From accidental careers to perspective transformation: Leadership development and professional identity in retail

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ABSTRACT

The retail sector continues to face difficulties in attracting and retaining employees, as retail is often not a career of choice but is seen instead as a temporary or fallback opportunity. Leadership programmes are one initiative that Retailers have invested in. Still, limited research has explored how retail professionals understand the relationship between their leadership development experiences, perceptions of retail, professional identity, and career commitment. Drawing on social cognitive career theory, transformative learning theory, and the professional identity development literature, this study explores how graduates of a leadership development programme understand their evolving perceptions of retail as a profession, professional identities, and commitment to retail careers. The study adopted an interpretivist analytical stance and an abductive qualitative research approach. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 19 participants who had completed the Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority (W&R SETA) International Leadership Development Programme (ILDP), and the data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Five interconnected themes emerged, revealing how participants associated their ILDP experiences with broader professional perspectives, evolving professional identities, and expressed commitment to retail as a long-term career. Participants also described professional identity as a developing process that involves continued learning and reflection, while an additional theme emerged - professional stewardship, which reflected their emphasis on mentoring, knowledge sharing, and contributing to the development of others and the retail profession. The study proposes an interpretive model that connects career experiences, perspective transformation, professional identity reconstruction, career commitment, and professional stewardship, in turn offering a contextually grounded contribution to understanding how experienced retail professionals make sense of leadership development and their continuing attachment and commitment to the sector.

Keywords: leadership development; professional identity; retail careers; career commitment; transformative learning; perspective transformation; professionalisation; qualitative research.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Retail is an important contributor to modern economies, serving as the interface between producers and consumers. The sector connects manufacturers with consumers, stimulates supply chains, and supports logistics (OECD 2020), all while making a substantial contribution to economic output and employment (ILO 2023). The sector accounts for almost 5% of GDP and employs about one in twelve workers in the OECD countries; among these workers, a majority are female, young, and/or first-time entrants into the job market (OECD 2020). Despite its considerable economic contribution, retail continues to experience labour shortages and persistent problems in attracting, developing, and retaining highly skilled employees (Deloitte 2024).

Several studies note that retail is viewed as a fallback or last-resort employment option rather than as a viable career path (Bhoola 2008; Heidig et al. 2017; Mokhlis 2014). Characteristics often associated with retail careers include low income levels, unstable or casual contracts, low salaries, a lack of prestige, poor work-life balance, and limited career progression, which contribute to a negative image of the sector and to high turnover (Bhoola 2008; Broadbridge 2003; Oh et al. 2016; Mokhlis 2014). These poor perceptions further reduce the likelihood of people entering retail careers, leading to their viewing it as a temporary occupation rather than as a profession of choice (Backman, Nilsson and Öner, 2025; Broadbridge et al. 2007; Høyen, 2026; Hurst and Good 2009).

Retail is also undergoing rapid change in response to global trends such as digitalisation, artificial intelligence, sustainability imperatives, changing consumer expectations, and increasingly complex supply chains (OECD 2026). These changes require additional and unique skill sets in retail – especially as the demand for higher-order cognitive, technological, and leadership skills has increased (OECD 2026). The sector therefore not only faces the challenge of attracting and retaining skilled employees, but is also further challenged by the need to source and develop unique skill sets. Constant upskilling, leadership development, and lifelong learning have become strategic priorities to ensure organisational resilience, innovation, and long-term competitiveness in the retail sector (ILO 2023; OECD 2026).

Contemporary workforce development literature suggests that significant attention has been devoted to the development of technical and digital competencies (ILO 2023; OECD 2026; WEF 2025), and recent empirical research has also examined retail career trajectories and industry loyalty (Backman et al., 2025; Weidinger et al., 2026), while studies of leadership development and professional identity have highlighted the importance of learning experiences and ongoing identity reconstruction (Obling, 2023; Hughes and Vaccaro, 2024). However, comparatively less attention has been given to how experienced retail professionals understand the relationships between leadership development, their evolving perceptions of retail, professional identity, and long-term career commitment. Addressing this gap, the present study integrates social cognitive career theory, transformative learning theory, and professional identity development literature to explore these relationships within the context of a South African retail leadership development programme.

This study specifically aims to explore how graduates of a retail leadership development programme understand the relationships between their programme experiences, evolving perceptions of retail as a profession, professional identity, and career commitment.

To achieve this aim, the study addresses the following research questions:

- How do retail employees describe the evolution of their perceptions of retail as a profession?
- How do graduates of a leadership development programme understand the relationship between their programme experiences and professional identity development in the retail sector?
- How do participants describe the relationship between their evolving professional identities and commitment to retail as a long-term career?

Jointly, these questions seek to provide a deeper understanding of how retail professionals interpret their career experiences, evolving perceptions of retail, professional identities, and long-term career intentions in relation to their leadership development experiences.

The remainder of the paper presents the theoretical background that underpins the study; this is followed by the conceptual framework that guided the analysis. Thereafter, the methodology is discussed before presenting the findings, an emerging model of retail professional identity development, and the discussion of the study's theoretical and practical contributions.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Two complementary theories underpin this study, namely social cognitive career theory (SCCT), transformative learning theory, and the literature on professional identity development. Combined, these provide a coherent framework for understanding participants' career journeys from entry into the retail sector to the development of a professional identity.

2.1 SOCIAL COGNITIVE CAREER THEORY

Derived primarily from Bandura's 1986 general social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), which emphasises the role of self-referent thinking in guiding human motivation and behaviour, Lent et al. (1994) developed a social cognitive framework for understanding three interlinked aspects of career development: the formation of career-relevant interests; the selection of academic and career choice options; and performance and persistence in educational and occupational pursuits. The framework emphasises how individuals exercise personal agency in the career development process and how extra-personal factors either enhance or constrain this personal agency. The theory further proposes that career-related decisions are shaped by an interaction between self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals, while recognising the role played by contextual supports and barriers.

Self-efficacy can be explained as an individual's belief in their capability to perform career-related tasks successfully. Outcome expectations, on the other hand, represent beliefs about the likely consequences of pursuing particular career paths, and goal setting refers to people's capacity symbolically to represent desired future outcomes. These three cognitive factors are influenced by prior learning experiences, personal characteristics, and environmental conditions, which ultimately shape career interests, choices, and persistence (Lent et al. 1994). Importantly, SCCT also recognises that career decisions are not solely based on personal preferences or abilities, but are also influenced by contextual opportunities and constraints. Factors such as socioeconomic circumstances, labour market conditions, family expectations, educational opportunities, and organisational environments may either facilitate or restrict career choices. Individuals may therefore enter occupations not because they represent an initial career aspiration, but because they are perceived as realistic or accessible opportunities in their circumstances (Lent et al. 2002). This highlights the

importance of examining career development within specific occupational contexts, where the circumstances surrounding initial employment may differ from individuals' longer-term career intentions.

Contextual influences on career choice are particularly evident in retail, where it is often the case that employment represents both an accessible entry point into the labour market and a potential long-term career pathway. Backman et al. (2025) found that retail and wholesale employees followed diverse career trajectories, with some remaining in the sector for extended periods, while others used their initial employment as a pathway to further education or employment in other industries. Despite the availability of long-term career opportunities, retail continues to face challenges regarding its attractiveness as a career. Backman et al. (2025) highlight how perceptions of relatively low occupational prestige, inconvenient working hours, lower remuneration and limited advancement opportunities contribute to the sector's less favourable image compared with other industries.

Furthermore, Backman et al. (2025) identified limited opportunities for skills development as an important factor contributing to employee turnover in retail and wholesale. This finding suggests that career trajectories are shaped not only by the circumstances surrounding initial employment but also by the developmental opportunities available to employees as their careers progress. Similarly, Høyen (2026) found that decisions to enter and remain in retail were shaped by individuals' social backgrounds and the relationship between their personal dispositions and workplace environments. The study explains how retail employment may develop into a sustained career commitment despite the relatively low occupational prestige associated with the sector.

Although SCCT provides a valuable framework for understanding career entry, career choices, and the influence of personal and contextual factors on career development, it also recognises that career-related beliefs, expectations, and goals may evolve through learning and experience (Lent et al., 1994, 2002). However, while SCCT helps explain changes in career-related beliefs and behaviours, transformative learning theory offers a more focused perspective on how individuals critically examine and fundamentally reconstruct their underlying assumptions and frames of reference. Transformative learning theory, together with the literature on professional identity development, therefore, complements SCCT by providing a framework for understanding how leadership development experiences may facilitate perspective transformation and contribute to the ongoing reconstruction of professional identity and career commitment within the retail sector.

2.2 TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY

Developed by Mezirow (1978, 1991), transformative learning theory explains how adults fundamentally change their perspective through critical reflection and meaningful learning experiences. The theory proposes that learning extends beyond the acquisition of knowledge or skills, but involves questioning previously held assumptions, beliefs and values, leading to a transformation in an individual’s frame of reference. Mezirow (1991) argues that transformative learning is often initiated by experiences that challenge existing ways of thinking, prompting individuals to examine their assumptions critically, to consider alternative perspectives, and ultimately to reconstruct how they understand themselves and their environments.

A central argument in the theory is that critical reflection enables individuals to reinterpret past experiences and to develop new ways of thinking, and that this influences future behaviour and decision-making. This perspective transformation then encompasses both cognitive and affective change, resulting in shifts in attitudes, self-concept, and professional practice (Mezirow 2000). In a study by Giraldo-García and Orozco (2023) on newly appointed school principals, it was found that participation in a leadership development programme was associated with changes in perceived leadership self-efficacy and critical reflection on participants' emerging leadership roles. Correspondingly,

Hughes and Vaccaro (2024), in a longitudinal qualitative study of young professionals participating in leadership coaching, established how reflective dialogue, questioning and challenging existing assumptions contributed to changes in participants' understanding of themselves as leaders. Their findings suggest that leadership development can extend beyond the acquisition of competencies to involve changes in how individuals interpret their experiences and construct their leadership identities.

In the context of the current study, transformative learning theory, therefore, provides an appropriate lens for understanding how participation in a leadership programme may have challenged participants' existing perceptions of retail and led to new ways of viewing the sector. Drawing on this theoretical perspective and the empirical evidence of Giraldo-García and Orozco (2023) and Hughes and Vaccaro (2024), the present study considers how exposure to new knowledge, interaction with peers, and opportunities for critical reflection within a leadership development programme may encourage participants to reconsider previously held assumptions about retail. Such experiences may contribute not only to the development of leadership knowledge, skills and confidence, but also to changes in how participants understand their professional capabilities and the retail sector as a potential long-term career.

Transformative learning theory provides a valuable explanation of how individuals critically examine and reconstruct their existing assumptions and frames of reference, but it does not fully explain how these changes become integrated into their professional self-concept or influence their longer-term career commitment. Professional identity development therefore provides a complementary perspective for understanding how transformed perceptions may become incorporated into individuals' sense of professional belonging, identification and commitment to retail as a career.

2.3 PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AND CAREER COMMITMENT

The concept of professional identity has evolved from several disciplines (psychology, education, sociology, and professional studies). It specifically refers to how individuals understand themselves in relation to their profession, and it consists of their values, beliefs, competencies, and sense of belonging in a professional community (Wenger 1998). Professional Identity is also viewed as a dynamic and continually evolving construct that ultimately develops through learning, workplace experiences, social interaction, and critical reflection (Ibarra 1999; Pratt et al. 2006). Recent research reinforces the view that professional identity is not a fixed attribute but that it is continually constructed and reconstructed through individuals' engagement with professional experiences and expectations. In a study by Reissner and Armitage-Chan (2024), four manifestations of professional identity work were identified: Becoming, aligning, exploring and struggling, illustrating the different ways individuals negotiate and develop their professional self-understanding. Similarly, Obling (2023), in a qualitative study of a professional education programme for military career officers, demonstrated how professional identity reconstruction is shaped by the interaction between developmental experiences, changing role expectations and organisational conditions. The findings highlight that professional identity development is not necessarily a straightforward or uniformly positive process, as organisational expectations may also create tensions in how individuals understand and enact their professional roles. As individuals develop, they gradually construct an evolving understanding of themselves as competent professionals, and this influences both how they perform their roles and how they perceive their future in the profession.

Professional identity and career commitment are related but also conceptually distinct. While professional identity concerns how individuals understand and identify themselves as members of a professional community, career commitment refers to their psychological attachment to a chosen occupation or career path and their willingness to continue pursuing it. A strong professional identity may contribute to career commitment, although career decisions are also influenced by employment conditions, developmental opportunities and changing personal circumstances.

Recent retail-specific research highlights the importance of distinguishing commitment to an individual employer from commitment to the broader retail sector. Weidinger et al. (2026), in a survey of 1,006 frontline retail employees, found that salary and growth opportunities were particularly influential in explaining employees' intentions to remain within the retail industry and their industry-level loyalty. Their findings suggest that longer-term attachment to retail is shaped by opportunities and employment conditions beyond an individual's identification with a particular organisation. People who identify strongly with their profession are more likely to demonstrate higher levels of engagement, motivation, and dedication (Wenger 1998; Pratt et al. 2006). Within the present study, career commitment is understood as participants' developing attachment to retail as a long-term career, reflected in their expressed intentions to remain in the sector and continue their professional development. Professional identity development is considered a potential contributor to this commitment, rather than its sole determinant. In this study, professional identity development is applied to understand how participation in a leadership programme may have shaped participants' identification with the retail profession and influenced their commitment to pursuing long-term careers in the sector.

Existing research demonstrates that professional identity is continuously negotiated through learning, workplace experiences and changing professional expectations (Obling, 2023; Reissner and Armitage-Chan, 2024). Retail-specific research further highlights the importance of career development opportunities and employment conditions in shaping employees' longer-term attachment to the sector (Backman et al., 2025; Weidinger et al., 2026). However, these studies do not directly explain how participation in leadership development programmes may contribute to changes in employees' perceptions of retail as a profession, how such changes become integrated into their professional identities, or how these processes relate to career commitment. Examining these relationships together provides the rationale for the present study and its integrated conceptual framework.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The two identified theories – social cognitive career theory, transformative learning theory, and the literature of professional identity development provide complementary explanations for understanding participants' career journeys. Individually, each explains a particular aspect of employees' career journeys, but collectively they suggest a broader developmental process through which leadership development may influence how employees perceive retail as a profession.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework for the study, illustrating the theoretical relationships that inform the analysis and serving as a guide for interpretation of the findings.

The framework begins with employees' entry into the retail sector and prompts them on the perceptions they hold of retail as a career. Applying the lens of SCCT, these perceptions are arguably shaped by individual beliefs, previous experiences, outcome expectations, and contextual opportunities or constraints. Participants then enter a structured leadership development programme, which represents the catalyst for change within the framework. Being exposed to formal learning, new ideas, interacting with peers, and engaging in practical leadership experiences provides participants with opportunities to broaden their understanding of the retail sector and to reflect on their personal leadership potential. The programme creates opportunities for transformative learning, whereby participants critically reflect on previously held assumptions and develop new perspectives on retail, leadership, and their professional abilities. Participants not only acquire new knowledge: they also start to reinterpret their experiences and to reconsider

the role of retail as a meaningful and rewarding profession. As their perspective evolves, they develop a stronger professional identity, characterised by increased confidence, pride, self-belief, and a greater sense of belonging in the profession.

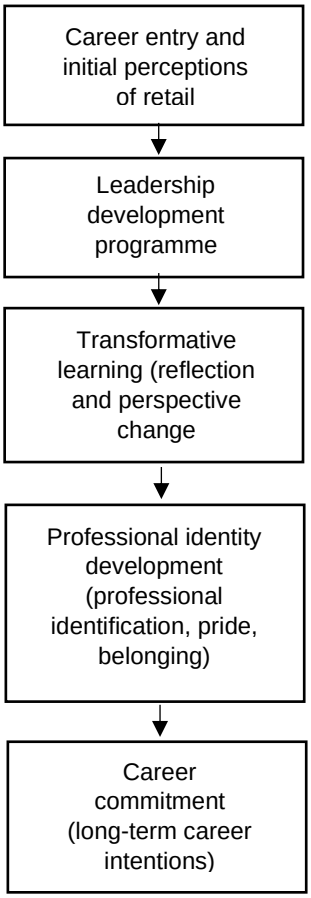

FIGURE 1: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

4. METHODS

4.1 RESEARCH PARADIGM, APPROACH, AND STRATEGY

This study is rooted in an interpretive research paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and that individual meaning is developed through participants' lived experiences (Creswell and Poth 2016). The study adopted a qualitative research approach, which is particularly well suited for exploring participants' experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making processes in depth. The study further used an abductive research approach, recognising that understanding participants' experiences required an iterative dialogue between existing theory and empirical evidence (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). This allowed SCCT, transformative learning theory, and the literature on professional identity development to inform the initial conceptual framework while remaining open to unexpected insights emerging from the interview data; it also allowed existing theoretical understandings to be refined and extended in the light of participants' lived experiences.

4.2 CONTEXT

This study used a case study design centred on the International Leadership Development Programme (ILDP). This is a leadership development initiative implemented by the Wholesale and Retail (W&R) Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) for managers in the wholesale and retail sector in South Africa. The specific programme is a Postgraduate Diploma in Management Practice. It was established in 2009 to develop high-potential senior managers by exposing them to leading retail and leadership practices through a combination of academic learning, action learning

projects, an international immersion experience, and engagement with global industry experts. The programme is delivered in partnership with accredited higher education institutions (e.g. the University of Pretoria, the University of Cape Town) and is offered over a period of one year (W&R SETA 2026).

The ILDP offers an appropriate context for this study, as its design extends beyond conventional management training to emphasise critical reflection, experiential learning, peer engagements, and exposure to international retail practices. These components align well with the theoretical perspective that underpins the research – in particular, transformative learning theory and professional identity development, which suggest that meaningful learning experiences can reshape professionals' perceptions of their profession, strengthen their professional identity, and influence their long-term career commitment.

4.3 PARTICIPANTS, SAMPLING, AND DATA COLLECTION

Participants were recruited from the W&R SETA database of alumni who had enrolled in the ILDP programme in the previous ten years – that is, between 2016 and 2025. Ethical clearance was obtained for the study and permission to recruit participants was granted by the W&R SETA. All participants provided informed consent and participated voluntarily, with confidentiality and anonymity obtained.

The database of 323 ILDP alumni who participated in the programme between 2016 and 2025 served as the sampling frame. A purposive, maximum-variation sampling strategy, supported by quota-guided recruitment, was adopted in order to capture diverse perspectives across educational institutions, gender, provinces and urban–rural workplace contexts. A target sample of 36 graduates was initially established to facilitate representation across these characteristics. A dedicated research assistant coordinated recruitment by identifying and contacting prospective participants according to the sampling criteria, primarily through email, supplemented by telephone calls and WhatsApp communication. Eligibility was based on successful completion of the ILDP, irrespective of whether graduates had subsequently remained employed in the retail sector. Despite these recruitment efforts, the final realised sample comprised 19 alumni who agreed to participate in an interview. The sample was therefore smaller than originally intended and did not fully achieve the planned quotas.

Although continued employment in retail was not an eligibility criterion, participants' interview accounts indicated that all 19 remained employed in the sector at the time of the study. Consequently, the sample does not capture the experiences of ILDP alumni who had subsequently left retail. The voluntary nature of participation also introduces the possibility of self-selection bias, as graduates with particularly positive experiences of the programme or stronger professional attachment to retail may have been more inclined to participate. These characteristics should be considered when interpreting findings concerning professional identity and long-term career commitment, as the accounts may disproportionately reflect graduates who have remained engaged with the sector.

Although recruitment was guided by maximum-variation principles, the realised sample did not fully achieve the intended institutional and geographic representation. Furthermore, participation was voluntary, introducing the possibility of self-selection bias, as alumni with stronger views or more positive experiences of the programme may have been more inclined to participate. The findings may also be affected by survivor bias if graduates who remained active in the retail sector were more accessible or willing to participate than those who had subsequently left. These limitations are particularly relevant to the interpretation of participants' accounts of professional identity and long-term career commitment.

The final sample comprised 19 retail professionals representing a range of organisations, leadership positions, and levels of managerial experience in the South African wholesale and retail sector. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted online, as the participants were located all over South Africa. They were prompted to answer questions about how they entered the retail field, what their initial perceptions were of the field, and whether they believed that the programme had changed how they view their identity as retail professionals. The interviews lasted between 50 and 70 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Teams. Table 1 outlines the participants' details.

TABLE 1: PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Participant #	Age	Gender	Functional area / Role	Province	Year (completed)	Institution
Participant 15	40	Female	Legal	Western Cape	2025	UCT
Participant 9	49	Male	Inventory Management	Gauteng	2025	UCT
Participant 6	43	Female	Operations	Gauteng	2025	UCT
Participant 12	33	Female	Human Resources	Gauteng	2025	UCT
Participant 7	42	Female	Executive	Gauteng	2025	UCT
Participant 10	44	Female	Human Resources	Gauteng	2024	GIBS
Participant 18	47	Male	Manager	Gauteng	2020	Regenesys
Participant 5	37	Female	Sales	Gauteng	2025	UCT
Participant 1	53	Male	Human Resources	Western Cape	2024	GIBS
Participant 2	52	Male	Director	KwaZulu Natal	2025	GIBS
Participant 16	46	Female	Manager	Gauteng	2020	Regenesys
Participant 13	36	Female	Human Resources	Western Cape	2025	UCT
Participant 19	61	Male	Director	Gauteng	2022	Regenesys
Participant 8	48	Female	Finance	Gauteng	2019	Regenesys
Participant 3	39	Male	Warehousing	Gauteng	2022	GIBS
Participant 11	47	Female	Merchandising	Western Cape	2020	Regenesys
Participant 17	46	Female	Human Resources	KwaZulu Natal	2023	GIBS
Participant 4	36	Female	Manager	Gauteng	2025	GIBS
Participant 14	43	Female	Operations	Western Cape	2025	UCT

The majority of the sample were enrolled at the University of Cape Town (UCT), while six completed their studies at The Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) and five at Regenesys. The majority worked in the Gauteng province of South Africa, followed by the Western Cape and then KwaZulu-Natal, and the majority of the participants were female and in their 40s.

4.4 DATA ANALYSIS

To become thoroughly familiar with the data, the researcher read the interview transcripts repeatedly, documenting initial reflections and emerging ideas before beginning the coding process. The interview data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2019), adopting an abductive analytical approach. This method provides a flexible yet rigorous method for identifying, interpreting, and constructing patterns of meaning in qualitative

data while recognising the active role of the researcher in the analytical process. Consistent with an abductive approach, the analysis involved an iterative movement between participants' accounts and the three theoretical lenses. This enabled theory to inform interpretation while remaining open to new concepts and relationships emerging inductively from the data.

The analysis was conducted manually, working directly with the interview transcripts. Initial coding involved identifying meaningful segments of participants' accounts relating to their career entry, perceptions of retail, leadership development experiences, professional identity and career commitment. Codes were developed through close engagement with the data, while the theoretical perspectives underpinning the study provided informing concepts rather than predetermined coding categories. Related codes were subsequently examined for broader patterns of meaning, from which candidate themes were developed. These themes were reviewed and refined through repeated engagement with the transcripts, considering both their internal coherence and their relevance to the research questions.

Researcher reflexivity was supported through the documentation of emerging ideas and interpretations during the analytical process. As the researcher manually coded the transcripts, notes were kept capturing developing insights, possible relationships between participants' experiences and the theoretical perspectives informing the study. These notes supported an iterative process of reflection and theme development, enabling the researcher to consider how initial interpretations evolved through continued engagement with the interview data. This approach recognised the researcher's active role in constructing themes rather than treating them as objectively emerging from the data.

Throughout the analysis, participants' accounts were compared, as this allowed the researcher to identify similarities, differences and variations in their experiences. This comparative process was used as an analytical practice within reflexive thematic analysis rather than as a formal grounded theory procedure. Aligning with the abductive approach, the researcher moved iteratively between the interview data, emerging thematic interpretations and the existing theoretical framework, allowing the analysis to develop beyond the initially anticipated concepts. In particular, professional stewardship was identified as an additional dimension of participants' experiences that extended the initial conceptual framework.

The analysis also considered the consistency and variation in participants' accounts. Although participants expressed overwhelmingly positive perceptions of the ILDP, attention was given to how they described its influence on their career perceptions, professional identity and longer-term commitment to retail. No accounts directly contradicting the predominantly positive evaluation of the programme were identified. This consistency was interpreted within the context of the voluntary sample, recognising that participants' positive experiences may also reflect self-selection and the fact that all interviewees remained employed in the retail sector.

Given the interpretive nature of the analysis, attention was paid to the researcher's role in constructing meaning from participants' accounts. Emerging interpretations were reconsidered in relation to the original transcripts and the theoretical assumptions informing the study. Attention was given to accounts that differed from the developing thematic patterns, including variations in participants' initial career intentions, experiences of leadership development and expressions of career commitment. These differences were considered when refining the themes to avoid presenting participants' experiences as uniform or attributing all changes in professional identity solely to the leadership development programme.

4.5 ENSURING RESEARCH QUALITY

The study adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was supported through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which provided participants with opportunities to describe their experiences and perceptions in detail. Repeated engagement with the transcripts and comparisons across participants' accounts enabled the researcher to examine recurring patterns and variations in their experiences. The inclusion of participants from different organisational functions, leadership positions and programme cohorts provided a range of perspectives on the ILDP. Verbatim quotations were incorporated into the presentation of findings to illustrate the relationship between participants' accounts and the researcher's interpretations.

Transferability was supported by providing a detailed description of the research context, the ILDP, participants' characteristics, recruitment procedures and analytical approach, enabling readers to assess the relevance of the findings to other contexts. Dependability was addressed through a transparent account of the research procedures, including participant recruitment, interview administration, manual coding and theme development. Confirmability was supported through repeated engagement with the interview transcripts and the documentation of emerging analytical ideas and interpretations. These reflective notes enabled the researcher to reconsider developing interpretations in relation to participants' accounts and the theoretical perspectives informing the study. Consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, the researcher was recognised as an active participant in the construction of meaning rather than as a neutral observer whose influence could be entirely eliminated.

The adequacy of the realised sample was considered in relation to the focused research objectives, the relevance of participants' experiences and the depth of the interview accounts. Although the initial recruitment target was 36 graduates, 19 interviews were ultimately completed. These interviews provided detailed accounts from participants across different organisational functions, leadership positions and programme cohorts, supporting an in-depth, contextually situated interpretation of their experiences. Rather than claiming theoretical saturation, the analysis emphasised the richness and analytical relevance of the data, recognising that additional interviews could have generated further perspectives. The findings are therefore presented as interpretations of the participating graduates' experiences rather than as an exhaustive account of all ILDP alumni.

Participants' predominantly positive accounts of the ILDP informed the interpretation of the findings but were not treated as independent evidence of the programme's effectiveness or influence on career commitment. Voluntary participation and all interviewees' continued employment in retail may have contributed to these favourable accounts. These factors were considered when interpreting the findings and are acknowledged as study limitations.

5. RESULTS

Five interconnected themes were constructed through the analysis of participants' retrospective accounts. Each theme is presented with reference to the theoretical perspectives informing the study, alongside additional insights developed through engagement with the interview data. Although the research questions guided the enquiry, participants' accounts suggested relationships between their initial perceptions of retail, experiences of leadership development, professional identity, career commitment and professional stewardship. These relationships are interpreted as interconnected dimensions of participants' experiences rather than as a fixed developmental sequence or evidence of causal effects. The themes collectively address the three research questions and inform the interpretive model presented in Figure 2.

THEME 1: ENTERING RETAIL: FROM CIRCUMSTANCE TO OPPORTUNITY

This theme primarily addresses the first research question by illustrating how participants initially entered retail and how their early perceptions of the sector were shaped by circumstance rather than deliberate career choice.

Deductive findings: SCCT argues that people's career choices are influenced not only by individual interests and self-efficacy but also by contextual opportunities and constraints. The majority of the participants reported that they did not actively aspire to retail careers, but entered the industry for reasons ranging from financial necessity to referrals, graduate programmes, or unexpected vacancies. Initial career decisions were therefore strongly shaped by contextual circumstances rather than intrinsic career intentions.

> *"Okay, so to be brutally honest, I'm working here for 31 years. And, you know, at the time when I got the job, it was just like the importance of survival and getting a job. So it wasn't a choice, it was more employment." (P14)*

> *"So you can say retail chose me rather than I chose retail" (P14)*

> *"Okay. So I think retail, I don't think anyone really looks for retail. I think retail finds them. It starts earlier on in my career. So I used to work part time and study part time. And I used to work in retail." (P13)*

> *"Okay, to be quite honest for me, it wasn't planned because I went to... Technical College, I did my N1 to N6...Then I ended up with Retail" (P9)*

Inductive findings: Beyond identifying the contextual influences on career entry, participants' accounts revealed a recurring narrative of retail as an occupation they had encountered through circumstance rather than deliberate career planning. Several participants described retail as having effectively "found" them. This shared expression illustrates how participants retrospectively made sense of their initial entry into the sector, while their later career experiences contributed to changing perceptions of retail as a professional opportunity.

THEME 2: EXPANDING PERSPECTIVES THROUGH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Addressing the first and second research questions, this theme explains how participation in the leadership development programme fundamentally transformed participants' understanding of retail and broadened their professional perspectives.

Deductive findings: According to transformative learning theory, critical reflection and exposure to alternative perspectives reshape existing assumptions and frames of reference. Participants consistently described the ILDP programme as providing experiences that challenged their previous understanding of retail through systems thinking, international benchmarking, peer learning, and exposure to other organisations. Participants did not simply acquire technical knowledge; they reported a change in how they understood retail, leadership, and organisational strategy.

Inductive findings: While transformative learning theory explains the transformation of perspective that took place, the interviews suggested that participants did not merely change their opinions of retail; they began to think differently about it. This perspective transformation occurred on multiple levels. For example, operational thinking became systems thinking, functional thinking became enterprise thinking, local thinking became global thinking, and transactional thinking became strategic thinking. This suggests that perspective transformation is a possible central mechanism through which leadership development influences the subsequent development of identity.

> *"Customer experience, it goes a long way. And when you are in there, when you are learning, that's when you're like, I need to change how I treat people. I need to change how I see. I need to change how I communicate, how I help, especially with me now because I'm in there." (P4)*

> *"My perspective on so much has changed from a retail perspective since being on this course. And honestly speaking, I don't think that I would have looked at things the way that I now do had I not gone on the course." (P13)*

> *"For me, it was, it just reaffirmed why I love doing what I do. And specifically for me being in the people team, just understanding how different organisations handle the people structure in their organizations." (P12)*

> *"Different retailers are doing things. So it gives you an opportunity to see that there is a lot happening in retail besides running the stores beside having just the stock on the shelf. There's a whole lot more in terms of business and sense that is happening too." (P18)*

> *"So, it gave you that knowledge. It gives you the opportunity to be able to think beyond your area of work, you know, and be able to get an interest in other businesses. Now, you follow the, you know, the market share for other retailers and see how they're doing in the market." (P18)*

> *"Hundred percent. It changes the mindset. So it educates because then it broadens your thinking. You're no longer thinking about retail in South Africa. You're thinking about retail in a global perspective. You think of how retail, South African retail is performing in a way." (P6)*

Participants' accounts suggest that exposure to broader strategic perspectives, international retail practices and cross-retailer learning was associated with changes in how they understood retail and their leadership roles. Perspective transformation was therefore interpreted as a central feature of their reported experiences, providing a possible connection between leadership development and the ways participants subsequently described their professional identities.

THEME 3: RECONSTRUCTING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

This theme addresses the second research question by exploring how participants connected their broadened professional perspectives with changes in how they understood themselves and their roles within the retail sector. Participants associated their developing professional identities with experiences such as obtaining a formal qualification, engaging with peers and gaining exposure to broader leadership perspectives.

Deductive findings: As many participants occupied relatively senior positions and had accumulated retail experience before participating in the ILDP, changes in professional identity could not be attributed solely to the programme, as identity development is inherently shaped by ongoing workplace experience and career progression. However, the participants consistently reported increased confidence, legitimacy, and leadership capability following the ILDP. This is consistent with the professional identity development literature, which proposes that individuals gradually develop a professional self-concept through participation, competence, and recognition. Their professional identity was strengthened through obtaining a formal qualification, peer recognition, executive exposure, and increased self-efficacy.

Inductive findings: Identity construction occurred at multiple levels, however, thereby extending the professional identity development literature. The participants described becoming retail professionals, strategic leaders, business partners, executive leaders, and scholar-practitioners. Their developed identities therefore extended beyond occupational membership towards broader leadership identities.

> *"Yes. Completely. Completely. I'm not an in-house lawyer anymore. I am a business partner and I've driven that culture in my team as well. And the tagline that I say to everyone to the point where I wanted them to say it, is we do the how. Because I think that" (P15)*

> *"and feel valued. Sometimes value isn't remuneration, but it's just being heard and seen. So really, this program and participating in this program has taught me that, you know, speaking up matters, especially when you need to know when to speak up. And it's really shaped my confidence personally." (P5)*

> *"However, when I see now the program and how it's changed me, it's given me a proper seat around the table, a seat of trust, validation with my male counterparts, that working for a global business, it means that my executive team is predominantly European." (P10)*

> *"I think I am a retail professional, by the way, if I can put it that way, because I know lots of things. Even in meetings, even if they were to discuss something" (P8)*

> *"Knowing what I have learned through the program, yes, the program has been like business stuff in there, but a lot of the program for me spoke to my leadership qualities and my expectation of my leadership and how I can make a difference within the sector by taking back the learnings on being a thought leader versus a process driven leader and managing people differently. You know, like we say like managing effectiveness. What is actually management effectiveness? You know, actually it is how do we step in as leaders and make the change with associates and make associates understand" (P15).*

> *Identity building was therefore not limited to increased confidence only. The participants described fundamental shifts in how they understood themselves, their professional roles, and their organisational contribution.*

THEME 4: COMMITTING TO RETAIL AS A PROFESSION

Addressing the third research question, this theme explores how participants described their attachment to retail as a long-term career and how they associated this commitment with their evolving professional identities and perceptions of the sector.

Deductive findings: The participants described greater confidence in their future in retail following participation in the programme. This is in line with SCCT, which proposes that increasing self-efficacy and positive outcome expectations strengthen career commitment.

Inductive findings: However, the interviews moved beyond career commitment to illustrating professionalisation, with participants becoming advocates for retail careers. Retail was reframed as intellectually challenging, socially valuable, economically significant, and professionally rewarding.

> *"In particular, I think it's phenomenal. The achievement is quite good. And now it's a profession. We have to professionalise the industry or sector as it's called. And that sort of prompted me to learn more. And I've learned quite a lot from the colleagues, their understanding" (P19)*

> *"I'm in it, you know, I don't see myself elsewhere. It will have to be retail." (P12)*

> *"Develop and grow yourself within the retail. So you are not just stuck in one position, but you can be in management and leadership positions where you are also able to affect other people's lives. Yes, definitely changed." (P9)*

> *"No, I see it. I see it as a long-term career path. You know, so it's both ways. " (P14)*

Career commitment, therefore, developed beyond mere organisational retention. Participants increasingly positioned themselves as advocates for retail and viewed the sector as a legitimate profession deserving greater recognition.

THEME 5: LEADERSHIP BEYOND THE SELF – PROFESSIONAL STEWARDSHIP

Extending the third research question, this theme captures participants' accounts of leadership responsibilities that extended beyond their own career development to include mentoring others, sharing knowledge and contributing to the development of retail professionals. These accounts were interpreted as expressions of professional stewardship, representing an additional dimension of professional identity and commitment identified through the analysis. The findings suggest that professional stewardship may represent an outward-looking expression of professional identity and career commitment, rather than a necessary endpoint of professional development.

Deductive findings: Although the theoretical perspectives informing the study provide insights into career development, learning and professional identity, participants' emphasis on mentoring, knowledge sharing and developing others introduced an additional dimension that was not explicitly represented in the initial conceptual framework.

Inductive findings: The participants consistently described leadership as involving mentorship, coaching, knowledge sharing, lifelong learning, developing future leaders, and strengthening the profession. Leadership became increasingly outward-looking rather than self-focused. The findings suggest that professional stewardship may represent an outward-looking expression of professional identity and career commitment, reflected in participants' emphasis on developing others, sharing professional knowledge and contributing to the future development of retail. Rather than constituting a necessary final stage of professional identity development, stewardship emerged as an additional dimension of how participants understood their leadership responsibilities.

> *"It positions you to give back….But it's not just money for nothing. You've got a responsibility. So you've got a responsibility to come back and grow others. So, you know, especially from the previously disadvantaged. So, you know, when we come back in our management positions, yeah, we always have that in the back of our minds." (P14)*

> *"Some kind of work. And I think that's been good. Yeah. I think the team's been, I did a lot of personal mastery, sharing the learnings with them. So after each of the courses, the block courses that we did, I sat with my team and I did a presentation and I made them do the test." (P15)*

> *"Also, make sure that they also understand that they have to look for some new opportunities. And when you see other ideas that one has done, you also try and implement with other people. So you always try to do that. I always try to come up with new ideas, new way of presenting the same baked beans that Checkers has got that you've got, but you need to have it..." (P18)*

Considered together, the five themes suggest interconnected relationships between participants' career experiences, leadership development, professional identity and commitment to retail. The model presented in Figure 2 was developed through the abductive interpretation of these thematic relationships. Theme 1 provided the contextual background against which participants described their initial perceptions of retail. Theme 2 captured their accounts of broadened strategic and professional perspectives associated with participation in the ILDP. Theme 3 reflected how participants related these experiences to their evolving professional self-understanding, while Theme 4 captured their expressed commitment to retail as a long-term career. Theme 5 extended the interpretation beyond individual career development by identifying participants' emphasis on mentoring, knowledge sharing and contributing to the profession.

The relationships depicted in Figure 2 therefore represent an interpretive synthesis of recurring patterns across participants' accounts, rather than an empirically established causal pathway. Although participants frequently associated the ILDP with changes in their perspectives and professional identities, these accounts were retrospective and may also reflect the influence of prior career experience, organisational opportunities and continuing professional development. The model is consequently proposed as a contextually grounded explanation of how participating ILDP graduates understood the relationships between leadership development, professional identity, career commitment and stewardship, rather than as a universal or sequential model of career development.

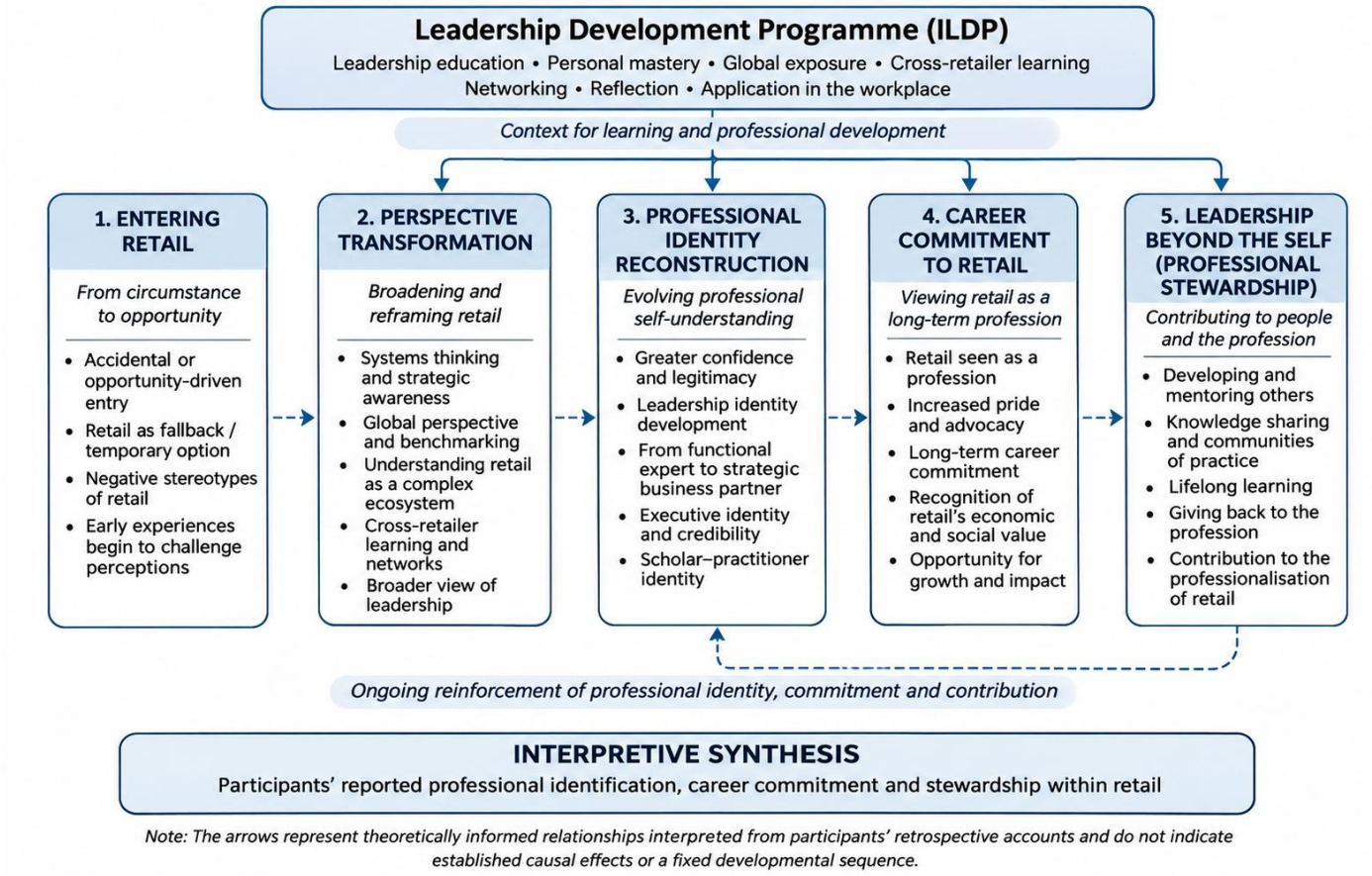

FIGURE 2: INTERPRETIVE MODEL OF PARTICIPANTS' REPORTED EXPERIENCES OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT, PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AND CAREER COMMITMENT IN RETAIL

The emerging model, developed through the interpretation of the five interconnected themes, illustrates how participants understood the relationships between their experiences of leadership development, changing perceptions of retail, professional identity and career commitment. Most participants described entering retail through circumstance or initially viewing it as a temporary career option. Against this background, participants associated their ILDP experiences with a broadening of their professional perspectives, particularly in relation to systems thinking, strategic awareness, global benchmarking, understanding retail as a complex ecosystem, professional networking and leadership. This perspective transformation emerged as a central interpretive process through which participants made sense of their developing professional identities. They described greater confidence and professional legitimacy, alongside changes in how they understood their roles, including shifts from functional specialists towards strategic business partners, executive leaders and scholar–practitioners.

These evolving perspectives and professional identities were also reflected in participants' expressed commitment to retail as a long-term career, characterised by increased professional pride, advocacy, recognition of the sector's economic and social value, and opportunities for continued growth and contribution. An additional dimension emerging from the findings was professional stewardship, reflected in participants' emphasis on mentoring and developing others, sharing knowledge, lifelong learning and contributing to the professionalisation of retail. Rather than representing a fixed developmental sequence or established causal pathway, the model offers an interpretive explanation of how these interconnected dimensions were understood and articulated by participating ILDP graduates, while recognising the continuing influence of prior career experiences and organisational contexts.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

First, the findings provide contextual support for social cognitive career theory (SCCT) by illustrating how participants' initial entry into retail was frequently shaped by available opportunities and contextual circumstances rather than deliberate career intentions. This is consistent with SCCT's recognition of the influence of environmental factors, learning experiences and career-related expectations on career choices (Lent et al., 1994, 2002). The findings further suggest that participants' perceptions of retail as a career continued to evolve through professional experience and learning. This finding complements Backman et al. (2025), who examined career trajectories within retail and wholesale, by providing insight into how experienced retail professionals interpreted their career entry and subsequent identification with the sector. Whereas career trajectory research considers patterns of employment over time, the present study focuses on participants' retrospective understandings of their professional journeys. Rather than extending SCCT as an independent theory, the study demonstrates the value of integrating SCCT with transformative learning and professional identity perspectives to interpret how experienced retail professionals retrospectively understood their career journeys.

Second, the findings are consistent with transformative learning theory, particularly Mezirow's (1991) proposition that meaningful learning experiences may encourage individuals to reconsider previously held assumptions and frames of reference. Participants associated their ILDP experiences with broader systems thinking, strategic awareness, international perspectives and a more comprehensive understanding of retail as a profession. These accounts resonate with Giraldo-García and Orozco (2023), who examined leadership development experiences among school principals, and Hughes and Vaccaro (2024), who explored leader identity development through coaching. While these studies highlight the relationship between developmental experiences and individuals' understandings of leadership, the present findings offer a complementary perspective by illustrating how experienced retail professionals also associated

broader leadership perspectives with their identification with retail as a profession. The contribution of the present study lies in examining how participants connected these perceived changes in professional perspective with their evolving identification as retail professionals and their expressed longer-term career intentions. Perspective transformation is therefore interpreted as a central feature of participants' accounts rather than an independently established causal mechanism.

Third, the findings contribute to the understanding of professional identity development within the retail context. These findings are consistent with Reissner and Armitage-Chan (2024), who conceptualised professional identity work as an ongoing process, and Obling (2023), who examined professional identity reconstruction in the context of professional education. While these studies demonstrate that professional identity development is not necessarily a fixed or completed outcome, the present study provides a retail-specific perspective by showing how experienced professionals associated changes in their professional self-understanding with broader perspectives on the sector and their leadership roles. Participants described changes in their professional self-understanding, including identifying more strongly as retail professionals and viewing themselves as strategic business partners, executive leaders and scholar–practitioners. These findings do not establish that continuous identity reconstruction is a new theoretical phenomenon. Rather, the study contributes a contextually grounded account of how experienced retail professionals associated leadership development with changes in their occupational identification and leadership identities. This is particularly relevant to a sector in which participants frequently described their initial career entry as circumstantial rather than deliberately planned.

The findings concerning career commitment also complement Weidinger et al. (2026), who identified salary, growth opportunities and other working conditions as important factors associated with loyalty to the retail industry. While their research examined industry loyalty among frontline retail employees, the present study provides a different perspective by exploring how experienced retail leaders understood their commitment in relation to their professional identities and perceptions of retail as a profession. This distinction is important, as the participants' expressed career commitment cannot be interpreted as evidence that leadership development increased employee retention.

Finally, the study offers an integrated interpretive model that brings together career entry, perspective transformation, professional identity reconstruction, career commitment and professional stewardship within the context of retail leadership development. Although the individual relationships between learning, identity and career development are recognised in existing scholarship, the study's contribution lies in examining how these dimensions were connected in the retrospective accounts of experienced retail professionals. An additional insight was participants' emphasis on mentoring, knowledge sharing, developing others and contributing to the profession, which was interpreted as professional stewardship. This extends the study's initial conceptual framework beyond individual professional identity and career commitment to consider an outward-looking orientation towards the development of others and the retail profession. The model therefore offers a contextually grounded theoretical proposition for further investigation, rather than a demonstrated causal pathway or universal developmental sequence.

The findings provide insights into the three research questions. Regarding the first research question, participants frequently described entering retail through circumstance rather than deliberate career choice, while their perceptions of the sector evolved through subsequent professional experiences and learning. In relation to the second research question, participants associated their ILDP experiences with broader professional perspectives and changes in how they understood themselves as retail professionals and leaders. Addressing the third research question, participants expressed a strong commitment to retail as a long-term career and described an outward-looking leadership orientation involving mentoring, knowledge sharing and developing others. These findings suggest interconnected relationships

between career experiences, leadership development, professional identity and career commitment, while recognising that the retrospective research design does not establish the direction or causality of these relationships.

6.2 PRACTICAL CONTRIBUTION

Leadership programmes

Participants particularly valued the ILDP's emphasis on systems thinking, cross-functional learning, international benchmarking and exposure to broader strategic perspectives (Theme 2). These findings suggest that leadership development programmes in retail could benefit from incorporating learning experiences that encourage participants to examine the sector beyond their immediate functional responsibilities. Opportunities for critical reflection and engagement with professionals from different retail organisations may also support broader professional understanding. Although participants associated these experiences with changes in their perspectives and professional identities, the present study did not independently evaluate the effectiveness of individual programme components.

Participants' accounts also highlighted the value they attached to personal mastery, reflective learning and opportunities to reconsider their professional roles (Themes 2 and 3). Leadership development providers could therefore incorporate structured reflection, peer dialogue, coaching and self-awareness activities alongside technical and strategic leadership education. Such activities may create opportunities for participants to examine their professional assumptions and identities, although their specific contribution would require further evaluation.

The emphasis on evolving professional identities and lifelong learning (Themes 3 and 5) suggests that leadership development should be supported by opportunities for continued professional growth. Organisations and SETAs could consider postgraduate education pathways, alumni learning activities, mentoring and partnerships with higher education institutions. Participants' accounts of developing and supporting colleagues (Theme 5) also suggest value in incorporating mentoring and coaching opportunities into leadership development programmes. These recommendations reflect participants' expressed priorities and should be evaluated in practice rather than assumed to produce particular career or organisational outcomes.

Participants' accounts revealed a contrast between their initial perceptions of retail as a possible fallback career and their later recognition of its strategic complexity and professional opportunities (Themes 1 and 4). This suggests an opportunity for W&RSETA, retailers and higher education institutions to communicate the diversity of professional career pathways within the sector more clearly. Leadership development, formal qualifications and professional recognition initiatives may contribute to these efforts. However, the present study provides evidence of participants' perceptions and aspirations rather than demonstrating changes in the professional standing of retail across the sector.

Leadership development should not be treated only as a single intervention. Organisations should rather design developmental ecosystems that accompany employees throughout their careers. This could include initiatives such as staged leadership programmes – especially starting from early career, alumni networks, executive coaching, postgraduate education pathways, action learning projects, and, as mentioned earlier, opportunities for mentoring.

Networking

Consistent with Theme 2, the participants identified networking with colleagues from other retailers as one of the programme’s core strengths. Leadership programmes should intentionally cultivate communities of practice by maintaining alumni networks, facilitating ongoing peer learning, and creating opportunities for collaboration between organisations.

Retailers

The contrast between participants' initial career-entry narratives (Theme 1) and their later professional identification with retail (Theme 4) suggests a need to communicate the sector's career opportunities more clearly. As retail is frequently described as a fallback career, retailers should reposition retail as a profession by showcasing the diverse career paths it offers beyond frontline operations. Recruitment campaigns, graduate programmes, and employer branding initiatives should highlight opportunities in areas such as supply chain management, human resource management, finance, marketing, technology, and executive leadership.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study should be interpreted against several limitations. First, the study was conducted in a single context – the W&R ILDP leadership programme in South Africa. Even though the participants represented different organisations, positions, and career stages, the study remains grounded in this one context. Future research should therefore examine whether similar processes of perspective transformation take place in other industries, organisations, and countries. Comparative studies would provide insights into the transferability of the proposed process model in different professional and cultural contexts.

The study is also subject to limitations associated with participant recruitment and sample composition. Although a purposive, maximum-variation sampling strategy was adopted, the realised sample of 19 graduates was smaller than the intended target of 36 and did not fully achieve the planned representation across institutional and geographic contexts. Participation was voluntary, introducing the possibility of self-selection bias, particularly among graduates with positive experiences of the ILDP. Furthermore, although continued employment in retail was not an eligibility requirement, all participating graduates remained employed in the sector. The findings may therefore underrepresent the experiences of alumni who subsequently left retail or held less favourable views of the programme. This is particularly important when interpreting participants' expressed career commitment and the implications for retention.

The study furthermore adopted a cross-sectional qualitative design, capturing the participants’ reflections at a certain point in time. Although changes in professional identity and career commitment were described across the participants’ careers, the research relied on retrospective accounts. Longitudinal research, in which participants are followed before, during, and after a leadership development programme, would provide a potentially richer understanding of how perspective transformation, identity development, and career commitment evolve over time, and whether these changes are sustained throughout participants’ careers. Consequently, the study cannot establish that participation in the ILDP caused changes in professional identity or career commitment, nor can it determine whether the relationships represented in the interpretive model unfolded in a particular sequence.

The study focused primarily on participants’ perception of their own development. Future research could adopt a multi-perspective design by incorporating the views of supervisors, colleagues, or direct reports to explore how professional identity transformation is experienced and recognised by others in organisational settings. Comparative studies across industries and professions would help to determine whether the developmental process identified in this study is unique to retail or reflects a broader phenomenon in leadership development.

Most participants had already accumulated significant retail experience before attending the programme. Consequently, the study cannot isolate the effects of leadership development from broader career experiences. Future research could examine how the impact of leadership development differs between career stages. Comparative studies involving early-career, mid-career, and senior retail professionals would provide valuable insight into whether

leadership development influences professional identity differently over time, and whether perspective transformation varies according to prior workplace experience.

Future research could examine perspective transformation as a potentially important interpretive process in leadership development, investigating how changes in professional perspectives relate to identity reconstruction and career commitment over time. Further research could also explore professional stewardship as an additional dimension of professional identity and leadership development, particularly through mentoring, knowledge sharing and contributions to the development of others. Longitudinal and comparative studies would be valuable in examining whether these relationships differ across career stages, organisational contexts and industries.

Finally, the interpretive model developed from the qualitative results in this study remains conceptual and grounded in qualitative evidence. Future research should seek to refine, test, and extend this model in different organisational and cultural contexts. Mixed-methods and quantitative studies could examine the relationships between perspective transformation, professional identity reconstruction, career commitment, and professional stewardship, thereby providing further evidence of the model's explanatory value and contributing to the cumulative development of theory on leadership development and professional identity.

8. CONCLUSION

This study explored how graduates of a leadership development programme understood their experiences of retail as a profession and the relationships between leadership development, professional identity and career commitment. The findings revealed that many participants initially entered retail through circumstance rather than deliberate career choice, but subsequently developed a stronger identification with the sector as a meaningful long-term profession. Participants associated their ILDP experiences with broader strategic perspectives, increased professional confidence and evolving leadership identities. Drawing on SCCT, transformative learning theory and the literature on professional identity development, the study developed an interpretive model illustrating the interconnected relationships between career experiences, perspective transformation, professional identity reconstruction and career commitment. An additional contribution was the identification of professional stewardship as an outward-looking dimension of participants' professional identities, reflected in their emphasis on mentoring, knowledge sharing and developing others. While the retrospective, cross-sectional design does not establish causal relationships or a fixed developmental sequence, the findings offer contextually grounded insights into how experienced retail professionals make sense of leadership development and their continuing commitment to the sector. The study highlights the potential value of leadership development that encourages broader professional perspectives, ongoing learning and contribution beyond individual career advancement.

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