







Exploring gender diversity in key account management: A comparative global perspective on gender-specific roles and competencies for customer success

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Abstract: The present research investigates the influence of gender on the roles and competencies in Key Account Management (KAM) across various cultural settings. Twenty-six managers from the following six countries participated in this study: Germany, France, Spain, Hungary, India, and Vietnam. The five major themes uncovered through thematic analysis shed light on the gender dynamics in KAM. Insights into gender-specific approaches to KAM are provided by our findings, which also emphasize the distinct contributions of various genders in KAM. The result highlights the potential advantages that organizations can derive from incorporating gender diversity into KAM teams. This study, which is among the initial ones to examine gender perspectives in KAM on an international scale, addresses a substantial void in the current body of literature and offers noteworthy implications for applied theories.

Keywords: key account management; gender diversity; role and competencies; qualitative study; global perspective

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1. Introduction

Key Account Management (KAM) has gained significant importance in the rapidly changing environment of global business. It is recognized as a crucial element for building enduring relationships with customers and achieving overall organizational success (Homburg et al., 2002; Ivens & Pardo, 2007). In this context, the importance of gender diversity in KAM has become a vital factor that contributes to improving organizational performance and strengthening customer engagement (Ivens, 2023). This study aims to investigate the intricate relationship between gender diversity and KAM, with the goal of comprehending how gender-specific roles and skills impact Key Account (KA) dynamics and the effectiveness of KA strategies in different cultural contexts.

Existing research emphasizes the significance of gender diversity in business leadership, establishing a connection between gender diversity and enhanced financial results and organizational performance (Hunt et al., 2015; Noland & Moran, 2016). Expanding upon this basis, our research especially examines the influence of gender diversity in KAM, a field that requires crucial strategic decision-making, successful relationship-building, and a customer-focused approach (Guesalaga et al., 2018). The research is driven by four fundamental Research Questions (RQ):

- **RQ1:** What is the impact of gender disparities on boundary-spanning responsibilities in KAM?
- **RQ2:** In what ways are gender-specific competencies and roles manifested in KAM, and what are the gender-based variations in executing these competencies and roles?
- **RQ3:** How do the distinct approaches of female and male KA managers integrate to enhance value within KAM teams?
- **RQ4:** How can female and male KA managers leverage each of their abilities to enhance the overall success of their teams in KAM?

Germany, France, Spain, Hungary, India and Vietnam are among the countries where we conducted our initial research. The selection of these countries is based on their varied cultural and economic backgrounds, and thereby the study wishes to offer a global outlook on the gender roles and competencies in KAM. The inclusion of this variety facilitates an in-depth examination of gender diversity in KAM, enabling an exploration of culturally and operationally specific characteristics (Hoogendoorn et al., 2013).

We aim to conduct a thorough analysis of these data in order to make insightful comparisons and to gain an in-depth understanding of gender dynamics in KAM. This study enhances knowledge and provides practical guidance for KAM firms aiming to leverage gender diversity as a competitive advantage. The paper aspires to develop important KAM strategies that are more inclusive and effective, hence enhancing customer success and organizational performance in a global business context.

2. Theoretical background

This section of the paper examines KAM, and extends to gender diversity, and the boundary-spanning role integration model. The focus of this chapter is to establish a robust theoretical framework for this study.

Key account management

KAM is a strategy that is crucial for the success of organizations, especially in a diversified global marketplace. The core of KAM involves successfully managing a company's most important customers (Wengler et al., 2006). As Ryals and Rogers (2007) suggested, this entails employing an optimized combination of strategic planning, comprehensive customer understanding, and robust relationship management. This strategy surpasses conventional sales strategies by emphasizing the development of enduring partnerships, in which KA managers serve as strategic collaborators (Hengstebeck et al., 2022). KA managers link their company's objectives with the intricate requirements of their KAs. KA managers' roles are diverse, encompassing both analytical expertise and interpersonal abilities to establish trust and sustain consumer satisfaction (Mahlamäki et al., 2019). The effectiveness of KAM relies on KA managers successfully navigating intricate customer and cultural variables, and acting as cultural intermediaries that align business strategies with the complexities of global marketplaces (Georges & Eggert, 2003; Kadam et al., 2023).

Gender diversity in KAM

The importance of gender diversity in KAM is being increasingly acknowledged as a crucial catalyst for innovation and enhanced corporate performance. Studies demonstrate the correlation between gender diversity and enhanced organizational performance. According to McKinsey & Company's survey underlined by Hunt et al. (2015), organizations that have diverse leadership teams have a 15 percent higher likelihood of achieving better financial performance compared to industry averages. Based on a study conducted by the Peterson Institute, companies with a minimum of 30 percent female leadership had a 15 percent rise in profitability (Noland & Moran, 2016). Notwithstanding these advantages, there continues to be a gender gap in KAM positions. In line with Zippia Research in 2023, women make up only 31.2 percent of KA managers and 22.5 percent of KAM directors in the United States (Zippia

Research, 2023). Christiansen et al. (2016) argues that women occupied only 19 percent of corporate board seats and 14 percent of senior executive positions in the top 600 firms in Europe in 2014. Furthermore, the influence of gender diversity in KAM is not consistent across different cultures. Some cultures have more rigid gender conventions, which consequently affects how KA managers are perceived and how well they perform (Neculăesei, 2015). Addressing the underlying mechanisms of gender diversity in different cultural contexts becomes essential for attaining global customer satisfaction.

Boundary-spanning role integration model of KA managers

We integrated the “roles and competences model” model by Hohl (2012) with the “network model of KAM” by Ivens et al. (2016) and Niersbach (2016) to construct our theoretical framework for this research, as depicted in Figure 1. This integration has established an extensive framework that positions KA manager as the focal point of an intricate network of managerial roles and competencies that are essential for effective KAM.

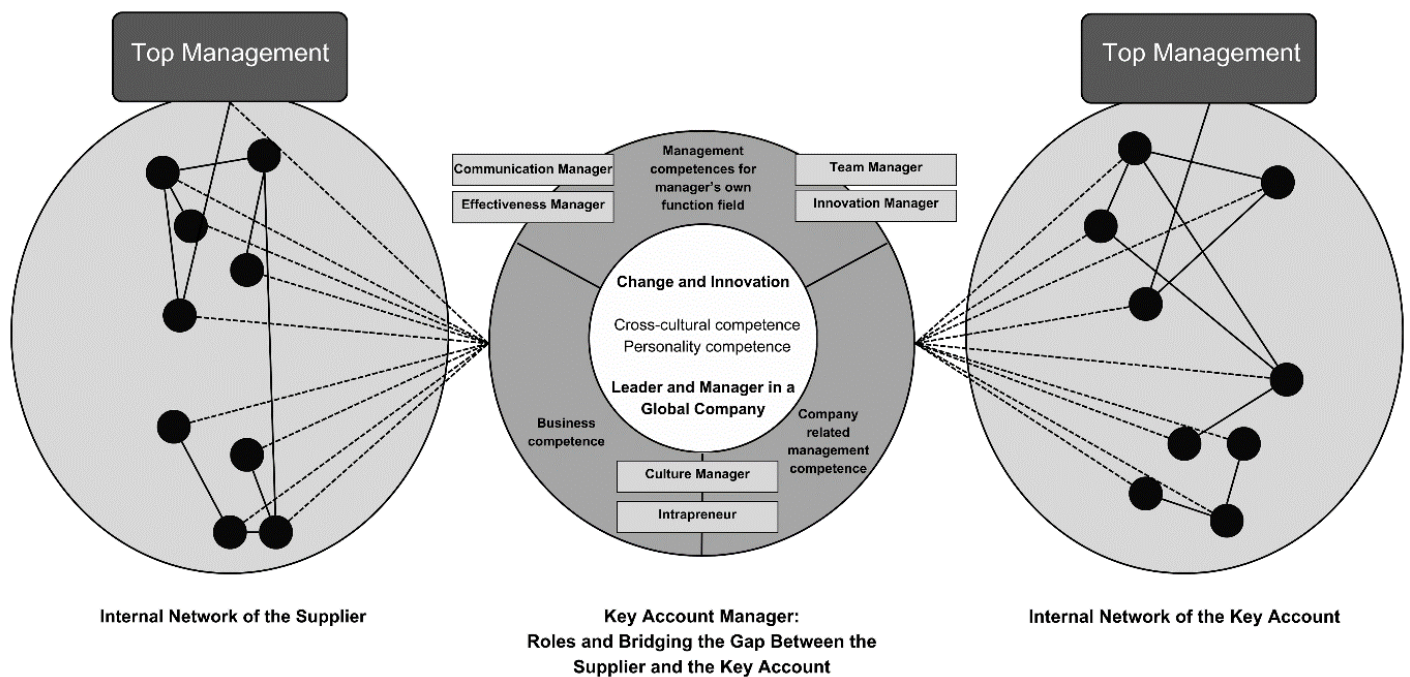


Figure 1. Boundary-spanning role integration framework of KAM. *Source: Author's own*

The framework demonstrates the vital role of a KA manager in aligning supplier strategies with customer demands. It highlights the significant contributions of various roles that KA manager plays, such as communication, team management, effectiveness management, intrapreneurship, innovation, and culture management, in order to achieve effective business navigation and managing customer relationships.

3. Research methodology

This study employs a qualitative method based on Spiggle’s (1994) approach and utilizes a case study strategy. Our goal is to develop a comprehensive understanding of gender-related nuances in KAM, focusing on unique expertise rather than broad generalizations.

Data collection

We conducted 26 semi-structured interviews across six countries: Germany, France, Spain, Hungary, India, and Vietnam. This selection of locations was based on the diversity of these countries and their unique business practices, which provides rich, contextual data.

Interviews ranged from three to five participants per country, with a total interview duration of 1,211.03 minutes and an average duration of 46.58 minutes.

We employed a purposive sampling technique, based on principles outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Tuckett (2004), with a particular emphasis on achieving gender diversity within KAM teams. We have chosen interviewees who represent a range of roles within these teams, encompassing KA managers, KA directors, and sales managers. We have ensured that the interviewees possess at least two years of professional experience and actively participate in teams which foster gender diversity. Furthermore, our group includes two HR specialists from Germany, who showed extensive knowledge in KAM, worldwide operations, and gender-related barriers. Their expertise offers valuable perspectives on organizational policies and diversity initiatives, which are vital for an intensive understanding of gender diversity in KAM.

Table 1. List of respondents and demographic details. Source: Author's own

Respondent (R)	Country	Job title	Industry type	Gender (M/F/D)	Experience in KAM (years ±)
R1		Head of KAM	Pharmaceutical	F	11
R2		Senior KA Manager	IT Leasing	F	>25
R3	Germany	Global Vice President HR	Electronic	M	>25
R4		Global Head of People and Culture	IT Leasing	F	16
R5		Director KAM	Pharmaceutical	M	>25
R6		National KA Manager	Manufacturing and distribution	F	10
R7	France	KAM Director	Manufacturing and distribution	M	10
R8		General Manager	Manufacturing and distribution	M	21
R9		National Sales Director	Manufacturing and distribution	M	20
R10		Talent Acquisition Manager	Electronics and Telecommunication	F	15
R11	Spain	Managing Director	Banking and Financial Services	F	15
R12		Head of Marketing	Technology	M	20
R13		KA Manager	Biotechnology	F	5
R14		KA Manager	Technology	F	5
R15		Managing Director	Information Technology	M	5
R16	Hungary	KA Manager	Healthcare	F	5
R17		KA Managers	Information Technology	M	5
R18		Relationship Manager	Information Technology	M	12
R19	India	KA Manager	Electronics and Telecommunication	F	8
R20		KA Manager	Education and training	F	5
R21		Sales Manager	Healthcare	M	6
R22		Vice Manager	Banking and Financial Services	F	18
R23		Director KAM Customer	Education and training	M	6
R24	Vietnam	Development Manager	Advertising and Media	M	20
R25		Managing Director	Advertising and Media	F	10
R26		KA Manager	Financial Services	F	20

Data analysis

We performed an in-depth data analysis of the interview data, in compliance with Braun and Clarke’s (2012) thematic analysis, through an iterative coding approach. The process started with an initial phase of familiarization, during which we carefully reviewed the interview transcripts multiple times to acquire a comprehensive insight. Subsequently, we proceeded to generate preliminary themes by identifying noteworthy concepts and recurring patterns. As a result, comparable codes were organized into potential themes. During the subsequent stage, we thoroughly examined these themes, refining them to accurately represent the data. In the end, we established and classified the themes, describing their scope and emphasis.

4. Findings

The findings of this study, presented as pilot studies, are divided into two major sections. Section 4.1. focuses on the codes and themes derived from our data analysis, while section 4.2. provides a country-specific overview based on interviews and the literature.

4.1. Codes and themes generated using data analysis

From the analysis of the fifty initial codes derived from our data, we have identified five central themes that encapsulate the core aspects of our study’s findings: this is depicted in Table 2.

Table 2. Themes and codes generated in thematic analysis. Source: Author’s own

Themes	Theme 1 Perceptions and Roles of Gender in KAM	Theme 2 Institutional and Structural Barriers	Theme 3 Value of Gender Diversity	Theme 4 Challenges and Tensions in Gender Integration	Theme 5 Communication as a Core Skill
Codes	High percentage of female university graduates, Low female, representation in DAX companies, Only 23% female KAMs, Gender gap in leadership roles, Positive view on gender diversity, Competency over gender focus, Male strength in networking, Female strength in customer follow-ups, Societal perception affecting roles, Respect for female KA managers, Female strength in emotional intelligence, Male strength in negotiation, Gender-specific account management strategies, Male strength in problem-solving, Female strength in detail-orientation	Academic focus on management, Gender-specific challenges in smaller firms, Lack of institutional focus on diversity, Systemic inequality undercurrent 19% gender pay gap, Need for equitable participation	Balanced gender ratios in large corporations, Improved team dynamics, Increased turnover in mixed-gender teams, Recognized importance of gender diversity, Belief in team creativity, Varied perspectives enhance problem-solving Strategic gender diversity, Improved client interaction strategies, Gender diversity as strategic advantage, Valued mixed-gender teams, Complementary skill sets, Long-term focus on diversity	Ongoing gender integration challenges, Mixed views on gender diversity, Hesitation towards cross-gender collaboration, Unfair competition concerns, Gender tensions, Need for continued diversity focus, Reduced internal conflicts	Gender role in communication styles, Women focus on empathy, Men focus on extended relationships, Communication as crucial skill, Men as stress-resilient, Women excel in communication, Flexible task management Gender-specific strengths leveraged

Theme 1: Perceptions and roles of gender in KAM

Global disparities exist in the perceptions of gender roles in KAM. Results indicate that women in India and Vietnam are perceived as being adept in communication and emotional intelligence, whereas men are often recognized for their negotiation abilities. This aligns with the research conducted by Eagly and Carli (2007) on societal norms. Hungary and Spain acknowledge the importance of women's empathetic communication, in agreement with the findings of Koenig et al. (2011). Gender diversity in teams is highly appreciated in France, lining up with the findings of Dang A et al. (2017) about the significance of gender diversity in team dynamics.

Theme 2: Institutional and structural barriers

The obstacles preventing women from participating in KAM and leadership roles are clearly evident. Brader and Lewerenz (2006) observed a discrepancy in Germany between the number of female graduates and their presence in high-level positions within companies. In Hungary, there is a shortage of institutions that prioritize gender diversity in KAM, which aligns with the broader problem of institutional obstacles mentioned by Oakley (2000). The presence of enduring wage disparities in India and the existence of structural inequity in other countries are emphasized, which is consistent with the conclusions drawn by Antonczyk et al. (2010) regarding worldwide gender-based wage differentials.

Theme 3: Value of gender diversity

The benefits of gender diversity are widely recognized. Spain considers it a strategic benefit, whereas France acknowledges augmented synergy within the team, aligning with Herring's (2009) research, which demonstrates how diversity fosters more efficient problem-solving and innovation. Vietnam attributes the reduction of internal conflicts to the presence of gender diversity, which aligns with the findings of Woolley et al. (2010) regarding the enhanced collective intelligence of teams with diverse individuals.

Theme 4: Challenges and tensions in gender integration

In Vietnam, there is a noticeable presence of uncertainty and anxiety when it comes to collaboration between individuals of different genders. Female managers express worry about the possibility of unfair competition and disputes arising from self-image clashes. This statement highlights the difficulties associated with incorporating gender equality, as examined by Ibarra et al. (2010). In France, smaller organizations are subject to traditional gender biases, which might leave female KA managers feeling vulnerable. This parallels the conclusions stated by Prime and Moss-Racusin (2009) regarding implicit gender biases in the workplace.

Theme 5: Communication as a core skill

The significance of communication in many business scenarios is emphasized. Spain places great importance on achievement, particularly in relation to female KA managers placed in France, Hungary, and India, who are recognized for their exceptional communication abilities, as highlighted by Carli and Eagly's (2016) study. Spain acknowledges the importance of gender diversity in improving communication adaptability and efficiency with important consumers, in line with findings from Homan et al. (2007) on the advantages of varied perspectives.

Section 4.2. delves into nation-specific observations, offering localized viewpoints on how these themes are evident in unique cultural and business environments of a chosen country.

4.2. Country-specific findings

Embarking on a journey through diverse landscapes, this part unveils the country-specific findings, and reveals the unique facets of gender diversity in KAM across different global contexts.

Germany

Germany has an unequal representation of women in leadership positions, with only 14 percent of board members in DAX businesses and 23 percent of KAM jobs being women (Kirsch et al., 2023).

“To feel the vibe of the negotiation, to read between the lines, to recognize eye contact or the way to look in the eye. This women can really do better than men.” (R1)

Gender-diverse teams, reputed for achieving customer success, frequently acknowledge women's exceptional communication and teamwork abilities. Germany's maternity leave system offers assistance to women in KAM positions, but it also presents challenges to their advancement in KAM, which reflects the wider disparities in gender in executive positions (Brader & Lewerenz, 2006).

France

In France, the emphasis on gender diversity in KAM is placed on the development of skills and the attainment of equitable representation in large companies. Male KA managers demonstrate exceptional proficiency in building professional relationships, whilst females exhibit outstanding aptitude in analytical thinking. Smaller organizations face challenges in dealing with gender prejudices, as highlighted by Prime and Moss-Racusin (2009). Over the past decade, larger organizations have seen mixed-gender teams exhibit increased turnover rates and enhanced dynamics, as they have benefited from the synergistic combination of skills from both genders.

Spain

Spain recognizes the importance of gender diversity in the workplace, since it believes that teams with a mix of genders are more innovative and comprehensive.

“A mixed-gender team can analyze problem-solving capabilities by drawing on a wider range of skill and approaches [...] By combining these diverse skill sets, a team can leverage a broader range of problem-solving techniques.” (R10)

Homan et al. (2007) provide evidence in favor of this viewpoint: the researchers explore the advantages of many perspectives in both communication and problem-solving. Gender diversity is considered essential for achieving profitability, as it improves a company's capacity to communicate effectively and adapt to the demands of its customers.

Hungary

In Hungary, there is an array of attitudes towards gender diversity in KAM roles. While certain companies prioritize competences without regard to gender, others recognize the distinct benefits of gender-specific skills, as exemplified by an interviewee acknowledging the usefulness of females in fostering relationships.

“A female KAM can find the required level of communication and key points for customers, and males have to learn this factor. For example, if we have a female colleague in our team, from my perspective, it's better for female KA managers to handle communication because they can find effective ways to connect. This is something I have to learn from females.” (R17)

The contrast highlights the ongoing structural obstacles to achieving gender diversity in KAM, as described by Oakley (2000). Despite the acknowledged benefits of mixed-gender teams, demanding KA manager roles with significant time commitments create a barrier to female participation.

India

Women in KAM positions in India are typically highly respected and appreciated for their expertise in nurturing relationships. Nevertheless, there is a significant gender wage gap of 19 percent, which suggests the presence of structural inequity (Chakraborty, 2019).

"In India, we often see women as family-oriented, you know. This respect carries into KAM roles also. Female managers bring a kind of nurturing touch to customer relationships, which is highly valued here." (R18)

Men in KAM positions are commonly perceived as adept negotiators and bold individuals who are willing to take risks. These attributes are crucial for achieving success but tend to obscure the complimentary abilities that women bring to the table. The persistent discrepancy in salaries and advancement possibilities highlights the necessity for continual endeavors to achieve gender diversity.

Vietnam

Vietnam's KAM teams recognize that mixed-gender teams improve decision-making and consumer engagement.

"...men can benefit from learning how to communicate in a more supportive and encouraging way..." (R23)

However, cultural stereotypes and gender tensions still present challenges. Female managers are concerned with unfair competition and ego conflicts, whereas male managers are concerned with maintaining their status. This indicates the need for more initiatives to fully realize the benefits of gender diversity in KAM.

In summary, these findings from various countries illuminate the diverse tapestry of gender dynamics in KAM, highlighting both challenges and progress, and underscoring the critical role of cultural understanding in fostering effective gender diversity strategies.

5. Conclusions

This study addresses the gender dynamics that exist in KAM and reveals unique findings in response to four research questions. Research Question 1 (RQ1) emphasizes the notable influence of gender disparities on boundary-spanning positions. In light of Eagly and Carli (2007), female KA managers in India and Vietnam demonstrate exceptional communication and emotional intelligence, whereas male managers are perceived as pragmatic, which is consistent with the findings of Koenig et al. (2011). In line with the findings of Carli and Eagly (2016), there is an evident correlation between gender and individual competencies (RQ2). For instance, Vietnamese male managers are recognized for their problem-solving capabilities (Homan et al., 2007), while Hungarian and French female managers are regarded for their empathic communication (RQ2). Regarding the value of integrating the distinct approaches of male and female KA managers, RQ3 reveals France's emphasis on competencies, which echoes Woolley et al. (2010) on collective intelligence, and Spain's competitive edge in gender diversity, as supported by Herring (2009). Finally, RQ4 demonstrates that the collaborative efforts of male and female KA managers, which encompass pragmatic negotiation and complementary analytical and communicative abilities, contribute to the success of the team. This notion is consistent with the significance attributed to diverse skill sets, as proposed by Homan et al. (2007). To summarize, this study emphasizes the need to acknowledge and utilize gender-specific abilities to improve team relationships and overall effectiveness in KAM.

6. Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

This study has significant implications for the discipline of KAM, specifically with regard to comprehending the influence of gender diversity on team dynamics and performance. The results indicate that including a range of gender-specific skills and responsibilities can improve the efficiency of KAM teams. Organizations should acknowledge and utilize these distinctions,

and ought to cultivate an environment where both female and male managers utilize their distinct capabilities.

Nevertheless, this research does have some limits. The utilization of qualitative data obtained through interviews could restrict the capacity to apply the findings to a broader population. The perception of gender roles might be influenced by cultural variations of the selected nations, which might impact the relevance of the findings in other global contexts.

A future study in the field should strive to broaden the geographical coverage and needs to incorporate a wider array of nations to improve the applicability of the results. Also, quantitative research methods can be used to confirm the results and to expand upon qualitative observations. Furthermore, longitudinal studies might offer a more profound comprehension of the progression of gender roles in KAM over time and the enduring influence of gender diversity on KAM success. This study establishes the foundations for further investigation into the complex correlation between gender diversity and KAM, and provides a starting point for future scholarly research and practical implementation in the field.

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