

# The effect of inclusive leadership on employee engagement, mediated by psychological safety in the hospitality industry

Inclusive leadership and employee engagement

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper assesses the inclusive leadership and employee engagement nexus in the hospitality industry, using psychological safety as a mediator.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study conveniently sampled 247 employees from the hospitality industry in Zimbabwe. Data were collected using a self-administered structured questionnaire with the aid of trained research assistants. Descriptive and inferential statistics were generated using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23. Regression analysis was used.

**Findings** – The findings of this study indicate that the predictor variable (inclusive leadership) directly affects the outcome variable (employee engagement) in the presence of the mediator. In addition, these findings depict that the indirect coefficient was partially significant, which shows that psychological safety partially affects employee engagement in the presence of inclusive leadership.

**Research limitations/implications** – The study came up with essential conclusions on the link between inclusive leadership and employee engagement in the hospitality industry. However, there is a need to exercise caution when generalising the findings to a different setting. The results represent the opinions of a sample drawn from Zimbabwe, a developing country in Southern Africa. Future research can carry out a comparative study on the same variables in the context of developed and developing countries. Further, future research can execute a longitudinal analysis to better understand if inclusive leadership directly affects employee engagement in the presence of psychological safety. This would help hospitality management to employ relevant leadership strategies that enhance employee engagement.

**Practical implications** – This research has pertinent implications for both academics and human resource practitioners. The study results revealed that there is a direct effect on inclusive leadership and employee engagement. Practically, if leaders avail themselves to work with employees and discuss business operations and social issues affecting them, employees will be committed to exerting more energy towards their work and productivity will be improved. Moreover, it is understandable that mistakes always happen, but errors will be minimised and controlled in such an environment. The results also revealed that the connection between inclusive leadership on employee engagement is partly enhanced by the moderator. This may be taken as a good strategy that can be employed by human resources practitioners in the hospitality industry.

**Originality/value** – The study significantly contributes to researchers and practitioners because it develops strategies for enhancing employee engagement in the hospitality sector. In addition, there is scant research that explores the mediating relationship of psychological safety between inclusive leadership and employee engagement in developing countries, particularly in the hospitality sector.

**Keywords** Employee engagement, Inclusive leadership, Psychological safety, Hospitality industry

**Paper type** Research paper



## Introduction

In a competitive environment characterised by globalisation, employee engagement has been regarded as a salient facilitator for organisational growth (Radda *et al.*, 2015), performance (Tran and Choi, 2019) and competitiveness (Sibanda *et al.*, 2014). Several studies revealed that employee engagement is linked with lower absenteeism, lower turnover rates, increased loyalty, enhanced creativity, increased production, improved citizenship behaviour and enhanced customer satisfaction (Busse and Regenberg, 2019; De Waal and Pienaar, 2013; Shuck and Herd, 2012). Woodka (2014) posits that engaged employees can participate in different programmes of the organisation and are usually attached to the entity for many years. Lower turnover rates, together with low absenteeism, are antecedents of employee engagement. Conversely, employee disengagement leads to low production, lack of creativity and high labour turnover. Osborne and Hammoud (2017) note that disengaged employees cost corporates in the United States of America (USA) about \$ 30 billion per year.

Most organisations across the globe are experiencing a low level of employee engagement. Gallup's tracking statistics reveal that 13% of employees worldwide are engaged, 63% are not engaged and 24% are actively disengaged (Gallup, 2014). The Gallup group interviewed employees in 142 countries worldwide and observed that only 180 million employees in those countries are engaged with their leaders (Gallup, 2014). Further, it was discovered that 30% of employees in the USA and Canada were engaged, followed by Australia and New Zealand at 24%. Gallup group reveals that Africa has a high number of disengaged employees compared to European countries. Only 13% of employees were engaged in Egypt, while only 9% of the South African workforce was engaged (Mann and Harter, 2016). Compared with the above statistics, Zimbabwe has the lowest percentage of engaged employees at 7% (Shoko and Zinyemba, 2014). The low level of employee engagement has compounded the challenges businesses face in Zimbabwe, and the hospitality industry is not spared.

The hospitality industry has several characteristics that generate challenges for the employees in comparison with other industries. These unique challenges include increasing customer demands, which propels employees to be creative and commit to the improvement of quality service (Hoang *et al.*, 2021). However, employees in the hospitality industry experience unfavourable conditions, which encompasses long working hours, non-existence of career structures, low salaries, emotional labour, the physical demands of the work, stress, burnout and autocratic management (De Beer *et al.*, 2014; Mkono, 2010; Shereni, 2020; Umasuthan and Park, 2018; Wisikoti and Mutanga, 2012). Such unfavourable work environments usually make employees experience job stress, physical and emotional burnout and have a lower sense of work engagement, which may necessitate high labour turnover (Tan *et al.*, 2020). Malek *et al.* (2018) observed that between 2001 and 2006, the average employee turnover rate in the USA across all industries was 39.6%, and in 2015 it was 25%. Furthermore, the same study noted that the tourism and hospitality sector in the USA recorded an average employee turnover rate of 74.6% between 2001 and 2006, and the year 2015 also recorded 51.2% (Malek *et al.*, 2018). This clearly shows that even from a developed country's perspective, labour turnover is an urgent issue in the hospitality industry as compared to other industries.

Carasco-Saul *et al.* (2015) posit that most employees leave their organisations because of their leaders. Leadership is one of the most important determinants of employee engagement (Busse and Regenberg, 2019; Maximo *et al.*, 2019). Leader-member exchange concept was seen to positively influence employee dedication and devotion towards their work in the hospitality sector (Bufquin, 2020). Undoubtedly, a leader's behaviour is a relevant ingredient of motivation and employee satisfaction and creates a healthy environment to support employee engagement, especially in the hospitality industry where employees encounter unfavourable working environments (Tran and Choi, 2019). Self-concept theory posits that employees develop positive behaviour and feelings when they receive support from their

leaders (Tan *et al.*, 2020). As such, when leaders are available whenever needed, employees will exhibit behaviours and attitudes that benefit the organisation (Rabiul *et al.*, 2021). Organisational support, especially from top management, is regarded as an essential determinant of employees' performance in the hospitality industry (Li *et al.*, 2010).

However, there are few research studies on the effect of inclusive leadership on employee engagement in the hospitality industry, particularly in the context of developing countries. A significant number of scholars have carried out different studies on leadership styles, concentrating more on the impact of transformational leadership (Akanji *et al.*, 2018; Busse and Regenberg, 2019) and authentic leadership (Maximo *et al.*, 2019). In that same vein, several studies in European countries established that inclusive leadership completely impacts employee engagement (Tran and Choi, 2019; Busse and Regenberg, 2019).

A handful of researchers highlighted the effect of inclusive leadership on employee engagement, but a paucity of studies had focused on inclusive leadership as a driver of employee engagement through psychological safety, especially in the hospitality industries operating in developing countries. This study aims to contribute to the academic literature by establishing the effect of inclusive leadership on employee engagement, mediated by psychological safety. The setting of this study is the hospitality industry in Zimbabwe, a developing country facing an unstable economic situation. The following sections of this paper look at the literature review, hypotheses, methodological considerations, findings of the study, discussion and conclusion.

## Literature review and hypotheses formulation

### *Inclusive leadership and employee engagement*

The notion of inclusive leadership was first opined by Nembhard and Edmondson (2006). The concept was expressed as actions exhibited by top leaders that show incitement and appreciation for followers' subscriptions within the enterprise (Qi *et al.*, 2019). Subsequently, Carmeli *et al.* (2010) described the inclusive leadership style as the leader who exhibits openness, availability and accessibility when interacting with subordinates. Inclusive leaders are always supportive, believe in open communication, avail themselves to their followers and are interested in their team members' contributions (Choi *et al.*, 2017). A perfect example is Saks's (2019) work, which reveals that engagement levels are predicted by perceived support granted to employees by the organisation and their leaders. There is strong evidence suggesting that management actions positively influence employees' behaviour in hospitality organisations (Malek *et al.*, 2018). Bogan and Dedeoglu (2019) observed that employees in labour-intensive industries like the hospitality industry play a pertinent role in achieving organisational objectives, as such managers should be seen to be engaging in activities that make employees feel to be part of the organisation.

Several scholars have defined employee engagement differently across the literature. Kahn (1990) asserted that employee engagement involves the organisational members controlling and characterising their selves to become closer to their roles. Employee engagement is not only about where employees exhibit energy in their work, but they also show a spirit of devotion (Ugwu *et al.*, 2021). Schaufeli *et al.* (2002) expressed employee engagement as a helpful, satisfying, work-related state of mind identified or depicted by vigour, dedication and absorption. Vigour is articulated as an amplified physical strength, and the will and ability to accomplish a given task at work; dedication is characterised by the quality of being committed to a given task or job in an organisation; and absorption refers to being fully concentrated and engrossed in one's work (Busse and Regenberg, 2019; Khan *et al.*, 2018; Saks, 2019). In the hospitality industry, work engagement exemplifies the positive mental state, attitude and behaviours of employees at work.

Work engagement is strongly interconnected with a greater zeal to work hard, feeling linked to work and behaviour of doing the work, which leads to improved organisational

performance (Woodka, 2014). Tabak and Hendy (2016) posit that engaged employees are associated with their work and exhibit strong energy towards their work. Further, Rabiul *et al.* (2021) highlighted that extremely engaged workers result in limited turnover intention, improved customer service delivery, improved customer incivility behaviour, enhanced financial performance and decreased job stress. Several scholars agreed that work engagement is a strong predictor of organisational performance (Bakker, 2011; Bakker and Bal, 2010; Van Beek *et al.*, 2012).

Several authors have highlighted that inclusive leadership is positively related to employee engagement (Busse and Regenber, 2019; Carmeli *et al.*, 2010; Choi *et al.*, 2015). More so, in a study done in the context of green inclusive leadership, Bhutto *et al.* (2021) posit that inclusive leadership increases employee engagement in the hospitality industry. Social exchange theory (SET) asserts that social behaviour is the outcome of an exchange process. Using the SET, leaders who are open, available and accessible to their employees incite them to be attached and be happy with their work roles (Choi *et al.*, 2015). Leaders who exhibit openness, availability and accessibility may enhance job satisfaction among their followers, and they reciprocate through work engagement (Carmeli *et al.*, 2010). Further, Woodka (2014) reveals that engagement levels are improved through the support given to employees by the organisation. Like the above constructs, inclusive leadership is about creating high-quality relationships with followers, facilitating and necessitating employee engagement (Randel *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, it was presumed that:

*H1.* There is a positive and significant effect between inclusive leadership and employee engagement.

#### *Inclusive leadership and psychological safety*

Kahn (1990) asserts that psychological safety was experienced as feelings that can show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status or career. Psychological safety is described as individuals' views of the consequences of taking personal risks in their work environment (Edmondson, 1999). People feel safe in an environment they trust and perceive that they might not suffer for their engagement (Kahn, 1990). Psychological safety fosters team learning and enhances productivity (Dunne and Greenwald, 2014). Psychological safety expresses individuals' views about the consequences of interpersonal risks in their work roles. Employees always think about how other members will respond when they put themselves clearly on the line, for example, posing a question, asking for feedback, reporting a mistake or initiating a new idea within the organisation.

However, if employees perceive that they might get a negative answer to their instigation, they may choose not to participate in the group to be safe. Conversely, if they realise that their leaders are open, available and accessible, they might feel psychologically safe and be obliged to reciprocate (Edmondson, 2004). The latter is supported by the SET. Clearly, co-workers and supervisors positively influence the psychological safety and work behaviours of frontline hospitality staff (Bufquin, 2020).

The central premise of SET is that loyal, trusting and mutually committed relationships develop over time, assuming that no rules of exchange are broken (Dunne and Greenwald, 2014). If employees perceive that their leaders are open, available and supportive, they may feel that they are safe from interpersonal risks and they feel safe taking part in any activities of the organisation. Carmeli *et al.* (2010) reveal that inclusive leadership enhances the feeling of both psychological safety and employee creativity, that is when employees perceive their leaders as open, available and accessible. In such cases, employees exhibit signs of psychological safety and are not worried about what will happen to them if they put themselves on the line at work. Further, Zeng *et al.* (2020) posit that leaders' view towards employee advice, respect and trust improves their psychological safety. The literature

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indicates that inclusive leadership influences employees' psychological safety. Therefore, we assume that:

H2. There is a positive and significant effect between inclusive leadership and psychological safety.

#### *Employee engagement through psychological safety*

Psychological safety is an ingredient that fuels employees to take risks, be creative in their work roles and actively engage in their work tasks, enhancing work engagement (Dunne and Greenwald, 2014). Hall *et al.* (2010) also highlighted that psychological climate positively augments employee engagement. If employees feel that they are not at risk, they are compelled by the environment to exert more energy towards their work. The above scholars reveal that psychological safety positively necessitates employee engagement. However, due to limited research on psychological safety and employee engagement in developing countries, the study aims to establish if psychological safety may improve employee engagement, particularly in the hospitality industry in Zimbabwe. Consequently, it was expected that:

H3. There is a positive and significant effect between psychological safety and employee engagement.

The role of psychological safety as a mediator between inclusive leadership and employee engagement.

Mediation is an essential notion in most disciplines, including management, human resource management, psychology, education and medicine. The goal of the mediator is to understand how changes are conveyed from causal variables through one or more intervening variables, which leads to changes in an outcome (Kline, 2015). The mediation variable is affected by the independent variable, and it affects the dependent variable. Therefore, it links the two variables and helps explain their relationship. Psychological safety was used as a mediation variable in the current study. Psychological safety is defined as a person's observations of the outcome of taking interpersonal risks at the workplace (Opoku and Choi, 2020). People are comfortable with being themselves, and they want to show their capabilities without being afraid of negative outcomes to their career, status and self-image (Carmeli *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, the psychological safety of employees is vital in an organisation.

Numerous studies were done in developed countries, where psychological safety was a mediating variable. Carmeli *et al.* (2010) carried out a survey on inclusive leadership and employee involvement in the workplace, mediated by psychological safety. The results revealed that inclusive leadership is positively related to psychological safety, which stimulates employee involvement in creative work. Liu *et al.* (2016) studied abusive supervision and employee creativity: the mediating role of psychological safety and organisational identification. The findings depicted that psychological safety negatively mediates the nexus between abusive supervision and worker creativity.

In addition, Jiang and Wang (2019), in their study titled "Knowledge hiding as a barrier to thriving: the mediating role of psychological safety and the moderating role of organisational cynicism", indicated that the mediation effect of psychological safety on the relationship between knowledge hiding and thriving was conditional on the moderator, organisational cynicism. Further, Cheng *et al.* (2014), in their research titled "Social relations and voice behaviour: the mediation effect of psychological safety", show that the mediator positively mediated the nexus between voice behaviour and workers' perceived relationships with supervisors and co-workers.

Some scholars reveal that inclusive leadership augments the psychological safety of workers (Carmeli *et al.*, 2010; Dunne and Greenwald, 2014). Further to that, many studies indicate that psychological safety is a veritable instrument that enhances employee engagement (Dunne and Greenwald, 2014; Hall *et al.*, 2010). However, there is limited research in developing countries, particularly focusing on the nexus between inclusive leadership and employee engagement, and the role of psychological safety as a mediator. The following hypothesis was constructed in this regard:

- H4.* Psychological safety positively mediates the effect of inclusive leadership on employee engagement.

The conceptual framework in Figure 1 was formed based on the above hypothesis.

## Research methods

### Sampling

The study conveniently sampled 247 employees from registered hospitality operators in Bulawayo, the second largest city in Zimbabwe. Bulawayo is ranked among the three major tourist regions in the country, with the largest share of accommodation rooms and bed capacity (Zimbabwe Tourism Authority, 2020). The Zimbabwe Tourism Authority website shows that the database of registered tourism operators in Zimbabwe as of December 2020 had 85 hospitality establishments from Bulawayo. Respondents were drawn from different hospitality establishments such as hotels, lodges, guest houses, bed and breakfast, restaurants and self-catering providers. The sample represented top management and employees from departments such as front office, food and beverages and housekeeping.

### Measurement instrument

The questionnaire items for this study were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree). Utrecht work engagement scale (UWES), which was developed by Schaufeli *et al.* (2002), was used to measure employee engagement (Young, 2012). The scale includes three dimensions, which are dedication, vigour and absorption. Sample items include “time flies when I am working” and “when I get up in the morning, I look forward to going to work”. A measurement scale developed by Carmeli *et al.* (2010) was used to measure inclusive leadership. The scale comprises three dimensions, which are openness, availability and accessibility. The sample items include “the manager is open to hearing new ideas” and “the manager encourages me to access him/her on emerging issues”. For psychological safety, the measurement scale developed by Edmondson (1999) was applied (Chen *et al.*, 2015). Sample items include “it is safe to take a risk on this team” and “If you make a mistake on this team, it is often held against you”.

The measurement instrument was peer-reviewed by colleagues of the researchers who are experts in the study area. After this exercise, some questions were rephrased, and others were removed. This helped to simplify the questionnaire without altering the intended meaning of the constructs. Various strategies recommended by Jordan and Troth (2020) were implemented to minimise common method bias. The strategies include providing detailed

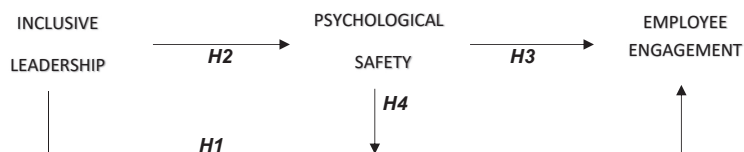


Figure 1.  
Conceptual framework

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instructions on the questionnaire to guide respondents, keeping the wording of questions simple, proximal separation of the variable items and developing measurement items using different data sources. Research assistants were also available to clarify issues in cases where respondents needed assistance.

### *Procedure*

The researchers sought permission from participants' organisations to carry out the study. Respondents were aware that participation was not compulsory, and they were asked to sign informed consent forms without any coercion. The objectives of the study were clarified to them. Participant anonymity was ensured by not collecting any identifying information such as respondents' names and email addresses. Data collection was done between May and June 2021. A combination of an online questionnaire (Google forms) and physical visits to hospitality establishments was done due to the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic. Several follow-ups were done with respondents to ensure a high response rate.

### *Data analysis*

Regression analysis was used to test the mediation role of psychological safety on the nexus between inclusive leadership and employee engagement. Hayes and Rockwood (2020) highlighted that there are three conditions the mediation test should satisfy in the regression analyses: To confirm a full mediation, inclusive leadership must predict psychological safety, and psychological safety must predict employee engagement. Inclusive leadership must not have a significant predictive effect on the outcome variable in the presence of the mediator variable (psychological safety). If the independent variable is still imperative, then partial mediation is established.

## **Results**

### *Demographic characteristics of respondents*

The study distributed 307 questionnaires, and 247 usable responses were collected, giving a response rate of 80.4%. The demographic characteristics of the respondents show that there were more females (56%) than males (44%) in the sample. The results revealed that most of the sampled employees were in the age range of 25–34 (43.3%), followed by 35–44 years (24.7%). Further, the results indicated that most respondents were degree holders (40.1%), followed by those who have diplomas (31.6%). However, the study did not find out which degrees or diplomas most employees have. Therefore, it is not clear whether their professional qualification is in line with their work or not. In addition, the results showed that most of the respondents had between 1 and 5 years of experience (50.2%), which can be an indication that there is high labour turnover in the sector. The study's respondents came from the front office (24.7%), food and beverages (32.4%), housekeeping (9.3%), management (23.5%) and accounts (9.7%) departments.

### *Reliability and validity tests*

The results of the reliability statistics for the three variables (inclusive leadership, employee engagement and psychological safety) reflect the internal consistency based on Cronbach's alpha measure of reliability, and their results were as follows: inclusive leadership (0.934), employee engagement (0.922) and psychological safety (0.618). The combined Cronbach's alpha of all the items was 0.772. Generally, a Cronbach's alpha of at least 0.6 reflects acceptable levels of reliability (Pallant, 2010). Therefore, the results show that the research instrument was reliable.

*Descriptive statistics*

The descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviations of the dimensions under study were also determined. Respondents rated the following dimensions: inclusive leadership ( $M = 3.71$ ), which means that most respondents agreed that inclusive leadership enhance employee engagement; psychological safety ( $M = 2.99$ ), which means that, on average, participants were neutral on the notion that psychological safety improves the connection between employee engagement and the independent variable (inclusive leadership); employee engagement ( $M = 3.56$ ), which means that, on average, respondents agreed that employees who show vigour, absorption and dedication are engaged.

*Regression analysis of inclusive leadership and employee engagement*

The hypothesis “inclusive leadership affects employee engagement” was examined using regression analysis (Table 1). The findings depicted that predictor variable had a positive and significant result on employee engagement,  $\beta = 0.47$ ,  $SE = 0.04$  and  $p$ -value = 0.000, which is less than 0.005. These results supported the H1. Approximately 39% of the difference in employee engagement was necessitated by the independent variable ( $R^2 = 0.39$ ). The results in Table 1 are consistent with the findings of (Carmeli et al., 2010; Choi et al., 2015; Randel et al., 2016). Their findings indicated that inclusive leadership, such as openness, availability and accessibility, enhances employee engagement in any organisation. A leader who is open to employees influences them to show their creativity and innovation, hence triggering employee engagement, dedication, absorption and vigour.

As predicted by self-concept theory (Rabiul et al., 2021) and social exchange theory (Choi et al., 2015), appropriate inclusive leadership promotes dedication, absorption and vigour among employees within the organisation. Once employees perceive their leaders as available, open and accessible whenever they are needed, they will be engaged in their work roles. Further, leaders who are available and accessible improve the engagement of employees in the organisation. Consequently, we agree that the H1 assumes that there is a significant relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement.

*Regression analysis inclusive leadership and psychological safety*

Table 2 shows that inclusive leadership had a significant influence on psychological safety,  $\beta = 0.31$ ,  $SE = 0.15$  and  $p$ -value = 0.000. These results supported the H2. Roughly 22% of the variance in psychological safety was caused by the independent variable ( $R^2 = 0.22$ ). Hence, these results are constant with the findings of (Zeng et al., 2020), who posit that leaders who work with their employees promote employee participation without fear of what other employees will say about their views. Further, inclusive leadership necessitates teamwork and reduces social loafing. Inclusive leadership improves teamwork within the organisation, which also encourages the philosophy of transparency and responsiveness (Shoko and Zinyemba, 2014).

Outcome variable: employee engagement

*Model summary*

<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> -sq	MSE	<i>F</i>	df1	df2	<i>p</i>
0.62	0.39	0.28	155.36	1.00	245.00	0.000

*Model*

	coeff	se	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	1.70	0.14	11.79	0.000	1.42	1.99
Inclusive leadership	0.47	0.04	12.46	0.000	0.40	0.55

**Note(s):** Inclusive leadership and employee engagement

**Table 1.** Regression analysis using SPSS mediation process (Model 4)



Inclusive leadership promotes employees to feel free to share their ideas with others without fear of the reaction of other employees and their leaders. In addition to that, it fosters workers to be open to their colleagues when they make mistakes. Kahn (1990) suggested that people feel safe in an environment that they trust and think they might not suffer for their contribution and engagement. So, if leaders support their employees by being available, open and accessible, they feel safe contributing to what they think may help the organisation expand and be competitive. The results are also supported by SET which asserts that social behaviour is the outcome of an exchange process, which means that employees reciprocate what they are getting from their leaders (Choi et al., 2015). Therefore, the study accepts H2, which asserts that there is a positive and significant relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement.

The role of psychological safety as a mediator between inclusive leadership and employee engagement.

Regression analysis was used to ascertain the suggestion that psychological safety mediates the nexus of inclusive leadership on the dependent variable. The findings in Table 3 depicted that inclusive leadership significantly impacts employee engagement,  $\beta = 0.35$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p = 0.000$ , and psychological safety had an effect on the outcome variable,  $B = 0.39$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $p = 0.000$ . Inclusive leadership had a positive impact on employee engagement in the presence of the psychological safety, the mediator, hence it is consistent with partial mediation. Roughly 48% of the variance in the outcome variable was necessitated by both inclusive leadership and psychological safety ( $R^2 = 0.48$ ). The findings exhibited that the mediating variable partly facilitates the connection between the predictor variable and the outcome variable as shown in Table 4. These findings imply that there is a statistically significant effect between the variables because the  $p$ -value is at 0.000 which is less than 0.05.

The above assertion means that the mediating variable partly enhances the nexus between the predictor and the outcome variables. Subsequently, the findings disclosed that

Outcome variable: psychological safety

Model summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
0.47	0.22	0.28	67.98	1.00	245.00	0.000

Model

	Coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	1.83	0.15	12.60	0.000	1.54	2.12
Inclusive leadership	0.31	0.04	8.24	0.000	0.24	0.39

**Table 2.**  
Inclusive leadership and psychological safety

Outcome variable: employee engagement

Model summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
0.70	0.48	0.24	114.31	2.00	244.00	0.000

Model

	Coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	0.99	0.17	5.76	0.000	0.65	1.32
Inclusive leadership	0.35	0.04	8.85	0.000	0.27	0.43
Psychological safety	0.39	0.06	6.72	0.000	0.29	0.51

**Table 3.**  
Psychological safety mediating inclusive leadership and employee engagement

inclusive leadership had positively affected employee engagement without being mediated or facilitated by psychological safety, which means that inclusive leadership influences employee engagement without the help of psychological safety.

*Direct and indirect effect*

The indirect effect was established using a percentile bootstrap with the PROCESS macro version 3 (Hayes, 2017). These outcomes presented in Table 5 show the indirect coefficient was partially important,  $\beta = 0.12$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ . The direct effect was substantial in the presence of the mediator with  $\beta = 0.35$  and  $SE = 0.04$ . From the total effect subscribed by both independent and the mediator variables, inclusive leadership contributed 74.5%, and psychological safety contributed 25.5%, which established that the indirect coefficient was partially substantial. It can be noted that inclusive leadership had a direct effect on employee engagement. Hence, it was established that psychological safety partially exists as a mediator in the association between inclusive leadership and employee engagement.

**Discussion and conclusions**

*Conclusions*

In the 21st century, employee engagement has become a backbone of organisational survival. If employees are engaged, it means that labour turnover is controlled, and quality products are guaranteed. This study explored the effect of inclusive leadership on employee engagement, mediated by psychological safety in the hospitality industry. This is one of the few studies carried out in the hospitality industry, particularly in developing countries like Zimbabwe, where the economy is in turmoil. The results revealed that there is a direct effect between inclusive leadership and employee engagement.

**Table 4.**  
Coefficients and *p* values

Model	Unstandardised coefficients		Standardised coefficients Beta	<i>t</i>	Sig	Correlations		
	<i>B</i>	Std. error				Zero-order	Partial	Part
(Constant)	0.987	0.171		5.763	0.000			
Inclusive leadership	0.349	0.039	0.460	8.848	0.000	0.623	0.493	0.407
Psychological safety	0.394	0.059	0.350	6.724	0.000	0.564	0.395	0.309

**Table 5.**  
Direct and indirect effect

Total effect of <i>X</i> on <i>Y</i>							
Effect	se	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	LLCI	ULCI	c-ps	
0.47	0.04	12.46	0.000	0.40	0.55	0.70	
<i>Direct effect of X on Y</i>							
Effect	se	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	LLCI	ULCI	c-ps	
0.35	0.04	8.85	0.000	0.27	0.43	0.52	
<i>Indirect effect of X on Y</i>							
Psychological safety	Effect	BootSE	Boot LLCI	BootULCI			
	0.12	0.03	0.08	0.17			

Furthermore, the results also indicated that psychological safety partially mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement. These results show that if leaders in the hospitality industry are open, available and accessible, employees will be engaged in their work roles. In addition to that, inclusive leadership necessitates employee engagement, which also reduces high labour turnover in the hospitality industry as it was depicted that the industry has got the highest rate of employee turnover (Malek *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, leaders in organisations must be open, available and accessible to their employees to be engaged in their work and the organisation.

### *Theoretical implications*

The current study proffers distinct theoretical benefactions. First, the effect of inclusive leadership on employee engagement mediated by psychological safety in the hospitality sector has not been analysed much in the hospitality sector, especially in the framework of developing countries. Consequently, this study adds to the academic literature regarding strategies for enhancing employee engagement in the hospitality sector. Related studies focusing on the hospitality industry have looked at issues like transformational leadership, servant leadership, job embeddedness, green inclusive leadership, career expectations, leadership satisfaction and employee self-reported voice behaviour (Agler and De Boeck, 2017; Bhutto *et al.*, 2021; Book *et al.*, 2019; Elsaied, 2020; Jolly and Lee, 2021; Rabiul *et al.*, 2021; Sadiq, 2014; Slatten and Mehmetoglu, 2011; Zia *et al.*, 2021).

Second, few studies have assessed the mediating effect of psychological safety in the hospitality industry in reference to developing countries. Those studies which have looked at it were concentrating more on developed countries, and hence looking at specific sectors like state-owned enterprises, general working population, transport industry, telecom industry and brick manufacturing industry (Ahmad *et al.*, 2019; Cheng *et al.*, 2014; Jiang and Wang, 2019; Liu *et al.*, 2016). The hospitality industry is among industries with high labour turnover, which is a serious indication of employee disengagement (Mkono, 2010). Employee disengagement indicates that current models of employee engagement such as salaries and benefits and traditional leadership styles do not significantly improve employee engagement. Henceforth, inclusive leadership and psychological safety can be used as strategies that forestall employees with the intentions to exit the hospitality sector. Further, this research shows the effect of inclusive leadership on employee engagement as a direct effect.

Finally, the results also revealed that if employees are given support by their leaders, in the form of their availability, accessibility and openness, psychologically, they will be compelled to be engaged in their work roles. SET believes that if employees notice that their top management cares for them, they feel obliged to the organisation to meet its expectations and exhibit positive behaviour of engagement.

### *Practical implications*

The findings of the current study have important implications for both human resource practitioners and academics. It was revealed in this study that there is a direct effect on inclusive leadership and employee engagement. Practically, suppose leaders avail themselves to work with employees and discuss business operations and social issues affecting them. In that case, employees will be committed to exerting more energy towards their work and productivity will be improved. Further to that, it is understandable that mistakes always happen, but errors will be minimised and controlled in such an environment. Therefore, when employees work hand in hand with their leaders, their level of engagement may be enhanced, which is an essential ingredient of improved performance and organisational growth.

The results also indicated that there is a partial indirect effect on the outcome variable and inclusive leadership, mediated by psychological safety. However, if employees know that there is no harm in sharing their views in front of their leaders and teammates, they will strive to share their thoughts. By so doing, it is easy for the leaders to realise the strengths and weaknesses of employees. The results on demographic characteristics indicated that 40.1% of respondents are degree holders; however, it is not clear which degrees they have attained. Therefore, if employees feel psychologically safe to share what they know, leaders will know how to work with their employees, using their views and experiences. There are so many educated employees in the sector, and some are wrongly placed. Inclusive leadership will necessitate strategies of placing them in the right places according to their qualifications and experience because they will know the competence of their workforce.

Organisations in the hospitality sector that want to enhance employee engagement and reduce labour turnover should make sure that their managers or leaders avail themselves and practice openness and accessibility to improve employee engagement. Furthermore, organisations must train their management on the importance of leader inclusiveness and what it brings to the organisation. This is in concurrence with findings by [Dunne and Greenwald \(2014\)](#), who posited that a psychological safety climate improves employee engagement in any organisation.

#### *Limitations and future research*

While the current study is significant to both theory and practice, there are some limitations associated with this research. The research used a cross-sectional research design, making it challenging to identify and establish causalities among the research variables. Further to that, this study only concentrated on hospitality operators in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. Therefore, caution should be observed when generalising the results as the respondents' views might not be the same in a different context. The study was limited to the hospitality sector, and therefore the results represent employees' views from that sector and cannot be generalised to other industries.

Longitudinal research design can be used in future research to determine the causality relationships between the variables. Further studies can also be done in the context of another developing country to determine if different results will be attained. Moreover, further studies can consider using different theoretical lenses on the same study.

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