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Inclusive Leadership Fosters Challenge-Oriented Organizational Citizenship Behavior: Mediating role of Inclusive Climate

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Abstract: *Employee's challenge-oriented organizational citizenship behavior (COCB) has gained high potential in the recent era of innovations and amplified competition. Accordingly, to grow and lead the market, firms prefer employees who exhibit creative behavior in workplace. Based on optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT) this study aims to investigate how inclusive leadership (IL) stimulates employee's challenge-oriented organizational citizenship behavior (COCB) and to determine the mediating role of inclusive climate (IC). To assess the study hypotheses, data were collected from 398 employees working in small size IT firms operating in Pakistan. A cross-sectional survey-type questionnaire was designed and distributed among employees in their natural workplace. Initially using Amos-23, CFA his established the prominence of variables used in this particular study. AMOS-SEM results revealed that IL stimulates COCB in work unit, and IC partially mediates the association between IL and employee's COCB. This study significantly contributes to both leadership and challenge-oriented organizational citizenship behavior literature, as in the past studies little attention was given to the impact of inclusive leadership to envisage employee's COCB directly and via mediation of inclusive climate. Moreover, theoretical and managerial implications are also discussed in detail.*

Key Words: Inclusive Leadership, Challenge-Oriented Organizational Citizenship Behavior, Inclusive Climate, Mediation Analysis, Structure Equation Modeling Pakistan's IT Industry

Introduction

Employees with exceptional strengths assist firms in establishing a competitive edge and long-term survival in the marketplace (Hussinki et al., 2019). Organizations confront multiple challenges that threaten their leadership roles in today's global competitive environment; hence they focus on a systematic oversight of human resources (Zameer *et al.,* 2021; Afraz *et al.,* 2021). Organizations have focused on retaining employees that give their organizations a competitive edge (Onyemah *et al.,* 2021). Organizations that strive for sustainable growth in the dynamic technological innovations, globalization and amplified competition strangely rely more than ever on their workers' innovative and forward-looking behavior, i.e., COCB (Mustafa *et al.,* 2022; Javed et al., 2021).

Challenge-oriented organizational citizenship behavior refers to actions and decisions that are focused on potential future implications or outcomes, rather than merely reacting to current circumstances (Strömmer, 2022; Mackenzie et al., 2011). In a growing innovative environment, businesses demand individuals to not solely perform their responsibilities effectively, but also be proactive in responding to problems and engage in creative behavior with the aim to strengthen the firm's core competitiveness (Haldorai & Phetvaroon, 2022). Individuals that are Challenge-Oriented have a vision for the future and

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establish goals that are in line with their long-term aspirations (Tuan, 2020). As an outcome, firms' main emphasis revolves around bringing innovation in their products and services. it enables firms to chart new paths for development and survival in the marketplace (Manzoor et al., 2024; Bulturbayevich, 2021; Gawer & Cusumano, 2014). In this regard, employees' efforts play a vital role for exploring, establishing and promoting challenge-oriented organizational citizenship behavior (Mackenzie *et al.,* 2011; Janssen, 2005).

challenge-oriented behavior in the perspective of a workplace preserves an organization to lead the industries effectively and efficiently.Moreover, follower's vigorous and willing involvement in organizational growth and performance enhancement through the production of innovative ideas or the instigation of transformational work techniques, policies, and procedures are referred to as COCB (Cortes *et al.,* 2021; Miao et al., 2017). It generally entails contestation of the status quo and confronts top management. It presents itself in several ways, active participation, and commitment, positive and creative behaviors (Fateh *et al.,* 2020). Regardless of the differences, all COCB initiatives are carried out to develop the organization (Mackenzie *et al.,* 2011) even if they might also result in conflict, and sometimes employee may face negative consequences.

According to recent studies, employee positive and creative behavior is impacted by both individual and organizational influences (Chen and Zhang, 2023; Younas et al., 2022). Whereas prevailing studies revealed that COCB can be influenced by different variables, including specific behavior (Chen et al., 2020; Oke *et al.,* 2009) inspirational features, such as behavioral orientation, learning intentions, and attainment of desires (Sagnak, 2016; Wang and Zhu, 2018). Previous investigations have largely revealed that organizational leadership behavior is an imperative factor influencing employee COCB. Several studies have demonstrated that authentic leadership (Roncesvalles & Gaerlan, 2021), servant leadership (Ghalavi & Nastiezaie, 2020), transactional leadership (Asgari & Taherpour, 2020), transformational leadership (Aldrin & Yunanto, 2019), empowering leadership (Li & Zhang, 2016), ethical leadership (Saleh et al., 2022) and participative leadership (Sagnak, 2016) influences employees organizational citizenship behavior. However, limited studies have been found that doe's relational leadership i.e., inclusive leadership affects employees challenge-oriented OCB via mediation of inclusive climate. Further investigation is essential to establish the relationship. Inclusive leadership is a dynamic prerequisite approach for leaders and managers to change the diversified environment (Younas et al., 2021; Javed et al., 2021; Ashikali et al., 2019) and established management factor for boosting individual COCB (Li et al., 2022).

Inclusive leadership approach is expected to stimulate employee challenge-oriented OCB directly and indirectly through other mediating mechanisms, i.e., inclusive climate. As an outcome, employee COCB might comprise several risks and insecurities associated to their innovative and creative activities and to develop this behavior individuals are entailing to certain risks and endow greater potential (Chiaburu & Van Dyne, 2013; Mackenzie & Podsakoff, 2011; Choi, 2007). A past study by Perry & Noumair (2021) has revealed an intervening role of inclusive climate in link between inclusive leadership and employee workplace outcomes, e.g., OCB. We believe that inclusive climate might play a significant intervening role in inclusive leadership and employee challenge-oriented OCB relationship. This study is an attempt to bridge the gap and explore circumstances where inclusive leadership affects COCB through inclusive climate. Hence, the current study implied inclusive climate as mediating variable for inclusive leadership to influence the individual COCB.

In conclusion, this study might be the first to employ empirical analysis to verify and establish the significance of inclusive climate in mediating the relationship between IL and COCB. It additionally emphasizes inclusive leadership impacts on COCB, while it broadens COCB's current research perspective. In execution, it reveals several aspects of motivation and developing employees COCB, it further offers novel concepts and practical recommendations for managing employee extra-role behaviors.

Review of Literature and Hypotheses Development
Inclusive Leadership and Employee Challenge-oriented Organizational Citizenship Behavior

When it comes to power disparities, inclusiveness refers to actions that call for acknowledging and taking into account the opinions of others (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). By focusing on shared objectives, an inclusive leader prioritizes group benefits and promotes a healthy relationship between leaders and followers (Dulebohn et al., 2017). In efforts, to foster a climate of inclusion, one effective strategy is to

allow employee participation in formulating and implementing organizational policies and this strategy involves employees in the decision-making processes (Edmondson et al., 2018). Creative ideas might be openly discussed, promoted, and implemented by providing employees an opportunity to engage in interactions and decision-making (Manzoor et al., 2023; Abdullah et al., 2021; Taştan et al., 2015). COCB involves generating, promoting, and implementing new ideas, and employees who exhibit challenge-oriented behavior go beyond standard procedures and challenge their leaders (Calikoglu, 2019; Mackenzie *et al.,* 2011). When leaders demonstrate sympathetic behavior towards novel ideas, employees perceive it as organizational support for COCB (Chen *et al.,* 2020). This sparks the significance of leadership in creating a work environment that encourages innovation.

Inclusive leadership fosters "openness, accessibility and availability," recognized worth of each employee as an individual, pays attention to how each employee works, values individual diversity, pays attention to each employee's unique needs, promotes teamwork, and strengthens organizational support for employees (Kuknor & Bhattacharya, 2022; Chen et al., 2016). According to precedent studies, inclusive leadership involves "leaders appreciating employee contributions and encouraging people to get involved" (Hantula, 2009; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Employers whose ideas are being implemented are specifically included in inclusive leaders' discussions.

Organizational leaders, especially inclusive leaders, play a central role in fostering innovation between employees by providing the necessary support and possessions to protect, develop, and implement creative ideas (Javed et al., 2021). According to Kanter (1988), employees require leadership support to generate and promote ideas, particularly those that are unique and require significant implementation support. This support and encouragement of leaders helps and create confidence among employees and increases the likelihood of successful implementation of creative ideas (Miao *et al.,* 2017; Sagnak *et al.,* 2016). Inclusive leaders display certain traits that promote fair treatment of all employees, regardless of individual capabilities (Bourke *et al.,* 2020). This fosters a sense of equity and motivates employees to meet job requirements that align with their intrinsic work behavior (Elvestuen *et al.,* 2021). Research supports the idea that such relationships encourage employees to perceive a fair distribution of effort and rewards which reflects COCB (Alnaimi *et al.,* 2021). Optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT) posits that when employee his given in inclusive workplace climate above and beyond their diversity they are more likely to engage in OCB (Perry & Noumair, 2021; Ashikali, 2021, 2019). Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

> **H1:** There is positive and significant alliance between inclusive leadership and challenge oriented organizational citizenship behavior.

Inclusive Leadership and Inclusive Climate

Inclusive leadership emphasizes on forming diverse and inclusive work environment, where all employees feel valued and included (Payne *et al.,* 2023). Inclusive leaders actively seek to engage with and understand the experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives of their team members, and they strive to create an environment that allows all employees to contribute to their full potential (Xintian & Peng, 2023). Inclusive leadership is viewed as considerably essential to encourage and foster a sense of belonging and individuality (Randel et al., 2018). According to precedent studies, inclusive leadership involves "leaders appreciating employee contributions and encouraging people to get involved" (Hantula, 2009; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). According to this definition, it was contended that inclusive leadership fosters "openness, accessibility and availability," recognized the worth of each employee as an individual, pays attention to how each employee works, values individual diversity, pays attention to each employee's unique needs, promotes teamwork, and strengthens organizational support for employees (Javed et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2020; Mackenzie et al., 2011). Further, inclusive leadership is described as "the extent whereby an employee believes that they are an admired part of the work unit by receiving behavior that meets their desires intended for belongingness and individuality" (Shore *et al.,* 2018). Employees work under supervision of leadership in organization and need facilitation in their tasks rather than directing them apart from their diversity (Puntaier, 2023). Inclusive leadership generates a feeling of identity and individuality (Ashikali, 2021; Ramlall, 2008). When an employee develops a stronger feeling of belonging to the organization, strengthens their relationship with it, makes an effort to complete duties for both

parties' benefit, and aspires to long-term outcomes, they are considered as included (Gursoy & Maier, 2023). Further, Employees feel valued and respected for their extraordinary skills and that they are part of a prestigious team. They further stated that their work with others is distinctive (Ullah *et al.,* 2021; Sugiyama *et al.,* 2016).

Inclusive leadership is essential for creating and maintaining an inclusive climate, as it sets the tendency for the organization and provides a framework for initiatives (Ashikali, 2021). By exhibiting inclusive behaviors, values, and attitudes, leaders can inspire and motivate their team members to embrace and promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in their daily work (Mor Barak & Brimhall, 2022). An inclusive climate is a work environment where everyone feels comfortable, respected, and valued regardless of their identity or background (Li *et al.,* 2022). It is an environment where individuals from diverse backgrounds feel safe to express themselves, bring their authentic identity to work, and contribute to their full potential (Kropp & Sedlmeier, 2019).

According to optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT), individuals have an inherent need to strike a balance between being similar to and unique from others (Way & Lineberry, 2022). Inclusive leaders attempt to provide an atmosphere in which employees may demonstrate their individuality while simultaneously encouraging a feeling of belonging and uniqueness (Ashikali, 2021). According to ODT, inclusive leadership supports and appreciates the distinct perspectives, experiences, and talents of each team member (Hanif et al., 2023). Furthermore, inclusive leaders develop a feeling of belonging and inclusion by creating a sense of shared identity and shared purpose that ties the team together (Shore et al., 2023). In the light of above discussion, we hypothesized that,

H2: There is positive and significant alliance between inclusive leadership and inclusive climate.

Inclusive Climate and Challenge Oriented Organizational Citizenship behavior

In this modern age of innovations and creativity, workplaces are comprised up of individuals from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities that might bring new ideas and experiences (Akbari & Asadnezhad, 2022; Hunsaker & Ding, 2022). Organizations that encourage inclusion can foster a work environment in which all employees feel appreciated, valued, and empowered (Mor Barak, 2022). inclusive workplaces have a favorable influence on employees' psychological and emotional well-being, which may lead to greater productivity, innovation, job satisfaction, and forward-looking behavior, e.g, COCB (Khaddam et al., 2023).

Inclusive leaders are empathetic and consistently engage to their followers, soliciting input and suggestions from all employees, irrespective of their job, level and background (Chen et al., 2020). They also acknowledge and reward each team member's individual qualities and abilities, and they provide opportunity for all employees to develop and enhance their skills (Goto & Ando, 2023). This makes it easier for individuals to feel-like an integral member of the organization and its long-term targets (Perry, 2021). Furthermore, inclusive leader's prime focus is on providing an inclusive work environment for all employees and providing opportunities for them to raise their voices and participate in organizational discussions and decision-making processes, which encourage lead them to establish extra-role behavior (Zhong & Luo, 2022).

Drawing on optimal distinctiveness theory, there is a potential link between inclusive climate and challenge-oriented OCB, as employees feel included and valued in their workplace are likely to engage in proactive and creative behavior that benefit the organization, including seeking out and embracing challenges (Chen *et al.,* 2020; Ashikali, 2021). Organizations can foster an inclusive climate by creating policies and practices that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion, i.e., implementing diversity and inclusion training programs, offering flexible work arrangements, and promoting open communication channels can help create an inclusive work environment (Ghafoor & Haar, 2020).To encourage challenge-oriented OCB, organizations must provide opportunities for employees to take on creative projects, encourage innovation, risk-taking, while recognize their creative behavior and reward employees for their contributions to the organization's success (Saleem & Irshad, 2023; Shahab & Udin, 2018; Jha, 2014). We hypothesize the following:

H3: There is positive and significant alliance among inclusive climate and challenge oriented organizational citizenship behavior.

Mediating Role of Inclusive Climate

Inclusive leadership is a significant attribute of an organization that assists in promoting the development of innovative and inclusive work environment (Chen et al., 2020; Ashikali, 2021; Carmeli et al., 2010). Employees might take benefit from workplace climate that encourages inclusive practices since they are willing to raise voices and take obligation when their efforts are recognized (Wang & Zhu, 2018). Many scarce resources might be made attainable through inclusive leadership availability, accessibility, and visibility; whenever team members encounter challenges, they can consult and participate in equal interaction with them (Yasin et al., 2023) which further promotes collaboration among leader-follower (Mehmood et al., 2022). Employees benefit from high level of flexibility in their inclusive workplace atmosphere that encourages open discussion regarding resolving difficulties and achieving goals, as well as information sharing based on equality (Katsaros, 2022). In other words, this promotes a positive work atmosphere in which employees can acquire more preliminary resources comparable to organizational support (Mor Barak & Brimhall, 2022; Yoon & Kim, 2015) and develop their sense of acquiring resources when they interact with leaders or other members (Perry & Noumair, 2021). Employees have the confidence to take initiative, be innovative, be proactive, and engage in good forward-looking behavior, such as COCB, to promote the organization's sustainable growth (Chang & Lin, 2022).

According to optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT), Inclusion depends on two needs that individuals attempt to meet: belongingness and uniqueness (Shore & Chung, 2022). An individual wants a sense of belonging and acceptance from others. By balancing these demands, optimum uniqueness can be obtained (Hogg & Brewer, 2017). ODT Further speculates that, individuals strive to balance two desires: being validated by being like others and individuating and being different (Leonardelli & Brewer, 2010; Brewer & Roccas, 2001). Individuals are likely to feel excluded if these two conditions are not met, belongingness is poor, and individuality is undervalued (Ashikali & Kuipers, 2021; Shore et al., 2018). Hence, an inclusive atmosphere constitutes a situation in which the work group and the organization meet employees' needs for both belonging (everyone is considered an insider) and uniqueness (everyone is encouraged to maintain their individuality) (Rashid & Zaman, 2021). According to past research, Inclusion perceptions are linked to organizational commitment, work satisfaction, well-being, willingness to engage in OCB, and job performance (Rice & Sheridan, 2020; Brimhall et al., 2017). This study proposed the following hypothesis:

H4: Inclusive climate mediates the association between inclusive leadership and challenge- oriented organizational citizenship behavior.

Hypothesized Model
Figure 1
Research model
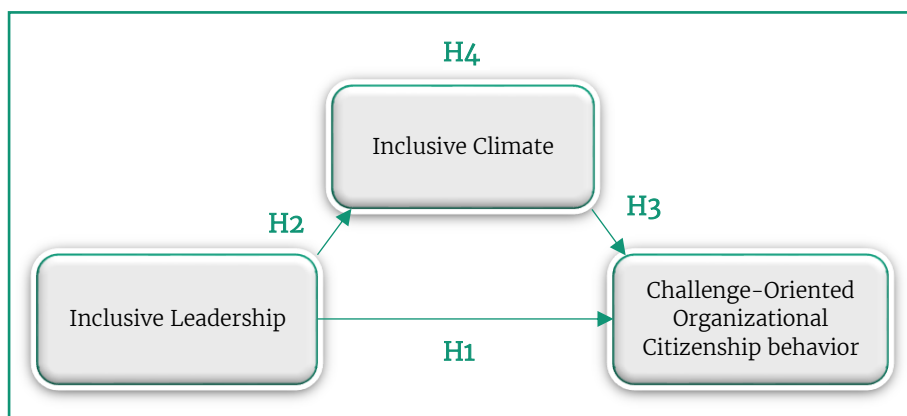
Based on the proposed research model, hypotheses are formulated. The basis for the developed hypotheses was identified in the previous section. Hypotheses were tested using AMOS- SEM 23.0 and Hays PROCESS macro (4.0). The measurement model was established to assess the goodness of the fitted model, as well as construct validity and reliability.

Methodology
Research Design
Research design is conceptualized as a way that commences with the framework of the study and continues until the investigation reaches a final result. The current study was Quantitative in nature which imply data in numbers and uses scientific tools to analyze specific information for the purpose to answer the research questions.

Population and Sample Size
The current study population was employees working in IT firms operating in Pakistan. The IT firms were chosen since businesses need to survive in this sector to adapt to new developments brought about by technological innovation and competitive marketplaces in the form of novel ideas, Sample size for the current study was framed by (Yamane, 1967) method and the final sample size was 398.

Instruments Measurement and Sampling Procedure
Employee's responses were obtained through 5-point Likert-Scale anchors; 1- strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree for the entire study variables i.e., inclusive leadership, COCB, inclusive climate. The scales used for control variable are as follow. For gender (1 for male and 2 for female), for age (1 =18-25, 2 = 26-33, 3 = 34-41, 4 = 42-49 and 5 = 50 and above), for education (1= intermediate, 2 = bachelor, 3 = master and 4 = PhD), for experience (1 = less than 1 year, 2 = 1-5, 3 = 6-11, 4 = 12-17 and 5 = 18 years or above). To obtain the responses and address the potential problem employees filled the questionnaire regarding study variables. Every employee working in IT industry was able to understand the English language well as it was composed simple. Inclusive leadership was measured using 9-item scales developed by Carmeli et al. (2010). COCB was measured with the five-item scale developed by (Mackenzie *et al.,* 2011). Inclusive climate was measured with 8 items scale developed by (Nishii, 2013).

Demographic Information
The researcher distributed a total of 525 questionnaire out of which 423 were received and the final sample for the current study was 398 by eliminating 15 questionnaires due to missing data and 10 were not returned back. The overall response rate was 75.8% the majority of which were male: 66.1% and 33.9% female. Age frequency shows that 25.4% were 18-24, 43.5% were in 25-30 age group, 14.1% were 31-36, 9.5% are in the 37-42 age category and 7.5% were above 43. Academic qualification of study respondents shows that, 17.6% held intermediate, 48.7% bachelor degree, 26.9% master and 6.8% PhD degree. Experience of the study respondents, 17.6% had less than 5 years, 37.2% had 6-10 years of experience, 21.4% had 11-15 years, 17.6% had 16-20 and 6.3% had above 20 years of working experience in IT firms. Peshawar, Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi respondents participated in filling study questionnaires, showing that, 32.7% were working in IT Firms based on Peshawar City, 25.1% were based on Islamabad, 22.6% based on Lahore and 19.6% were based on Karachi. (Table 1)

Table 1
Demographic information

Details	Frequency	Percentage%
Gender		
Male	252	66.1
Female	129	33.9
Age		
18-24	101	25.4
25-30	173	43.5
31-36	56	14.1
37-42	38	9.5
Above 43	30	7.5

Details		Frequency	Percentage%
Experience			
below 5 years		70	17.6
6-10 years		148	37.2
11-15 years		85	21.4
16-20 years		70	17.6
Above 20 years		25	6.3
Qualification			
Intermediate		701	7.6
Bachelor		194	48.7
Masters		107	26.9
PhD		27	6.8
R/W Respondent			
Peshawar	*130*	32.7	32.7
Islamabad 100	*100*	25.1	57.8
Lahore	*90*	22.6	80.4
Karachi	*78*	19.6	100.0
Total n-398			

Data Collection

Data collection was carried out through adapted survey-type questionnaire. Employees working in IT Firms located in Peshawar, Islamabad, Karachi and Lahore were given questionnaire in their natural work environment and asked to fill it out.

Data Analysis Tools

Data was analyzed using SPSS (Ver. 21), Amos (V.23) to carried model fit indices, SEM (Structure equation modeling) to test hypotheses and Hays PROCESS macro (Ver. 4.0) to conduct mediation analysis. Inferential statistics were used in the primary analysis phase. All-inclusive, current study considered all the ethics, whereas information regarding firms and employees remained confidential. Further, respondents participated in this study were thoroughly briefed and they were given adequate time to read, understand and respond to every question fairly.

Results

Assessment of Measurement Model

The measurement model was established to assess the convergent and discriminant validity of the scales. Convergent validity probes whether the items measure the same concept or not. It entails average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR). According to Hair et al. ([2017](#)) the AVE value > 0.5 and CR > 0.70 are accepted. Concurrently, discriminant validity was patterned by the Fornell–Larcker criterion, i.e., taking the square root of AVE. The structural measurement model was developed to test the hypotheses, P-values, confidence intervals, β-values, and t-statistics. The outcomes of the study analysis are shown in this section. The study hypotheses were tested using AMOS-SEM (23) with maximum- likely hood method. Initially, we implied Amos using CFA to check the fitness of measurement model. Further, to go into the detail investigation we assessed the normality and reliability outliers of the study variables. We calculated CR, AVE and factor loadings for inclusive leadership, inclusive climate and challenge-oriented OCB. CR values are > .7 which is acceptable, AVE values are > .5. To fulfill convergent validity rules, AVE should be >0.5. To fulfill the discriminant validity standards, MSV should be less than AVE, and MaxR (H) value should be greater than AVE. Hence, the AVE value of discriminant validity has been fulfilled. As mentioned below in Table 2, standard loadings of each variable show an assessment of standardized factor loadings >0.70, CR of inclusive leadership loading is 0.920, and the AVE is 0.562, standardized factor loadings for Inclusive climate is > 0.70, CR value is 0.893 and AVE is 0.644 and finally, standardized factor loadings for COCB is >0.70 CR value is 0.856 and AVE is 0.602. (Table 2)

Similarly, Table 2 contains the Cronbach's alpha, CR, AVE, discriminant validity, MSV and MaxR (H) values. Cronbach's alpha value of all the study items and CR values range from 0.85 to 0.92 for each variable. Hence, all the internal consistencies meet the standard 0.70 criterion (Nunnally, 1978; Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). According to Fornell and Larcker (1981) if the value of AVE is >0.5 it is good and acceptable. However, CR is considered more significant if the value is >0.6. The results of item loadings of study variables (i.e., inclusive leadership, inclusive climate and challenge-oriented organizational citizenship behavior) are in suitable range, i.e., value should be > 0.5; we removed some items having less loading to get better results. Table 3 shows the outcomes for standardized regression weights of items, assessment of construct validity and goodness of model fit based on CFA.

Table 2
Construct validity and reliability

Variable	Alpha-value	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)	Discriminant Validity
IL	.925	0.920	0.562	0.028	0.922	0.750*
IC	.899	0.893	0.644	0.001	0.838	0.803*
COCB	.879	0.856	0.602	0.028	0.892	0.776*

Note: CR means Composite reliability, AVE means Average variance extraction, MSV means Maximum shared variance, and MaxR (H) means Maximum reliability.

Table 3
Standardized regression weights/ items loadings

Variable Inclusive Leadership	Items	Estimate
Leadership		
IL1	.802	
	Il2	.755
	Il3	.816
	Il4	.730
	Il5	.673
	Il6	.708
	Il7	.614
	Il8	.552
	Il9	.594
Challenge-Oriented OCB		
	COCB2	.676
	COCB3	.780
	COCB4	.754
	COCB5	.658
Inclusive Climate		
	IC2	.731
	IC3	.752
	IC4	.704
	IC5	.635
	IC7	.603

Model Fit Assessment

CFA was conducted to assess the overall goodness of the fitted model. The values of the fit indices regarding study variables (i.e., inclusive leadership, inclusive climate and challenge-oriented OCB) indicated the excellent fit, (CMIN/DF 1.425, CFI 0.990, RFI 0.958, NFI 0.966, IFI 0.990, TLI 0.987, RMSEA .033 and P close is .999). (Table 4)

Hypotheses Testing Results

Table 5 shows the results of the tested hypotheses developed for the current study. The direct relationship between IL and COCB is significant as the value indicates (β= .34, S.E .071, T value 4.730 and P- value <

0.05), IL & IC values indicates significant relationship (β= .11, S.E .053, T value 2.062 and P value < 0.05), IC and COCB values indicated that inclusive climate has a significant impact on employees COCB (β= .21, S.E .100, T value 2.079 and P value < 0.05).

Mediation Analysis

Preacher *et al.* (2007) recommendations were followed to test the mediating role of inclusive climate in relationship between IL and COCB. Mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS macro (V 4.0) developed by Hayes (2017). Hence, Hays process model 1 (which includes independent variable, dependent and mediating variable) was implied to test the hypothesis. The result shows that inclusive climate partially mediate the relationship between IL and COCB (β= .1744, Boot LLCI= .0993, Boot ULCI= .2629) (Table 5).

Table 4
Model fit indices

Measures	Estimate	Threshold	Interpretation
CMIN/DF	1.425*	between 1 & 3	Excellent
CFI	0.990*	> 0.95	Excellent
RFI (rho1)	0.958	> 0.95	Excellent
NFI (Delta1)	0.966	> 0.95	Excellent
IFI (Delta2)	0.990	> 0.95	Excellent
TLI (rho2)	0.987*	> 0.95	Excellent
RMSEA	.033*	> 0.95	Excellent
P-close	.999	> 0.95	Excellent

Table 5
Hypotheses testing outcomes

Variable	Estimate	S.E	T Value	P Value	Decision
IL→COCB	.34	.071	4.730	***	H1: Supported
IL→IC	.11	.053	2.062	***	H2: Supported
IC→COCB	.21	.100	2.079	***	H3: Supported
Mediation test					
IL→ IC→COCB	**Indirect Effect**	**Boot LLCI**	**Boot ULCI**		
	.1744	.0993	.2629		H4: Supported

Discussion

Organizations and research scholars have been paying special attention to innovation since it is an ongoing prerequisite for the long-term sustainability of businesses. COCB is essential in the communication and information technology sectors for promoting services supplied and firm competitiveness. The present study goal was to assess the mediating role of inclusive climate in relationship between IL and COCB using a sample size of 398 employees working in the IT industry in Pakistan.

According to the study findings, inclusive leadership traits received greater emphasis than inclusive climate and COCB. The divergent gender distribution in the study's sample might be one of the probable reasons for this conclusion. In general, males prefer inclusive leadership practices in a workplace climate that encourages innovation. In the Pakistani context, this result is partially expected, considering that males are more engaged in technology and communication than women. The findings also revealed a link between inclusive leadership and COCB, which was investigated in a previous study (Chen et al., 2020), showing the critical role of inclusive leadership in motivating COCB.

To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is a pioneering study that examines inclusive climate as mediator in explaining the association between IL and COCB. The findings of AMOS-SEM analysis revealed that inclusive leadership and inclusive climate were independent predictors of COCB. Considering these

findings, this study offers guidelines to corporate executives on how to establish an inclusive atmosphere, promote creativity, encourage individuals to voice creative ideas, and undertake further investigations on firm innovation capacity.

Theoretical Implications

Based on optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT) this study presents inclusive climate as mediating mechanism influences individual COCB, which confirms the previous studies investigation that inclusive leadership has positive impacts on employees innovative and creative behavior (Javed et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2020). ODT assumes that when an employee has given an inclusive work unit, they are expected to increase their job satisfaction, work engagement and organizational citizenship behavior (Payne et al., 2023; Randel et al., 2018). Further it proposes that individuals have a fundamental need to achieve a balance between being similar to others and being distinct from others (Way & Lineberry, 2022). Inclusive leaders strive to create an environment that allows individuals to express their uniqueness while also promoting a sense of belonging and commonality (Ashikali, 2019). Additionally, inclusive leaders tolerate their mistakes and boost up their potential to act creatively. Moreover, ODT posits that inclusive leadership encourages and celebrates the diverse perspectives, experiences, and skills that each team member feels included (Hanif *et al.,* 2023). Furthermore, inclusive leader creates a sense of shared identity and common purpose that binds the team together, fostering a sense of belonging and inclusivity (Shore *et al.,* 2023). Besides this investigation ODT is comparatively novel theoretical investigation to explain the intervening role of inclusive climate in IL–COCB connection. Under the supervision of an inclusive leader, it is believed that employees are expected to enjoy high inclusiveness, remain unique and observe high organizational belongingness, thereby encouraging them to establish extra role behavior, i.e., COCB (Ashikali, 2021; Chen et al., 2020; Javed et al., 2017). This study contributes both to theory and expands the existing literature of knowledge on COCB. Prior to this attempt and up to the best knowledge of author, no study has been found that investigated mediating role of inclusive climate in relationship among IL–COCB.

Managerial Implications

First, organizations should allow and implement inclusive leadership practices due to its proven importance in developing job loyalty, satisfaction and OCB (Younas et al., 2020; Wang and Zheng, 2018). In today's era of innovation and creativity, employees are observed to be more comfortable, creative and innovative with inclusive practices (Ghani et al., 2022; Paolillo & Scuderi, 2021). Leaders are preferred to adopt inclusive approach which promotes equality, fairness, personnel and organizational growth and extra role behavior. Managers should not always be directive but should support and help employees with their tasks.

Second, managers should always prefer in developing and strengthening relation with employees. Especially, managers in IT firms should give an inclusive environment to their employee's so they can creatively respond to the technological changes. According to the study findings, individual from diverse background is more progressive if they have given inclusive environment where they can remain unique and enjoy the sense of belongingness.

Third, managers can use these guidelines to upgrade or design organizational policies to get more growth and success in future perspective. This study investigated that inclusive climate mediates the IL–COCB relationship which have foremost impact on organizations. Employees working in Pakistan's IT firms are more comfortable with inclusive climate and are observed to be more challenge-oriented in their tasks.

Research limitations and Future Directions

First, study questionnaire was distributed among employees and they were asked to fill it. Future studies should focus on asking employees about inclusive leader behavior and leader should be asked regarding employees COCB to minimize common biases. This study used cross-sectional data, but future studies should focus on longitudinal data to further explain the causal relationship among IL–COCB. Second, this study was quantitative in nature and distributed questionnaire among employees working in IT firms, but future researcher should focus on qualitative study to get in-depth detail. Third, this study implied inclusive climate as mediator, future studies should focus on exploring psychological empowerment, job

propensity and creative self-efficacy as mediator to further deepen the relationship between IL-COCB. Finally, this study was conducted on IT firms working in Pakistan; future researchers should focus on other industries and target different countries to expand the COCB literature.

Conclusion

The current study was intended to assess the impact of inclusive leadership style on encouraging employees COCB. Inclusive climate was implied as intervening variable to further explain the above relationship. AMOS-SEM and Hays PROCESS macro was utilized to analyze the collected data from Pakistan's IT industry. Employees working in IT firms located in Peshawar, Islamabad, Lahore, and Karachi were visited in their workplace. The empirical results verify that inclusive leadership is positively and significantly stimulates employee COCB. Further, the current study investigation explored how inclusive leader positive role can stimulate employees COCB in the current era of innovation and new technology emergence in the IT sector as firms always seek employees with creative and innovative behavior. The current study findings are of great worth for IT firms to serve in technology market and by stimulating employee COCB they can outperform. Furthermore, the introduction of a novel concept, i.e., inclusive climate as mediator to explain employee COCB was investigated and based on the response of participatory in the survey type research verified that inclusive Climate which is comprised of two senses uniqueness and belongingness; stimulate employee COCB and significantly mediates the IL-COCB relationship. Moreover, the study concluded that as more employees observe these 2 senses (climate for inclusion) the more they develop their COCB.

Based on findings of this study, it is recommended for the managers of IT firms that diversity in employees should always be welcome and employees should be given an atmosphere where they can remain unique and have an equal sense of belongingness. Leadership behavior i.e., inclusive leader plays an important role in developing employee creative behavior (COCB) through inclusiveness.

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