Leading Like a Woman?

A Qualitative Study of How Women's Leadership Differs Between Male- and Female-Dominated Industries

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Abstract:
This thesis explores how female leadership differs across male- and female-dominated industries by examining how gendered norms shape leadership behavior. Rather than comparing women to men, the study focuses on differences among women across contexts. Interviews with 14 female managers in Sweden suggest that leadership behavior is shaped by contextual expectations, highlighting that there is no single model of "female leadership". The biggest difference emerged in how norms are embedded in the industries and how this allows leaders to react to them. In male-dominated sectors, normative pressures make gender expectations feel external, prompting women to consciously adapt or resist. In female-dominated sectors, cultural-cognitive pressures make norms feel internalized, and harder to challenge. To explain these dynamics, the study introduces the concept of *identity alignment*, highlighting how personal alignment with institutional norms affects leadership behavior. This suggests that women may be perceived as empathetic or relational, not only due to inherent traits, but also because of deeply embedded norms in certain industries. By making these invisible pressures more visible, the study encourages reflection, awareness, and agency in how women engage with leadership expectations, offering a nuanced understanding of gendered leadership and its contextual nature.

Keywords
Contextual Leadership, Institutional Norms, Gendered Organizations, Female Managers, Gender Studies

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Definitions

Female-dominated industries	*Industries in Sweden that have a gender distribution of at least 60% females (Yrkesregistret, SCB, 2023) and/or industries that can be argued to have a female culture, based on organizational logic* and *individual identities. (Acker, 1990)*
Male-dominated industries	*Industries in Sweden that have a gender distribution of at least 60% males (Yrkesregistret, SCB, 2023) and /or industries that can be argued to have a male culture, based on organizational logic* and *individual identities. (Acker, 1990)*
Female leaders/managers	*In this thesis, solely defined as a woman in a management position and is not influenced by any inherent meaning associated with the term. (Essinger & Höglund, 2025)*

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The topic of women in leadership has attracted significant scholarly attention over the past decades, as women remain persistently underrepresented in top executive roles across industries (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ryan & Haslam, 2005). In response, much of existing research has sought to identify gender-based differences in leadership style, where women are depicted as relational and collaborative, compared to their male counterparts, who are framed as directive and transactional (Eagly et al., 2003; Gabriel & Gardner, 1999; Khan, 2024; Naura, 2023). These categorizations have shaped dominant narratives around leadership and gender, frequently positioning women as inherently different from men.

Such depictions may ignore intra-gender variation, implying a static "female leadership" archetype. As a result, women have historically been portrayed as a fixed category, defined by shared traits, rather than as diverse individuals navigating complex social and institutional landscapes (Chapman, 1975). However, contemporary research shows that women increasingly distance themselves from traditional feminine traits, suggesting a need to revise outdated leader stereotypes (Donnelly & Twenge, 2017; Eagly & Wood, 2017). Moreover, femininity can be context-dependent; individuals may express it more in female-dominated settings, showing how gender expression shifts with social dynamics (Mehta & Dementieva, 2017).

Although recent research has begun acknowledging that leadership behavior may be shaped by contextual factors (Gannouni & Ramboarison-Lalao, 2019; Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1999; Offringa & Groeneveld, 2024; Gaytan, 2014), little attention has been paid to how leadership styles vary *within* the category of women. The result is a knowledge gap: although there exists much literature on how women supposedly lead differently from *men*, we know surprisingly little about how women differ from *each other* in leadership roles, and how these differences are shaped by the gendered contexts in which they lead. Understanding how women adapt their leadership in different industry contexts is crucial, as evidence shows that conforming to gendered expectations can negatively impact their mental health and well-being (Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1999).

This thesis responds to this gap by shifting the analytical focus away from gender differences between men and women, and toward differences between women. Specifically, the authors explore how women in male- and female-dominated industries may adopt different leadership styles, and how these styles are shaped by institutional pressures. In doing so, the aim is to contribute to the

conversation on gender and leadership by viewing it not as a matter of fixed traits but as a dynamic interplay between individuals and their environments.

1.2. Research Gap

Existing literature in the field of gender and leadership has largely been comparative, concerned with how women differ from men in terms of style and barriers to advancement (Bishu & Headley, 2020; Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Edaño et al., 2025; Tokbaeva & Achtenhagen, 2021). This research, while valuable, tends to treat gender as a fixed identity, overlooking how leadership is shaped by contextual norms and organizational cultures.

In parallel, the field of contextual leadership has highlighted how leadership styles must adapt depending on cultural, geographical, and industrial settings (House et al., 1997; Byrne & Bradley, 2007; Boykins et al., 2013; Dickson & Mitchelson, 2003). However, this research does not account for gender dynamics.

Recent work has begun to explore the intersection between gender and context, showing how leadership expectations differ between male- and female-dominated industries (Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1999; Offringa & Groeneveld, 2024; Gaytan, 2014). However, this research continues to compare males and females as two distinct categories, and does not make intra-group comparisons between females in different contexts.

Addressing this gap, this thesis investigates how external gender norms and internalized institutional expectations influence leadership approaches among women across both male- and female-dominated industries. In doing so, it moves beyond binary gender comparisons and applies Scott's (2001) institutional theory to offer a more context-sensitive understanding of how female leadership is shaped by the interplay between gender and institutional environment.

1.3. Aim and Research Question

Given the importance of contextual factors in explaining leadership behavior (Day, 2000; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Oc, 2018), a deeper investigation is needed into the role of different *gendered* contexts in influencing behaviors by women in management positions. Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to the current debate, which, to a great extent, categorises female leaders as different from their male counterparts.

The aim is to investigate if, and how, gendered norms in different contexts influence the leadership behavior executed by women. Through in-depth interviews with female managers in male- and female-dominated sectors in Sweden, this study seeks to understand expectations and behaviors. Thereby, it explores how contextually embedded norms tied to gender may influence leadership behavior, answering the research question:

How does the leadership of women differ between male- and female-dominated industries?

1.4. Main Focus and Delimitations

This study focuses specifically on industries that are statistically defined as male- or female-dominated (gender distribution of ≥60% of one gender, *Yrkesregistret*, 2023). To ensure consistency and minimize cross-cultural variation, the geographical scope is limited to Sweden. Sweden is a country oftentimes ranked as a top country globally when it comes to gender equality, indicating a high level of equality between men and women at work (Tokbaeva & Achtenhagen, 2021; *Global Gender Gap Report, 2024*). This contributes to a solid ground for this thesis to concentrate on industry-based differences in leadership norms, while minimising influence by embedded gender-discrimination in society at large.

2. Literature Review

Research on women in leadership and contextual styles is well established, yet few studies explore their interaction. This review is structured to *(1) summarize findings on female leadership traits and barriers, (2) outline how leadership adapts across contexts*, and *(3) highlight research on the intersection between gender and industry*. This leads to the specific gap this thesis addresses: If/how female leaders adjust their leadership in response to the gendered culture of the industries in which they operate.

2.1. Women in Leadership: Traits and Barriers

Previous research on women in leadership positions has focused on two main topics: *(1)* defining and comparing stereotypical "male" and "female" leadership traits (Rodríguez-López et al., 2023), and *(2)* exploring the lack of female leaders, establishing explanations such as structural barriers and obstacles (e.g., Oakley, 2000).

2.1.1. Traits

While early meta-analyses (Chapman, 1975; Eagly & Johnson, 1990) supported the existence of gender differences in leadership styles, more recent research questions the consistency of these patterns, suggesting that women are moving away from stereotypically feminine traits (Donnelly & Twenge, 2017). This limitation underlines the need to update outdated stereotypes and examine leadership through more dynamic and institutionally embedded frameworks.

Moreover, results on this topic are often inconsistent, and conclusions are ambiguous. While some studies support gender-based style differences (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001), others find that leadership traits often overlap and vary by situation (Thompson & Vecchio, 2009). More recent work has begun to recognise that leadership behavior is not a result of innate gender traits, but is shaped by how leaders are forced to navigate within gendered norms (Eagly & Carli, 2007). This has prompted scholars to shift attention from individual traits toward structural barriers and organizational norms that impact women's advancement.

2.1.2. Barriers

A second stream of literature focuses on the structural barriers women face in leadership. Despite formal equality efforts, women remain underrepresented in senior roles (Oakley, 2000). This has been linked to gendered recruitment practices, cultural biases, and exclusion from informal networks (Bishu & Headley, 2020; Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016; Kubu, 2018; Lekchiri & Kamm, 2020). Ryan & Haslam (2005) further show that women are disproportionately appointed to risky leadership roles during times of crisis, reinforcing negative stereotypes when failure occurs.

According to some scholars, the "template for leadership" is associated with male attributes such as assertiveness (e.g., Cuadrado et al., 2015). Women who display these traits often face backlash for violating gender norms (Brescoll, 2016), while those who act communally risk being perceived as less competent (Rudman & Glick, 1999). Thereby, even when women exhibit dominant traits, the mismatch between masculinized task demands and prevailing gender stereotypes continues to hinder their emergence as leaders (Ritter & Yoder, 2004). Much of this work stems from early research grounded in social role and role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), which focuses on stereotype-consistent behaviors and role violations, but often treats organizational settings as neutral rather than gendered. To better understand how leadership expectations shift across settings, scholars have increasingly turned to research on contextual leadership.

2.2. Contextual Leadership: Cultural and Industrial

Contextual leadership research often draws on contingency theory and situational leadership models, positing that effective leadership is shaped by external variables. (Oc, 2018). Two contexts have been especially explored - *cultural and geographical* and *industry type*.

2.2.1. Cultural and Geographical Contexts

Several scholars demonstrate how different countries hold different expectations for leaders influenced by cultural context (Aktas et al., 2016; Pekerti, 2005; Yang, 2024). Byrne and Bradley (2007) emphasized how national culture shapes not just behavior, but the standards by which leadership is judged. They concluded that a manager's national culture shapes leadership style through the influence of cultural values (ibid). For instance, Asian leadership

emphasizes collective well-being and respect for authority (Chu & King, 2019), while Western leadership often prioritizes an assertive and individualistic approach (Lerutla & Steyn, 2022). While these findings highlight the role of context in shaping leadership, they treat national culture as fixed and homogenous, leaving less attention to more immediate contexts, such as industries, which shape leadership through localized norms. Industry, therefore, emerges as a critical context to explore.

2.2.2. Industrial Contexts

Boykins et al. (2013) found that both organizational role and industry significantly affect how leaders act. Research from various industries confirms this: in the automotive sector, democratic and transformational leadership boost employee motivation, while autocratic and charismatic styles are less effective (Vasileva & Datta, 2021). Meanwhile, in banking, transactional and passive leadership improve team effectiveness (Sukumaran, 2024). These findings illustrate that leadership styles are shaped by industry-specific factors. Industry thus offers a valuable lens for examining how gender dynamics influence leadership behavior. Yet, these perspectives often treat context as a neutral backdrop, neglecting its gendered dimensions. This calls for more research accounting for gender dynamics when exploring contextual influences on leadership.

2.3. Intersection of Gender and Context in Leadership

Building on these insights into the role of context, research has begun to specifically examine how gender interacts with contextual factors to shape leadership practices and perceptions.

2.3.1. Leadership in Gendered Contexts

Shen and Joseph (2020) concluded that women leading male-dominated teams are evaluated more harshly than men, especially when using leadership styles misaligned with traditional feminine stereotypes. In contrast, gender-balanced environments help female leaders be seen as more legitimate and effective (ibid). This underscores that context influences both what leaders *do* and how they are *perceived*. However, while this work focuses on team or organizational composition, other scholars have explored how broader industry-level gender

norms influence leadership. This is crucial, as industries often carry deeply embedded gendered expectations that extend beyond individual workplaces.

O'Brien et al. (2023) showed that male-dominated industries still reward traditional, "masculine" leadership behaviors like assertiveness and competition. In these spaces, female leaders experience pressures to conform to prevailing norms (Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1999). On the other hand, female-dominated industries place more value on emotional intelligence, collaboration, and ethical responsibility (Cummings et al., 2018). In these settings, leaders are more likely to adopt communal, interpersonally oriented leadership styles, reflecting the influence of gender composition on leadership dynamics (Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1999). Although this research offers valuable insights into how industry norms shape leadership expectations, it continues to rely on binary gender comparisons. Focusing on the differences between men and women overlooks how women differ from each other. This further stresses the need to explore this intersection, the research gap this thesis addresses.

2.4. Summary and Research Gap

Research on women in leadership has focused mainly on gendered leadership traits and the barriers women face in male-dominated environments (e.g., Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Bishu & Headley, 2020b; Lekchiri & Kamm, 2020; Tokbaeva & Achtenhagen, 2021). While valuable, this reduces leadership behavior to fixed gender differences or external constraints, underplaying women's agency. At the same time, contextual leadership research shows that effective leadership varies across cultures and industries, but often overlooks gender dynamics (Boykins et al., 2013; Byrne & Bradley, 2007; Pekerti, 2005).

Recent studies have begun to explore how gender and context interact, showing that industry norms influence both how women lead and how they're perceived (Cummings et al., 2018; O'Brien et al., 2023; Shen & Joseph, 2021). Although there is growing interest in how gendered industry contexts shape leadership, existing studies largely tend to document differences in perception or style between men and women, but rarely examine how women differ from each other.

3. Theoretical Framework

To explain how external pressures and internalized gender norms shape leadership of women across industries, this study applies Scott's institutional theory (2001) and Acker's theory of gendered organizations (1990). Scott explains how organizations and individuals conform to *normative* and *cultural-cognitive pressures*, while Acker shows how *gendered norms* are embedded in organizational cultures. Together, they enable a comprehensive analysis of how leadership differences emerge from gendered institutional pressures.

3.1. Scott's Institutional Theory (2001)

Scott (2001) conceptualizes institutions as social structures composed of three pillars: *regulative*, *normative*, and *cultural-cognitive*. These pillars describe how individuals in organizations conform to external pressures to achieve legitimacy and acceptance. This thesis focuses on the normative and cultural-cognitive pillars because they move beyond formal rules to capture the subtle, often invisible expectations that shape leadership behavior, a dynamic central to understanding gendered leadership across industries (Patterson & Walcutt, 2014). The regulative pillar, focusing on formal rules and enforcement mechanisms, is excluded as gender-related policies are rarely formalized and rather subtly enforced (ibid). Figure 3.1 outlines the two chosen pillars, illustrating the key dimensions where different theoretical perspectives diverge.

	Normative Pillar	Cultural-Cognitive Pillar
Basis of compliance	Social obligation	Taken-for-granted shared understandings
Basis of order	Binding expectations	Constitutive schema
Mechanisms	Normative	Mimetic
Logic	Appropriateness	Orthodoxy
Indicators	Certification or Accreditation	Common beliefs, shared logics of action & isomorphism
Basis of legitimacy	Morally governed	Being comprehensive, recognisable and culturally supported

Figure 3.1. Scott's Normative and Cultural-Cognitive pillars (Scott, 2001). For a detailed explanation of all categories, see the Appendix.

3.1.1. The Normative Pillar

The *basis of compliance* in the normative pillar stems from a perceived social obligation to uphold shared values and norms (Scott, 2001). *Order* is based on binding expectations rooted in moral appropriateness. Normative *mechanisms* such as professional standards and peer pressure shape actions. The *logic* behind actions is driven by appropriateness (how one should act), with visible *indicators* like accreditation and feedback confirming actions are in line with expectations. *Legitimacy* arises when actions align with morals (ibid).

In the context of this thesis, this suggests that normative pressures can influence how female managers behave. High normative pressures may impose expectations on women, influencing them to adjust their behaviors to align with stereotypical behaviors. Research confirms how women adapt to expectations about what is considered "appropriate" leadership in their respective industries (Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1999). Similarly, Cook & Glass (2014) argue that women are judged against institutionally shaped *norms* of *appropriate* leadership. Unlike Cook & Glass, who focus on access to leadership, our study explores how those already in leadership positions behave.

3.1.2. The Cultural-Cognitive Pillar

Compliance under the cultural-cognitive pillar arises through unconscious alignment with shared understandings and taken-for-granted assumptions (Scott, 2001). These understandings form constitutive schemas, which create *order* by assuming what is seen as "normal" or "natural." *Mechanisms* include mimetic behavior, copying others to fit in. Actions in this pillar are driven by a *logic* of orthodoxy, where decisions are justified because they match cultural scripts and generalized beliefs. Institutional *indicators* are recognized not through formal credentials, but by how well behaviors reflect a group's common beliefs and shared logics, and *legitimacy* is achieved through alignment with social scripts (ibid).

Applied to leadership, Scott's cultural-cognitive pillar explains how leadership norms can become internalized as natural or self-evident within gendered industries. Walters et al. (2022) demonstrate this through academic conferences, where male-dominated hierarchies persist despite gender diversity, reinforcing the shared cognitive image of the "ideal academic" as male. This reflects how leadership legitimacy is tied to internalized, gendered prototypes. Lester (2008) shows how professional women often conform to stereotypically feminine behaviors, not solely due to external pressure, but because organizational culture subtly frames these behaviors as appropriate and expected. Similarly, Costas & Grey (2014) reveal how secrecy becomes a normalized leadership behavior within organizations, driven not by formal rules but by shared assumptions about what is appropriate to reveal or conceal. These examples illustrate how cultural-cognitive pressures can silently guide and legitimize leadership behaviors, making them particularly powerful in sustaining gendered expectations across different industries.

3.2. Acker's Theory of Gendered Organizations (1990)

Acker (1990) describes five interrelated processes through which gender is embedded in the culture of an organization. Two out of these are applied in this thesis to determine a gendered culture within organizations: *organisational logic and policies*, and *individual identities.* These two dimensions have been deemed to most directly shape the assumptions and behaviors that influence leadership perceptions, which can be linked to institutional pressures addressed by Scott's theory (2001). *Organizational logic and policies* explore how formal structures, rules, and practices are based on gendered assumptions, while *individual identities* describes how individuals in organizations unconsciously absorb and act according to societal gender expectations (Acker, 1990).

3.3. Applicability

Scott's Institutional Theory is highly applicable to this thesis as it provides a robust framework for understanding how external pressures shape individual leadership styles. By focusing on normative and cultural-cognitive pressures, the theory captures how industry-specific norms and expectations, such as those related to gender, can influence what leadership behaviors are viewed as appropriate or legitimate. Out of the six dimensions identified by Scott, five have been deemed suitable in explaining individuals' behaviors. The *basis of legitimacy* dimension has been determined to be less relevant as it explores how institutions gain legitimacy rather than individuals. The remaining align with the thesis's aim to move beyond assumptions about leadership and instead examine how leadership is shaped by broader institutional environments.

Research confirms how institutional norms significantly influence women's leadership styles by shaping the context in which women operate and the expectations placed upon them. Sidani et al., (2015) and Yousafzai et al., (2015) suggest that the institutional environment can either facilitate or hinder women's leadership by establishing norms that dictate acceptable behaviors and roles for women in management positions.

Scott's and Acker's theories combined (see Figure 3.2), will be used to analyse and explain behaviors observed in this study. The combined model shows how the gendered norms (Acker, 1990) translate into behaviors through Scott's five dimensions of industry pressures: the *basis of order* constitutes the foundation for expectations and assumptions within the pillars, which sets a framework for behavioral responses, as implied by the *order of compliance*. This behavioral response is then enacted through *mechanisms*, reinforced through institutional *logic,* and validated through *indicators*, creating a cycle upholding norms.

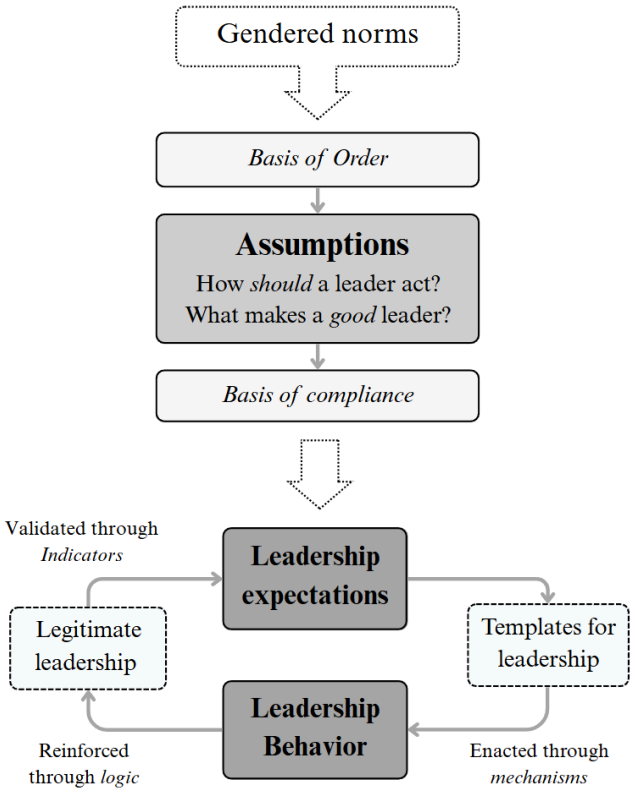


Figure 3.2. Usage of theoretical framework: how gendered norms impact leadership behavior. (Höglund & Essinger, 2025; based on theories by Scott, 2001; Acker, 1990)

3.4. Theory Discussion

Scott's theory has been deemed more relevant than other theories that have been traditionally applied to leadership research. Much of the early literature on gendered leadership behavior is grounded in social role theory and role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), which emphasize stereotype-consistent behaviors and the penalties for violating them. While these frameworks have been instrumental in identifying how women are perceived in leadership roles, it has been critiqued for reinforcing binary gender stereotypes, overlooking contextual and structural influences, and failing to account for how women actively adapt or challenge leadership norms across different environments (e.g., Ely & Padavic, 2007; Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2009; Koening & Eagly, 2011).

Contextual leadership is often explored using contingency theories (e.g., Fielder, 1964, 1970; House, 1971; Hersey & Blanchard, 2013). Although these models emphasize the importance of context, they assume fixed leader traits and often overlook broader cultural or institutional influences. Scholars

have criticized contingency theories for being overly prescriptive, lacking flexibility, and ignoring power, identity, and social norms (Graeff, 1997; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

When examining the intersection of gender and context, Acker (1990) is often applied to investigate how masculinity is embedded in organizational structures, but this framing has been critiqued for neglecting how feminine norms can also operate as restrictive or prescriptive forces (Bates, 2021). In this thesis, Acker's theory is therefore applied not to analyze marginalization directly, but to define the gendered logic of industries.

To address these limitations, this thesis applies Scott's (2001) theory, which provides a more dynamic and structural approach to understanding how leadership is shaped. Unlike trait- or role-based models, it focuses on how external norms and internalized assumptions shape behavior, making it relevant when investigating behavioral differences in gendered contexts.

However, Scott's (2001) framework is not without limitations. Scholars have noted that it tends to underemphasize individual agency and subjective experience (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2009; Porter, 2012). This study addresses this limitation by using Scott's model interpretively, focusing on how women perceive, internalize, and adapt to institutional expectations, rather than assuming behavioral determinism. Through in-depth interviews, the analysis explores how norms are navigated, not just followed.

Additionally, Scott pays limited attention to gender power dynamics - a gap addressed by integrating Acker's perspective. As Risman (2004) argues, gendered norms operate at both individual and institutional levels. Neither theory alone fully captures both the symbolic and structural dimensions of gendered leadership. By integrating them, this study analyzes how deeply embedded gender assumptions are not only *produced* by organizations (Acker) but also *reproduced* through institutional scripts and leadership behaviors (Scott).

4. Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological framework adopted to explore how gendered institutional norms shape female leadership across different industry contexts. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm, the study explores participants' subjective experiences and meaning-making processes. An abductive strategy enabled balancing theoretical sensitivity with openness to emergent patterns, ensuring that analysis remained grounded in the empirical realities of leadership practice. Semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis were used to capture both individual behaviors and the contextual structures influencing female leadership, aligned with Scott's (2001) and Acker's (1990) theoretical frameworks.

4.1. Research Approach

4.1.1. Research Paradigm

This study follows an interpretivist paradigm, which views reality as socially constructed and best understood through individuals' subjective experiences (Thanh & Thành, 2015). This is particularly relevant for the aim of this thesis: exploring how female leaders perceive and respond to gendered expectations in their organizational environments. Interpretivism also supports the co-construction of knowledge, recognizing that both participant narratives and researcher perspectives shape findings.

4.1.2. Research Approach

An abductive approach was chosen to enable a flexible interplay between theory and data. While the analysis was informed by Scott's (2001) and Acker's (1990) theories, it remained open to adapting these frameworks based on recurring patterns in the empirical material (Bell et al., 2019). Abduction allowed for refining theoretical assumptions in response to context-sensitive insights that emerged through the interviews. Unlike deductive reasoning, which may impose rigid theoretical structures, abduction supports iterative theory-building grounded in lived experiences. This flexibility was essential in interpreting women's leadership practices within different contexts. Fragmentation in early themes was addressed through systematic categorization and ongoing linkage to theoretical foundations.

4.2. Research Design

4.2.1. Qualitative Design

Given the study's focus on subjective interpretation and context, a qualitative design was chosen. Qualitative research is ideal for capturing the depth and complexity of personal leadership experiences across different industry settings (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Given that much of the existing research focuses solely on one industry type (O'Brien et al., 2023; Tokbaeva & Achtenhagen, 2021), a qualitative approach allows for an in-depth analysis that considers leadership in both sectors, particularly relevant when exploring how behaviors are shaped by industry contexts. By using qualitative methods, this study could capture the lived experiences of female leaders, uncovering insights that may be overlooked in quantitative data.

4.2.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews offered the necessary flexibility to explore participants' subjective leadership experiences in depth. This method aligned with the study's interpretivist foundation, enabling participants to express how they experienced, interpreted, and responded to organizational norms. More rigid methods, such as surveys, were excluded as they would limit access to the nuanced, contextual insights required for the theoretical lens.

4.2.3. Design of Interview Questions

The questions included a mix of open and categorical questions. Initial questions addressed participants' roles and industries, followed by more personal reflections on leadership style and context. This funnel structure helped participants move from general to reflective responses. As common themes emerged, the questions were refined to explore these areas more deeply, which is in line with the study's aim and the interpretative approach (Thanh & Thành, 2015).

4.3. Data Collection

4.3.1. Sampling Strategy and Participant Selection

Purposive and quota sampling (Emmel, 2013) were used to recruit female leaders from male- and female-dominated industries based on gender distribution data (*SCB*, 2023). This ensured relevance to the research question and sectoral balance, with participants drawn from banking, engineering, construction (male-dominated), healthcare, and education (female-dominated). Fourteen participants were selected to represent different leadership roles, industries, and career stages. Whilst this is a smaller sample size than quantitative studies apply, it aligns with qualitative research norms (Creswell & Poth, 2016), and with the study's aim and research paradigm in gaining deeper knowledge on subjective experiences.

While this design supports sectoral comparison, it may not fully capture leadership variations linked to other factors such as age, ethnicity, or organizational size. While this limits transferability, it aligns with the study's aim and focus on female managers in Sweden. Participants were recruited via email with study information and consent details (See Appendix 2). The selected industries were classified as gendered based on two of Acker's dimensions: *organizational logic* and *individual identities*.

Banking, engineering, and construction were considered male-coded industries, as they often are associated with toughness, risk-taking, and task orientation (Ness, 2012). These traits align with *masculine gender norms* and are sustained by masculine organizational logics. For example, in banking, a masculine "gender culture" is reinforced through recruitment practices, such as interview dynamics and selection criteria, that privilege assertiveness, competitiveness, and individualism, thereby perpetuating hegemonic masculinity within the workplace (Jones, 1998). In construction, masculine norms are shaped by occupational identities that valorize toughness, risk-taking, and competence. (Hanna et al., 2020; Kosla, 2015).

Meanwhile, healthcare and education are defined as female-coded. These are often seen as feminine industries due to traditional *gender norms* that associate women with caregiving roles, reflected in their organizational *cultures*. Policies promoting women's inclusion may reinforce the perception that these fields align naturally with feminine traits (Bedoya-Vaca et al., 2016; Muraya et al., 2019). In healthcare, the focus on holistic care and family involvement aligns with traditional feminine traits, with many women prioritizing work-family balance due to societal gender expectations (Chudner et al., 2025). Similarly, in

education, women dominate early and primary teaching roles, where care is strongly linked to feminine identity (Bedoya-Vaca et al., 2016).

4.3.2. Interviewing Processes

Interviews were conducted in person or online (Teams, Google Meet), based on participant preference. In-person formats allowed richer non-verbal engagement, while online interviews were more accessible and efficient (Gray et al., 2020). Each session lasted 30 - 45 minutes and was audio recorded using multiple devices. Questions moved from a general professional background to reflective discussion on leadership behavior and context. This progression supported depth while allowing flexibility. All quotes were translated from Swedish to English. To reduce potential misinterpretation, each translated quote was compared with the original transcript to ensure accuracy with participants' intended meanings.

4.4. Thematic Analysis

This thesis applied Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization, coding, theme generation, review, definition, and write-up. First, we transcribed interviews using Klang AI and Turboscribe.ai. Coding was done manually, and insights were visualized using digital tools (Canva, sticky notes). First-order codes, providing an overview of the main themes discovered in the empirical findings, were grouped into five second-order themes (communication, decision-making, motivation, expectations, and reactions). These were then synthesized into two aggregate dimensions: leadership behavior and experienced expectations. These aggregate dimensions were interpreted through Scott's cultural-cognitive and normative pillars, helping explain how institutional context influences both what leaders do and how they are expected to behave. See Figure 4.1 for a graphic representation of the thematic analysis.

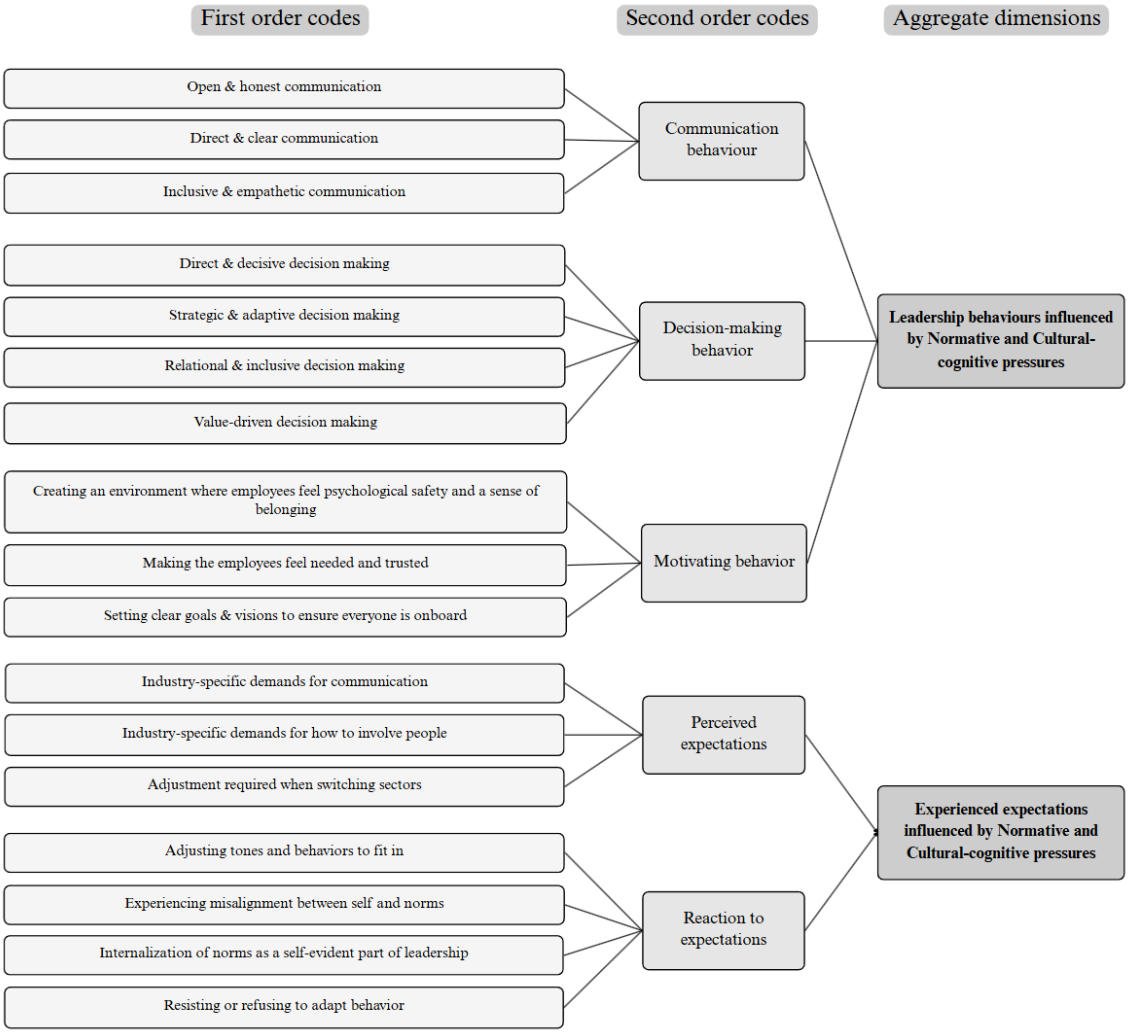


Figure 4.1: Overview of first , second-order themes and aggregate dimensions of empirical findings. (Essinger & Höglund, 2025)

4.5. Research Quality

4.5.1. Credibility

To enhance credibility, semi-structured interviews were used, allowing participants to share experiences in their own words, on their terms. Interview questions were piloted and revised for clarity and relevance. Although transcribing of interviews was done using AI, the transcribed versions were double-checked by both authors with the original audio file as reference. Themes were derived both inductively from the data and through theory (Scott and Acker), ensuring that findings were grounded in participant narratives yet theoretically

coherent. The combination of predetermined questions and flexibility for emergent themes is in line with the abductive approach, by integrating both deductive and inductive elements (Bell et al., 2019).

4.5.2. Reflexivity

Reflexivity was integral to our methodology, acknowledging that our positionalities as researchers inevitably shape data collection, interpretation, and representation, especially since an interpretive approach has been used. As female scholars with a shared interest in gender and leadership, we are aware that our background, values, and expectations may have influenced both how we framed questions and how we interpreted responses. To address this, we maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process, noting our assumptions, emotional reactions, and emerging thoughts. Ongoing internal discussion between the researchers further helped challenge assumptions and refine interpretations. This helped make our interpretive process more transparent and self-aware. Moreover, we view the empirical data as co-constructed, shaped through interaction between researchers and participants. Interview accounts are not treated as objective facts, but as situated perspectives, filtered through both personal experience and institutional norms.

4.5.3. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to the design and execution of this research. Adhering to principles of informed consent, it was ensured that all participants were fully aware of the study's purpose, their rights, and how their data would be used. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout, with all personal information securely stored and de-identified in reporting. Additionally, we remained vigilant about avoiding plagiarism, properly citing all sources, and acknowledging the contributions of others. These measures aimed to uphold the integrity, transparency, and ethical rigor of the study.

4.6. Use of Artificial Intelligence

AI tools have been utilised throughout the processes to ensure both efficiency and accuracy. KlangAI and Turboscribe.ai were used to transcribe interviews. Although resulting in transcripts with high

accuracy, the results were manually analyzed to minimize mistakes. ChatGPT and Perplexity.ai were used for brainstorming initially, to gather ideas and sort out unrealistic ones. Later, the tools were mainly used for feedback and language improvements, as well as rephrasing and shortening of sentences and paragraphs, to ensure preciseness in content and language. No analytical findings were extracted from AI, the tools were merely used for support and efficiency, not for data interpretation.

5. Empirics

This section presents the empirical data, which provides the foundation to answer how the behavior of female managers differs between female- and male-dominated industries. The empirics are presented following the second-order themes described in Figure 4.1. Table 5.1 explains the code names used in this section, where names starting with "F" have been chosen for the *female-dominated* industries and names starting with "M" have been chosen for the *male-dominated* industries.

#	Code-name	Industry	Male/Female
1	Flora	Education	Female-dominated
2	Frida	Education	Female-dominated
3	Freja	Health-care	Female-dominated
4	Fatima	Health-care	Female-dominated
5	Felicia	Health-care	Female-dominated
6	Fredrika	Health-care	Female-dominated
7	Märta	Banking	Male-dominated
8	Maja	Banking	Male-dominated
9	Molly	Engineering	Male-dominated
10	Minna	Engineering	Male-dominated
11	Mira	Construction	Male-dominated
12	Moa	Construction	Male-dominated
13	Matilda	Construction	Male-dominated
14	Michelle	Construction	Male-dominated

Table 5.1. Summary of all interviewees and code names used (Essinger & Höglund, 2025)

5.1. Experienced Expectations Influenced by Normative and Cultural-Cognitive Pressures

The empirical findings reveal that women leaders are aware of the expectations placed upon them. These expectations often reflect gendered assumptions about leadership. When these norms do not align with the leaders' values, some women adapt to gain legitimacy, while others resist in favor of authenticity.

5.1.1. Perceived Expectations

Women in male-dominated sectors presented a picture of behavioral expectations centered around decisiveness, confidence, and control:

"You have to be able to make quick decisions. And stand by them. [...] *You need to be confident in yourself and your role."* - Michelle

"You have to understand that you're the one making the decision. [...] *You need to be brave while also understanding the consequences."* - Märta

In contrast, leaders in female-dominated sectors emphasized a need for a more collaborative and empathetic approach with emphasis on emotional intelligence and inclusivity:

"You can't be too direct or straightforward. [...] *There's a need for a softer communication style."* - Freja

"There's an expectation that you keep your ethical compass high." - Flora

"I believe there's a humanistic attitude and orientation in this industry, so of course that affects me. - Fatima

Leaders like Flora and Freja, who transitioned between sectors, noted stark contrasts:

"[...] *coming from a male-dominated industry to a female-dominated one, I almost got a shock and thought, my god, can people not say things as they are? Here I'm driving straight into a ditch. This isn't working."* - Flora

"Even if my strengths have stayed the same, the two environments are completely different. In the male-dominated setting, it was about being tough, showing initiative through confidence, and keeping things professional. Now, in my current role, it's more about soft values, talking about purpose, making a social impact. [...] *"* - Freja

This underscored that there might be differences in how leaders are expected to behave in different industries.

5.1.2. Reaction to Expectations

Some women experienced clashes between industry-expectations and their inherent traits.

In this industry, you lack the kind of masculinity I have; you lose directness, firmness, and the courage to make decisions. - Freja

"Of course, you should be fair and empathetic, but that's not really what drives me. I think [...] *in healthcare*, *managers tend to be more caring and nurturing. But for me, I wouldn't say empathy is a key trait. That doesn't mean I'm unkind, but we're here to get the job done."* - Flora

"*I find that things are more straightforward in a male-dominated industry. In this female-dominated one, I feel like you have to tiptoe around and offer a bag of candy to make progress on certain issues. It goes completely against who I am, I feel like I'm forcing myself, but I've realized I have to do it*" - Flora

Interestingly, both Flora and Freja describe how the norms within their industry did not align with their inherent traits, despite the expectations being tied to "feminine qualities".

The respondents explained how they respond to the expectations, some through adjustments in behavior or by adopting a different tone or interpersonal style.

"I've learned to pay attention to [...] *tone and how I phrase things. Sometimes you have to mirror the room a bit. Sometimes I bring up sports, like hockey, just to have an easier entry point. Then they think, 'Okay, she gets it.'"*- Mira

"I almost had to practice. How should I approach [her], *how do I reach her without making her feel like she's being abruptly confronted? So I had to adjust, take a step back, and prepare differently."* - Flora

Others, however, resisted these norms or redefined them on their terms:

"I didn't get the attention that the issue or the answer I gave deserved. And then there's this expectation that I should change my way of speaking. But I've never felt it was that important to do so." - Matilda

These experiences highlight how female leaders navigate expectations through deliberate strategies. Some adapt by adjusting their tone, mirroring group dynamics, or referencing shared cultural touchpoints to gain legitimacy, particularly in male-coded environments. In female-dominated sectors, aligning with norms was described more as a self-evident part of leadership:

"Yes, of course you need to explain and communicate [...] *you have to be inclusive."* - Flora

"You have to work with compassion and you have to have empathy, naturally."- Fatima

"*I care so much about everyone that I want to help out.*" - Fredrika

These quotes highlight a contradiction of how, i.e., Flora above described how the traits are against her personality and felt as "forced", but she still expresses how "you have to be inclusive"

In summary, women in both sectors meet expectations, but the nature of these expectations and how consciously they are experienced, differ by context. Male-dominated sectors prioritize output and decisiveness, and here women display more conscious resistance. Female-dominated sectors promote inclusion and empathy, but these norms are more internalized and feel less optional, even for those who do not identify with them. The next section explores how these expectations manifest in actual leadership behaviors.

5.2. Leadership Behaviors Influenced by Normative and Cultural-Cognitive Pressures

This section presents the most recurring leadership behaviors described by the participants, coded as second order themes: (1) **Communication**, (2) **Motivation**, and (3) **Decision-Making.**

5.2.1. Communication

Participants described three main approaches to communication: (1) **open and honest**, (2) **direct and clear**, and (3) **inclusive and empathetic**. While all styles were present across industries, certain tendencies emerged.

Open and honest communication was discussed most frequently by leaders in male-dominated sectors.

"[I aim to] *create a culture that is as open as possible* [...]. *I communicate and I hope to receive communication in return."* - Märta

"I believe that the more open you are and show who you are, the better the cooperation in the team will be." - Mira

Direct and clear communication was seen as a vital leadership skill in both industries, and was described by several respondents**:**

"[It is important to be] *communicative, being straight and clear, setting clear goals so everyone knows to a large extent where we are going."* - Märta

"I often hear from employees and colleagues that I am a clear communicator." - Fatima

Inclusive and empathetic communication was especially emphasized by leaders in female-dominated fields; however also echoed by some in male-dominated industries:

" It is important that [the employees] *can participate in all decisions* [...]*"* - Flora

"[You should aim to] *create a good relationship* [with your employees] *and build trust. You need to get people on board."* - Felicia

"[...] *I've received positive feedback for being a good listener. Maybe because there's a certain empathy and warmth in how I express myself in those situations."* - Matilda

Although directness and clarity were valued in both sectors, empathetic and inclusive communication was more deeply embedded in the leadership style of those in female-dominated fields. Open and honest communication was more common in male-dominated fields.

5.2.2. Motivation

Participants described three primary motivational strategies: (1) **fostering psychological safety and belonging,** (2) **promoting autonomy and trust,** and (3) **establishing clear goals and purpose**.

Several leaders explained that they motivate their employees through making them feel **psychologically safe and a sense of belonging**. They described that a part of their job is to create a positive culture, where everyone feels seen, safe and can develop:

"It is really important to have a value base, and policies. There needs to be a safe space, and it is about seeing people. [...] *You should build a culture where people feel that they are allowed to fly - where they can thrive and develop."* - Michelle

"[...] *you work with creating visions and a culture, it is your role to be a carrier of - and create - a positive culture."* - Felicia

"Sometimes you step on a mine, but then you can learn from it. [...] *You need a forgiving environment, so no one walks around and is afraid to be yelled at."* - Moa

Some leaders, especially in the female-dominated industries, stressed work-life balance as a core motivator:

"I repeatedly talk about being 'good enough'. To prioritize recovery and rest. It is important that we feel good, and to take it easy at times." - Felicia

"Well-being is the prerequisite to being productive. [...] *It is important that you have fun at work. At least, that is what I tell myself."* - Freja

Promoting autonomy and trust was done through empowerment and delegation, and was described to be an efficient way to motivate employees, especially among managers in male-dominated fields.

"Much more than factors such as salary and bonuses, [it motivates employees] *to feel needed, to receive confirmation, and to simply feel important. Those are components for creating motivation and engagement."* - Molly

"... and the part about giving them responsibility. I think that motivates many employees. And then to have a good dialogue with your colleagues." - Mira

"You need to give them responsibility, the employees should find out for themselves how to do their tasks. [...] *It is my job to enable them to contribute, come up with ideas, and find clever solutions."* - Frida

Several respondents in both industries explained that **setting clear expectations and goals** helps to motivate employees, benchmark progress, set the direction of the work, and improve individual performance.

"For me, it is all about inspiring and encouraging the organization to set a very ambitious goal." - Minna

"Motivation is about having a clear mission. [...] *Many people thrive at work when they know that there are expectations about their performance and progress"* - Fatima

"The reward itself is that you contribute to a result." - Märta

Most motivational strategies were shared across contexts, leaders across industries relied on trusting relationships and vision alignment to sustain engagement. One difference emerged through participants from female-dominated fields emphasizing wellbeing as a motivator, and managers in male-dominated sectors focusing on autonomy.

5.2.3. Decision-Making

Lastly, participants described four types of decision-making behaviors: (1) **direct and decisive**, (2) **strategic and adaptive**, (3) **relational and inclusive**, and (4) **value-driven**

Direct and decisive decision-making was more frequently highlighted by leaders in male-dominated sectors:

"The most important thing is probably the ability to make decisions. [...] *And to be able to stand by it.* [...] *You are lonely at the top, you need to be confident in yourself."* - Michelle

"I am here to deliver results. [...] *I am a tool for the board.* [...] *But I also expect that if I make a decision, people have to accept it. I call it putting in my veto on the matter - and then you just have to go with it."* - Molly

"Personally, I think to be a leader you need to be equipped with courage. You need to dare to lead, just wanting to lead is not enough." - Märta

Strategic and adaptive decision-making was discussed across sectors as a reflective and situational approach:

"I find it fairly easy to see the full picture, and I am good at prioritizing." - Felicia

"Leadership looks different depending on the phase. [...] It depends on context." - Märta

Relational and inclusive decision-making involved engaging team members in the process, and was mentioned in female-dominated sectors:

"I'd say inclusiveness is the most important. I think it's an absolutely central part of our mission." - Felicia

"*There's an expectation that everyone gets to be part of every discussion.* [...] *It's a different kind of involvement.* [...]" - Flora

Value-driven decision-making was also especially emphasized in female-dominated sectors:

"I think it is very important to have a high, ethical compass. We are talking about people, and you cannot compromise on people's [needs and rights]. [As a leader, you have to] *be able to see the full picture, and what is best for the organization as a whole."* - Flora

"As a leader, you make the best decisions possible with the information you have, then and there. [...] *You don't have all the information, and you need to learn to be okay with that."* - Frida

In general, leaders in male-dominated fields described the need for courage and confidence when making decisions. At the same time, leaders in the female-dominated industries put stronger emphasis on doing the right thing for the organization and the people. Most other decision-making behaviors observed were present in both industries.

5.3. Summary of Empirical Findings

The empirical findings show that women in both industries described being aware of implicit behavioral expectations. In male-dominated sectors, these expectations emphasized decisiveness and confidence. Leaders often spoke of the need to be assertive, take control, and make decisions. In contrast, female-dominated sectors discussed inclusivity, emotional intelligence, and ethical responsibility. They described an expectation to involve others in decisions and to lead with compassion and purpose.

Leadership behaviors overlapped across sectors, such as in direct communication, clear goal-setting, team inclusion, and value-driven leadership, but some differences emerged. **Communication** leaned more toward inclusiveness in female-dominated industries and toward openness and honesty in male-dominated ones. **Motivation** in male-dominated fields centered on trust and autonomy, whereas well-being and work-life balance were more emphasized in female-dominated contexts. Similarly, **decision-making** in male-dominated sectors emphasized confidence, while in female-dominated sectors, decisions were designed to benefit the people and the organization. See Figure 5.1 for a summary of the main findings regarding differences in observed behaviors across the sectors.

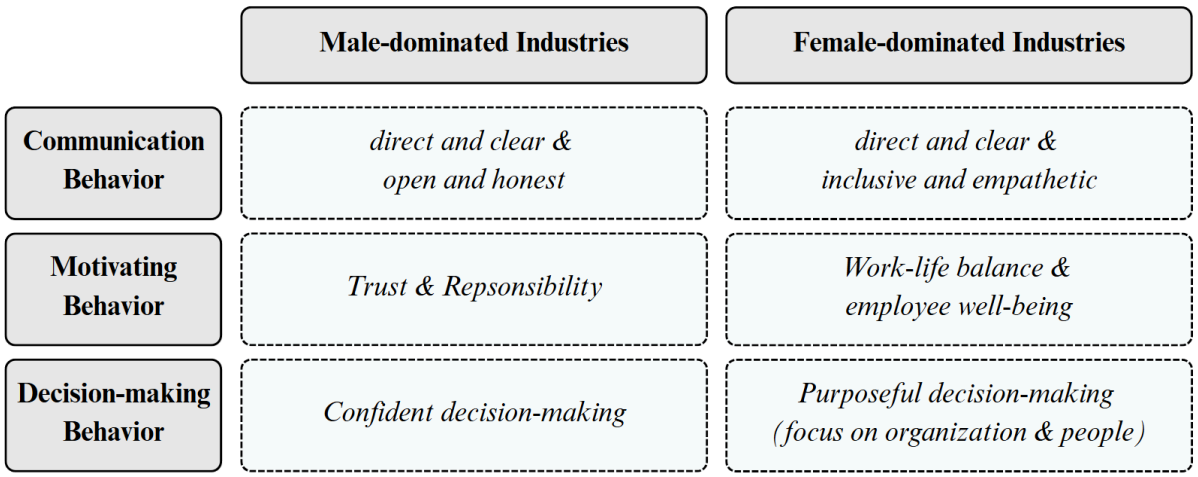


Figure 5.1: Summary of main findings within leadership behavior (Essinger & Höglund, 2025)

6. Analysis & Discussion

The empirics confirm gendered expectations across both contexts: In female-dominated industries, women were expected to be caring and supportive, traits traditionally associated with femininity, while in male-dominated industries, they were expected to be confident and decisive, reflecting masculine-coded ideals (Naura, 2023; Sinclair, 2005). However, behavior is influenced not only by contextual leadership ideals, as suggested by (Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1999; Petrides & Furnham, 2006; Cummings et al., 2018), but also by how individuals personally interpret these norms. The findings indicate that personal interpretations significantly shape how leaders respond to industry-specific gender norms and, consequently, choose to act.

6.1. Normative and Cultural-Cognitive Pressures Influencing Behaviors

In both industries, the participants displayed compliance with the norms through a sense of *social obligation*. In male-dominated industries, leaders like Michelle and Mira described adjusting their tone, demonstrating decisiveness, or referencing culturally masculine topics to be taken seriously. Similarly, Flora's statement on having to be inclusive even when it clashed with her personal style points to an *obligation* to align with moral standards and professional identity.

However, in the male-dominated industries, the empirical data suggest that obligation is based on *expectations*, perceived as externally imposed and *binding*, tightly linked to performance and role accountability. This confirms previous research on how women in male-dominated sectors often face pressure to adapt their leadership styles (Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1999). Conversely, in female-dominated sectors, the *social obligations* seem to stem from *constitutive schemas*, defining empathy as essential to legitimate leadership. The behavior was more habitual, and many leaders conformed automatically, describing expectations as more intrinsic and self-evident. This is in line with what previous research has concluded on how institutional expectations often function subconsciously, guiding behaviors that individuals view as ethically or professionally essential (Costas & Grey, 2014).

When these norms were translated into behaviors, the respondents in male-dominated environments described how they consciously adjusted leadership strategies to reflect professional standards and *appropriate* behavior, indicating *normative logic and mechanisms*. In the female-dominated industries, the adjustment was more imitative. Especially women transitioning from male- to female-dominated sectors illustrated a need to adjust their behavior to align with their peers because it felt like the right and most ethical way to act. This reflects how deeply internalized norms can guide behavior through *mimetic* mechanisms (Hentschel et al., 2019). Moreover, respondents described an industry-specific "ethical compass" that encouraged empathy and care. This aligns with Bryden's (2024) finding on ethical leadership ensuring quality of - and success in - healthcare management. This can be explained by how both normative and cultural-cognitive logics were at play - on one hand, behaving ethically is seen as the *appropriate* way to lead (normative), and on the other, it is perceived as natural and self-evident within the industry's shared values, reflecting a logic *orthodoxy* (cultural-cognitive).

Respondents across both sectors (e.g., Matilda and Fatima) emphasized the importance of *accreditation* and *certification* through peer recognition, underscoring that normative indicators

validate leadership success. This supports findings by, Ibarra et al., (2013) and Frey et al., (2006) emphasizing that women, in particular, value peer relationships.

Sub-conclusion: While behaviors often overlap across sectors, different types of pressures drive them. In male-dominated industries, normative pressures are more prominent, with expectations tied to external role demands and professional standards. In contrast, female-dominated industries are shaped more by internalized values, indicating a stronger influence of cultural-cognitive pressures, summarized in Figure 6.1

	Male-dominated	**Female-dominated**
Basis of Compliance	Social obligation	Social obligation
Basis of order	Binding expectations	Constitutive schema
Mechanisms	Normative	Mimetic
Logic	Appropriateness	Appropriateness/Orthodoxy
Indicators	Accreditation/Certification	Accreditation/Certification

Figure 6.1. - Summary of Institutional pressures (Scott, 2001) observed in the industries.

6.2. Resistance: The Defining Difference

The most noticeable difference across industries was *how women understood and reacted to expectations*, either by resisting or adapting to them. Women in male-dominated industries did not describe themselves as passively pressured to conform, but rather as making conscious decisions about when and how to align with male-coded norms. Matilda's refusal to adjust her communication style and Mira's deliberate adaptation to align with male-coded expectations illustrate this. This contradicts research saying that women feel pressured to adapt in male-coded environments (Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1999), instead reflecting a deliberate negotiation of gender norms. This aligns with Denissen's (2010) analysis that women in male-dominated industries actively construct context-sensitive identities to navigate institutional demands.

This tendency was less present in female-dominated sectors. Even when respondents like Flora and Freja articulated personal misalignment with expected behaviors, they framed their compliance as inevitable or morally required. The lack of explicit resistance in these contexts was due to how the norms were experienced as core elements of one's identity as a leader rather than imposed rules. This

confirms research on how women internalize societal expectations regarding femininity by "self-stereotyping" into feminine roles (Coleman & Hong, 2008). It shows how institutional expectations often operate beneath awareness, shaping behaviors that individuals perceive as morally or professionally necessary (Costas & Grey, 2014).

Scott's theory demonstrates how institutional pressures influence behavior. Yet, the existing dimensions do not fully explain how the individuals position themselves to these norms. While the framework distinguishes between normative and cultural-cognitive pressures, it largely assumes that stronger institutional forces result in greater influence on behavior, which might *overlook how individuals' alignment or dissonance with these norms can mediate their willingness or ability to conform.*

Sub-conclusion: The findings suggest that resistance is more visible in environments with clear external expectations (male-dominated), while internalized norms (female-dominated) prompt greater compliance, even when misaligned with personal values. This indicates that institutional influence is not only about the strength of norms, but also about their *alignment with personal values.* This phenomenon cannot be fully explained by Scott's (2001) six dimensions, suggesting the need for an extension of the model.

6.3. Additions to the Theory

The authors propose adding a seventh dimension to Scott's (2001) model: *identity alignment*. This new dimension accounts for how institutional pressures intersect with individuals' self-concept and emotional investment. In male-dominated industries, defined by high normative pressures, women recognized leadership expectations as external or role-specific, creating a space for critical distance, conscious resistance, or adaptation. Individuals consciously adjust their behaviour to *strategically adapt* to expectations, often while maintaining internal distance from the role. This is consistent with previous research showing that women in such contexts adopt gender expressions that emphasize the most strategically beneficial identity for the situation (Denissen, 2010).

In contrast, in female-dominated industries, expectations like empathy and relationality are experienced not as imposed norms but as reflections of personal identity and deeply internalized values, indicating higher cultural-cognitive pressures. Here, women are more likely to "self-stereotype" by internalizing feminine norms (Coleman & Hong, 2008), resulting in stronger emotional alignment and less cognitive distance. Consequently, deviation from these norms feels like personal dissonance rather than simply role misfit. Expectations are perceived as naturally fitting with

one's identity, making behavior feel like *authentic alignment* rather than adaptive, rendering them harder to recognise or deviate from. In Figure 6.2, this additional dimension is illustrated in Scott's theory.

Sub-conclusion: This additional dimension can help explain why behaviors in female-dominated sectors appear more uniformly relational and empathetic, not necessarily because women inherently possess these traits, but because deviation from those norms is more costly at the identity level. Conversely, in male-dominated sectors, the external nature of expectations allows for greater behavioral variation, even in environments with clear expectations.

	Normative Pillar	**Cultural-Cognitive Pillar**
Basis of compliance	Social obligation	Taken-for-granted shared understandings
Basis of order	Binding expectations	Constitutive schema
Mechanisms	Normative	Mimetic
Logic	Appropriateness	Orthodoxy
Indicators	Certification or Accreditation	Common beliefs, shared logics of action & isomorphism
Basis of legitimacy	Morally governed	Being comprehensive, recognisable and culturally supported
Identity Alignment	Strategic adaptation	Authentic alignment

Figure 6.2 - Scott's institutional theory (2001) with the addition of the 7th dimension by Essinger & Höglund (2025)

6.4. Answering the Research Question

This study set out to explore the question:

How does leadership of women differ between male- and female-dominated industries?

The **main empirical findings** indicate some differences in how women lead in male- and female-dominated industries. While direct and clear communication was valued across both industries, leaders in male-dominated industries stressed confident decision-making and motivating through trust and responsibility. In contrast, leaders in female-dominated industries emphasized purposeful decision-making considering the organization and the people, and motivating through focusing on employee well-being and work-life balance.

Apart from these results, two **additional findings** emerged:

1. Normative pressures were more prevalent in male-dominated industries and cultural-cognitive pressures in female-dominated industries.
2. Women in male-dominated fields expressed a greater distance from the norms, choosing to consciously adapt to, or resist them.

6.5. Contributions

The **main findings** provide several important insights. Similar to the work of Acker (1990), and Risman (2004), the results of this study show that leadership is not simply an expression of gendered traits, but shaped by the institutional environment in which it is enacted. (Lester, 2008; Cummings et al., 2018; Walters et al., 2022). Moreover, not all participants displayed stereotypically feminine traits, challenging claims on how women lead in an uniform or inherently feminine way (Gabriel & Gardner, 1999; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Šavriņa & Sedlmayr, 2016; Khan, 2024), and instead supporting the view that gender is not the main factor driving leadership differences (Van Engen et al., 2001; Boyer et al., 2023).

The **additional findings** highlight how normative pressures in male-dominated sectors and cultural-cognitive pressures in female-dominated sectors influence behavior. This adds to the work of (Ko et al., 2015; Gannouni & Ramboarison-Lalao, 2019) by illustrating how institutional dynamics in different gendered contexts help explain how norms shape behavior, beyond individual personality or traits. It explains findings on how women exhibit a self-stereotyping tendency, reinforcing gender roles in feminine environments (Coleman & Hong, 2008). As well as the tendency to manipulate

gender rules in masculine environments, by engaging in reflexive gender displays that emphasize the most advantageous identity for each situation (Denissen, 2010). These findings raise the question if women align with "feminine" leadership traits because they inherently identify with them, as argued by Lippa, (2010) and Rodríguez-López et al., (2023) or because they are more deeply embedded and therefore harder to distinguish as norms, thus supporting findings by Coleman and Hong (2008). This distinction is critical in understanding whether alignment reflects personal preference or adaptation to institutional ideals.

Lastly, the **additional dimension of identity alignment** contributes to the academic debate on institutional compliance and resistance by suggesting how women respond to institutional expectations. By distinguishing between *strategic adaptation* (normative pressures) and *authentic alignment* (under cultural-cognitive pressures), this additional dimension responds to calls for more nuanced interpretations of agency within institutional theory (Porter, 2012). This indicates that institutional influence also depends on how norms align with personal values, highlighting how actors may push back when norms conflict with their sense of self, in line with research on institutional agency (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2009; Porter, 2012; Aca et al., 2025). This form of strategic engagement further reflects Creed et al.'s (2010) concept of identity work, where individuals actively navigate tensions between institutional expectations and personal values.

This distinction also deepens the conversation around gendered resistance. Previous research has emphasized the sanctions women face for non-conformity, (e.g., Brescoll, 2016; Rudman & Glick, 1999) particularly in male-dominated sectors (Heilman et al., 2024). However, these findings show how male-dominated industries, influenced by strong, normative pressures, may paradoxically offer space for reflection and strategic distancing from gendered expectations. In such settings, norms are recognized as external and negotiable, allowing leaders to manage their expression more consciously. Conversely, in female-dominated industries, where norms are more internalized and morally anchored, resistance may be harder to recognize or enact.

Ultimately, understanding how behavior is shaped by the degree of identity alignment allows for a more layered perspective on institutional agency, showing that institutional dynamics may influence how norms are translated into behaviors.

7. Conclusion

7.1. Limitations

Firstly, the cultural and geographic context of the study was limited. All participants were women working in Sweden, with most located in or around Stockholm. This concentration may limit the transferability of the findings, both within Sweden and to other countries. Sweden's focus on gender equality may not reflect conditions elsewhere, potentially affecting the broader applicability of the results. For example, some research indicates that Swedish women show greater resistance to feminine stereotypes compared to women in other countries (Kling et al., 2017). Secondly, the representation of industries within the sample also poses limitations. Participants were primarily from healthcare (a female-dominated field) and construction (a male-dominated field). While these industries provided a useful contrast in terms of gender dynamics, the lack of representation from a broader range of sectors means that the results may not fully capture the complexity of female leadership across different professional environments. Lastly, the study relies on subjective experiences and observations, therefore, the results may not be representative of all women.

7.2. Recommendations for Future Research

The findings suggest several interesting areas for future researchers that can contribute to further closing the knowledge gap around how women lead in different contexts. Building on the finding that norms are embedded differently depending on the context, this opens up for research about how norms operate in other gendered settings, such as groups or specific organizations. Future studies could also investigate whether similar patterns appear among men in gendered industries, offering a broader comparison. Lastly, the idea of identity alignment could be further explored by testing it in diverse settings to understand how personal values shape leaders' responses to institutional norms. Future research might examine this dimension in gender-balanced or hybrid sectors and through cross-cultural comparisons to assess contextual differences.

7.3. Concluding Remarks

This study set out to explore how female leadership differs across male- and female-dominated industries, focusing on how gendered norms shape leadership behavior. While previous research often emphasizes differences between women and men or highlights structural barriers in male-dominated fields, this thesis shifts the focus to differences among women across contexts. The findings suggest that leadership behavior is not only tied to gender identity, but is partly shaped by the type and strength of institutional pressures and gendered norms within each industry, confirming that there is no "one female leadership". In male-dominated sectors, where normative pressures make gender norms feel more external, women often navigate expectations more consciously - either adapting strategically or selectively aligning with them. Conversely, in female-dominated sectors, cultural-cognitive pressures lead to more internalized norms, making them feel more natural and self-evident.

By introducing the concept of *identity alignment*, this study offers a new perspective on how the dynamics of institutional pressures impact individual responses to the norms. This distinction helps explain how misleading perceptions of leadership style can arise - not because of inherent traits, but because leaders may unknowingly conform to deeply embedded norms. This offers a possible explanation for why women are often perceived as relational or empathetic - not due to inherent differences from men, but because the norms in female-dominated industries are more deeply embedded and harder to recognize or resist. Recognizing this dynamic offers a valuable perspective for reflecting on how norms shape leadership within organizations and encourages greater awareness and agency in how one chooses to engage with them.

8. Implications for Practice

The findings of this study carry several implications for (1) *women in management positions,* (2) *organizations and employers* and (3) *policymakers*. The findings suggest that although there are some differences between how women lead in male- and female-dominated contexts, these are not categorical, implying that a gendered industry context only partly shapes leadership behaviors.

8.1. Women in Management Positions

For *women in management positions*, the findings can help create awareness of expectations and industry pressures, and how they can be difficult to identify. Understanding how they are embedded in organizations can make it easier to distinguish them, offering an opportunity for women to actively take a stance and choose how to act, rather than just going with what they assume to be natural in the context. This provides two important implications:

1. A woman who doesn't think she is a "fit" for a leadership role might dare to try, understanding that norms are not definite requirements.

2. A woman currently leading in that industry feels more confident in leading authentically, understanding that the norm is separate from absolute job requirements.

Recognizing that these are not fixed requirements empowers women to consciously choose how to respond. This can help women develop a leadership style they identify with, rather than simply conforming to what feels expected. Over time, this could foster greater variation in female leadership and bring nuance to the broader conversation. It may also encourage more women to enter male-dominated industries, eventually increasing the presence of senior female leaders who can support, mentor, and recruit others. Finally, the findings offer a way to better understand and manage negative feedback or feelings of exclusion. By recognizing how institutional norms shape perceptions, especially in industries with strong cultural-cognitive pressures, women can gain distance from those expectations. This added perspective can reduce feelings of isolation and support strategic adaptation - helping women lead in ways that are both contextually smart and personally sustainable.

Recommendation: Introduce self-reflection tools or leadership coaching modules that help women identify which expectations align with their values versus those driven by norms.

8.2. Organizations and Employers

For organizations aiming to promote inclusive and effective leadership, this thesis underscores the importance of making implicit leadership norms visible and open to critique. Female leaders may not always resist gendered norms, not due to agreement, but because such norms are deeply embedded and go unquestioned, especially in female-dominated sectors. Organizations should avoid reinforcing the assumption that women naturally embody relational leadership and instead foster environments that accommodate diverse leadership expressions, regardless of gender.

Discussing how gender is embedded in leadership norms is crucial to transform them and to define leadership qualities based on knowledge and competence rather than tradition. This change could be implemented by acknowledging the existence of gendered norms and traditions within organizational culture, and educating about them. The purpose would be to redefine what is seen as legitimate and successful leadership, and to separate leadership qualities from traditional expectations. This also opens up opportunities for organisations and employers. By recognising embedded assumptions and addressing these, organizations can gain control over subconscious beliefs and alter these to best fit the organization's desired culture and values.

Many respondents emphasized that retaining talent was one of their core responsibilities as leaders. The findings of this study offer valuable insights to support that goal. By understanding the institutional pressures shaping behavior, employers can better assess the degree of alignment between individual identity and organizational norms. This awareness can inform how to effectively engage employees, whether by challenging assumptions, supporting motivation, or facilitating change in ways that resonate with their values and experiences.

Recommendation: Alter existing leadership development programs to identify and challenge assumptions about “appropriate” leadership behaviors, ensuring they do not implicitly reinforce gendered expectations.

8.3. Policy Makers

As displayed in Figure 3.2, leadership behavior is not only shaped by institutional pressures, but also reinforced through institutional feedback loops. When leaders are perceived as legitimate, their behavior contributes to shaping a leadership template, recreating ideals and stereotypes. This brings important insights into why gendered ideals and stereotypes persist, despite formal ambitions to counteract them. This can provide relevant insights for policymakers wanting to get to the core issue

of gender discrimination. Especially in industries with high levels of cultural-cognitive pressures, it might be more difficult to implement policies aimed at changing norms and stereotypes within these industries, since they are deeply embedded and sometimes hard to identify. This might provide insights into how different types of policies are needed within different industry contexts, highlighting how a one-size-fits-all approach will not work.

Recommendation: Conduct field experiments assessing the level of embeddedness of norms within organizations. Use these insights to develop industry-specific gender equality policies that account for the unique pressures within each sector, rather than relying on generalized, uniform interventions.

8.4. Ethical Considerations

This thesis brings to light a central ethical tension: while adapting to gendered norms may help individual women succeed in the short term, it risks reinforcing the institutional structures that excluded them to begin with. When women are encouraged to modify their behavior without addressing the systemic roots of the pressures, responsibility is shifted from the organization to the individual, posing an ethical risk. Moreover, adaptation itself can create new, unrealistic expectations that women must adjust to every context. This not only increases emotional labor and self-monitoring but also places women in a constant state of identity negotiation. As shown by previous research, a strong pressure to conform to norms can result in negative impacts on mental health (Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1999)

Ethical leadership development should therefore combine individual support with organizational efforts to question and transform exclusionary norms, to avoid risking individuals taking on sole responsibility. This exposes a broader ethical issue: when systems remain static, individuals must continuously adjust to gain recognition and influence. A more equitable approach requires shifting the focus toward transforming institutional cultures themselves, so that leadership norms evolve in response to changing expectations and demographics. This implies viewing leadership not as a fixed ideal, but as a flexible, context-sensitive practice open to redefinition.

Another important ethical consideration concerns the nature of industry-specific leadership ideals. In healthcare, for example, participants described leadership as being guided by a strong moral compass, closely aligned with the sector's demands and values since they work closely with people in need. While raising awareness of how such norms may be gendered is important, framing them solely as a product of gendered expectations risks overlooking their functional relevance. Efforts to challenge or deconstruct these ideals in pursuit of reducing gender bias must therefore be approached with caution,

particularly in industries where ethical sensitivity and empathy are essential due to the nature of the work and its impact on vulnerable individuals.

8.5. Recommendations

The implications from this thesis provide some practical recommendations, specifically targeted towards the stakeholders for which the findings have implications.

- For **female leaders**, we recommend introducing self-reflection tools or leadership coaching modules that help women identify which expectations align with their values versus those driven by norms.
- For **organizations and employers**, it is recommended to alter existing leadership development programs to identify and challenge assumptions about "appropriate" leadership behaviors, ensuring they do not implicitly reinforce gendered expectations.
- For **policymakers**, it is vital to understand the institutional forces at play, in order to tailor policies and mitigate risks of reinforcing cycles. In industries characterised by high normative pressures, it might suffice with traditional policies. However in industries where norms are more embedded, long-term strategies aimed at identifying and addressing subconscious norms is important.

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10. Appendix

Appendix 1. Interview Guide and Questions.

(Translated from Swedish)

Name:

Company/Role:

Date:

Introduction & procedure:

- ☐ Greet, thank her for taking the time.
- ☐ Briefly explain our project and who we are
- ☐ Ask for permission to record - start recording.
- ☐ Remind them to fill in the consent form.
- ☐ Offer to share the final draft of the thesis once done.
- ☐ Procedure: expected to take around 30 min, but ask her to tell us if she needs to leave.
- ☐ Ask if she has any more questions, otherwise start questions.

Questions:

1. **Background & Leadership Role**
   1.1. Tell us a bit about yourself, your career, and your role as a leader.
   1.2. Can you describe your current leadership role and areas of responsibility?

2. **Leadership Style & Self-Perception**
   2.1. How would you describe yourself as a leader?
   2.2. Rank the following six leadership traits from most to least important in your role (and explain why): *Inclusive, Empathetic, Decisive, Authoritative, Self-confident, Communicative*
   2.3. If you were to choose three keywords to describe yourself as a leader, what would they be?

3. **Motivation & Communication**
   3.1. How do you think a leader best motivates their employees?
   3.2. How do you communicate with your employees or team members?
   3.3. Have you ever felt the need to adjust your communication based on the gender of your employees or in other ways?

4. **Team Dynamics & Development**
   4.1. How would you assess the level of motivation and competence among your employees?
   4.2. How do you handle conflicts within your team?
   4.3. How do you create an inclusive and positive work culture?
   4.4. How do you view your role in developing and retaining talent within the organization?

5. **Final thoughts & own reflections**
   5.1. Is there anything you would like to add?
   5.2. Do you have any questions for us?

Appendix 2. Email to Prospective Interview Participants.

(Translated from Swedish)

Hello [Name],

We are two students from the Stockholm School of Economics currently working on our bachelor thesis. We're writing about female leadership and would be very excited to interview you, as we believe you could contribute valuable and insightful perspectives to our project!

Would you be open to meeting with us, either digitally or in person, sometime in the coming weeks? We expect the interview to take between 30 - 60 minutes. If you have any questions or thoughts, feel free to reach out to us!

We look forward to hearing from you!

Best regards,
Emilia Essinger & Felicia Höglund

Appendix 3. Overview of Interview Participants.

Table summarizing the name used in this thesis, the industry the participant worked in and whether this industry is defined as having a male or female culture (Acker, 1990).

#	Name used in this thesis	Industry	Male or female dominated
1	Flora	Education	Female dominated
2	Frida	Education	Female dominated
3	Freja	Health care	Female dominated
4	Fatima	Health care	Female dominated
5	Felicia	Health care	Female dominated
6	Fredrika	Health care	Female dominated
7	Märta	Banking	Male dominated
8	Maja	Banking	Male dominated
9	Molly	Engineering	Male dominated
10	Minna	Engineering	Male dominated
11	Mira	Construction	Male dominated
12	Moa	Construction	Male dominated
13	Matilda	Construction	Male dominated
14	Michelle	Construction	Male dominated

Appendix 4. Detailed Version of Scott's (2001) Institutional Theory.

Summary of Scott's (2001) Normative and Cultural-Cognitive Pillars, with the added, seventh dimension of identity alignment. The Figure explains how different institutional processes happen through the lens of the normative and the cultural-cognitive pillar.

	Normative Pillar	**Cultural-Cognitive Pillar**
Basis of compliance *Why people comply with expectations*	Conform due to perceived **social obligation** to uphold values and norms.	People comply becuase the expectations align with **shared understandings**.
Basis of order *What maintains stability and structure*	**Binding expectations** about moral rules create order.	Shared understanding and idea of reality creates a **constiutive schema**.
Mechanisms *Ways institutions influence behavior*	Behavior is shaped by **normative** forces: professional standards, peer pressure & role expectations.	Behavior is shaped my **mimetic** forces: imitating behaviors to understand "how it is done".
Logic *Reasoning behind behavior and actions*	Decisions are based on **appropriateness** (the right thing to do) according to roles & values	Actions are justified by **orthodoxy**, they align with general belifs and culutral scripts.
Indicators *Signs or markers telling us elements are in place*	Recognition through peers through **accreditation or certification**	Behaviors are recognized by aligning with the groups **common beliefs and shared logics**
Basis of legitimacy *How and why institutions are seen as valid or appropriate*	Legitimacy as a consequence of being **morally goverened,** and aligning with values and norms.	Legitimacy as a result of being **culturally supported,** aligning with accepted worldviews.
Identity Alignment *How institutional expectations intersect with individuals' self-concept and emotional investment*	Individuals consciously manage or adjust their behaviour to **strategically adapt** to performance and legitimacy, often while maintaining internal distance from the role.	Expectations are perceived as naturally fitting with one's identity, making behavior feel like **authentic alignment** rather than adaptive.

Appendix 5. Illustration and Categorization of Observed Behaviors.

A graphic displaying the most common leadership behaviors discovered in male- and female-dominated industries. The behaviors were then categorized into masculine and feminine according to Sinclair (2005) and Naura (2023), and conclusions were drawn about whether industry and behavior align, i.e. if masculine behaviors were observed in male-dominated industries, and if feminine behaviors were observed in female-dominated industries (Essinger & Höglund, 2025).

Male-dominated industries							
Leadership Behavior	Honest communication	Transparent communication	Making employees feel needed	Making employees feel trusted	Giving them independence & responsibility	Confident decision making & standing by decisions	Being brave
Associated with male / female behavior	Male & Female	Male & Female	Male & Female	Female	Male	Male	Male
Does it align?	Partly	Partly	Partly	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Female-dominated industries							
Leadership Behavior	Inclusive communication	Empathetic communication	Open & honest communincation	Enabeling good work-life balance	Focus on employee well-being	Making decisions that benefit the organization	Making decisions that benefit the people
Associated with male / female behavior	Female	Female	Male & Female	Female	Female	Male	Female
Does it align?	Yes	Yes	Partly	Yes	Yes	No	Yes