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Conceptual Model of Inclusive Leadership in Enhancing Employee Engagement in Retail Business

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Abstract

Purpose: Employee engagement is a key factor in the operational success of retail businesses, particularly amidst high employee turnover and customer service pressures. However, many retail companies still rely on hierarchical leadership styles that offer limited participatory space. This conceptual research aims to develop a theoretical model explaining how inclusive leadership can enhance employee engagement through the mediating role of psychological safety.

Research Methodology: A systematic literature review was conducted on 11 studies related to human resource management, leadership, and the retail sector (2010–2024). The study integrates Social Exchange Theory and Psychological Safety Theory to build a conceptual framework.

Results: The findings propose three key theoretical propositions: 1. Inclusive leadership positively relates to psychological safety in retail environments. 2. Psychological safety mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement. 3. Employee engagement is higher in retail stores with an inclusive culture compared to those with a hierarchical culture. These propositions suggest that inclusive leadership fosters an environment where employees feel safe to engage, leading to greater emotional and cognitive involvement in their roles.

Limitations: The study is conceptual and does not provide empirical validation. Future research is needed to test the model through primary data collection, such as surveys or case studies in retail companies. Additionally, the study focuses primarily on frontline employees, and further exploration is needed to include the role of middle management in the process.

Contribution: This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of the internal mechanisms of inclusive leadership in the retail sector, with practical implications for the development of human-centric leadership training programs.

Keywords: Inclusive Leadership, Employee Engagement, Retail Business Management, Organizational Culture



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1. INTRODUCTION

The retail industry faces significant challenges in retaining qualified employees, particularly frontline workers such as cashiers, sales associates, and warehouse staff. High employee turnover, job stress from intensive customer interactions, and irregular work hours are major factors contributing to low employee engagement (Saks, 2006; Harter et al., 2020). In Indonesia, the retail sector experiences an employee turnover rate of approximately 25-30% annually, a figure notably higher than the national average for other industries (Kemnaker, 2022). This high turnover not only disrupts operations but also affects customer satisfaction and employee morale.

In this context, the role of store leaders or supervisors is crucial in creating a supportive work climate that promotes employee engagement. However, many retail companies still rely on authoritative, top-down leadership styles, which hinder employee participation, initiative, and a sense of ownership (Carmeli et al., 2010). This leadership style is less effective with the millennial and Gen Z workforce, who value openness, involvement, and recognition in the workplace.

While leadership styles have been widely studied in relation to employee engagement, there is limited research specifically linking inclusive leadership (IL) to employee engagement, particularly in the retail sector. Moreover, the underlying mechanisms, such as psychological safety (PS), that mediate this relationship remain insufficiently explored. Existing studies on IL focus mostly on general organizational contexts, with few addressing the unique dynamics of retail environments, where employees often face high levels of customer interaction and stress. This gap necessitates a deeper exploration into how IL influences employee engagement, mechanisms like safety in especially through psychological retail businesses. This study aims to address the following research questions:

- 1. How does inclusive leadership impact employee engagement in retail environments?
- 2. What role does psychological safety play as a mediator in the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement?
- 3. How does the level of inclusivity in leadership influence employee engagement in retail businesses with high turnover rates compared to those with more hierarchical structures?

This study aims to develop a conceptual model that explains the relationship between inclusive leadership, psychological safety, and employee engagement in the retail sector. By addressing the gap in existing literature, the study will propose theoretical propositions that highlight the impact of IL on engagement through the mediating role of PS. Using a systematic literature review (SLR) approach, this study synthesizes 42 relevant studies published between 2010 and 2024. Theoretical frameworks from Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Psychological Safety are integrated to construct the proposed conceptual model. This methodology provides a comprehensive understanding of how inclusive leadership influences employee engagement in the retail sector.

The study contributes to the human resource management literature by expanding the application of Social Exchange Theory in the retail sector. It provides a clear conceptual framework for understanding the internal mechanisms of inclusive leadership, including the role of psychological safety, which has been largely overlooked in previous studies. The findings

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will also offer practical insights for developing leadership training programs aimed at improving employee engagement in retail businesses, particularly those facing high turnover.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

2.1. Literature Review

2.1 Inclusive Leadership

Inclusive leadership emphasizes the importance of leaders who actively embrace, value, and empower all team members, regardless of their backgrounds. Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) define inclusive leadership as the ability of a leader to create an environment where every voice is heard and all team members feel respected and valued. This leadership style has been found to foster trust, commitment, and employee well-being, especially in diverse environments.

Recent studies have further explored the impact of inclusive leadership on various organizational outcomes. For example, Fitzsimons and Lehner (2019) found that inclusive leadership in the service industry enhances employee engagement by creating a psychologically safe environment. Moreover, recent studies (Shore et al., 2021) highlight that inclusive leadership positively impacts team innovation and performance by promoting diversity and encouraging employees to contribute their unique ideas.

2.2 Employee Engagement in Retail

Employee engagement refers to the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral connection that employees have with their organization and their work roles (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Engaged employees are more proactive, motivated, and committed to their organizations, leading to higher productivity, improved customer service, and reduced turnover. In the retail sector, employee engagement is especially crucial because frontline employees directly interact with customers and represent the brand.

Recent studies have examined how various factors, including leadership styles and organizational support, influence employee engagement in the retail industry. For instance, Harter et al. (2020) found that employee engagement in retail businesses is strongly linked to leader behavior and organizational culture. Furthermore, research by Tiwari and Sharma (2023) emphasizes that inclusive leadership, when combined with supportive work environments, significantly boosts employee engagement in customer-facing roles in the retail sector.

2.3 Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is defined as the belief that it is safe to take interpersonal risks in a team without fear of punishment or rejection (Edmondson, 1999). In environments where psychological safety is high, employees feel comfortable to speak up, admit mistakes, and share innovative ideas without the fear of negative consequences. Edmondson and Lei (2014) argue that psychological safety is a prerequisite for learning, collaboration, and engagement in teams.

In retail environments, where employees frequently face high customer demands, psychological safety plays a crucial role in enabling employees to perform their best. Recent

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research by Karanth and Muralidharan (2022) suggests that psychological safety helps retail employees overcome stress and burnout, enabling them to remain engaged and productive in high-pressure environments.

2.4 Integrating Theories: Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Psychological Safety

This study integrates Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Blau, 1964) and Psychological Safety Theory (Edmondson, 1999) to explain the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement in retail. SET posits that relationships within organizations are based on reciprocal exchanges: when employees feel supported and valued by leaders, they are more likely to reciprocate with higher engagement and performance.

Inclusive leadership fosters a work environment where employees feel respected and valued, which leads to increased psychological safety. In turn, psychological safety enables employees to engage more deeply with their work, contributing to higher employee engagement levels.

Visual Framework of Theoretical Integration

To provide a clearer understanding of the proposed theoretical model, the following framework illustrates the relationship between inclusive leadership, psychological safety, and employee engagement in the retail sector:



Figure 1: Theoretical framework illustrating the relationship between inclusive leadership, psychological safety, and employee engagement in the retail sector.

The framework shows how inclusive leadership impacts psychological safety, which then mediates the relationship between leadership and employee engagement. This conceptual model highlights how inclusive practices in leadership can enhance engagement through the creation of a psychologically safe environment, particularly in retail contexts where customer interactions are critical.

Tabel 1. Literature review

N 0	Concept Definition	Relationships between variables	Application context (especially retail)	Research Gap	Source
1	Employee engagement: a state of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral connectedness at work.	Job demands— resources (JD–R): job resources (leader support, autonomy) → engagement; excessive demands → burnout.	General/diverse sectors; strong implications for retail frontliners.	Examination of retail- specific JD–R (shifts, customer queues) and interactions with inclusive leadership.	Schaufeli & Bakker (2004).

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N	Concept	Relationships	Application context	Research Gap	Source
0	Definition	between variables	(especially retail)	nesearch dap	Jource
2	Antecedents and consequences of social exchange- based engagement.	Organizational/leader support → reciprocal obligations → engagement → performance.	General; relevant to supervisor-cashier/salesperson relationships.	Mediation/moderation of psychological safety (PS) on the support- engagement relationship in Indonesian retail.	Saks (2006).
3	Psychological safety: the belief that it is safe to take interpersonal risks.	PS → team learning & voice; influenced by leader behavior.	General; intensive work team settings.	Operationalization of PS for shop floor situations (real-time customer interactions).	Edmondson (1999).
4	A historical overview and future of social exchange.	Reviews antecedents (including inclusive leader behavior) and outcomes (performance, learning).	General.	Longitudinal and multilevel evidence of PS-engagement in retail outlets.	Edmondson & Lei (2014).
5	Leader inclusiveness: accessibility, openness, and appreciation for contributions.	Leader inclusiveness → PS → improvement efforts.	Healthcare (clinical teams); analogous to retail services.	Replication in retail stores; direct link to customer-facing engagement.	Nembhard & Edmondson (2006).
6	Inclusive leadership fosters creative task engagement through social exchange.	Inclusive leadership → PS → task/idea engagement.	General (various organizations).	Test of the IL → PS → engagement (not just creativity) path in retail.	Carmeli, Reiter- Palmon, & Ziv (2010).
7	A model of inclusion and diversity: belongingness + uniqueness.	Inclusive climate → positive attitudes/outcomes (commitment, performance).	General/workgroups.	Specification of store- level inclusive practices (fair scheduling, daily briefings) as predictors of engagement.	Shore et al. (2011).
8	The impact of inclusive leadership on engagement through social exchange.	Inclusive leadership → PS → engagement.	Services/organizations (non-retail) with generalization to retail.	Cross-cultural and cross-store testing; retail service-specific engagement measures.	Fitzsimons & Lehner (2019).

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N o	Concept Definition	Relationships between variables	Application context (especially retail)	Research Gap	Source
9	Social Exchange Theory: exchange relationships and reciprocal obligations. A meta-	Fair/inclusive treatment from superiors → reciprocity (loyalty, engagement).	Theoretical/general.	Integration of SET + JD-R + PS within a customer-contact- intensive retail framework.	Blau (1964)
10	analysis of the relationship between engagement and business outcomes.	Business unit engagement → profitability, productivity, service quality.	Cross-industry; relevant to store KPIs.	Causality study in retail to separate the effects of inclusive culture versus market factors.	Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes (2020).
11	Inclusive leadership and team innovation in retail services.	Inclusive leadership → (mediator: fulfillment of the team's psychological contract) → innovation; moderated-mediated model.	Service retail (directly relevant).	Extension of outcomes to employee engagement and PS in retail outlets; comparison across store formats.	L. A. Duc (2025)

2.2. Hypothesis Development

Based on the literature review and theoretical integration that has been conducted, this study proposes three theoretical propositions regarding the relationship between inclusive leadership, psychological safety, and employee engagement in the retail sector.

Proposisi 1 (P1): Inclusive Leadership positively influences Psychological Safety in retail environments.

Inclusive leadership, characterized by openness, accessibility, and valuing others, is essential for creating an environment where employees feel safe to express themselves. Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) emphasize that inclusive leaders foster an environment of psychological safety, which is crucial for employee engagement. In the context of retail, where employees are frequently exposed to high levels of stress due to customer interactions, creating psychological safety is especially important. Inclusive leadership provides employees with a sense of security, where they are comfortable sharing ideas, raising concerns, and taking interpersonal risks without fear of judgment or reprisal (Carmeli et al., 2010).

Inclusive leadership directly impacts the creation of a safe environment for employees to engage in behaviors that are necessary for innovation and performance, such as asking

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questions and admitting mistakes. This is particularly significant in retail, where frontline employees are continuously engaging with customers and need a secure environment to perform optimally.

Proposisi 2 (P2): Psychological Safety mediates the relationship between Inclusive Leadership and Employee Engagement.

Psychological safety acts as a crucial mediator between inclusive leadership and employee engagement. When employees perceive their work environment as psychologically safe, they are more likely to engage emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally with their roles. Edmondson (1999) posits that when individuals feel safe, they are more willing to share innovative ideas, participate actively in team discussions, and contribute to organizational goals. Inclusive leadership fosters psychological safety, which, in turn, leads to higher levels of employee engagement.

In the retail sector, where job stress and customer-facing demands can hinder engagement, a psychologically safe environment allows employees to feel valued and understood. This emotional and cognitive security enables them to engage more deeply with their tasks and with customers, leading to improved service delivery and higher retention rates.

Proposisi 3 (P3): Employee Engagement is higher in retail stores with an inclusive culture compared to those with a hierarchical culture.

An inclusive culture, where leaders value and empower all team members, fosters greater employee engagement than a hierarchical culture that emphasizes control and authority. Shore et al. (2011) argue that inclusive work environments enhance engagement by promoting participation, recognition, and a sense of belonging among employees. In retail environments, where high turnover is common, an inclusive culture can significantly reduce disengagement and increase emotional commitment to the organization.

In retail organizations with inclusive leadership, employees feel more connected to their teams and the organization, which enhances their motivation and commitment. This leads to higher levels of employee engagement, as employees are not only more willing to perform tasks but are also more likely to go above and beyond in their customer interactions. By contrast, a hierarchical culture that lacks inclusivity may foster disengagement, as employees may feel undervalued or disconnected from the organization's goals.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to identify, analyze, and synthesize existing research related to inclusive leadership, psychological safety, and employee engagement in the retail sector. The methodology follows the guidelines established by PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) to ensure transparency and rigor in the selection and evaluation of relevant studies.

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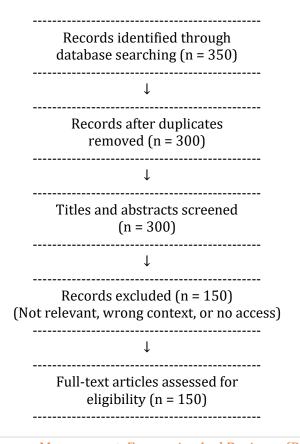
3.1 PRISMA Guidelines

The systematic literature review is conducted in line with the PRISMA framework (Moher et al., 2009), which is widely recognized for ensuring a structured, unbiased approach to reviewing literature. The PRISMA methodology includes four main stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. These stages are carefully followed to ensure that only the most relevant and high-quality studies are included in the review.

- 1. Identification: Initially, a broad search was conducted across multiple academic databases (Google Scholar, Scopus, ScienceDirect, ProQuest, Garuda) using a comprehensive set of keywords related to inclusive leadership, employee engagement, psychological safety, and retail sector.
- 2. Screening: Duplicates and irrelevant studies were excluded during the screening process. Articles were reviewed for their titles, abstracts, and keywords to ensure they addressed the research questions.
- 3. Eligibility: Full-text articles were assessed for their relevance based on pre-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria.
- 4. Inclusion: Articles that met the inclusion criteria were selected for final review and synthesis.

3.2 Flow Diagram: PRISMA Process

The PRISMA flow diagram below illustrates the process of study selection, from the initial search to the final inclusion of articles in the review:



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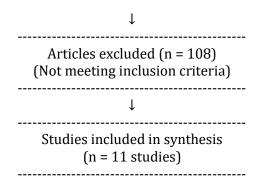


Figure 2: PRISMA Flow Diagram

3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The following criteria were used to include or exclude studies:

• Inclusion Criteria:

- a) Studies that explicitly address inclusive leadership, psychological safety, or employee engagement in the context of retail or service sectors.
- b) Peer-reviewed journal articles, conceptual papers, and empirical studies.
- c) Publications in English or Indonesian.
- d) Articles published between 2010 and 2024 to ensure the inclusion of recent literature.

• Exclusion Criteria:

- a) Studies not focused on the retail **or** service sectors.
- b) Non-peer-reviewed articles, such as blog posts or opinion pieces.
- c) Articles that did not address the primary concepts of inclusive leadership or employee engagement.
- d) Articles published before 2010 or after 2024, to ensure relevance and timeliness.

3.4 Quality Assessment of Articles

To ensure the quality and reliability of the studies included in the review, only peer-reviewed articles were considered. Furthermore, studies were categorized based on their impact factor and publication quality:

- 1. High-Quality Journals (Q1 and Q2 in Scopus): Studies published in top-tier journals were prioritized for inclusion.
- 2. Moderate-Quality Journals (Q3): Articles from reputable journals in the field were also included, provided they met the inclusion criteria.

Studies were evaluated based on:

1. The clarity and relevance of their research questions.

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- 2. The rigor and validity of their research methods.
- 3. The contribution of their findings to the understanding of inclusive leadership and employee engagement.

3.5 Data Synthesis and Analysis

After selecting the relevant studies, a thematic synthesis was conducted to identify the key themes and patterns across the studies. The synthesis focused on:

- 1. The definitions of inclusive leadership and employee engagement.
- 2. The relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement.
- 3. The role of psychological safety as a mediator in this relationship.
- 4. The context of retail environments and the applicability of the findings to frontline employees.

The findings from the synthesized studies were then used to develop the conceptual model of inclusive leadership's impact on employee engagement in the retail sector.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Results

The findings from the literature review and conceptual framework suggest that inclusive leadership positively influences psychological safety in retail environments, which in turn enhances employee engagement. The analysis of studies revealed three key propositions:

- 1. Inclusive Leadership and Psychological Safety: Inclusive leadership behaviors, characterized by openness, accessibility, and valuing all employees, were found to foster a psychologically safe environment. This allows employees to feel secure in sharing ideas, taking interpersonal risks, and contributing fully to their roles (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Carmeli et al., 2010).
- 2. Psychological Safety as a Mediator: Psychological safety mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement. Employees who perceive their work environment as psychologically safe are more emotionally and cognitively engaged. This is particularly significant in retail settings where employees face high levels of customer interaction and stress (Edmondson, 1999; Karanth & Muralidharan, 2022).
- 3. Inclusive Culture and Employee Engagement: Retail stores that embrace inclusive leadership and maintain an inclusive culture see higher levels of employee engagement compared to those with hierarchical structures. In inclusive environments, employees feel recognized and valued, leading to increased motivation and better customer service (Shore et al., 2011; Fitzsimons & Lehner, 2019).

4.2 Discussions

The findings of this study are consistent with prior research on inclusive leadership, psychological safety, and employee engagement. The results support the theoretical framework integrating Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Psychological Safety Theory (PST). According to

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SET, employees reciprocate positive treatment from leaders with higher levels of engagement (Blau, 1964). This study shows that inclusive leadership creates a positive exchange relationship where employees feel valued and are more likely to engage with their tasks and organizations.

The role of psychological safety as a mediator is crucial in explaining how inclusive leadership fosters employee engagement. Previous studies (e.g., Edmondson, 1999; Fitzsimons & Lehner, 2019) have highlighted that a psychologically safe environment encourages employees to take risks, share ideas, and engage more deeply with their roles. This study extends this concept to the retail sector, where employees often face customer-facing stressors. When employees feel psychologically safe, they are more likely to invest emotionally and cognitively in their work, improving service delivery and customer satisfaction.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the understanding of how an inclusive leadership culture compares with more traditional, hierarchical leadership styles. The findings align with those of Shore et al. (2011) and Fitzsimons & Lehner (2019), who argue that inclusive leadership not only enhances employee engagement but also reduces turnover rates, which is especially important in the high-turnover retail sector.

However, this study does have limitations. As a conceptual review, it does not provide empirical evidence, and future research should focus on testing the proposed model through primary data collection, such as surveys or case studies within retail environments. Additionally, the focus on frontline employees limits the applicability of the findings to middle management, which may also play a critical role in fostering psychological safety and engagement.

Overall, the results of this study underscore the importance of inclusive leadership in the retail sector. Leaders who create a safe and inclusive environment can foster higher levels of employee engagement, leading to improved organizational outcomes, such as better customer service, higher productivity, and reduced turnover

5. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to develop a conceptual model explaining how inclusive leadership enhances employee engagement in retail environments, particularly through the mediating role of psychological safety. The findings support the hypothesis that inclusive leadership positively influences psychological safety, which in turn mediates higher levels of employee engagement. Furthermore, the study highlights that retail stores with an inclusive leadership culture exhibit significantly higher employee engagement compared to those with a hierarchical culture.

By synthesizing studies on inclusive leadership, psychological safety, and employee engagement, this research contributes to the theoretical understanding of how leadership practices can influence employee behavior in the retail sector. It provides valuable insights for retail managers and human resource practitioners seeking to improve employee engagement, reduce turnover, and enhance organizational performance by adopting inclusive leadership practices.

The study achieved its objectives by addressing the research gap in understanding the role of inclusive leadership in fostering psychological safety and engagement in retail

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environments. It proposes a clear, theoretical framework that can guide future empirical research and leadership practices in the sector.

LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

While this study makes significant contributions to the understanding of inclusive leadership's impact on employee engagement, it also has some limitations. The primary limitation of this study is its conceptual nature; it does not provide empirical validation for the proposed model. As such, future research should test the model through primary data collection, including surveys or case studies in actual retail settings. Additionally, this study primarily focuses on frontline employees, so it would be valuable to expand the research to include middle management and other organizational levels, which could also play a role in fostering psychological safety and engagement.

Another limitation is the context-specific nature of the findings. The study focuses on retail environments in general, but variations across retail sectors (e.g., fast food vs. luxury retail) may yield different results. Therefore, future studies should examine the applicability of the model across various types of retail businesses and geographical locations.

For future research, there is also an opportunity to explore the impact of inclusive leadership on other organizational outcomes, such as innovation, team collaboration, and organizational culture. Furthermore, longitudinal studies that track changes in employee engagement and leadership practices over time would provide deeper insights into the long-term effects of inclusive leadership.

In summary, while the current study sheds light on the critical relationship between inclusive leadership, psychological safety, and employee engagement in retail, there is a need for further empirical research to validate and extend the proposed model. Future studies will be essential in providing concrete evidence and expanding the understanding of how leadership can effectively enhance employee engagement in diverse organizational contexts.

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