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The Moderating Role of Social Justice on the Relationship between Democratic Leadership and Cultural diversity in Public Universities in Southwest Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined the moderating role of social justice in the relationship between democratic leadership and cultural diversity in public universities in Southwest Nigeria. It addressed the concern that universities may bring together students from different ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds while inclusion, fairness, participation, and belonging remain uneven. The objective was to determine whether social justice strengthens or weakens the relationship between democratic leadership and cultural diversity. The study adopted a pragmatic research philosophy and a convergent mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were collected from 592 final-year students across six selected public universities, while qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with 14 educational leaders. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, ordinal logistic regression, and thematic analysis. Findings showed that democratic leadership significantly influenced cultural diversity ($\chi^2(3) = 18.138$, $p < .001$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .038$). Social justice significantly moderated the relationship ($\chi^2(3) = 19.849$, $p < .001$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .059$), increasing explanatory power from 3.8% to 5.9%. The conclusion was that democratic leadership supports cultural diversity, but its influence is stronger when supported by fairness, equity, inclusion, and access.

Keywords: Cultural diversity, democratic leadership, higher education, inclusive governance, social justice

Introduction

Cultural diversity has become a defining feature of higher education because universities now bring together students and staff from different ethnic, religious, linguistic, gender, national, and socio-economic backgrounds. This diversity can enrich learning, creativity, intercultural understanding, and institutional development when it is supported by inclusive structures. However, the presence of different groups within a university does not automatically produce inclusion, fairness, belonging, or meaningful participation (Ramdas et al., 2025; Ward et al., 2025). Students may study in the same institution and still experience exclusion when their cultural identities are not reflected in classroom practices, curriculum content, student leadership, policy processes, and institutional support systems. Cultural diversity in higher education should therefore be understood not only as the presence of diverse groups, but as the extent to which those groups are recognised, respected, represented, and able to participate in academic and institutional life (Corres-Medrano et al., 2026; Morgan et al., 2025; Ward et al., 2025).

The challenge of cultural diversity is more complex in African higher education because universities operate within historical, political, linguistic, ethnic, and resource-related realities that shape how inclusion is experienced. African universities are often expected to promote national integration and global competitiveness while also responding to local cultural identities, social inequalities, and institutional constraints (Bhowmik et al., 2026; Cumar et al., 2025; Idahosa & Love, 2025). In Nigeria, these concerns are particularly important because the university system operates within a deeply plural society marked by ethnicity, religion, language, region, social class, and state-of-origin identity (Abiola et al., 2026b; Obiagu

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et al., 2025). Although public universities admit students and employ staff from different backgrounds, cultural inclusion may still be weakened by ethnic preference, language dominance, unequal representation, quota-related imbalance, weak curriculum responsiveness, and uneven participation in university life (Obiagu et al., 2025). This shows that cultural diversity in Nigerian universities is not only a demographic reality, but also an institutional and leadership concern.

Leadership shapes how these dynamics play out because university leaders influence decision-making, resource allocation, conflict management, policy implementation, and student and staff involvement in matters that affect them (Bhowmik et al., 2026; Cumar et al., 2025). Democratic leadership is relevant to culturally diverse universities because it emphasises participation, consultation, shared responsibility, teamwork, and motivation (Raupu et al., 2021; Riza et al., 2025; Ukeje et al., 2026). These leadership practices can create opportunities for students and staff from different cultural backgrounds to express their views, work collaboratively, share responsibilities, and feel represented in institutional processes. However, democratic leadership may not automatically lead to cultural inclusion if participation is shallow, authority remains centralised, teamwork excludes minority voices, or motivation is applied selectively (Adewale & Ghavifekr, 2025; Bhowmik et al., 2026). This means that democratic leadership may provide the process of inclusion, but it may require supportive institutional conditions to produce meaningful cultural diversity outcomes.

Social justice, which includes fairness, equity, and access to resources and representation (Chaaban et al., 2025; Mincu & Mills, 2026), is the condition that may determine whether democratic leadership translates into real inclusion. Leaders can invite participation, but participation does not guarantee inclusion if some groups are treated unfairly or denied equal access to institutional support (Chaaban et al., 2025; Zare & Pathania, 2025). This study treated social justice as a moderating variable in the relationship between democratic leadership and cultural diversity. In Southwest Nigerian public universities, this matters because the region serves students from diverse backgrounds despite the dominance of Yoruba culture; students outside the dominant setting may remain enrolled yet marginally included if language practice, leadership structures, and resource distribution do not intentionally support other voices (Abiola et al., 2026b; Obiagu et al., 2025).

Although leadership, social justice, and cultural diversity have each been studied in education, few studies have tested how social justice moderates the relationship between democratic leadership and cultural diversity, specifically in Nigerian public universities (Bhowmik et al., 2026; Owusu-Agyeman, 2021). This study addressed that gap by pursuing two objectives: to examine the influence of democratic leadership on cultural diversity in public universities in Southwest Nigeria; and to determine the moderating role of social justice in the relationship between democratic leadership and cultural diversity in public universities in Southwest Nigeria.

Literature Review

Democratic Leadership and Cultural Diversity in Universities

Democratic leadership is one of the major leadership styles discussed in organisational and educational leadership literature. It is commonly traced to the early work of Lewin, Lippitt, and White, who distinguished democratic leadership from autocratic and laissez-faire leadership. Democratic leadership was associated with group participation, discussion, shared decision-making, and a leadership climate in which members are allowed to contribute to issues that affect them (Lewin et al., 1939; Lippitt & White, 1943). Later scholars expanded this understanding by explaining democratic leadership as a leadership style that promotes participation, consultation, shared responsibility, deliberation, and collective ownership of institutional decisions (Gastil, 1994; Northouse, 2021; Raupu et al., 2021). It does not remove the authority of the leader. Rather, it requires the leader to use authority in a way that allows members of the institution to participate meaningfully in decisions and activities that affect them.

Its major tenets are participation, empowerment, deliberation, shared responsibility, teamwork, and motivation, as captured in Gastil's (1994) three functions: distributing responsibility (sharing leadership tasks beyond formal leaders), empowering members (providing support, confidence, and recognition), and aiding group deliberation (ensuring different views are heard before decisions are made). These tenets are useful in universities because higher education institutions are made up of students, lecturers, administrators, committees, and other stakeholders with different roles, knowledge, and cultural backgrounds (Cumar et al., 2025; Kelder et al., 2025).

Sharma and Singh (2013) further made democratic leadership measurable by identifying leadership behaviours such as involving subordinates in decision-making, motivating followers, encouraging participation and skill-sharing, mediating leader-follower and follower-follower relationships, and taking input from followers. Accordingly, this study examined democratic leadership through four dimensions: participation, shared responsibility, teamwork facilitation, and followers' motivation, reflecting how it may operate where students and staff span different ethnic, religious, linguistic, regional, and socio-economic backgrounds.

The relationship between democratic leadership and cultural diversity rests on the idea that leadership practices shape whether diversity is ignored, controlled, or leveraged for inclusion. Participation can create opportunities for students and staff from different backgrounds to express their concerns and contribute to institutional decisions. Shared responsibility or authority can reduce overdependence on a few leaders and allow different groups to take part in governance. Teamwork can strengthen cooperation, trust, and conflict management across cultural lines. Followers' motivation can encourage students and staff to participate in university life when they feel recognised and valued (Sharma & Singh, 2013; Cumar et al., 2025; Ukeje et al., 2026). These leadership practices can therefore support intercultural competence, curriculum inclusivity, and student participation.

Empirical studies have provided support for this relationship, although the evidence differs across contexts. Almaskari et al. (2021) studied 633 university employees in the United Arab Emirates and found that participative leadership significantly predicted innovation ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .46$). Cultural diversity also played an important role in the relationship between leadership and institutional outcomes. Zulfqar et al. (2022) found that participatory decision-making significantly predicted job satisfaction in higher education ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .52$). These studies showed that participatory forms of leadership can influence institutional outcomes in higher education. Both, however, focused on innovation and satisfaction rather than cultural diversity, and neither reflected the ethnic, religious, linguistic, and resource realities of Nigerian public universities.

Shared responsibility or authority has also been linked with inclusion and knowledge sharing in higher education. Lauring and Selmer (2012), in a study of 489 academics in Danish universities, found that cultural and linguistic diversity had a positive relationship with knowledge sharing ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .34$). This suggested that when diverse academic groups are able to share knowledge, institutional learning may improve. Kezar et al. (2025) and Harper et al. (2025) showed that shared and distributed responsibility can support equity work and institutional change in higher education. However, shared leadership does not always operate strongly in university systems. Al Muqarshi et al. (2020) found that shared leadership in an Omani university department was limited by centralised and hierarchical practices. This criticism is important because universities may claim to support shared responsibility while major decisions remain controlled by a small group of formal leaders.

Teamwork may also support cultural diversity by helping students and staff cooperate and manage difference constructively. Urionabarrenetxea et al. (2021) found team diversity significantly related to performance among management students ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .38$); Cherian et al. (2020) reported cultural diversity's influence on team performance ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .29$); and Iskhakova and Ott (2020) found team-level cultural intelligence contributed significantly to culturally diverse team performance ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .44$). Diversity can produce positive outcomes when teamwork is properly managed. These gains depend on active facilitation, since poor communication, unequal participation, or majority dominance can turn diversity into tension instead.

Followers' motivation, which refers to the encouragement, recognition, support, and inspiration that leaders provide to members of the institution, is also key. In culturally diverse universities, students and staff may withdraw from participation when they feel ignored, undervalued, or excluded. Motivational leadership can therefore encourage them to take part in academic and institutional life. Almaskari et al. (2021) found that leadership motivation significantly predicted innovation in culturally diverse university settings ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .46$). Holgate (2020) established that university instructors' intercultural orientations were significantly associated with students' classroom experiences and educational outcomes ($\beta = 0.40$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .39$). Motivation may support cultural diversity by strengthening morale, participation, and belonging.

Even so, the relationship should not be overstated: democratic leadership may encourage participation, teamwork, and motivation without producing deep cultural inclusion if institutional structures remain unfair or centralised, consulting without allowing input to shape policy, encouraging teamwork while excluding some groups from leadership, or motivating generally while overlooking minority needs. In Nigerian public universities, this concern is heightened by bureaucracy, political influence, resource limitations, ethnic identity, religious difference, and state-of-origin considerations (Adewale & Ghavifekr, 2025; Abiola et al., 2026a; Obiagu et al., 2025).

Moderating Role of Social Justice in the Relationship Between Democratic Leadership and Cultural Diversity

Social justice is an important concept in education because it focuses on fairness, equity, access, participation, representation, dignity, and protection from exclusion or discrimination (Makateng, 2022; Mincu & Mills, 2026). In higher education, social justice is concerned with whether students and staff from different backgrounds have fair opportunities to learn, participate, access resources, and experience respect within the institution (Forde, 2014; Lopez, 2016). This makes social justice relevant to cultural diversity because the presence of different cultural groups in a university does not automatically mean that those groups are treated fairly or included meaningfully. A university may have students from different ethnic, religious, linguistic, and social backgrounds, yet some groups may still experience limited representation, weak participation, poor access to resources, and exclusion from decision-making (Bhowmik et al., 2026; Zare & Pathania, 2025).

The major tenets of social justice in education include equity, inclusive learning, access to resources, representation, and respect for diversity. Equity means that students and staff should have fair opportunities and support, especially where some groups may experience disadvantage. An inclusive learning environment means that classrooms, teaching methods, institutional spaces, and student support systems should allow students from different backgrounds to participate without fear of exclusion. Access to resources refers to a fair opportunity to benefit from academic materials, facilities, information, mentoring, welfare support, and institutional opportunities. Representation means that different groups should see their identities, experiences, and concerns reflected in leadership, curriculum, policy, and student participation structures (Makateng, 2022; Mincu & Mills, 2026; Zare & Pathania, 2025). These tenets show that social justice is not only a moral concern but also an institutional condition that can shape how cultural diversity is experienced.

Social justice was treated as a moderating variable in this study because democratic leadership may not produce the same level of cultural diversity outcome in all university settings. Democratic leadership may create participation, shared responsibility, teamwork, and motivation, but these leadership practices may have a limited effect if institutional systems are not fair. For example, participation may become symbolic if students are consulted, but their views do not influence

decisions. Shared responsibility may remain weak if authority is still concentrated among a few leaders. Teamwork may not produce inclusion if some groups dominate discussions or if minority students feel unsafe to contribute. Motivation may also become ineffective if recognition and support are not fairly distributed across cultural groups. This means that social justice may strengthen democratic leadership where fairness, access, inclusion, and representation are present, but may weaken its effect where institutional practices remain unequal (Bussu & Karp, 2026; Chaaban et al., 2025; Mincu & Mills, 2026).

Empirical studies have supported the view that social justice can shape diversity-related outcomes in higher education. Owusu-Agyeman (2021) examined cultural diversity and students' sense of belonging in a South African university using hierarchical regression analysis. The study found that cultural diversity significantly predicted students' sense of belonging ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < .001$). When social justice was introduced as a moderator, the interaction term was also significant ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < .01$), and the full model explained 37% of the variance in students' sense of belonging ($R^2 = .37$). This showed diversity becomes more meaningful under justice-oriented conditions, though the study measured belonging rather than cultural diversity itself, and was set in South Africa rather than Nigeria.

Denisova (2020) also found that institutional commitment to social justice significantly predicted lower interethnic tension ($\beta = -0.33$, $p < .01$) and higher perceptions of inclusivity ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < .001$). The model explained 31% of the variance in interethnic relations outcomes ($R^2 = .31$). Justice-oriented institutional practices could reduce tension and improve inclusion in culturally diverse settings. However, the study did not examine democratic leadership as the independent variable or focus on the Nigerian context, a gap the present study extended by testing whether social justice strengthens or weakens the leadership–diversity relationship.

Other studies have shown that social justice can influence the strength of relationships involving leadership, institutional practices, and educational outcomes. Harun and Ahmad (2022), in a study of 272 administrators in Malaysian private universities, found that distributive justice significantly influenced retention ($\beta = 0.36$, $p < .001$). They also found that social justice strengthened the relationship between human resource management practices and employee commitment ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .48$). Karataş and Han (2022), using data from 404 prospective teachers in Turkey, found that cultural intelligence significantly predicted professional attitudes ($\beta = 0.39$, $p < .001$), while social justice mediated the relationship ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .42$). Social justice can function as an important condition in institutional and educational relationships. However, these studies did not directly test social justice as a moderator between democratic leadership and cultural diversity in Nigerian public universities.

The moderating role of social justice, therefore, rests on the argument that democratic leadership provides the process of inclusion, while social justice provides the condition that makes inclusion fair and meaningful. Democratic leadership may open spaces for participation, shared responsibility, teamwork, and motivation. Social justice determines whether those spaces are accessible, safe, fair, and representative for students and staff from different cultural backgrounds. Where equity, inclusive learning environments, access to resources, and respect for diversity are strong, democratic leadership is more likely to improve intercultural competence, curriculum inclusivity, and student participation. Where these justice conditions are weak, democratic leadership may remain limited to consultation and general collaboration without producing deep cultural inclusion.

The reviewed literature showed that social justice was linked with belonging, inclusivity, lower interethnic tension, commitment, and educational attitudes. However, most existing studies examined social justice as a direct predictor, a mediator, a general leadership value, or an institutional principle. Few studies had tested social justice as a moderator of the relationship between democratic leadership and cultural diversity, especially in Nigerian public universities. This gap matters because the effect of democratic leadership may depend on whether the university environment is fair, inclusive, and accessible. The present study addressed this gap by testing whether social justice significantly moderates the relationship between democratic leadership and cultural diversity in public universities in Southwest Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on democratic leadership theory, social justice leadership theory, and social identity theory, suited respectively to the analysis of leadership practice, justice conditions, and cultural group relations within public universities.

Democratic Leadership Theory

Democratic leadership theory is linked to the early leadership work of Lewin, Lippitt, and White, who distinguished democratic leadership from autocratic and laissez-faire leadership (Lewin et al., 1939; Lippitt & White, 1943). The theory assumes that group members should be allowed to participate in discussions and decisions that affect them, while the leader still provides direction and coordination. Gastil (1994) later explained democratic leadership through three major functions: distributing responsibility, empowering members, and aiding group deliberation. These functions are important because they show that democratic leadership is not only about consultation, but also about giving members responsibility, supporting their participation, and creating fair conditions for discussion.

In this study, democratic leadership theory explained how leadership may influence cultural diversity through participation, shared responsibility or authority, teamwork facilitation, and followers' motivation. Participation allows students and staff to contribute to institutional decisions. Shared responsibility or authority allows leadership influence to move beyond one office or person. Teamwork facilitation promotes cooperation and conflict management across groups, while followers' motivation encourages members to take part in university life. These dimensions matter in public universities because students and staff come from different ethnic, religious, linguistic, regional, and socio-economic backgrounds, and such differences require leadership practices

that encourage voice, collaboration, recognition, and shared institutional responsibility (Cumar et al., 2025; Riza et al., 2025; Ukeje et al., 2026).

Social Justice Leadership Theory

Social justice leadership theory explains the moderating role of social justice in the study. The theory is rooted in the argument that educational institutions should promote fairness, equity, access, recognition, participation, and protection from exclusion. Rawls (1971) emphasised justice as fairness in the distribution of rights, opportunities, and resources, while Gewirtz (1998) and Fraser (2008) extended the discussion by showing that justice also involves recognition, dignity, participation, and the removal of marginalising structures. Accordingly, social justice requires leaders to identify exclusionary practices and promote conditions for meaningful participation (Forde, 2014; Lopez, 2016; Makateng, 2022).

Social justice leadership theory was central to this study because democratic leadership may not produce the same cultural diversity outcomes across all universities. A leader may encourage participation, teamwork, shared responsibility, and motivation, but these practices may have limited effect when some groups lack access to resources, when learning environments are not inclusive, or when institutional practices favour dominant groups. Social justice was therefore treated as a moderating variable because it can strengthen or weaken the relationship between democratic leadership and cultural diversity. Where equity, inclusive learning environment, access to resources, and respect for diversity are present, democratic leadership is more likely to produce meaningful cultural inclusion.

Social Identity Theory

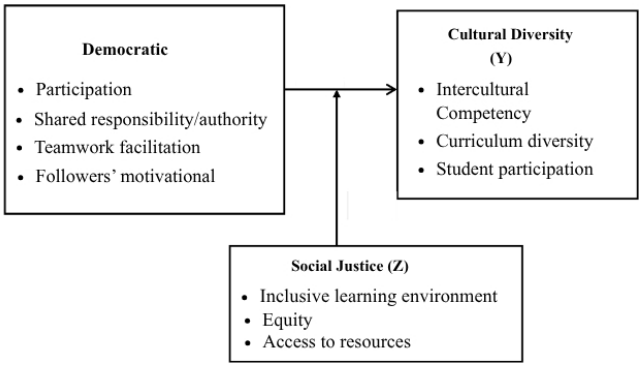
Social identity theory explains that cultural diversity involves relationships among different social and cultural groups. It states that people classify themselves and others and interpret social life through such group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, as cited in Reznik, 2019). The major tenets of the theory are social categorisation, social identification, and social comparison. Social categorisation occurs when individuals group themselves and others by identity markers such as ethnicity, religion, language, gender, region, or social class. Social identification occurs when people attach meaning and belonging to those groups. Social comparison occurs when people compare their group with other groups, sometimes creating bias, exclusion, or tension.

Social identity theory is relevant to the present study because students and staff in Nigerian public universities may experience university life through ethnic, religious, linguistic, regional, or socio-economic identities. These identities may influence how they respond to leadership, curriculum, student participation, resource access, and institutional representation. Democratic leadership can reduce negative group separation by creating opportunities for participation, dialogue, teamwork, and shared responsibility among different groups. Social justice can further reduce exclusion by ensuring that such participation is fair, inclusive, and supported by access to resources and recognition.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework links democratic leadership and cultural diversity, with social justice as the moderating variable. Democratic leadership is represented through four dimensions: participation, shared responsibility or authority, teamwork facilitation, and followers' motivation (Sharma & Singh, 2013). Cultural diversity, the dependent variable, is represented through intercultural competence, curriculum inclusivity, and student participation, since diversity involves not just the presence of different groups but how they interact, learn, and feel represented. Social justice is the moderating variable because democratic leadership may not yield uniform diversity outcomes across settings, and is represented through equity, an inclusive learning environment, access to resources, and diversity. The framework thus tests both the direct influence of democratic leadership and the moderating role of social justice in public universities in Southwest Nigeria.

Figure 1
Conceptual framework of the study



Methodology

A pragmatic research philosophy underpinned the convergent mixed-methods design used in this study. Pragmatism facilitated quantitative evidence on the relationship among democratic leadership, social justice, and cultural diversity, as well as qualitative explanations of how leadership, fairness, and cultural diversity are experienced in university settings (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Mertens & Wilson, 2019). The convergent mixed-methods design allowed quantitative and qualitative data to be collected within the same phase, analysed separately, and integrated during interpretation.

The study was carried out in six selected public universities across the six states of Southwest Nigeria: Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti; Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta; Federal University of Technology, Akure; Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomoso; University of Lagos; and Osun State University, Osogbo. One public university was selected from each state to ensure geographical representation across the geopolitical zone. The quantitative strand focused on final-year undergraduate students because they had spent enough time in the university system to assess leadership practices, social justice conditions, and cultural diversity experiences. Postgraduate students were excluded because many postgraduate programmes in Nigerian

universities are research-based and students are not always available on campus for structured survey participation. The qualitative strand engaged educational leaders, including deans, heads of departments, senior lecturers, and administrative heads, because they were directly involved in leadership, governance, and student-related institutional processes.

A stratified random sampling technique was used for the quantitative strand to ensure representation of final-year students across the selected universities and departments. A total of 618 questionnaires were administered, and 592 were completed and returned, giving a response rate of 95.9%. The qualitative participants were selected through expert purposive sampling to engage only leaders with direct experience of university leadership, social justice issues, and cultural diversity management. 14 educational leaders participated in the semi-structured interviews. Data collection stopped when the responses provided sufficient recurring ideas for interpretation.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide. The questionnaire was organised around democratic leadership, social justice, and cultural diversity. Democratic leadership was measured through participation, shared responsibility or authority, teamwork facilitation, and followers' motivation, following the dimensions of democratic leadership identified by Sharma and Singh (2013). Cultural diversity was measured through intercultural competence, curriculum inclusivity, and student participation. Social justice was measured through equity, inclusive learning environment, access to resources, and diversity. The questionnaire contained a four-point Likert-type scale ranging from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree.' The interview guide contained open-ended questions on leadership practices, fairness, access to resources, inclusion, participation, representation, and cultural diversity within the selected universities.

The instruments were validated before the main study. Content validity was ensured through expert review by supervisors and academic reviewers, who examined the items for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study variables. The questionnaire was adapted from established instruments addressing democratic leadership, social justice behaviour, cultural intelligence, multicultural personality, and diversity and inclusivity. Permission was obtained for instruments that required approval, while publicly available instruments were adapted to suit the study context. A pilot study was conducted among final-year students from Obafemi Awolowo University, which was not part of the main study. The pilot study assessed the feasibility, clarity, reliability, and validity of the instruments before the main data collection.

Construct validity was examined through exploratory factor analysis using Principal Axis Factoring with Oblimin rotation. The factor analysis yielded clear and interpretable factor structures across the scales. The retained items loaded meaningfully on their intended constructs, with factor loadings ranging approximately from .43 to .83. As all factor loadings exceeded the minimum acceptable threshold of .40, the items were retained for the main study. These findings provided evidence of the questionnaire's construct validity and confirmed its suitability for measuring democratic leadership, social justice, and cultural diversity within the university context.

Instrument reliability was examined using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. All constructs recorded alpha values above the .70 minimum threshold commonly accepted for internal consistency: Participation (α = .748), shared responsibility or authority (α = .906), teamwork facilitation (α = .933), followers' motivation (α = .905), social justice (α = .871), and cultural diversity (α = .865) (see Table 1). The items used to measure the constructs were internally consistent and suitable for the main analysis.

Table 1

Reliability of the Quantitative Instrument

Construct	Cronbach's alpha	Interpretation
Participation	.748	Acceptable
Shared responsibility or authority	.906	Excellent
Teamwork facilitation	.933	Excellent
Followers' motivation	.905	Excellent
Social justice	.871	Good
Cultural diversity	.865	Good

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and ordinal logistic regression. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise respondents' perceptions of democratic leadership, social justice, and cultural diversity using means and standard deviations. Ordinal logistic regression was employed to examine the relationship between the ordered levels of the dependent variable, cultural diversity, and the predictor variables. The model estimated the odds of reporting higher levels of cultural diversity as a function of democratic leadership and social justice (Field, 2018; Hosmer et al., 2013). The direct effect of democratic leadership on cultural diversity was first examined. Subsequently, the moderating effect of social justice was assessed by introducing an interaction term between democratic leadership and social justice into the ordinal logistic regression model, consistent with established procedures for testing moderation effects (Aiken & West, 1991).

Before interpreting the ordinal logistic regression results, diagnostic tests were conducted to assess the underlying model assumptions. The Test of Parallel Lines was used to assess the proportional-odds assumption, while Tolerance and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were examined to assess multicollinearity among the predictor variables (Field, 2018; Kim, 2019; Liu et al., 2023) (see Table 2). These diagnostics were conducted to determine whether the proportional-odds assumption was satisfied and whether multicollinearity among the predictors was within acceptable limits.

Table 2

Test of Parallel Lines

Model	Chisquare	*df*	*p* value	Decision
Participation → cultural diversity	0.860	2	.650	Assumption met
Shared responsibility or authority → cultural diversity	4.541	2	.103	Assumption met
Teamwork facilitation → cultural diversity	8.672	2	.013	Assumption violated
Followers' motivation → cultural diversity	3.807	2	.149	Assumption met
Social justice → cultural diversity	2.217	2	.330	Assumption met

The Test of Parallel Lines showed that the proportional odds assumption was satisfied for participation, shared responsibility or authority, followers' motivation, and social justice because their p-values were greater than .05. The assumption was violated for teamwork facilitation ($\chi^2(2) = 8.672$, $p = .013$). This did not invalidate the result, but it meant that the teamwork model was interpreted with caution because its effect on cultural diversity may differ across the ordered categories of the dependent variable.

The multicollinearity test showed that all tolerance values were above .10 and all VIF values were below 10 (see Table 3). Participation and social justice had acceptable VIF values of 2.444 and 2.730, respectively. Shared responsibility or authority, teamwork facilitation, and followers' motivation showed moderate VIF values, but these were expected because they are related dimensions of democratic leadership. Since none of the VIF values reached the severe multicollinearity threshold, all predictors were retained for analysis.

Table 3

Multicollinearity Test

Predictor variable	Tolerance	VIF	Interpretation
Participation	.409	2.444	Acceptable
Shared responsibility or authority	.184	5.434	Moderate multicollinearity
Teamwork facilitation	.175	5.718	Moderate multicollinearity
Followers' motivation	.165	6.067	Moderate multicollinearity
Social justice	.366	2.730	Acceptable

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis. The interview recordings were transcribed, read repeatedly, coded, and organised into themes that reflected the study variables. The qualitative analysis focused on how educational leaders described participation, shared responsibility, teamwork, motivation, fairness, access to resources, inclusion, and cultural diversity. The quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated during interpretation to show areas of convergence and explanation. Ethical approval was obtained before data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process.

Results

Descriptive Results

Table 4 shows the average perceptions of respondents regarding the major variables of the study. Since the questionnaire contained four-point Likert-type scale questions, mean scores above the midpoint of 2.50 indicate that respondents generally agreed that the measured practices were present in the selected universities.

Table 4

Descriptive Results of Democratic Leadership, Social Justice, and Cultural Diversity

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Interpretation
Participative leadership	2.96	.9669	Moderately present
Shared leadership	3.01	.8248	Moderately present
Team leadership	3.16	.7924	Moderately present
Motivational leadership	3.13	.8063	Moderately present
Democratic leadership composite	3.07	.8500	Moderately present
Social justice	2.99	.8538	Moderately present
Cultural diversity	3.16	.7756	Moderately present

Democratic leadership was moderately present in the selected public universities, with a composite mean score of 3.07 (*SD* = .8500). Among the dimensions, team leadership recorded the highest mean score (3.16), followed by motivational leadership (3.13), shared leadership (3.01), and participative leadership (2.96). Qualitative data showed a similar trend as participants described teamwork as important for unity, cooperation, and respect across cultural groups. One participant explained that leaders must "deliberately give everyone the opportunity to speak, not only the majority voices." Another participant noted that "a leader should allow unity in diversity."

The mean score for motivational leadership was also relatively high at 3.13. Participants associated recognition and encouragement with stronger participation. One respondent noted that "recognition boosts morale," while another explained that appreciation helps people "forget about tribal or religious differences."

Shared leadership recorded a mean score of 3.01, showing that respondents moderately perceived the distribution of responsibility and authority in the selected universities. Some educational leaders noted that universities operate through committees, departments, student representatives, and administrative structures, but major decisions are often still influenced by hierarchy, bureaucracy, and formal authority. Participants reported that universities operate through committees, departments, and formal administrative structures, but they also noted that hierarchy still affects decision-making. One participant observed that "there are still leaders who believe democracy is a weakness."

Participative leadership recorded the lowest mean (2.96) among the democratic leadership dimensions, which was above the midpoint. Respondents reported that participatory

practices existed, but they may not have been sufficiently strong or consistent. The qualitative findings showed how democratic leadership, social justice, and cultural diversity were experienced by educational leaders in the selected universities. Participants described consultation as important, but not always deep enough to influence final decisions. One participant stated, "Before making any decision, you have to sample the opinions of others."

Social justice (M = 2.99; SD = .8538) was perceived as moderately present in the selected universities. Fairness, equity, inclusive learning environments, access to resources, and recognition of diversity were evident to some extent but were not strongly experienced. Participants linked fairness with visible institutional practice. One participant stated, "If you are due for promotion, they promote you, no matter where you come from." Another participant added, "If you preach fairness, you must practice it."

Cultural diversity recorded a mean score of 3.16 (SD = .7756), making it one of the highest-rated variables in the descriptive analysis. Respondents generally perceived cultural diversity as present, with students from different cultural backgrounds interacting and participating in various aspects of university life. Qualitative findings identified student associations, religious groups, classroom interactions, peer relationships, group assignments, and social activities as visible expressions of cultural diversity. Participants recognised that the universities comprised students and staff from different backgrounds. One participant stated, "We have different people from different tribes and cultures."

Hypothesis Testing

Ordinal logistic regression was used to test the hypotheses, given the ordered nature of the cultural diversity outcome. The first hypothesis examined the direct effect of democratic leadership on cultural diversity, while the second examined the moderating effect of social justice on this relationship. Results are presented by hypothesis.

H_{01}: Democratic leadership has no significant influence on cultural diversity in public universities in Southwest Nigeria

The composite democratic leadership model had a statistically significant influence on cultural diversity ($\chi^2(3) = 18.138$, $p < .001$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .038$) (see Table 5). Thus, democratic leadership significantly predicted cultural diversity.

Table 5

Ordinal Logistic Regression of Democratic Leadership on Cultural Diversity

Model	Chisquare	*df*	pvalue	Nagelkerke R^2	Decision
Participation	7.469	2	.024	.015	Significant
Shared responsibility or authority	5.421	3	.143	.011	Not significant
Teamwork facilitation	19.252	3	< .001	.037	Significant
Followers' motivation	23.720	3	< .001	.046	Significant
Democratic leadership composite	18.138	3	< .001	.038	Significant

At the dimensional level, participation had a statistically significant but weak influence on cultural diversity ($\chi^2(2) = 7.469$, $p = .024$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .015$). The qualitative findings indicated that students and staff were consulted through meetings, representatives, and committees, but such consultation did not always lead to a strong influence on institutional decisions. Shared responsibility or authority did not significantly influence cultural diversity ($\chi^2(3) = 5.421$, $p = .143$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .011$). Some educational leaders noted that universities operated through committees and administrative structures, but major decisions were often still shaped by hierarchy, bureaucracy, and formal authority.

Teamwork facilitation had a statistically significant influence on cultural diversity ($\chi^2(3) = 19.252$, $p < .001$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .037$). The qualitative findings showed that teamwork was encouraged through group assignments, student associations, departmental committees, and collaborative activities. Followers' motivation also had a statistically significant influence on cultural diversity ($\chi^2(3) = 23.720$, $p < .001$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .046$). This was the strongest explanatory value among the democratic leadership dimensions, although the effect remained modest.

Overall, democratic leadership significantly influenced cultural diversity in public universities in Southwest Nigeria. Participation, teamwork facilitation, and followers' motivation were significant, while shared responsibility or authority was not. Based on the composite model, the first null hypothesis was rejected.

H_{02}: Social justice does not significantly moderate the relationship between democratic leadership and cultural diversity in public universities in Southwest Nigeria.

Table 6

Ordinal Logistic Regression of Social Justice Moderation on Cultural Diversity

Model fit statistic	Value
2 Log Likelihood (Final)	16.501
Chisquare	19.849
Df	3
p value	< .001
Nagelkerke R^2	.059

The moderation result in Table 6 shows that social justice significantly moderated the relationship between democratic leadership and cultural diversity ($\chi^2(3) = 19.849$, $p < .001$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .059$). Therefore, the second null hypothesis was rejected. When compared with the direct democratic leadership model, which explained 3.8% of the variance, the inclusion of social justice increased the explanatory power by 2.1 percentage points.

Participants explained that democratic leadership became more meaningful when it was supported by fairness, transparency, access, and respect for cultural differences. One participant stated that, "If you are due for promotion, they promote you, no matter where you come from," while another emphasised that, "If you preach fairness, you must practice it."

Discussion

Previous studies have linked democratic and participatory leadership practices with inclusion, collaboration, and positive institutional outcomes in higher education (Almaskari et al., 2021; Cumar et al., 2025; Riza et al., 2025; Ukeje et al., 2026; Zulfqar et al., 2022). These studies evidence that leadership practices involving participation, consultation, teamwork, and motivation can improve institutional engagement and strengthen the ability of students and staff to contribute meaningfully to university life. The present study similarly found that democratic leadership is relevant to cultural diversity in public universities. However, its modest explanatory power suggested that other factors also shaped cultural diversity.

The finding that participation, teamwork facilitation, and followers' motivation were more relevant to cultural diversity than shared responsibility or authority was consistent with studies emphasising practical involvement over formal leadership structures. Almaskari et al. (2021) and Zulfqar et al. (2022) suggest that participatory practices are more effective when people feel that their voices are taken seriously and when their involvement produces visible institutional outcomes. Similarly, studies on teamwork and cultural diversity have shown that diversity is more productive when group interactions are deliberately organised, communication is encouraged, and students are supported in working across cultural boundaries (Cherian et al., 2020; Iskhakova & Ott, 2020; Urionabarrenetxea et al., 2021). This may explain why teamwork and motivation are more strongly linked to cultural diversity than to shared authority, especially in public universities, where formal decision-making may still be shaped by hierarchy, bureaucracy, and centralised administrative control.

The non-significant influence of shared responsibility or authority agrees with studies that caution against assuming that shared leadership automatically produces inclusion. Al Muqarshi et al. (2020) observed that shared leadership may be weakened when institutional cultures remain hierarchical and when authority is formally distributed but practically centralised. This was relevant to Nigerian public universities, where formal structures for student representation and participation could exist while decision-making remained concentrated among senior administrators. The finding therefore suggested that shared leadership needed to extend beyond formal structures to provide meaningful influence, representation, and shared responsibility.

The moderating role of social justice aligns with studies arguing that inclusion is not achieved solely by inviting people to participate, but by ensuring that participation occurs under fair and equitable conditions. Owusu-Agyeman (2021), Denisova (2020), Chaaban et al. (2025), Mincu and Mills (2026), and Zare and Pathania (2025) emphasise that fairness, recognition, access, and protection from exclusion are important in culturally diverse educational environments. The present study extends this argument by showing that social justice strengthens the relationship between democratic leadership and cultural diversity. Democratic leadership was therefore more meaningful when students and staff experienced fairness, access to resources, inclusive learning conditions, and recognition of cultural differences.

The modest increase in explanatory power after introducing social justice was important for interpretation. It showed that social justice makes a measurable contribution, but it should not be overstated as the dominant factor explaining cultural diversity. This agrees with diversity and inclusion studies which show that cultural diversity in universities is shaped by many interacting factors, including curriculum design, student support systems, language practices, religious accommodation, institutional culture, resource availability, leadership style, and wider social inequalities (Abiola et al., 2026b, 2021; Obiagu et al., 2025; Ramdas et al., 2025; Ward et al., 2025). Social justice was therefore best understood as a strengthening condition: it enhanced the contribution of democratic leadership without replacing the need for broader institutional reforms.

Theoretically, democratic leadership theory is extended by demonstrating that its effectiveness depends not only on participation, consultation, teamwork, and motivation, but also on the institutional conditions that enable these practices to produce inclusive outcomes. Democratic leadership may create spaces for voice and collaboration; however, their capacity to generate meaningful inclusion is constrained where access and fairness are uneven. This conceptualises democratic leadership as contingent upon justice-based institutional conditions, thereby extending formulations that have primarily emphasised participatory leadership practices.

Within social justice leadership theory, social justice is positioned as a moderating condition through which leadership practices translate into substantive inclusion, rather than merely as a normative value or institutional objective. It is therefore understood not simply as a principle of fairness, but as an institutional condition that shapes the extent to which democratic leadership can foster cultural diversity. Where social justice is embedded in institutional practices, democratic leadership is more likely to facilitate equitable participation, inclusive learning environments, and access to opportunities for students and staff from diverse cultural backgrounds. This clarifies the mechanism through which justice-oriented conditions could strengthen the relationship between democratic leadership and cultural diversity.

Social identity theory is further advanced by demonstrating that cultural diversity in universities concerns not only the presence of different identity groups, but also the recognition, representation, participation, and sense of belonging afforded to those groups. Students and staff may enter the university with diverse ethnic, religious, linguistic, regional, and socio-economic identities; yet the institutional treatment of these identities shapes whether diversity is experienced as meaningful inclusion or merely demographic presence. Cultural diversity is consequently conceptualised as an institutional and relational phenomenon, in which recognition, equitable participation, and belonging are central to how different groups experience membership within the university community.

The findings also have broader relevance to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDGs 4, 5, 10, and 16, as listed by the United Nations (2015). Their significance for SDG 4 (Quality Education) lies in demonstrating that educational inclusion extends beyond formal access to encompass the conditions under which students from diverse backgrounds participate and experience university life. The relationship between democratic leadership, social justice,

and cultural diversity therefore resonates with the SDG 4 emphasis on inclusive and equitable quality education. The findings similarly relate to SDG 5 (Gender Equality) insofar as institutional conditions that promote fairness and inclusion may influence how different forms of identity-based disadvantage are experienced within higher education.

The connection with SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) is particularly evident in the finding that cultural diversity is shaped by conditions of fairness, access, recognition, and participation. Inequalities associated with ethnicity, religion, language, region, and socio-economic background are therefore relevant not only as demographic differences but also in terms of how they affect members' experiences within the university. The findings further align with SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) through their emphasis on participation, fairness, representation, and inclusive institutional processes. Taken together, these connections indicate that cultural diversity in higher education intersects with wider questions of educational equity, social inclusion, and institutional justice, extending the significance of the findings beyond the immediate leadership-diversity relationship.

Limitations

The study was limited to selected public universities in Southwest Nigeria, which may constrain the generalisability of the findings to other geopolitical regions and to private, faith-based, and specialised institutions. The quantitative strand focused on final-year undergraduates, limiting representation of postgraduate students, lower-level undergraduates, and academic staff without administrative roles; moreover, the modest explanatory values of the statistical models indicate that other institutional and contextual factors may also influence cultural diversity.

Future research should examine democratic leadership, social justice, and cultural diversity across other geopolitical zones and institutional types in Nigeria. Researchers should also examine additional moderating and mediating factors, such as institutional culture, curriculum inclusivity, language policy, religious accommodation, student support, and resource availability, while including postgraduate students, lecturers, non-teaching staff, and policymakers. Qualitative research could further explore how minority groups experience cultural diversity beyond quantitative measures.

Conclusion

Democratic leadership fostered cultural diversity through participation, teamwork, motivation, and shared engagement, but its influence was strengthened when supported by social justice conditions, including fairness, equity, inclusive learning environments, access to resources, and recognition of diversity. Cultural diversity, therefore, extended beyond the demographic presence of students and staff from different ethnic, religious, linguistic, regional, and socio-economic backgrounds to encompass their recognition, representation, treatment, and meaningful participation in university life.

Universities should strengthen democratic leadership through meaningful participation, inclusive representation, collaborative practices, equitable access to resources, and transparent decision-making, even as policymakers support institutional frameworks that promote diversity, inclusion, and equitable participation.

The study contributed to scholarship by extending research on democratic leadership and cultural diversity to public universities in Southwest Nigeria. It advanced democratic leadership theory by demonstrating that its relationship with cultural diversity was contingent on social justice conditions, while contributing to social justice leadership and social identity theories by highlighting justice, recognition, belonging, and participation as important dimensions of inclusive university life.

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