality and integrity

Research quality was ensured through several verification dimensions, including credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Forero et al., 2018). Credibility was maintained through careful participant selection and consistent information sharing with the participants across all research phases. Transferability was addressed through detailed documentation of the retail industry context and research procedures (Dabengwa et al., 2020). Dependability was ensured through clear documentation of all procedures and processes, while confirmability was maintained through a comprehensive audit trail and continuous memo-keeping throughout the research process.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Johannesburg (UJ) Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management (IPPM) Research Ethics Committee (IPPM-2022-692[D]). Form A: 'Research ethics application for conducting research involving humans' was completed of the study collected data from human participants using LDPMI and semi-structured interviews.

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the retail organisations involved, and all the participants involved were provided written consent. Participation was voluntary (autonomy), and participants had the option to withdraw from the study at any time. The anonymity of the participants was ensured by using pseudonyms instead of personal and organisational names. The original names and information are protected as prescribed by the UJ ethics and information protection protocols. Data were transcribed personally using the software application Descript version 84.1.1, after which the anonymised data were uploaded to the CAQDAS software application ATLAS.ti23/24. Data are securely stored and are accessible only to the research team. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study without any negative consequences (Taquette & Borges da Matta Souza, 2022).

Results and discussions

Leadership development process maturity index

The results of the LDPMI are presented in Table 2.

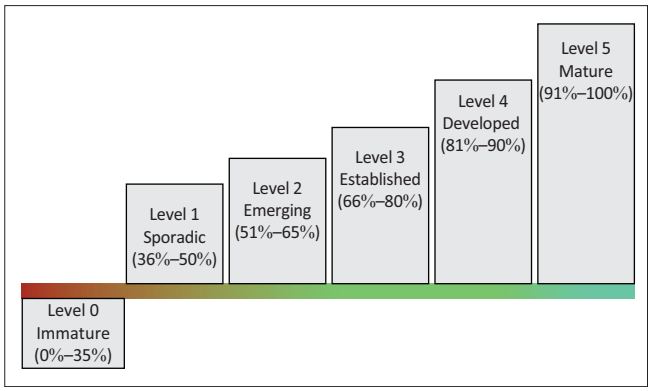
While these findings are derived from eight senior HR specialists, these participants represented organisations that collectively account for a substantial portion of South Africa's formal retail industry, offering insights into leadership development practices within the country's major retail operations. The results revealed that leadership development maturity in the South African retail industry is largely at the 'emerging' level, with an average score of 58% (Figure 1). This level indicates that while foundational leadership practices are established, there is significant room for growth, particularly in aligning leadership development processes across organisational leadership tiers. The maturity scores varied by management tier, with junior management scoring 60%, middle management 50% and senior management 62%, reflecting distinct disparities across the leadership tiers.

The junior leadership tier (60%) is reported at the second level end of the index as 'emerging'. This indicates that although foundational practices are in place, the maturity level suggests that leadership development for junior leaders remains basic and lacks the depth required for progression to more strategic roles. Given the rapid shifts in retail, developing junior management is essential to create a pipeline of adaptable leaders capable of responding to technological and consumer behaviour changes (Chen et al., 2022; Sonmez Cakir & Adiguzel, 2020). The maturity score at the junior leadership tier highlights the need for junior leaders to receive more targeted development in core

TABLE 2: Leadership development process maturity index results, $N = 8$.

Leadership tier	Overall retail industry (%)	Retailer A (%)	Retailer B (%)	Retailer C (%)	Retailer D (%)
Supervisory or junior	60	59	63	60	51
Middle	50	56	36	61	59
Senior	62	70	48	70	61
Total overall	**58**	**62**	**50**	**64**	**57**

Note: The LDPMI results in Table 2 were interpreted using the LDPMI maturity dimensions developed by Van der Westhuizen (2020), as depicted in Figure 1.
LDPMI, Leadership Development Process Maturity Index.



Source: Adapted from Van der Westhuizen, H.C. (2020). *Development and validation of a measure of organisational leadership development process maturity*. PhD thesis. University of Johannesburg (South Africa)

FIGURE 1: Maturity dimensions of the leadership development process maturity index.

competencies, such as self-leadership and adaptability, ensuring that they are well prepared to meet operational demands and transition effectively to higher roles (Majnoor & Vinayagam, 2024; Van der Westhuizen & Hewitt, 2021b).

The particularly low middle management maturity score (50%) reflects the challenges identified in the literature regarding the need for specialised skills in technological and TL (Mohamed & Otman, 2021). Middle leadership often bridges strategic objectives and operational execution, and gaps at the middle management tier can impede the effective implementation of the organisational strategy (W&RSETA, 2023). The 'sporadic' maturity classification suggests that development initiatives for middle management are either insufficiently structured or inconsistently applied. This finding is consistent with the challenges identified in earlier studies (Bienkowska & Tworek, 2020; Simon et al., 2020), which underscore the importance of developing middle management as a succession pipeline and its role in maintaining organisational stability during periods of transformation. This maturity gap at the middle management tier could signal a systemic issue, potentially impacting long-term leadership sustainability and progression, aligning with RO1 and RO4, particularly regarding the need for balanced development across leadership tiers.

Senior leadership scored the highest at 62%, suggesting that leadership development practices for this tier are the highest even though they are still regarded as at an emerging level. However, this score still falls short of the 'established' level, indicating that while senior leaders benefit from more structured development initiatives, there is potential to refine further and expand these processes. The higher investment in senior leadership development observed across organisations reflects a tendency to prioritise immediate strategic decision-makers over emerging leaders. This trend could create a misalignment in leadership capability distribution, impacting the organisation's resilience and succession planning. The industry's current emphasis on senior leadership development may be limiting its ability to cultivate a comprehensive leadership pipeline, directly addressing RO1 and RO4.

Table 2 also provides a detailed view of maturity levels across participating retailers, revealing interesting organisational trends. Retailer A, which had the most significant representation in the study, scored 70% in the senior leadership tier, the highest observed in this tier, yet demonstrated lower maturity in the junior (59%) and middle (56%) leadership tier. This uneven maturity distribution highlights a potential organisational trend in prioritising senior leadership development, likely at the expense of broader, cross-tier alignment in leadership growth.

Similarly, Retailer B scored 63% for the junior leadership tier but lagged in the middle leadership tier (36%) and senior leadership tier (48%). This disparity, especially the low score for middle leadership, may indicate organisational fragmentation in leadership development strategy, where junior leaders receive initial support but are not systematically guided through the middle leadership tier. Retailer C demonstrated the most balanced approach, with scores across junior, middle and senior tiers (60%, 61% and 70%, respectively), which suggests an organisational commitment to distributed leadership development maturity. This balance aligns more closely with a sustainable leadership pipeline, demonstrating a model that may offer strategic benefits for resilience and growth.

Retailer D also presented a relatively balanced pattern, with maturity scores of 51% for the junior leadership tier, 59% for the middle leadership tier and 61% for the senior leadership tier. Retailer D demonstrated a systematic approach to leadership development through targeted tier-specific programmes, evidenced by the sequential progression in maturity scores from junior through to senior levels. At the junior leadership level, the organisation implemented the 'One-Minute Manager' programme, focussing on essential management skills for emerging leaders. Middle managers underwent training in the principles of 'Multipliers', enhancing their ability to develop talent and drive team performance. The organisation established an executive mentoring and coaching programme at the senior level, pairing leaders with experienced mentors to enhance strategic capabilities. While these structured interventions demonstrate a thoughtful

approach to leadership development across tiers, the lower junior leadership score (51%) suggests a need to strengthen the 'One-Minute Manager' programme or supplement it with additional development initiatives to build a more robust foundation for future leadership roles.

The variations among retailers reflect differences in leadership development priorities, resource allocation and strategic focus, revealing potential best practices and areas for improvement. The imbalance observed in most organisations underscores the need for a more tier-sensitive approach to leadership development within the industry, which would support a balanced growth trajectory for all leadership tiers. This nuanced view not only addresses RO1 by evaluating maturity across leadership tiers but also highlights strategic opportunities to strengthen the industry's leadership foundation, supporting RO2 and RO4.

The average maturity scores and cross-organisational variations underscore the retail industry's need for a more cohesive and balanced approach to leadership development. The predominance of senior-tier development practices indicate that retail organisations may be heavily invested in short-term strategic capabilities, potentially overlooking the importance of cultivating a robust middle and junior management pipeline. This imbalance can impact an organisation's capacity to adapt to technological disruptions and shifting consumer expectations, as a well-prepared middle management tier is critical for operational continuity and adaptability (Liu et al., 2021; Majnoor & Vinayagam, 2024). These findings reinforce the relevance of the LDPMI in identifying tier-specific maturity gaps and informing leadership development strategies that align with evolving retail industry needs.

The LDPMI results not only confirm its applicability in identifying leadership maturity across organisational tiers in the retail industry but also highlight industry leadership development trends that indicate strategic opportunities to improve the current leadership development framework. These insights address RO3 by assessing LDPMI's retail industry applicability and provide a foundation for RO4, where practical recommendations will be proposed to enhance leadership maturity through more tier-aligned development initiatives.

Results: In-depth semi-structured interviews

Interpretative phenomenological analysis of the interviews revealed that several critical leadership competencies are required in the retail industry (Figure 2).

Five main competencies emerged from the data — Self-leadership, interpersonal skills, adaptability, innovation, resilience and the ability to lead and develop teams.

Self-leadership was the most frequently coded theme, appearing 63 times in leadership skill requirements and 29 times within leadership development priorities discussions and supports Rinawati and Sidharta's (2024) assertion that TL practices foster collaborative cultures through knowledge-sharing behaviours. Participant 8 emphasised this by stating:

> 'Self-leadership in understanding yourself and the emotional maturity to understand … it's not a personal attack. This is work. And this is what I need to do to pick myself up, be resilient and move beyond.'

This emphasis on emotional intelligence and self-awareness was further reinforced by Participant 4, who noted:

> 'I think this is where leadership starts, with personal leadership', highlighting particular challenges with young adult graduates entering the industry.'

Self-leadership forms the foundation of leadership development, encompassing the intentional process through which individuals direct and influence their actions using specific behavioural approaches, cognitive strategies and self-reinforcement techniques (Bäcklander et al., 2021; Flores, 2020).

Interpersonal skills were coded 27 times under ideal leadership skills and 24 times under development priorities, particularly for leading diverse teams and maintaining customer relationships. Participant 7 highlighted a concerning trend: *The younger generation of today is battling with basic interactions, interaction skills, to be honest*. He further explained this challenge in the context of technological advancement: *The rise of the internet, social media, all of that has not equipped them well to deal with an individual on a one-to-one personalised basis as a retail leader.*

Adaptability featured prominently in the analysis, coded 44 times within desired leadership capabilities and 16 times among development priorities. Transformational leadership theory supports the critical need for developing adaptability in future retail leaders, highlighting how this capability enables them to effectively navigate change and foster the resilient, innovative mindset essential for thriving amid heightened volatility and transformation (Majnoor & Vinayagam, 2024; Putra et al., 2020). Participant 5 provided context and explained:

> 'I believe that with leadership, we've seen over the past 3 years, Retailer A has gone through some of the worst crises that could affect them … we've had the looting, COVID, as

FIGURE 2: Human resource leadership skills and development priorities.

> well as the flooding last year, and each one of these crises had a detrimental effect on the business, and the reason why we are standing strong today, it's because of leadership capabilities.'

Aligning with adaptability, *Innovation* and *resilience* were also identified as essential competencies, each appearing 22 times in leadership skills discussions. In contrast, resilience was coded 8 times in development priorities and innovation 10 times. Participant 7 articulated the connection between these skills:

> 'The ability to innovate. If you can't innovate, you're really going to struggle … And then the ability to adapt and pivot quickly. So that can be very tiring. So, resilience, you need to have high levels of resilience'.

Resilience stands as a critical leadership competency for its dual impact: enabling leaders to navigate organisational disruptions while modelling adaptive behaviours, which is essential for maintaining performance and employee morale during crises (Antonakis, 2021; Wibowo & Paramita, 2022).

The emphasis on *leading and developing teams*, coded 37 times across leadership skills and development priorities, aligns with servant leadership theory, which focusses on leaders nurturing follower potential through service-oriented approaches (Vlok et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2021). Participant 1 provided a comprehensive overview of the required skills:

> 'Yeah, the topics would be self-awareness, EQ, managing teams, leading teams, actually building teams, call it that. How to conduct difficult conversations, how to coach as a leader, how to develop your team members, how to take decisions based on the right kind of stuff.'

These findings highlight the interconnected nature of leadership competencies in the retail industry, where self-leadership forms the foundation for developing other crucial skills such as adaptability, innovation and team leadership. The emphasis on these competencies reflects the industry's evolving needs as it navigates technological transformation and changing consumer behaviours.

Integrating LDPMI results with transformational leadership competencies

The emerged leadership competencies aligned closely with the TL theory's core components, providing a valuable context for understanding the LDPMI maturity scores. Self-leadership, identified as foundational competency, reflects the idealised influence dimension of TL (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978), particularly resonating with the lower maturity scores at the middle leadership tier (50%). This suggests that while organisations recognise the importance of self-leadership for transformational capabilities, current development programmes may not effectively cultivate this competency across all leadership tiers (Goldsby et al., 2021; Harari et al., 2021).

The emphasis on adaptability and innovation capabilities demonstrates the intellectual stimulation component of TL, reflecting the industry's response to recent disruptions and technological transformation (Ohlsson et al., 2020; Siangchokyoo et al., 2020). Participant 5's reference to multiple crises highlights how these transformational competencies directly impact organisational resilience. This finding adds depth to understanding the higher LDPMI scores at the senior leadership tier (62%), where TL practices and strategic adaptation are more developed (Putra et al., 2020). However, the lower middle leadership scores suggest a potential gap in developing these critical capabilities at intermediate leadership tiers.

The identified challenges with interpersonal skills, particularly among younger leaders, reflect gaps in individualised consideration, a key TL component (DeSilva, 2021). Participant 7's observation about technological impacts on interpersonal capabilities suggests that development programmes must address this TL gap. This aligns with the varying LDPMI scores across retailers, where organisations such as Retailer C, showing more balanced development across tiers (60%, 61%, 70%), may have more effective approaches to developing these essential TL competencies.

Team leadership capabilities, emphasising inspirational motivation through self-awareness and decision-making, support the LDPMI's holistic approach to assessing leadership maturity (Rinawati & Sidharta, 2024). The emphasis on transformational team development particularly resonates with the operational requirements of the retail industry, where effective TL directly impacts knowledge-sharing behaviours and organisational performance (Santoso et al., 2022).

The interconnection between these TL competencies suggests that effective leadership development requires an integrated approach (Majnoor & Vinayagam, 2024). The current 'emerging' maturity status (58%) across the industry indicates that while organisations recognise these critical TL components, there is a significant opportunity to develop more structured approaches to cultivating these skills across all leadership tiers. This is particularly crucial as the industry navigates technological transformation and evolving consumer expectations.

These findings highlight how traditional retail leadership capabilities must be complemented by enhanced TL competencies in adaptability, innovation and digital literacy (Ohlsson et al., 2020; Pandia & Meilani, 2024). This alignment between identified competencies and TL theory provides a clear direction for enhancing leadership development programmes while addressing the maturity gaps identified through the LDPMI assessment.

Practical implications

The findings significantly impact leadership development in the South African retail digital transformation journey. The identified maturity gap at the middle leadership tier (50%) compared to the senior (62%) and junior (60%) tiers reveals a

critical need to strengthen TL capabilities at this crucial organisational level. The middle leadership tier requires targeted development in two key areas: intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration. The focus should be on key TL dimensions that enable effective change management and team development. The model demonstrated by Retailer C, with its more evenly distributed maturity scores (60%, 61%, 70%), provides a compelling argument for implementing TL development across organisational tiers.

Three of the five critical competencies identified align with the core TL dimensions: self-leadership (idealised influence), adaptability (intellectual stimulation) and interpersonal skills (individualised consideration) (Bakhshandeh, 2021; Kontostavlou & Drigas, 2021). Self-leadership, emphasised by participants as crucial for emotional maturity and professional perspective, forms the foundation of TL development. This aligns with the industry's increasing need for leaders who can model adaptive behaviours and inspire others in digitally transformed environments. Adaptability, particularly concerning market unpredictability and technological change, requires focussed development through experiential learning that enhances leaders' capacity for intellectual stimulation and innovative problem solving. The identified gap in interpersonal skills, especially among younger leaders, necessitates structured programmes addressing individualised consideration in team management and inspirational motivation in customer relationships.

The overall 'emerging' maturity status (58%) across the retail industry indicates the need for a more systematic approach to embedding TL principles. Organisations must transition from ad-hoc interventions to structured, measurable development processes that cultivate transformational capabilities at all levels. This transformation requires regular LDPMI assessments to track progress in developing TL competencies and inform programme adjustments. The varying maturity scores across participating retailers suggest that while industry-wide challenges exist, development strategies must be tailored to address organisation-specific gaps while incorporating TL best practices from high-performing areas.

These implications are significant in the context of Industry 4.0–5.0 transformation as TL becomes crucial for driving technological adoption and organisational change. Leadership development programmes must integrate digital literacy and technological adaptation capabilities alongside traditional TL competencies. The emphasis on adaptability and self-leadership directly supports organisations' need for transformational leaders who can navigate technological change while maintaining effective team dynamics in increasingly digital environments. Furthermore, the development of interpersonal skills must now encompass traditional and virtual interaction capabilities, reflecting the evolving operational landscape of the retail industry and the need for leaders who can inspire and motivate across multiple channels.

Conclusion

This research makes contributions to understanding leadership development maturity in the South African retail industry through the lens of TL theory. The application of LDPMI revealed maturity scores of 60%, 50% and 62% across junior, middle and senior leadership tiers, respectively (RO1), with critical capability gaps identified particularly at the middle management level amid Industry 4.0–5.0 transformation (RO2). The LDPMI effectively captured retail-specific leadership requirements (RO3) while highlighting the need for balanced development across organisational tiers.

The research identified self-leadership, adaptability and interpersonal skills as vital competencies aligned with TL theory, providing direction for development programmes (RO4). This alignment between TL competencies and LDPMI assessment offers theoretical and practical value. Theoretically, it demonstrates the effectiveness of combining maturity assessments with qualitative insights in retail contexts. Practically, it provides organisations with a structured approach to evaluate and enhance leadership development across all tiers, which is crucial as the retail industry navigates technological transformation.

Future research opportunities include longitudinal studies examining how enhanced leadership development maturity impacts organisational performance, investigating specific interventions' effectiveness in improving maturity scores and transformational capabilities and comparative analyses across retail sub-industries. While this study provided valuable insights, limitations include the small sample size of eight HR specialists and its focus on large retailers, potentially missing perspectives from smaller retail operations. Research exploring the relationship between leadership development maturity and organisational adaptation to technological change could provide valuable insights into the industry's ongoing transformation. As the retail industry evolves, developing mature leadership processes will be crucial for navigating future challenges and capitalising on emerging opportunities.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

M.F. conducted the literature review, data collection and analysis, and led the manuscript writing. L.M.H. supervised the research, guided conceptualisation and interpretation and contributed to manuscript revision.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, M.F., upon reasonable request.

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