

**UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN**



School of Management Studies

**Investigating the mediating role of  
Psychological Safety and Workplace Belonging  
in the relationship between Inclusive Leadership and Employee  
Engagement**

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## Declaration

### **DECLARATION:**

1. I am presenting this dissertation in PARTIAL fulfilment of the requirements for my degree.
2. I know the meaning of plagiarism and declare that all of the work in the dissertation, save for that which is properly acknowledged, is my own.
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## Abstract

The world of work has embraced remote working since the beginning of the pandemic, in some industries certain employees are able to work remotely full time. However, how does the concept of inclusive leadership and its key mechanisms such as facilitating belonging and valuing uniqueness impact employee engagement. Therefore, this study aimed to find the how psychological safety as the ability for inclusive leaders to show that they value uniqueness within their employee. The study also aimed to see if leaders can create a sense of belonging with in their followers, this was taken from the Randel et al., 2018 framework of inclusive leadership, of how the mechanisms of sense of belonging and valuing uniqueness is the makeup of inclusive leaders. A simple regression analysis and mediation analysis was used to answer the research questions. It was found that there is a predictive relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement. Also, the workplace belonging mediated the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement, but psychological safety does not mediate the relationship inclusive leadership and employee engagement.

## **1.0 CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Contextual background**

Recently, the concept of inclusive leadership has gained significant traction in the global workspace, with many scholars shifting attention to its various nuances and how it impacts employee engagement (Siyal, 2023). Generally, the term inclusive leadership refers to the type of leadership that foster diversity and create an environment where workers or employees feel respected, valued, and included. Ferdman, Prime and Riggio (2020: 56) defines inclusive leadership “means that leaders commit to ensuring all team members: are treated equitably, feel a sense of belonging and value, and. Have the resources and support they need to achieve their full potential.” This is approach to leadership recognizes the significance of diversity and seeks to leverage it as a source of innovation, strength, and competitiveness in a particular organisation (Manoharan, Madera and Singal, 2021). Available evidence suggest that inclusive leadership is a vital component of creating an engaged and positive work environment (Kuknor and Bhattacharya, 2022). However, scholars suggest that for a better understanding its effects on employee engagement is an area that remains unresearched (Kuknor and Bhattacharya, 2022; Siyal, 2023).

The global business environment has been evolving rapidly. The shift has been made possible by the combination of globalization and the changing demographics in the workspace. In the face of the shifts and the uncertainty that comes with, inclusive leadership has now been regarded as a critical element that can drive organizations to thrive and survive beyond the impacts of globalization. Kuknor and Bhattacharya (2022) argue that, in a diverse workforce, leadership that can foster inclusivity can assist organizations to harness the maximum potential of employees, leading to enhanced engagement, productivity and innovation. As various organizations extend their operation beyond their national borders, the importance of inclusive leadership as a global practice becomes increasingly evident (Korkmaz, Van Engen, Knappert and Schalk, 2022).

The significance of inclusive leadership is equally important as shown by the increasing attention from researchers across the continent (Adams, Meyers and Sekaja, 2020). The African context is an area of interest owing to its dynamic and diverse workforce that is

composed of numerous languages, cultures, and backgrounds. This composition of the African workforce brings with it a mix of challenges and opportunities to organizations. However, inclusive leadership practices are critical for building cohesive teams, fostering collaboration, and addressing the specific diversity-related challenges that may rise in the African context (Babundo, 2023). To that end, understanding how inclusive leadership impacts employee engagement is particularly relevant in the African context, where harnessing the full potential of a diverse workforce is key to sustainable development and growth.

Within South Africa, a country marked by its rich cultural diversity and historical legacy, inclusive leadership takes on extra significance. South Africa's apartheid history has left a deep wound of division that is manifest in all aspects of society including the workforce (Dilraj, 2022). This past highlights the urgent need for leaders who can close the bridge divides, promote equality, and create a sense of belonging for all employees. Available evidence shows that organizations in South Africa recognize the need and benefit of fostering an inclusive workplace, and the study of how inclusive leadership affects employee engagement can provide valuable insights to drive positive change in this context.

## **1.2 Problem statement**

In the contemporary and multifaceted realm of organisations, the cultivation of employee engagement is widely acknowledged as a pivotal factor in attaining a competitive edge, driving innovation, and ensuring enduring prosperity (Turner, 2019). Employee engagement refers to the emotional dedication, drive, and passion employees exhibit towards their work and the organisation they are a part of (Turner and Turner, 2020). This concept has been associated with enhanced performance, decreased employee turnover, and enhanced overall effectiveness of the organisation. Kuknor and Bhattacharya (2022) argues that a notable strategy for augmenting employee engagement involves the adoption of inclusive leadership practices, which prioritise the establishment of a workplace atmosphere that fosters a sense of worth, esteem, and inclusion for all employees, irrespective of their diverse backgrounds or individual attributes.

However, although there is an increasing amount of scholarly literature (Kuknor and Bhattacharya, 2022; Turner and Turner, 2020; Turner, 2019) indicating that inclusive leadership has a good impact on employee engagement, there is still a lack of comprehensive research into the exact mechanisms that drive this link. To illustrate, there is a need for a deeper understanding of how inclusive leadership can be leveraged to improve employee engagement,

which is a critical factor in achieving organizational success and maintaining a competitive edge in diverse and dynamic work environments. To address this disparity, the present study examines the intermediary functions of psychological safety and workplace belonging in the association between inclusive leadership and employee engagement.

### **1.3 Current research and gaps and rationale**

Recently, researchers (Lee and Dahinten, 2021; Rabiul, Karatepe, Al Karim and Panha, 2023; Wang and Shi 2021) have paid increased attention to the subject of mediating roles of psychological safety and workplace belonging in the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement. For instance, Lee and Dahinten (2021: 737) examined the “psychological safety as a mediator of the relationship between inclusive leadership and nurses' voice behaviours and error reporting.” Findings from this study revealed that when leader inclusivity fosters a sense of psychological safety among nurses, it reduces the likelihood of them remaining silent and, instead, increases their propensity to openly share ideas and report errors with the aim of enhancing patient safety. In another study, Rabiul et al., (2023) draws on the transformational leadership, self-concept, and servant leadership theories to test whether the psychological safety and thriving at work mediate the effects of transformational leadership and self-concept on work engagement sequentially. These scholars established that feeling safe and doing well at work can partially explain how someone sees themselves and how engaged they are in their job. Also, doing well at work partly explains how a certain type of leadership affects work engagement. In a different study, Wang and Shi (2021) established that inclusive leadership has a noteworthy and favourable influence on employees' pro-social rule breaking. It further proposes that psychological safety and leadership identification serve as mediators in this relationship. Additionally, the study finds no substantial distinction in the mediating impacts of these factors.

However, while the existing literature (Lee and Dahinten 2021; Rabiul et al., 2023; Wang and Shi 2021) provides valuable insights into the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement, there are notable gaps in understanding the specific mechanisms and contextual nuances that influence this relationship. To illustrate, available literature highlights the potential impact of inclusive leadership on employee engagement, but it often lacks a thorough examination of the specific processes and mechanism through which this influence occurs. To that end, it is crucial to discern how and why inclusive leadership practices lead to increased employee engagement, and this study aims to address this by focusing on the

mediating factors of psychological safety and workplace belonging. Moreover, psychological safety is an essential element of a workplace setting wherein employees can openly communicate their thoughts, worries, and suggestions without apprehension of facing adverse consequences. This concept has been linked to heightened levels of employee commitment and effectiveness. Nevertheless, the precise impact of inclusive leadership practices on psychological safety and the subsequent effect on employee engagement levels remains uncertain.

#### **1.4 Aim of the study**

The purpose of the study is to analyse and better understand the mediating roles of psychological safety and workplace belonging in the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement. This research intends to explore the specific processes via which inclusive leadership practices impact the engagement of employees, with a particular focus on how feelings of psychological safety and a sense of belonging at the workplace play a part in this process.

#### **1.5 Research objectives and questions**

##### **1.5.1 Key Objectives**

- i. To investigate if inclusive leadership has the potential to increase employee engagement in the virtual workspace.
- ii. To identify a potential mechanism, through which inclusive leadership might create employee engagement in the virtual workspace by considering the role of workplace belonging and psychological safety as mediators.

##### **1.5.2 Key Research Questions**

- i. Does inclusive leadership have the potential to enhance employee engagement in the virtual workspace?
- ii. What are the mechanisms through which inclusive leadership could foster employee engagement in the virtual workspace, and how do workplace belonging and psychological safety act as potential mediators in this relationship?

#### **1.6 Significance of the study**

This study possesses not only scholarly pertinence but also practical implications. Through the process of elucidating the various routes via which inclusive leadership practices exert their influence on employee engagement, organisations can enhance their comprehension of the strategies necessary for cultivating work environments that are characterised by inclusivity,

psychological safety, and a sense of belonging. This understanding has the potential to inform the design of leadership training programs and organisational policies that are intended to improve employee engagement, which in turn can positively impact organisational performance. This study aims to fill a significant research vacuum by examining the relationship between inclusion, employee engagement, and business goals. The findings of this study have the potential to contribute to both academic discourse and the practical success of organisations.

## **1.7 Study Outline**

### **Chapter One: Introduction and Background**

Chapter one of the study focuses on the background, context, and introduction of the study. In this chapter, key areas that form the backbone of the study are discussed and highlighted. The chapter discusses the problem statement. Further, the current research, gaps and the rationale for the study were also discussed in this chapter. The chapter concludes by discussing the significance of the study and its practical implication to both the body of literature and the broader field of employee and employment engagement in South Africa.

### **Chapter Two: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

This chapter present the literature review. The chapter discusses the literature that relates to the study and subject under inquiry. The literature review in this study takes the shape of a thematic literature review, where the heading is arranged according to the themes. The themes used in the literature review were both inductively drawn from the key research questions and deductively retrieved from the key debates that ensured in the literature. Key themes discussed in the chapter are- virtual work and the virtual worker, a definition of inclusive leadership, Differentiating inclusive leadership from traditional leadership styles.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

This chapter is composed of the research methodology. It discusses the various steps that the researcher took to collect the data that answers the key research questions of the study. The chapter begins with the research design that informs the study. Secondly, the chapter explains the sample and the sampling techniques that were used in the study are discussed. Additionally, the data collection procedure and the data analysis approach. The chapter explains the measures used. Finally, the ethical considerations are discussed.

#### **Chapter Four: Data Presentation and Analysis**

This chapter presents and discusses the results of the study. The results are presented tables, charts, graphs, and other visuals are used. This visualisation makes data easier to understand and compare. Beyond data presentation, the chapter interprets findings. It explores the results' implications considering the research aims and literature. It emphasises statistically significant links and their practical applications.

#### **Chapter Five: Conclusion and Recommendation**

This chapter is the last section of the study. It serves two main purposes: to summarise the key findings and insights from the study and to offer recommendations and suggestions for future actions. The chapter begins by summarising the most important findings of the study. It also reiterates the key objectives of the study how demonstrate how these findings address the key objectives of the study. Finally, it offers practical suggestions or recommendations based on the study's findings. These include actions or strategies that individuals, organizations, or policymakers can implement to address issues or capitalize on opportunities identified in the research.

## **2.0. CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This chapter reviews relevant literature about the main objectives of the study. The literature review contextualises the research within academic and research circles. Furthermore, it allows the researcher to identify gaps, controversies, and key debates that have not been resolved in previous research. The literature review segment covers inclusive leadership, employee engagement, psychological safety, workplace belonging, and virtual employment. This chapter outlines the research's theoretical and empirical context. Further, it examines inclusive leadership, workforce engagement, psychological safety, and relationships. Additionally, the chapter discusses the literature on employee engagement's history and traits. The literature section then examines COVID-19-related virtual work environment challenges and potential. Moreover, it examines virtual work stressors and facilitators to measure employee engagement in this unique setting.

### **2.1 The leadership theory and types of leadership**

In the previous 60 years, many classifications of the concept of leadership have been proposed to define the various dimensions of leadership. An example of categorisation system is the one proposed by (Bass & Bass, 2009). For instance, (Bass & Bass, 2009) argued that some definitions of leadership perceive leadership as a focus group process. This view holds that the leader drives group change and activity, representing the group's goals. A different group of researcher conceptualised leadership is a combination of special traits and characteristics that some individuals may possess, and some may not (Zaccaro, 2007). Additionally, some conceptualise leadership in relation to the power relations that exists between leaders and followers. From this perspective, leaders are understood to have power that they use and exert on other to effect the desired change with the organization.

#### **2.1.1 Evolution of the concept of leadership**

There are many ways to define the term leadership. While various attempts have been made to define the term leadership, coming up with the definition of leadership for leadership is very difficult. This is largely because the definition of leadership of leadership has evolved. To illustrate, the definition of leadership that appeared from 1900 to 1929 places considerable emphasis on the aspect of control and centralisation of power, with the common theme being domination. For instance, according to Moore's (1927) definition, leadership can be seen as the

capacity to exert the leader's will upon those being led, so eliciting compliance, respect, loyalty, and cooperation.

In addition, throughout the 1930s, the concept of leadership attributes emerged as an essential component in the process of defining the concept of leadership. During this period, there was a shift towards placing a greater focus on the idea of leadership as influence as opposed to dominance. During this period, several prominent academics emphasised the idea that leadership may be defined as the interaction of a single person's unique personality features with those of a group. It should also be highlighted that although these beliefs and behaviours of the many can be altered by one person, the many can equally influence a leader.

During the 1990s, there was a shift in emphasis towards the examination of leadership and its correlation with management. During this period, there is ongoing scholarly debate over the differentiation between leadership and management as separate processes. Moreover, scholarly investigations have underscored the significance of leadership processes, particularly with a shift in attention towards followers. Basir (2023) posits that a multitude of techniques have emerged in the examination of how leaders exert influence over a collective of persons to attain a shared objective. Included in the repertoire of leadership approaches were servant leadership defined as a leadership approach that positions the leader as a servant, employing "caring principles" to prioritise the needs of followers. The objective is to facilitate the development of followers' autonomy, knowledge, and servant-like qualities. The concept of followership emphasizes the followers and their involvement in the process of leadership. Adaptive leadership is a leadership approach that entails motivating followers to engage in problem-solving, tackling challenges, and embracing changes.

In the 21st century, more approaches to leadership emerge, with morals being the common denominator. In this period, scholars have emphasized the importance of ethical and authentic leadership. There is also increasing emphasis on the importance of humility and spirituality in leadership. Additionally, leadership theory also indicates the importance of communication between leaders and their followers, and as an organization becomes increasingly more diverse, inclusive leadership is introduced. The approaches are highlighted below.

Authentic Leadership style places significant emphasis on the authenticity of leaders and their approach to leading. The concept of ethical leadership emphasises the appropriate conduct of

leaders in their acts and interpersonal connections, as well as their promotion of such conduct among their subordinates. The concept of spiritual leadership revolves around the utilisation of values, a clear sense of purpose, and a strong sense of belonging to motivate and inspire individuals who follow the leader. The notion of discursive leadership posits that leadership is not predominantly influenced by the inherent characteristics, abilities, and actions of leaders, but rather by the communication practises that are mutually agreed upon between leaders and their followers. An inclusive style of leadership emphasizes diversity and the behaviours exhibited by leaders that foster a sense of belonging among followers within a group, while also acknowledging and appreciating their distinctiveness.

## **2.2. Definition and components of leadership**

Despite the many ways in which the concept of leadership can be understood, researcher have agreed on some basic components in that captures the essence of and are central to the concept of leadership. For instance, (Northouse, 2021) argued that, underpinning the concept of leadership is: leadership is a process, leadership involves influence, leadership occurs in groups and leadership involves common goals. Hence, leadership may be defined as a dynamic process wherein an individual assumes the responsibility of guiding and inspiring a collective entity to collaboratively pursue a shared objective (Benmira & Agboola, 2021). The concept of leadership can be understood as a process rather than an inherent attribute or characteristic possessed by an individual. It is characterised by a transactional dynamic that takes place between the leader and their followers. In this instance, the term "process" pertains to the concept that the leader exerts influence on, and is reciprocally influenced by, their followers. The statement underscores the concept that leadership is not a unidirectional, linear occurrence, but rather an interactive occurrence. When leadership is conceptualised in this manner, it becomes accessible to individuals from all walks of life. The concept of leadership extends beyond the individual who holds the formal designation of leader within a group.

The notion that leadership involves influence is discusses broadly in literature. For instance, (Schilling et al., 2023) argued that leadership as influence is concerned with the manner leaders affect their followers and the communication that happens between followers and their leaders. (Mathiesen, 2023) states that influence is a “sine qua non of leadership”. This is to say that in the absence of influence the concept of leadership does not exist.

### **2.2.1. Behavioural leadership**

Behavioural leadership, known as the behavioural theory of leadership, offers an alternative perspective on leadership that shifts the focus from inherent traits to observable actions and behaviours. Unlike trait-based theories, which suggest that specific personality traits make individuals natural leaders, behavioural leadership theories contend that leadership can be acquired and developed through the adoption of leadership behaviours. These theories categorize leadership behaviours into two main types: task-oriented and people-oriented behaviours. Task-oriented behaviours centre on achieving objectives and tasks through directive and structured leadership, while people-oriented behaviours emphasize relationship-building, support, and creating a positive team atmosphere. Behavioural leadership theories highlight the adaptability of effective leaders who balance these behaviours based on the specific context and the needs of their team or organization. Prominent figures in this field include researchers like Kurt Lewin, Rensis Likert, and Robert Blake and Jane Mouton, and their work has significantly influenced leadership development and training programs, emphasizing the learnable nature of leadership behaviours that can be honed and improved over time.

### **2.2.2. Contingency**

Contingency leadership style, often known as the contingency theory of leadership, recognises that situational conditions determine the best leadership style. From the premise that one leadership style doesn't fit all situations. It claims that effective leadership depends on contextual aspects such the task, followers, organisational culture, and external environment. Contingency leaders must be adaptable to changing their leadership style to meet the needs of the scenario. Fiedler's Contingency Model, Hersey-Blanchard Situational Leadership Model, and Path-Goal Theory explain how situational variables affect leadership. Fiedler's model emphasises the relationship between a leader's style and the situation's favourability, while Hersey and Blanchard's model emphasises followers' maturity to suggest that leaders should adapt their style to their followers' development. Contingency leadership emphasises the necessity for context-sensitive leadership that meets the needs of each situation and group of followers.

## **2.3 Inclusive leadership: A definition**

The concept of inclusive leadership was first introduced in the year 2006 by Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) as “words and deeds by leaders or leaders that indicate an invitation and appreciation for others contribution” (Korkmaz et al., 2022). Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) introduced the concept in their study where they argued that Inclusive leadership plays

a crucial role in promoting cooperation within cross-disciplinary teams by addressing the adverse effects of status discrepancies, hence fostering an environment where team members can effectively collaborate to improve the overall process (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). In their study, these scholars established that team members are often influenced by the behaviour of their leader. To illustrate, employees will examine their leaders behaviours and actions for information that is expected and acceptable for team interaction (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). For example, if a leader takes a defensive, authoritarian, and defensive stance team members are more likely to feel that it unsafe to speak up in their teams. Contrary to a leader is supportive, democratic and welcoming to different opinions, team members are more likely to share their views and opinions with their teams (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) define as words and actions by a leader that show an appreciation for others' contribution. Inclusive leadership are leaders who often exhibit openness, accessibility and availability in the interactions with their employees (Carmeli et al., 2010).

The concept of inclusive leadership was later developed by scholars (Carmeli et al., 2010). In their study that examined how inclusive leadership promotes employee creativity in the workplace, Carmeli et al. (2010) define inclusive leadership as describe the type of leader or leadership who demonstrate, openness, approachability and ready availability. Recently, scholars have shown increased interest in developing the concept inclusive leadership (Randel et al., 2018). For instance, according to the definition provided by Randel et al. (2018) inclusive leadership may be characterised as a leadership approach that places emphasis on the provision of assistance to employees in their capacity as team members, with a particular focus on supporting principles of fairness, equity, and shared decision-making possibilities. Additionally, inclusive leadership aims to cultivate an environment that encourages the integration of varied perspectives and contributions. The three definitions of inclusive leadership underscore different aspects of leadership, hence emphasising the varied nature of this concept.

One core principle embedded in the definition of inclusive leadership by Randel et al. (2018) is based on the influential Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (Brewer, 1991), which was previously applied to inclusion by Shore et al. (2011). Based on the models, it can be inferred that inclusive leaders play a crucial role in facilitating employees' simultaneous experience of both belongingness and distinctiveness. In contrast, Carmeli et al. (2010) placed a greater emphasis on the availability, openness, and accessibility of leaders, whilst Nembhard and

Edmondson (2006) directed their attention on the recognition of employee efforts. Previous studies have characterised inclusive leadership as a leadership approach that places emphasis on cultivating strong and meaningful connections with subordinates (Ye et al., 2019) or proactively confronting and mitigating biases. The concept of fairness and equal opportunity, which is widely recognised in the diversity management literature (Ely & Thomas, 2001), is evident in definitions such as the one mentioned above. In accordance with the viewpoint presented by Ely and Thomas (2001), contemporary conceptualizations, including the notion of an inclusive climate, incorporate equitable employment procedures, the assimilation of diverse perspectives, and participation in decision-making processes. These perspectives provide valuable insights and recommendations on this matter (Dwertmann et al., 2016).

### **2.3.1. Inclusive leadership key behaviours**

Evidence from previous studies suggest various key behaviours that are associated with inclusive leadership. Among the most highlighted are facilitating belongingness, and value for forgiveness. A consensus among scholars is that inclusive leadership fosters a sense of belonging by embracing diversity, celebrating individuality, and communicating inclusion through actions like setting an example, implementing reward systems, and creating an inclusive environment. The section below discusses literature that focuses on these behaviours.

### **2.3.2. Facilitating belongingness**

There are specific leadership behaviours that are more likely to encourage and facilitate belongingness: Firstly, being supportive of group behaviours, secondly ensuring that equity and justice are part of team members work experience. Lastly they provide opportunities for employees to share their thoughts on relevant issues (Randel et al., 2018). Supporting group members is when a leader makes their team members feel comfortable enough to share and communicate their needs and interests with them (Randel et al., 2018). For this to be accomplished, inclusive leaders will create an environment that is comfortable and exert influence by assisting members with their needs and expressing support for them and their feelings and opinions. Inclusive leaders influence their teams to care for one another since leaders themselves are care for their teams and show acceptance in group interactions (Randel et al., 2018). When leaders are actively putting inclusive behaviours into their routines by role modelling caring behaviour or have inclusive behaviours such as setting time aside to each morning or at the end of each day to check-in with each group member or verbalising, their appreciation for the contribution made by each team member. By doing this inclusive leader

play role creating a sense of community among team members, which can cause the perception of belonging for employees (Randel et al., 2018).

The assertion for Randel et al. (2018) resonates with observations from various scholars. For instance, in a study that examines the impact of inclusive leadership on behaviour and indigenous voice and the perception of workplace inclusion in Vietnam, (Alang et al., 2022) argues found that Inclusive leadership practises promote workplace diversity by actively supporting the inclusion of Indigenous individuals through various initiatives such as recruitment efforts, provision of training and development opportunities, and advancement to decision-making roles. Furthermore, the implementation of inclusive leadership practises effectively cultivated a strong sense of belonging among Indigenous employees (Alang et al., 2022). This was achieved by the acknowledgement of their significance as integral members of the group and the display of empathy towards the unique issues they face. In a cultural context shaped by the principles of Confucianism and collectivism, the practise of inclusive leadership assumes a crucial role in acknowledging and recognising the distinctive attributes of Indigenous individuals (Alang et al., 2022). This is achieved via the facilitation of their active participation in decision-making processes, recognition of their valuable contributions, and demonstration of respect for their diversities.

In a different study conducted (Boekhorst, 2015), it was found that the combination of authentic leadership with diverse workgroups holds promise in fostering an inclusive working atmosphere, which in turn promotes collaborative learning opportunities and the attainment of shared goals (Boekhorst, 2015). To illustrate, Boekhorst (2015) argues that the presence of authentic leaders and followers who have a common objective of fostering inclusivity can have a positive impact on the acquisition of inclusive behaviours through observational learning among followers. Consequently, this reciprocal dynamic facilitates the attainment of their mutual goals, thereby yielding advantages for both entities involved.

Moreover, scholars also argue that ensuring justice and equity, this is the fair treatment of all group members these action can indicate to group members that they are respect part of the group (Randel et al., 2018). This includes behaviours that are exhibited by leaders is to ensure that all members are treated equally, and interactions are free from personal bias (Al-Atwi & Al-Hassani, 2021). When inclusive leaders ensure justice and equity, they go further than ensuring that all groups are treated fairly but they also consider how different decisions could

ensure equity across group members (Randel et al., 2018). Boekhorst (2015) agrees with Randel et al. (2018) when he argues that a leader who organises a strategy meeting at bar could negatively impact the perception of inclusivity of those who do not drink because of personal choice or religious reasons. Therefore, facilitating equity and belonging has to be practised by inclusive leaders is finding opportunity's that to demonstrate that regardless of ethnic or religious everyone is treated fairly (Randel et al., 2018). Shared decision-making, focuses on shared power between leaders and followers by with employees on broader decisions in the organisation and giving them autonomy in how they conduct their work can create a sense of belonging (Randel et al., 2018). Alang et al. (2022) argues that inclusive leaders can ask for group-wide participation when making key decisions and employees are given the opportunity to discuss how they would like to conduct their own work. By creating an environment where the decision making process becomes part of the groups norms, leaders have embedded inclusion in the contextual makeup of the group (Randel et al., 2018).

#### **2.3.4. Value for uniqueness**

Inclusive leadership goes further than creating a belonging, this is often emphasized in literature however inclusive leadership style also values each individual's unique qualities (Randel et al., 2018). Randel et al. (2018) suggest that encouraging diverse opinions/ contributions from employees and supporting employees when they share their contributions are key behaviours which can indicate that leaders value uniqueness. Encouraging diverse opinions can be important in creating the perception that uniqueness is valued. Leaders should encourage different contributions, by asking for different perspectives and support them (Shore & Chung, 2022). For example, a member who comes from a different organisation who is new, can be encouraged to share a different perspective on how similar work issues can be solved. Even though diverse opinions may not be widely accepted in the group and conflict could arise, thus an inclusive leader must consider how to support different opinions and manage any conflict that could arise (Randel et al., 2018).

Helping members fully contribute fully indicates that leaders encourage team members who do usually feel that their contribution are not welcome. For example team members can be encouraged to share their views in different ways such as being written in email, if they are not conformable to speak in a group setting (Randel et al., 2018). By not making team members who are not comfortable sharing feel alienated they are able to bring their full self to their work,

therefore encouraging higher performance and participation (Prime & Salib, 2014; Randel et al., 2018).

Inclusive leadership entails a comprehensive strategy that seeks to recognise and appreciate the distinctiveness of every individual while cultivating a shared sense of belonging within a team. It is imperative to acknowledge that the scholarly literature on inclusive leadership frequently emphasises the significance of these two dimensions (Carmeli et al., 2010; Randel et al., 2018). According to various scholars (Ely & Thomas, 2001), inclusive leaders play a crucial role in fostering diversity and individuality within their teams (Randel et al., 2018). This is achieved through the active promotion of varied perspectives and contributions from employees. This behaviour is considered fundamental as it reflects the significance attributed to variations across individuals. In practical application, leaders can actively seek out and encourage various viewpoints, even in cases where these diverse beliefs may not be universally embraced by the collective (Schilling et al., 2023). Effectively addressing possible conflicts that may emerge because of diversity is a crucial aspect of inclusive leadership (Randel et al., 2018). This attitude is consistent with the notion of psychological safety, since leaders who foster a climate of varied perspectives establish an environment where employees are at ease in voicing their distinct thoughts.

Furthermore, inclusive leaders surpass the mere promotion of diverse perspectives and actively guarantee the opportunity for all team members to make meaningful contributions (Shore et al., 2011). This encompasses the provision of various communication styles, wherein employees are afforded the opportunity to express their perspectives in written form, particularly for individuals who may experience discomfort when engaging in group discussions. Leaders may cultivate an inclusive climate that encourages team members to freely express themselves, hence fostering enhanced performance and engagement (Prime et al., 2014; Randel et al., 2018). The feature is intricately connected to the establishment of a sense of belonging fostered by inclusive leadership, as it underscores the notion that everyone's contribution is embraced and esteemed.

The behaviours linked to inclusive leadership are congruent with two essential outcomes: the appreciation of the distinctiveness of team members and the cultivation of a feeling of belongingness. The description provided by Randel et al. (2018) about the significance of uniqueness and the feeling of belonging bears a strong resemblance to the definitions of psychological safety and a sense of belonging, respectively. This observation implies a robust

correlation between inclusive leadership behaviours and the establishment of a work climate that fosters employees' psychological safety and sense of belonging. The establishment of this relationship serves as the basis for formulating hypotheses concerning the influence of inclusive leadership on psychological safety, sense of belonging, and ultimately employee engagement within the framework of virtual teams.

#### **2.4. Differentiating inclusive leadership from traditional leadership styles.**

A series of recent studies has indicated that there are differences between inclusive leadership and the traditional leadership (discussed in section 2.1.1 above). For instance, (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006) argues that inclusive leadership differs from other leadership styles because instead of leveraging on power differences, inclusive leaders focus on behaviours that acknowledge and invite others' views (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Traditional leadership styles often power is seen as commodity often leaders are the only people in most of the power in their team. However inclusive leaders, see power as a resource that can be distributed throughout their team but consistently collaborating with their followers (Booyesen, 2013). The decision-making process in traditional leadership styles, leaders would direct and delegate tasks to their followers. Inclusive leaders on the other hand would, rather create time for engagements that create space colleagues to share their input about decisions that will be taken. (Booyesen, 2013). The role of the leader in traditional leadership styles is create and enforce rules and take control and solve problems, however inclusive leaders tend to question popular, practices and focus on ensuring quality and fairness for all their followers (Booyesen, 2013).

Werder and Holtzhausen (2009) found that there is a favourable relationship between the inclusive leadership style and the utilisation of facilitative and cooperative problem-solving methods, as well as the effectiveness of informative and facilitative initiatives. Conversely, the transformational leadership style exhibits a favourable correlation with the implementation of power tactics and the efficacy of persuasive and collaborative problem-solving approaches. Similarly, Tucker and Lam (2014)'s study suggest a correlation between the traditional, hierarchical, and autocratic style of organisational leadership and the presence of more pronounced gaps in leadership qualities. On the other hand, a leadership style that is characterised by adaptability, inclusiveness, and collaboration is associated with reduced disparities in leadership skills.

The observations above regarding the evolving nature of leadership highlight the significance of harmonising leadership approaches with the dynamics of the organisation and team to achieve improved results. In the forthcoming section, it is imperative to acknowledge that the leadership approach holds significant importance in cultivating a workforce that is engaged and driven, as we shift our focus to the examination of employee engagement. The leadership styles of inclusivity and transformation, which prioritise collaboration, empowerment, and openness to diverse perspectives, hold significant relevance in fostering employee engagement. This engagement is widely recognised as a crucial element in achieving organisational success, enhancing productivity, and promoting the well-being of employees. The forthcoming sections will examine the correlation between leadership and employee engagement, elucidating the elements that contribute to teams being engaged and motivated.

## **2.5. Employee Engagement**

The phrase engagement was first coined by Kahn (1990), who defined personal engagement exists when employees bring all aspects of themselves – cognitive, physical, and emotional - to perform their work tasks. Personal disengagement is defined as when employees withdraw from their work by not bringing themselves cognitively, physically, and emotionally to their tasks. Cognitive engagement is the level of focus, concentration and engrossment while completing a work task (Huang et al., 2022). Emotional engagement is defined as feeling joy and fulfilment while completing work tasks. Lastly physical engagement, the is the amount of energy that is consumed while working on various tasks for the organisation (Huang et al., 2022).

### **2.5.1 Cognitive engagement**

Cognitive engagement, as defined by Kahn (1990), pertains to the degree of attention, concentration, and absorption demonstrated by employees throughout the execution of their job responsibilities. It denotes the degree to which individuals are cognitively engaged and focused on their obligations. This facet of engagement pertains to the dynamic involvement of employees in their professional responsibilities, wherein their cognitive processes are congruent with their job-related tasks, fostering the cultivation of problem-solving skills and critical thinking abilities.

### **2.5.2 Emotional Engagement**

Emotional involvement pertains to the subjective encounter of joy, fulfilment, and positive feelings during the execution of work-related duties by employees. The concept denotes the

affective bond and subjective contentment that individuals experience in relation to their occupational positions. When employees experience emotional engagement, there is an increased likelihood of them deriving meaning and enjoyment from their work, thereby cultivating a sense of attachment and passion towards their assigned responsibilities.

### 2.5.3 Physical Engagement

Physical engagement, as defined by Huang et al. (2022), refers to the level of effort exerted by employees in carrying out a range of duties for their respective organisations. This highlights the significance of the physical exertion and endurance necessary to accomplish job-related tasks. The aspect of engagement pertains to the employees' level of dedication in carrying out their responsibilities with enthusiasm and commitment, thereby assuring the allocation of their physical resources towards their work.

**Table 2.1 Definition of Work Engagement**

Work Engagement Definition	Author
Positive, fulfilling state of mind that is commonly characterised by absorption, vigour and absorption	Schaufeli, et al., 2002, p.74
When employees mainly feel positive emotions towards their work, they find their work meaningful and consider their workload manageable, and have hope for their future of their work while in the organisation	Nelson & Simmons, 2003
Opposite of burnout. Categorised by feeling energised, more involved in work tasks and efficacy (i.e. the direct opposite of the burnout dimensions exhaustion, cynicism and inefficacy)	Maslach et al., 2001

**Source:** *author*

### 2.5. Necessary conditions for employee engagement to emerge

In this section, the researchers explore and discuss the key factors or prerequisites required for employee engagement to manifest. It reviews existing literature and prior research to identify the conditions that are known to contribute to or hinder the development of employee engagement. This information helps to set the stage for understanding the role of inclusive leadership, psychological safety, and workplace belonging as potential facilitators of employee

engagement in the study. Kahn (1990) outlined three psychological conditions which need to be fulfilled for employee engagement to emerge: safety, availability, and meaningfulness.

Safety is a concept that pertains to the psychological state of employees, characterised by a sense of security and support inside their respective work environments. The concept encompasses the establishment of both physical and mental security, so employees are able to carry out their duties without apprehension of adverse repercussions or personal injury. When employees have a perception of safety in their workplace, they are more inclined to actively participate in their work, exhibit risk-taking behaviour, and freely express their opinions without any reservations.

Availability refers to the psychological condition in which employees perceive that they possess the requisite resources, information, and support to proficiently carry out their job duties. This pertains to the availability and provision of equipment, expertise, and support necessary for individuals to carry out their responsibilities. When employees possess a perception of being accessible and approachable, they are more inclined to experience a sense of empowerment and competence, hence potentially resulting in heightened levels of engagement in their professional tasks.

The concept of meaningfulness refers to the psychological state in which employees experience a sense of significance and purpose in their work. In the context of this discussion, it pertains to the notion that an individual's contributions hold significance and are in accordance with their ideals and aspirations. When employees have the perception that their work possesses significance, they exhibit a higher propensity to become emotionally committed and involved, motivated by a sense of satisfaction and intentionality in their respective positions.

The emergence of employee engagement is contingent upon three fundamental psychological states: safety, availability, and meaningfulness. Gaining comprehension and effectively dealing with these circumstances can offer valuable perspectives on the potential combined impact of inclusive leadership, psychological safety, and workplace belonging in promoting and maintaining employee engagement within an organisation.

## **2.7. Reasons for disengagement**

Potential causes of disengagement can include external environmental causes, psychological sources, and organisational causes. External environmental causes can include instability coming political climate and anticipated outside job offers (Heikkeri, 2010). Psychological sources, specifically lack of psychological safety at work, lack of trust between co-workers and the sense of feeling undervalued by leadership and perceived lack of equality in pay. Organisational causes such as the restructuring of departments within the company, poor management and lack of resources that are required for employees to complete their jobs (Heikkeri, 2010).

### **2.7.1 External environmental**

External environmental reasons encompass factors such as political instability and external job opportunities. The presence of political uncertainty or the expectation of forthcoming alterations in the political landscape might elicit sentiments of insecurity among employees, which may have the potential to reduce their level of participation. Furthermore, the existence of enticing employment prospects outside the organisation may entice individuals to consider alternate career paths, resulting in a lack of commitment and involvement in their current positions.

### **2.7.2 Organisational causes**

Organisational causes cover various aspects, including departmental restructuring, suboptimal management practises, and limitations in available resources. The regular occurrence of organisational restructuring can engender a perception of instability and ambiguity, hence exerting a detrimental influence on employees' confidence and commitment. Inadequate managerial strategies, characterised by deficient communication, inconsistent leadership, and unresponsiveness, have the potential to erode the trust and loyalty of employees. Moreover, a scarcity of crucial resources, like as equipment and technology, has the potential to impede employees' capacity to efficiently execute their duties, resulting in feelings of dissatisfaction and reduced motivation.

### **2.7.3 Psychological causes**

Psychological causes encompass various elements that contribute to workplace dissatisfaction, such as a dearth of psychological safety, a deficiency of trust among colleagues and superiors, a sense of being underappreciated, and perceived disparities in compensation. In a professional setting characterised by a deficiency in psychological safety, employees may exhibit hesitancy in expressing their opinions or taking risks, resulting in a dampening effect on their level of involvement and commitment. Moreover, the lack of trust within the team or between employees and leadership can give rise to a detrimental work environment, hindering the ability

to collaborate and provide mutual assistance. The disengagement of employees can be attributed to the sense of undervaluation or limited prospects for personal growth and recognition, as well as the belief in unjust remuneration practises inside the organisation.

When examining these elements, it becomes apparent that although an organisation may have limited control over external environmental influences, it can address internal organisational and psychological causes. The implementation of inclusive leadership, which prioritises transparent communication, fostering trust, and acknowledging individual contributions, has the potential to effectively address the psychological factors that contribute to disengagement. This implies that while organisations cannot ensure employee engagement, they can proactively foster the requisite conditions for engagement to flourish through the implementation of inclusive leadership practises.

## **2.8. Perspective of employee engagement used in this study.**

Schaufeli et al. (2002) identified three subcategories of work engagement, namely vigour, dedication, and absorption. The rationale for adopting Schaufeli et al. (2002) model of work engagement is supported by its solid theoretical underpinnings, extensive empirical evidence, reliable psychometric features, and practical applicability within the specific context of South Africa. Psychometric qualities like reliability and validity support operationalizing a notion in a certain way. Schaufeli et al.'s scale's reliability and validity in South Africa ensure its measurement precision and effectiveness. This measure routinely produces accurate findings, proving its applicability for measuring work engagement. Schaufeli et al. (2002) work engagement idea has been utilised and measured in many studies, including South Africa. As Bakker et al. (2008) stated, the linked measure has shown reliability and validity in South African investigations, highlighting its practical importance. This empirical support shows that the definition is theoretically solid and workable in the study. The chosen methodology is highly compatible with comprehensively examining the complex facets of employee engagement, which matches with the research objective of exploring this phenomenon within a particular organisational and cultural setting.

### **2.8.1 Vigor**

Vigour is characterised as the physical component of work engagement (Geldenhuis et al., 2014). Vigour occurs when individuals approach their work with elevated energy levels and mental resilience whilst working (Bakker et al., 2008). Similarly, Chughtai and Buckley

(2008), suggest that vigour results in individuals not becoming easily fatigued in their work and have skill to remain diligent while facing adversity or failure.

### **2.8.2 Dedication**

Dedication which is the emotional component of work engagement is characterised as having a strong sense of identification with one's work (Bakker et al., 2008; Geldenhuys et al., 2014). Therefore, dedication goes further than feelings of enthusiasm or pride but rather refers to an individual's psychological involvement and sense of significance in their work (Geldenhuys et al., 2014; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

### **2.8.3 Absorption**

Absorption, associated with the cognitive component of work engagement, occurs when individuals are fully immersed in their work. Individuals that are fully immersed in their work often feel like time is moving by rapidly and often forget everything happening in their environment (Bakker et al., 2008).

## **2.9. Outcomes of employment engagement**

Employee engagement is an important factor that should be considered in the workplace since it can have both positive and negative consequences for employees (Côté & Levine, 2014). Positive consequences include higher employee productivity and job satisfaction. If employees are disengaged, this can lead to burnout and low job satisfaction (Barik & Kochar, 2017; Saks, 2006). Perceived supervisor support can predict employee engagement if employees feel psychologically safe to share new ideas with their direct supervisors (Saks & Gruman, 2016). When it comes to remote working, and employee engagement

## **2.10. Linking inclusive leadership to employee engagement through the lens of social exchange theory.**

Past research has found a positive association between inclusive leadership behaviours and work engagement (Heimdal & Hellesmark, 2021). Social exchange theory Meira and Hancer (2021) provides a sound theoretical explanation for this link. Social exchange theory states that when an individual performs a favour or does something that is considered as valuable to another individual, the receiving person is likely to reciprocate with something equally valuable (Choi et al., 2015). Applied to the workplace, this means that when workers receive socioemotional resources from their leaders who use an inclusive leadership style, employee may feel more obliged to compensate the organisation. This compensation might take the form of greater work engagement can be a form of compensation (Saks, 2019). Social exchange

theory is based on communication and interactions between individuals which occur from the motivation of gaining a reward rather than incurring a loss (Stafford & Kuiper, 2021).

Therefore leaders can impact quality if the social exchange depending on the which behaviours and leadership styles leader adopt to (Dugar, 2021). The inclusive leadership style specifically, leaders who exhibit accessibility, openness, accessibility provide beneficial social and emotional resource to their employees (Choi et al., 2015). It is likely that inclusive leaders, who are open, available, and accessible, provide beneficial resources to their employees making them seen as supportive – and thus creating greater employee engagement. The perception that employees are receiving these resources from their leaders might motivate them to reciprocate by applying themselves fully to their jobs by devoting themselves cognitively, emotionally and physically to their work task (Choi et al., 2015). For this reason, the study's first hypothesis is:

**Hypothesis 1:** *Inclusive leadership has a positive relationship with to employee work engagement.*

## **2.11. The mediating role of psychological safety in the relationship between inclusive leadership and work engagement**

In this section it will be shown why it is likely that inclusive leadership positively influences work engagement through the mediator of psychological safety.

### **2.11.1 History and definition of psychological safety**

Edgar Schein and Warren Bennis, both professors at MIT at the time, coined the term psychological safety in 1965 (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). They argued that psychological safety is crucial for making people feel secure and capable of adopting adequate behaviour in response to challenges associated with change processes in an organisation. Schein (1993) cited in Edmondson and Lei (2014) later argued that research enhances understanding of conditions in which psychological safety occurs. Further, by creating psychologically safe environments which assist people to overcome anxiety and defensiveness. Kahn (1990), expanded on the concept of psychological safety through the lens of personal engagement while at work. He proposed that people believe they will be given the benefit of the doubt - which is a defining characteristic of psychological safety – when the relationships in the group are built on trust and respect. Studies conducted in organizational contexts have recognized psychological

safety as a pivotal element for comprehending how individuals collaborate to achieve a shared objective. Hence, because of the limitations of previous research, it becomes essential to explore psychological safety further, particularly in different contexts, such as virtual work environments.

Psychological safety can be defined as an individual's perception of the consequences they may face when taking interpersonal risks in a certain context for example the workplace (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). When team members feel psychologically safe, they share the belief that it is safe to take interpersonal risks includes speaking up with new ideas and engaging in voice behaviour (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Psychological safety has multiple levels. It mostly concerns an individual's perception of interpersonal dangers in the workplace, but it also affects teams. Psychological safety can affect team members' interactions and risk-taking, enabling open communication and collaboration. Thus, it is an individual- and team-level variable.

This definition was first presented by Amy Edmondson in 1999, who begun her research on psychological safety which focused on how team psychological safety can be associated with team learning behaviours (Edmondson, 1999). Learning behaviours can include asking others who are in the position to judge knowledge or skills (Carmeli et al., 2009). This also supported by Carmeli whose study showed that relational mechanisms such leadership can cultivate psychological safety which increase learning behaviours (Carmeli et al., 2009). Furthermore Clark (2020), developed a framework that describes the four stages of psychological safety. Stage one is inclusion safety, inclusion safety is created by continually inviting and accepting other into the group. Stage two is learner safety which means individuals feel safe enough to ask questions, experiment and make mistakes (Clark, 2020). Stage three is contributor safety which is when a team member can fulfil expectations by performing competently in their role. And lastly stage four, challenger safety this is when individual feel safe enough to challenge their leaders or the status quo without fear of retribution (Clark, 2020).

### **2.12. The relationship between inclusive leadership and psychological safety**

Behaviour and leadership styles can play a critical role in promoting and fostering psychological safety (Hirak, Peng, et al., 2012). Previous researchers show that specifically relational leadership styles is an antecedent for psychological safety (Carmeli et al., 2010; Heimdal & Hellesmark, 2021). Specifically, inclusive leadership style can facilitate the

development of psychological safety amongst employees at work (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Key inclusive leadership behaviours such as being accessible, available by listening to their followers, are willing to discuss different ways to achieve work goals and paying attention to new ideas (Carmeli et al., 2010). These behaviours can shape their employee perception of psychology safety positively (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). By leaders being accessible and available to their followers, followers perceive their leaders to be approachable therefore reducing any barrier that may increase open and free communication (Heimdal & Hellesmark, 2021). This followers may develop the sense that it is psychologically safe to share their honest views without facing negative consequences , thus creating psychological safety in the teams (Carmeli et al., 2010; Hirak, Peng, et al., 2012). Previous studies have examined the relationship between inclusive leadership and psychological safety, it has been stated that there is a positive relationship between the two (Askan et al., 2021; Carmeli et al., 2010; Heimdal & Hellesmark, 2021; Hirak, Chunyan, et al., 2012).

### **2.13. The relationship between psychological safety and work engagement**

Previous research can be considered a key variable that can impact psychological safety (Dramanu et al., 2020). For example, a study performed by Heyns et al. (2021), in South African mining industry reported a positive correlation between psychological safety and employee work engagement. Furthermore, research by Nelson (2016), found that employees that work in psychologically safe environment can positively impact psychological safety. The results from the studies above show that psychological safe environment may enable employees to engage in their work (Dramanu et al., 2020). This could be since inclusive leadership behaviours such as accessibility and availability can lead to employees opening more. This can lead to employees not being afraid to fully engage in their work by speaking up with new ideas (Carmeli et al., 2010). Therefore, based on the assertion made above it can be argued that:

*H2: Psychological safety mediates the role between inclusive leadership and work engagement.*

#### **2.13.1 The mediating role of workplace belonging in the relationship between inclusive leadership and work engagement.**

In this section it will be argued that inclusive leadership positively influence work engagement through the mediator of workplace belonging

### **2.13.2 History and definition of workplace belonging.**

The desire to belong may not be beneficial, but it drives our ideas, feelings, and actions (Allen et al., 2021). This also suggests that humans' fundamental motivation to be part of a social system or working groups (Katsaros, 2022). The need to belong is universal because it brings people together and fosters a sense of community and shared identity (Kennedy et al., 2021). Employees feel a sense of belonging at work when they feel seen when contributing their unique ideas. They feel connected to their co-workers, feel supported in their daily work and career improvements. Furthermore they are proud of their organisations purpose and mission when they feel that they belong (Kennedy et al., 2021). When companies have a culture of belonging, everyone is called in to participate which can create a space for inclusion and empathy for those who are marginalised (Kennedy et al., 2021). Therefore, workplace belonging is when employees feel motivated to perform in their work groups, refrain from engaging in behaviours that may harm others and are more inclined to cooperate with others (Allen et al., 2021; Malone, 2016).

### **2.13.3 The relationship between inclusive leadership and workplace belonging.**

Leaders can play an important role in creating a sense of belonging for employees in the organisation. Supportive leadership styles such as inclusive leadership, involves making leaders feel comfortable and often communicating that they have their best interests in mind (Randel et al., 2018). While several leadership styles are proven to be effective in the workplace, little research how leadership can foster organisational members need to belong and fit in (Katsaros, 2022). The inclusive leadership style might be the answer to this, since it is set of behaviours that are mainly focused on supporting their followers in their professional careers. Inclusive leaders are supportive by consistently helping employees with their needs and expressing their support for them and their opinions. Characteristics shown by inclusive leadership can cultivate employee sense of belonging in employees. This is because employees will receive favourable treatment from their supervisors, their ideas are often heard and employees feel accepted at work (Komisarof, 2021).

### **2.13.4 The relationship between workplace belonging and employee engagement.**

Workplace belonging in research has shown to positively impact workplace engagement (Katsaros, 2022). Research as suggested that the sense of belonging in the workplace plays a crucial role in motivating employees to actively learn and be more involved in their work tasks (Katsaros, 2022). Thus, workplace belonging will be viewed as a mediator between inclusive leadership and employee engagement.

## **2.14. Conclusion**

In summary, this chapter has examined several subjects pertaining to leadership, employee engagement, and the notion of inclusivity within the organisational setting. The exploration commenced with an examination of the different theories of leadership and the progression of leadership as a conceptual framework, emphasising the multitude of leadership styles that have arisen throughout history. The varied and dynamic nature of leadership is evident, as it encompasses various definitions and components that significantly contribute to the success of an organisation. Subsequently, the focus shifted towards inclusive leadership, highlighting the significance of this leadership approach within the contemporary context of a diverse and linked global society. Inclusive leadership can be characterised by its fundamental behaviours, including the facilitation of a sense of belongingness and the recognition of individual uniqueness. These behaviours serve to foster a climate of community and mutual respect within the organisational context. The leadership style under consideration is characterised by its divergence from conventional approaches, as it prioritises the cultivation of an inclusive atmosphere that promotes the sense of worth and active participation of all staff members.

The chapter also explored the domain of employee engagement, differentiating between cognitive engagement and factors contributing to disengagement. Moreover, an examination was conducted to investigate the correlation between inclusive leadership and employee engagement, employing the theoretical framework of social exchange theory. Through this investigation, it was determined that inclusive leadership has a notable influence on employee engagement by fostering an environment of trust and mutual exchange within the organisational setting.

The chapter also discussed the significant feature of the mediating effect of psychological safety in the association between inclusive leadership and work engagement. Psychological safety plays a crucial role in enabling employees to freely express their thoughts and ideas without the fear of negative consequences. Moreover, it serves as a connecting link between inclusive leadership and heightened levels of work engagement. On this study, we conducted an analysis on the mediating effect of workplace belonging on the association between inclusive leadership and job engagement. The establishment of a sense of belonging holds significant importance for the emotional well-being of employees and their dedication to their

professional responsibilities. Consequently, it serves as a critical connection between inclusive leadership and the level of engagement exhibited by employees.

In conclusion, this chapter has provided insight into the complex interrelationships among leadership, inclusivity, employee engagement, psychological safety, and workplace belonging. This statement highlights the need of implementing inclusive leadership approaches and establishing inclusive settings to enhance employee engagement and achieve organisational success. This study provides significant information for leaders and organisations aiming to improve their leadership practises and levels of employee engagement. The following chapter discusses and explains the methodologies that were used in this study.

### **3.0. CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Introduction**

The methodology chapter of the research study goes on a detailed discussion of the research design, sampling methodologies, data analysis procedures, ethical issues, and measuring tools that combined provide the foundation of the study. The significance of employing a descriptive research approach is expounded upon, with a particular focus on its pertinence in facilitating a comprehensive investigation of inclusive leadership, employee engagement, and psychological safety. Furthermore, the chapter explores the complexities of the sample and sampling procedures, elucidating the criteria, reasoning, and significance of these selections in guaranteeing the generalisability of the results. The methods utilised for the collecting and analysis of data are delineated, so ensuring transparency and offering valuable insights into the employed tools and approaches.

This chapter discusses the ethical concepts and strategies implemented to uphold ethical standards in research, such as obtaining informed consent from participants and safeguarding data privacy. The present analysis provides a comprehensive examination of the many measures and tools employed for the evaluation of inclusive leadership, employee engagement, and psychological safety. This thorough exploration highlights the significance of these measures and tools in ensuring the credibility and consistency of the research. The chapter seeks to provide a thorough perspective on the research methodology and the strength of the inquiry by means of these methodological components.

#### **3.2. Research design**

This study adopts a descriptive research design. This design allowed for the description and analysis of the relationships between the variables in this study (Nassaji, 2015). Specifically, a cross-sectional quantitative research design was adopted, as it allows the researcher to observe the relationships between variables in a single moment (Zangirolami-Raimundo et al., 2018). Moreover, data collection involved the use of surveys to gather information, and statistical analysis was employed to examine and establish relationships within the dataset (Nassaji, 2015).

### **3.3. Sample and sampling methods**

In this study, the approaches of non-probability purposive sampling and snowball sampling were utilised. It is necessary to conduct purposeful sampling because the population of interest possesses certain characteristics (Deeks et al., 2003). The participants are expected to carry out their tasks while inside the digital environment for this study. This is necessary since the purpose of the study is to investigate the links that exist between the various variables that pertain to labour done virtually. The researcher's networks will be leveraged to recruit volunteers for the study's first phase. Participants were requested to forward the survey link to other individuals they know who meet the requirements of the study so that the overall number of people who take part in the research increase. This act is completely voluntary. However since, remote working was being phased out, researcher reached out to companies that were working remotely exclusively. To gain access to employees, ethics application was sent to a representative in the company. How I gained access to the people was mainly on LinkedIn I reached out to people who was high up in the company, for example a head of department or division and asked if they were willing to share my study with their team. Once my study was approved study was shared company wide, this increased participation from 86 participants to 129 participants.

#### **3.3.1. Demographic characteristics**

The N = 129 study participants consisted of working professionals who were working remotely in any part of the world at the time of data collection (see tables 1 and 2 below for the demographic description of the sample). Participants ranged in age between 22 and 56 years ( $M = 33.45$ ,  $SD = 8.45$ ). The sample has shown gender statistics with 86 females (66.7%) and 43 males (33.33%) indicating that female employees were over-represented. However, the gender of managers was skewed in the opposite direction with the majority being male 72 (54.7%) and females 57 (44.5%). The racial distribution of the sample was the majority was black 83 (64.3%), followed by individuals who identified as white (N = 26; 20.2%), coloured (N = 11, 8.5%) and lastly Indian (N = 9, 7%).

### **3.4. Procedure and data analysis**

An online survey was compiled by the researcher in Qualtrics. Once permission was granted from the University of Cape Town's Commerce Faculty Ethics in Research Committee, a link to the survey was distributed via email which contains details of the study, to certain companies in South Africa that are working virtually to request permission for their employees to participate in the study. Organisations were requested to pass on the study invitation to their employees via email. Data were analysed using SPSS, version 27, and inferential statistics, including mediation analysis, were used to test the hypothesis.

**3.5. Ethical considerations**

Firstly, before distributing the survey, the research proposal which details the procedure of the study was submitted to the University of Cape Town's Commerce Faculty Ethics committee for review to ensure no ethical concerns have been overlooked. Participation in this study was voluntary and respondents were allowed to withdraw from the study at any point. The landing page of the online survey contained detail for all relevant study information, including consent and the nature of the study. Additionally, the landing page of the survey also informed employees that their data will be kept confidential. The study is interested in exploring general group trends. IP addresses were deleted from the dataset, thus rendering the data completely anonymous. Participants were informed that their participation is completely voluntary, that they may withdraw from the study at any point and that the dataset will not be made available to their employing organisation as the study is conducted independent from the organisation. Participants were also informed that they will receive no benefit, nor disadvantages from participating in the research. FuthoreThe items included in the survey were deemed of non-sensitive nature and no ethical concerns were expected to arise from participants completing the survey.

**3.6. Measures**

This section gives a detailed description of the measures that were used in the study.

**Table 3.1: Illustration of frequencies**

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
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Job Skill Level of Employees					
	Top Management	3	2.3%		
	Senior Management	9	6.9%		
	Mid-Management & Professionally Qualified Specialists	55	42.0%		
	Junior Management, Skilled Technical & Qualified Workers	42	32.1%		
	Semi-Skilled Workers	15	11.5%		
	Other	4	3.1%		
	<i>Missing</i>	3	2.3%		

<b>Race of Participants' Managers</b>					
	White	41	31.8%	36.9%	36.9%
	Black	42	32.6%	37.8%	74.8%
	Indian	10	7.8%	9.0%	83.8%
	Asian	2	1.6%	1.8%	85.6%
	Coloured	11	8.5%	9.9%	95.5%
	Other	5	3.9%	4.5%	100.0%
	<i>Missing</i>	18	14.0%		
<b>Gender of Participants' Managers</b>					
	Female	57	44.2%	44.5%	44.5%

	Male	70	54.3%	54.7%	99.2%
	Other	1	0.8%	0.8%	100.0%
	<i>Missing</i>	1	0.8%		

### 3.6.1. Inclusive leadership

Inclusive leadership is measured with Carmeli et al.'s (2010) inclusive leadership measure. This scale assesses all three dimensions of inclusive leaders in the workplace: openness (3 items), availability (3 items) and accessibility (3 items). Carmeli et al.'s respondents provided answers to the items which ask for ratings of participants' direct supervisor on a five-point Likert scale which ranged from (1) "Strongly disagree" to (5) "Strongly agree". A sample item for openness is "The leader is open to new ideas", for accessibility "The manager encourages me to access them" and for availability "The manager is ready to listen to my requests". All items in the scale were reversed coded. The Cronbach's alpha for several studies, with samples including participants from various professions, ranged between 0.70 and 0.90 (Ahmed et al., 2020; Carmeli et al., 2010; Choi et al., 2015; Javed et al., 2019).

### 3.6.2. Employee engagement

Employee engagement is measured through the 9-item, shortened Utrecht Work Engagement Scale developed by Schaufeli et al. (2002). The shortened scale was selected to keep the questionnaire as short as possible to minimise the risk of participants not completing the questionnaire and as it has shown sound psychometric properties (Cronbach alpha varied between .85 and .92 with a median of .92 across various populations; de Bruin & Henn, 2013). The shortened scale has also shown similar psychometric qualities to the longer scale version (Bakker et al., 2008). This scale measures three dimensions of work engagement – vigour (3 items), dedication (3 items) and absorption (3 items). Examples of items include "At my work, I feel bursting with energy" (vigour); "I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose" (dedication) and "I am immersed in my work" (absorption). Participants typically

respond to the scale on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 0 = "Never" to 6 = "Every day".

### **3.6.3. Psychological safety**

Psychological safety is measured using the psychological safety measure developed by Edmonson (1999). This measure assesses the degree to which an employee in an organisation feels safe enough in their team to speak up, take risks and discuss issues openly. The instrument consists of seven items and responses are typically recorded on a five-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (to a large extent). An example item is "If you make a mistake on tasks, it is often held against you". The item "People in my team reject others for being different" was reverse coded. The Cronbach Alpha for the measure ranges from 0.76 – 0.80 (Edmonson, 1999). Furthermore, this measure of psychological safety has been consistently reliable across diverse samples (Newman et al., 2017).

### **3.6.4. Workplace belonging**

Workplace belonging is measured using a 12-item scale based on Jena and Pradhan's (2018) work. The positively worded items aim to capture working professionals' feeling of belonging in their job and organisation. A five-point Likert scale was used to record responses, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). An example of an item is " I generally carry more positive emotions than negative ones during my job". The Cronbach Alpha was 0.86 in Jena and Pradhan's (2018) study, suggesting scale reliability. Even though this scale has not been used in the South African context, it has been chosen because it is one of the first scales that capture and measure belonging in the work context. Previous studies have often used general belongingness scales to measure belonging across a range of contexts and have ignored work-context specific belonging (Jena & Pradhan, 2018).

## **3.7. Conclusion**

The chapter examined the research design, sample, and sampling procedures, establishing a strong basis for the study. The study extensively examined the demographic characteristics of the sample, aiming to gain a comprehensive understanding of the contextual factors that influence the findings. The approach and data analysis methodologies were thoroughly delineated, so augmenting the credibility and replicability of the research. The study demonstrated a conscientious approach to ethical considerations, which exemplified the researchers' dedication to upholding rigorous standards of research integrity. The study

critically analysed the various measures implemented, such as inclusive leadership, employee engagement, psychological safety, and workplace belonging. The significance of these elements in the workplace and their interaction in promoting a productive and peaceful work environment is emphasised by these factors. This chapter provides an analysis of the present conditions of these sectors within the organisational environment, while also establishing a framework for future research to expand upon these fundamental understandings. The following chapter focuses on the presentation and analysis of the results.

## **4.0. CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF RESULTS**

### **4.1. Introduction**

This chapter presents the results on inclusive leadership and employee engagement, focusing on workplace belonging and psychological safety as mediators. It begins with a comprehensive Confirmatory Factor Analysis to validate the constructs, then examines the Inclusive Leadership Scale and Employee Engagement Scale using a robust methodological framework. It then discusses Workplace Belonging and Psychological Safety and their organisational importance. The chapter evaluates hypotheses using Reliability Analysis, Descriptive Statistics, and Correlation Analysis. Hypotheses 2A and 2B examine the mediation effect of workplace belonging, and Hypotheses 3A and 3B examine how psychological safety mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement, vigour and dedication and absorption. This chapter strives to clarify these complicated linkages and add to organisational behaviour and leadership research.

### **4.2. Principal Component Analysis (PCA)**

Confirmatory Factor analysis is the most robust method that is useful for establishing evidence for specifically construct validity (Wetzels, 2012). Construct validity is the extent to which a measure assesses the construct it is supposed to measure (Strauss & Smith, 2009). Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was run on all measures in the study to determine the construct validity of each scale. PCA was used because it reduces the dimensionality of large and complex data sets, by grouping variables that are highly correlated (Olawale & Garwe, 2010). Therefore, this allows for the easier interpretation while retaining a large amount of information (Jolliffe & Cadima, 2016). The decision to employ principal component analysis (PCA) instead of factor analysis was primarily motivated by its capacity to streamline the data structure by reducing dimensionality. This characteristic renders PCA particularly well-suited for the initial phases of research. In contrast to factor analysis, which aims to identify underlying variables, principal component analysis (PCA) is primarily concerned with elucidating variance and consolidating the information contained within observed variables into principle components. This feature renders it a proficient instrument for preliminary data analysis, particularly when the primary aim is to detect patterns and simplify data intricacy for easier comprehension. The utilisation of this method in the present investigation played a fundamental role in establishing the construct validity prior to engaging in more complex factor analytical procedures.

For PCA to provide robust results, the data needs to meet certain assumptions related to the sample size and distribution of scores. Pearson et al. (2010) demonstrated that the ideal

minimum sample size is  $N = 150$ , but other authors (e.g., Everitt, 1975; Nunnally, 1978) proposed to consider the ratio between the number of items on the measure and the sample size to determine if the sample size is sufficiently large. Both recommended that there should be at least ten times as many subjects to items. The Kaiser–Meyer Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's test of Sphericity were used to measure sampling adequacy and correlation between items (Olawale & Garwe, 2010). If the KMO value lies between .5 and 1.0, it indicates that it is appropriate to perform a factor analysis. A significant Bartlett's test of Sphericity indicates that the scale items, overall, are correlated (Field, 2018).

The data for all scales met all assumptions required to run a PCA. Firstly, the ration between the measure items and participants are greater than 10. The Kasier- Meyer Olkin for all values are greater than 0.5 (Olawande & Garwe, 2010). Lastly Bartletts test was significant for all scales.

**Table 4.1.The assumptions required to run a PCA for each scale.**

Scales	Number of items	Ratio of participants (N = 129) to number of items (criterion: > 10:1)	Kaiser- Meyer Olkin (KMO) value	Bartlett's Test
Inclusive leadership		14.33:1	.91	0.000 p < 0.05
Psychological safety		18.43:1	.72	0.000 p < 0.05
Workplace belonging		10.75:1	.91	0.000 p < 0.05
Employee engagement		14.33:1	.90	0.000 p < 0.05

To determine how many components to extract Kaiser’s criterion was used. Kaiser’s criterion is based on the component’s eigenvalue which shows the amount of total variance explained by the component. Components with eigenvalues greater than one were retained, because it indicates that more common variance is explained than unique variance in the component (Shrestha, 2021). An orthogonal rotation, specifically a varimax rotation, was used to simplify which items to allocate to which component (Scharf & Nestler, 2019). The analysis used Varimax rotation since it simplified component interpretation. Varimax, an orthogonal rotation

approach, maximises the variance of a factor's squared loadings on all factor matrix variables. This method makes elements as separate as feasible to improve interpretability. It groups elements that load substantially on one factor while minimising cross-loadings, making it easier to find strong factor associations. Our study relied on this clarity in factor structure to better define the dimensions inside our constructs and analyse the data in connection to our research objectives.

#### 4.2.1. Inclusive leadership scale

The PCA revealed the presence of one component that exceeded an eigenvalue of 1. Component 1 (eigenvalue = 6.47, explained variance = 71.91%). All items correlated with the component above the threshold of .30 and were therefore considered significant ( $.797 < r > .907$ ). Therefore, the inclusive leadership scale was considered unidimensional.

**Table 4.2**

#### The PCA for the Inclusive Leadership Scale

*Component Matrix<sup>a</sup>*

	Component 1 Inclusive leadership
My manager is open to hearing new ideas	.797
My manager is attentive to new opportunities to improve work processes	.822
My manager is open to discuss desired goals and new ways to achieve them	.850
My manager is available for consultation on problems	.836
My manager is an ongoing 'presence' in this team-someone who is readily available	.827
My manager is available for professional questions I would like to consult about with them	.830
My manager is ready to listen to my requests	.907
My manager encourages me to access them on emerging issues	.888
My manager is accessible for discussing emerging problems	.869

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

#### 4.2.2. Workplace Involvement Scale

The PCA revealed the presence of two components that exceeded eigenvalues of 1 (eigenvalue = 5.16, explained variance = 57.40%; eigenvalue = 1.11, explained variance = 12.54%). The varimax rotated solution showed that six items representing vigour and dedication loaded on the one (range of loadings:  $.654 < r > .836$ ) and three items representing absorption on the second component (range of loadings:  $.709 < r > .818$ ). This shows that in this sample, the employee engagement scale measured two instead of the expected three dimensions of

employee engagement, namely vigour and dedication as one dimension and absorption as a separate one.

**Table 4.3.**

**The PCA for the Employee Engagement Scale**

	Components	
	Vigour and Dedication	Absorption
At my work, I feel bursting with energy.	.836	
At my job, I feel strong and vigorous.	.833	
When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work	.804	
I am enthusiastic about my job.	.829	
My job inspires me.	.794	
I am proud of the work that I do.	.654	
I feel happy when I am working intensely.		.709
I am immersed in my work.		.818
I get carried away when I am working.		.785

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

a Rotation converged in 3 iterations.

2 components extracted

#### 4.2.3. Workplace belonging

The PCA revealed the presence of two component that exceeded an eigenvalue of 1. Component 1 (eigenvalue = 6.15, explained variance = 55.94), Component 2 (eigenvalue = 1.22, explained variance = 11.09). The workplace belonging scale was thus, as expected, unidimensional.

**Table 4.4.**

**Table showing the PCA for the workplace belonging scale**

	Component 1
When working with this team my unique skills are valued and utilised	.580
I am able to work in this organisation without sacrificing my principles	.647
I use to refer as “we/us” rather than “they/them” when I refer to my organisation to outsiders.	.567
I feel that there is a resemblance between my team and my own values and beliefs.	.699
I generally carry more positive emotions than negative ones during my job.	.778

Being a part of this organisation inspires me to do more than what is expected	.674
In my work unit I have many common themes with my co-workers.	.635
Fairness is maintained while executing rules and policies in my organisation	.799
My personal needs are well met by my organisation.	.817
Whenever I have any personal or professional issues my organisation extends necessary help and support.	.811
My career goals are well considered by my organisation.	.784
My organisation tries to make my job as exciting and promising as possible.	.811
My accomplishments at work are adequately rewarded in my organisation	.748

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.  
a 3 components extracted.

#### 4.2.4. Psychological safety

The PCA revealed the presence of one component that exceeded an eigenvalue of 1. Component 1 (eigenvalue = 2.64, explained variance = 37.72), Component 2 (eigenvalue = 1.26 explained variance = 18.05). These two components explain 55.77% of the variance, All factor loadings exceeded the threshold of .30, therefore all factor loadings were significant (.650 < r > .860).

**Table 4.5.**

**Table showing the PCA for the Psychological safety scale**

	Component 1
	Psychological safety
I am able to bring up problems and tough issues	.739
People in my team sometimes reject others for being different	.632
It is safe to take a risk in this organization	.683
It is easy for me to ask other members of this organization for help	.656
No one in this organization would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts	.536
When working with this team my unique skills are valued and utilised	.666
If I make a mistake in my team, it will not be held against me	.257

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.  
a. 2 components extracted.

#### 4.3. Reliability analysis

To determine the reliability of the scales in the study Cronbach's Alpha and inter-item correlations were used to determine the internal consistency of the scales. According to Nunally (1978), an Alpha >.70 is considered as acceptable. The average inter-item correlations should be between .15 and .85, items at that are between these values are considered as acceptable

(Onyefulu & Abayomi, 2023). All the measures except for the psychological safety scale used in this study showed acceptable internal consistency  $\alpha > .70$  and all internal consistencies lie between 0.15 and 0.85 (Refer to the table below).

**Table 4.6.**

**Cronbach alpha and inter-item correlation for each scale**

Scale	Cronbach Alpha	Inter-item correlation
Inclusive leadership (9 items)	.95	.51 < r > .81
Short Employee Engagement (9 items)	.90	.25 < r > .79
Psychological safety (7 items)	.68	.19 < r > .44
Workplace belonging (12 items)	.90	.28 < r > .77

**4.4. Descriptive statistics**

This section provides an overview of the descriptive statistics for each scale used in the study. The following descriptive statistics were analysed: minimum and maximum scores, means, standard deviation, skewness, kurtosis, and standard error of the mean.

**Table 4.7.**

**Descriptive statistics for the measurements in the study**

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Workplace belonging	1.00	5.00	3.75	.76	-.51	.13
Psychology safety	1.00	5.00	3.56	.62	.02	-.50
Employee Engagement	1.00	5.00	4.34	.74	-.56	-.12
Inclusive leadership	1.00	5.00	4.15	.74	-1.13	2.02

N = 129

All the scales in the study used a Likert Scale ranging from 1 to 5. On each scale, therefore the minimum statistic is 1 and the maximum statistic is 5. The average scores on the inclusive leadership and employee engagement scales are substantially higher than the scale midpoint of 3, indicating that the remote-working participants, on average, saw their leaders as showing inclusive leadership characteristics and described themselves as highly engaged. Remote workers also showed above average levels of psychological safety and workplace belonging.

The skewness for inclusive leadership, employee engagement and workplace belonging were negative, thus the distributions were skewed to the left, indicating that suggesting a concentration of higher scores. The positive kurtosis for workplace belonging and inclusive leadership implies a leptokurtic distribution, meaning these responses are more peaked and have heavier tails, suggesting a higher number of extreme values. Conversely, the negative kurtosis for psychological safety and employee engagement indicates a platykurtic distribution, with flatter peaks and lighter tails, implying fewer extreme values and a more uniform spread of responses across the scale.

#### **4.4.1 Correlation Analysis**

Bivariate correlational analysis was performed to determine the linear relationship between the study variables. In bivariate correlation analysis, the direction and magnitude of linear relationships are estimated and the statistical significance is determined (Prematunga, 2012). To interpret the sizes of the correlation coefficients, Schober et al. (2018) guidelines were used. Thus, a correlation coefficient of .00 – .10 shows a negligible correlation, .10 – .39 shows a weak correlation, a correlation coefficient of .40 – .69 shows a moderate correlation and a correlation  $>.70$  shows a strong correlation. Table 4.7 provides all correlation coefficients. It indicates that the correlation between inclusive leadership and vigour and dedication was positive and moderate ( $r(127) = .41, p > .001$ ), while the correlation with absorption was weaker ( $r(127) = .25, p > .001$ ).

#### **4.5. Hypothesis testing**

This section discusses the hypothesis testing.

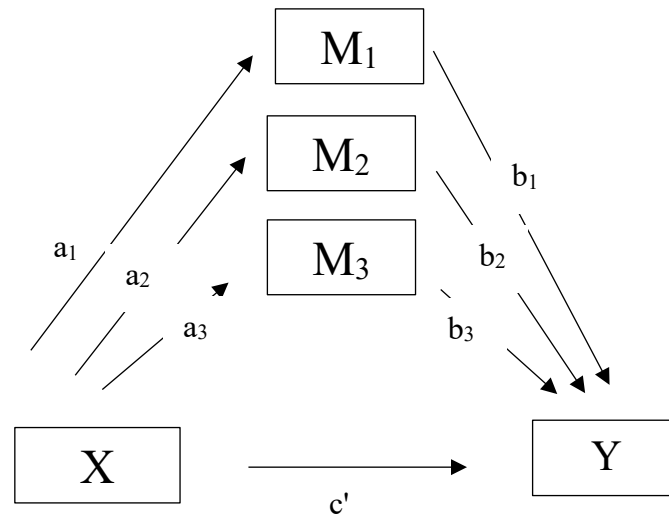
##### **4.5.1. Hypothesis 1: Mention the hypothesis.**

As the validity analysis had revealed two distinct components of employee engagement (*absorption and dedication and vigour*), the hypothesis was tested in two parts by considering the relationship between inclusive leadership and each of the engagement components. As shown in the intercorrelation matrix in Table 4.7, both engagement components were related to inclusive leadership.

##### **4.5.2. Hypothesis 2A: Workplace belonging mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and the vigour and dedication component of employee engagement.**

To assess the mediating role of workplace belonging on the relationship between inclusive leadership (independent variable) and the dedication and vigour component of employee engagement (outcome variable) and the three components of workplace belonging as mediator

variables. The results revealed a significant direct effect of workplace belonging on dedication and vigour (employee engagement)  $b = .409$ ,  $t = 1.29$ , CI [.198;.729], thus supporting H2A. However, the direct effect of inclusive leadership and dedication and vigour (employee engagement), in the presence of the mediator was found to be non-significant ( $b = .138$ ,  $p > .05$ ). Lastly the total effect the model was found to be significant  $b = .548$ ,  $t = 5.12$   $p > 0.05$ . the results show that workplace belonging fully mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and the dedication and vigour component of employee engagement.



**Figure 4.1: Mediation model with three mediators located between X and Y**

**4.5.3. Hypothesis 2B: Workplace belonging mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and factor 2 : employee engagement (absorption)**

The study assessed the mediating role of workplace belonging on the relationship between inclusive leadership and absorption (Factor 2: employee engagement). The results revealed a significant indirect effect of impact of workplace belonging on dedication and vigour (employee engagement)  $b = .232$ ,  $t = 4.2$ , CI [.104;.434], thus supporting H2A. However, the direct effect inclusive leadership and absorption (Factor 2: employee engagement), in the presence of the mediator was found to be non-significant ( $b = .0495$ ,  $p > .05$ ). Lastly the total effect the model was found to be non-significant  $b = .282$ ,  $t = 2.73$   $p > 0.05$ . Therefore, results show that workplace belonging fully mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and absorption (factor 2 – employee engagement).

#### **4.5.4. Hypothesis 3A: Psychological safety mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and factor 1 : employee engagement ( vigour and dedication)**

In examining the influence of workplace belonging on the link between inclusive leadership and the absorption aspect of employee engagement (Factor 2), our findings indicated an indirect effect of workplace belonging on the components of dedication and vigour, which was not statistically significant ( $b = .083$ ,  $t = 3.65$ ,  $p > .05$ ,  $CI [.030;.146]$ ). This outcome does not lend support to Hypothesis 3A. Furthermore, when considering the mediator's role, the direct impact of inclusive leadership on absorption (Factor 2: employee engagement) was also found to be statistically non-significant ( $b = .119$ ,  $p > .05$ ). However, the overall effect within the model was significant ( $b = .317$ ,  $t = 5.07$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), suggesting that while psychological safety may not serve as a mediator in the relationship between inclusive leadership and absorption (Factor 2 - employee engagement), other dynamics might be at play influencing this relationship.

The study assessed the mediating role of workplace belonging on the relationship between inclusive leadership and absorption (Factor 2: employee engagement). The results revealed a non-significant indirect effect of workplace belonging on dedication and vigour (employee engagement)  $b = .083$   $t = 3.65$ ,  $p =$ ,  $CI [.030;.146]$ . The results do thus not support H3A. Equally so, the direct effect of inclusive leadership on absorption (Factor 2: employee engagement), in the presence of the mediator was non-significant ( $b = .119$ ,  $p > .05$ ). Lastly the total effect the model was found to be significant  $b = .317$ ,  $t = 5.07$   $p < 0.05$ . Therefore results show that psychological safety does not mediate the relationship between inclusive leadership and absorption (factor 2 – employee engagement).

#### **4.5.5. Hypothesis 3B: Psychological safety mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and factor 2 : employee engagement ( absorption)**

The study assessed the mediating role of psychological safety on the relationship between inclusive leadership and absorption (Factor 2: employee engagement). The results revealed a non- significant indirect effect of impact of workplace belonging on dedication and vigour (employee engagement)  $b = .091$ ,  $t = 4.3$ ,  $CI [.037;.161]$ , thus not supporting H3B. Furthermore, the direct effect inclusive leadership and absorption (Factor 2: employee engagement), in the presence of the mediator was found to be non- significant ( $b = .119$ ,  $t = 1.67$   $p < .05$ ). Lastly the total effect the model was found to be significant  $b = .210$ ,  $t = 2.88$   $p < 0.05$ . Therefore, results show that psychological safety does not mediate the relationship between inclusive leadership and absorption (factor 2 – employee engagement).

**Table 4.8. Mediation analysis summary**

*Mediation analysis summary*

Relationship	Total effect	Direct Effect	Indirect effect	Confidence intervals		t-statistic	Conclusion
				Lower bound	Upper bound		
Inclusive leadership -> Workplace belonging -> Engagement (Vigour & Dedication)	.548	.138	.409	.198	.727	1.2	Full mediation
Inclusive leadership -> Workplace belonging -> Engagement (Absorption)	.282	.049	.232	.104	.434	4.2	Full mediation
Inclusive leadership -> Psychological safety -> Engagement (Vigour & Dedication)	.317	.235	.083	.030	.146	3.6	No mediation
Inclusive leadership -> Psychological safety -> Engagement (Absorption)	.210	.119	.091	.037	.161	4.3	No mediation

**4.6. Conclusion**

The results of this study included an examination involving Confirmatory Factor Analysis, the Inclusive Leadership Scale, Employee Engagement Scale, constructs of Workplace Belonging and Psychological Safety, followed by Reliability Analysis, Descriptive Statistics, Correlation Analysis, and Hypothesis Testing. The constructs utilised in the study were verified by Confirmatory Factor Analysis, hence assuring the reliability and validity of the measurement scales. The reliability and validity of the measures used to measure inclusive leadership and

employee engagement were established. The mediation studies yielded varied outcomes. namely, the hypotheses about the mediating role of workplace belonging in the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement (namely, vigour and dedication, and absorption) did not receive complete support. In a similar vein, the hypotheses 3A and 3B, which centre on the mediating influence of psychological safety, did not yield definitive evidence. The results of this study highlight the intricate nature of the relationship between leadership styles, employee perceptions of belonging and safety, and their levels of engagement, indicating that there may be more elements that impact these connections. This work makes a valuable contribution to the existing body of knowledge on leadership dynamics within organisational contexts, hence enhancing our overall understanding in this area. Additionally, it also provides new opportunities for future research in the realm of employee engagement techniques. The following section focuses on the discussion of the findings, and conclusion of the study.

## **5.0. CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The research presented in this dissertation investigated the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement via its link with psychological safety and workplace belonging among remote workers. Inclusive leadership on engagement there are two keys behaviours that they display to their followers. These behaviours include valuing uniqueness and facilitate belongingness. Thus, this used psychological safety to measure the leadership ability to make their followers feel safe enough to share their ideas. Workplace belonging was used to describe how inclusive leadership can create facilitate belongingness in their followers, making followers feel a sense of inclusion their teams.

The study's results provide valuable insights into the mediating effects of workplace belonging and psychological safety on the association between inclusive leadership and employee engagement. The results obtained from the mediation analysis demonstrate that workplace belonging serves as a complete mediator in the association between inclusive leadership and employee engagement, specifically in terms of vigour, dedication, and absorption. The associations examined in this study exhibited significant total effects, indicating that workplace belonging had a notable indirect impact on several aspects of employee engagement. In contrast, it was found that psychological safety did not exhibit a mediation role in the associations between inclusive leadership and either aspect of employee engagement. Although there were notable overall impacts identified in these associations, the indirect effects via psychological safety were not considerable. This suggests that psychological safety does not function as a mediator in these circumstances. The study emphasises the significant impact of workplace belonging on increasing employee engagement when under the guidance of inclusive leadership. Additionally, it brings attention to the fact that while psychological safety is crucial, it may not have a direct influence on this relationship.

### **5.1. Summary of results**

This section discusses the study results.

#### **5.1.1. Inclusive leadership and employee engagement**

As had been expected, the more employees perceived their leader to show inclusive leadership behaviours the more engagement they demonstrated. In the sample used in this study, employee engagement comprised two instead of the usual three dimensions: Absorption and Dedication and Vigour as one dimension. While greater absorption and dedication and vigour were higher the more inclusive the leader was perceived the relationship was particularly strong for the Dedication and Vigour component. The nature of the relationship mirrors the association between inclusive leadership and employee engagement found in studies in which participants

did not work remotely (Boa et al., 2022; Caremeli et al., 2010, Khan, Barney & Tsongalis, 2021; Vakira et al., 2023). It aligns with social exchange theory, as employees who receive more socioemotional resources from their leaders could feel more obliged to compensate their leaders by applying themselves cognitively, physically and emotionally (Dugar, 2021). Among remote workers, Heimdal and Hellsmark (2021) had found that greater inclusive leadership was related to lower employee engagement.

### **5.1.2. Workplace belonging as Mediator in the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement.**

The second hypothesis was to investigate the mediating role of workplace belonging in the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement. Based on Randel et al.'s (2018), conceptualisation of inclusive leadership, facilitating belonging is key behaviour that inclusive leaders display. Therefore, it was assumed that employees who perceived their leaders as inclusive would feel greater belonging than those who perceived their leader as less inclusive. This means that employees with more inclusive leaders are more engaged because they feel more included in the workplace. The results supported the hypothesis: In the virtual workspace, workplace belonging fully mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement.

This finding is in line with past research which shows the relationship with inclusive leaders and can increase workplace belonging. A study by Kennedy (2021) identified five key leader behaviours that can foster belonging. These were showing empathy, actively listening, openly communicating, creating a psychologically safe environment, and recognizing individual contributions. The consistent display of behaviours that indicate invitation and appreciation for their followers likely fosters a sense of belonging in amongst participants in this study. Workplace belonging then enhances employee engagement. This finding is in line with Lartey's (2022) research that argues that workplace belonging can be considered as antecedent to employee engagement.

### **5.1.3. Psychological safety as Mediator in the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement**

The third hypothesis was that psychological safety mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement. Psychological safety was selected as mediator as inclusive leadership behaviour seeks to value employees' uniqueness (Randel et al., 2018). Team members who feel psychologically safe can share ideas without fearing judgement. Feeling that uniqueness is valued minimise such fear (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Contrary to expectation and unlike in Heimdal and Hellsmark's (2021) study, psychological

safety did not serve as mediator. This is because inclusive leadership was found to have no correlation with psychological safety. This could be because psychological safety looks different in virtual teams than in in-person teams. Casual conversations between leaders and team members which might contribute to creating a sense of psychological safety are likely lower in virtual teams. Equally so, non-verbal communication is reduced in virtual teams. It might be that these forms of conversations are relevant for psychological safety to develop. In addition, Tkalitch et al. (2022) found that psychological safety might be hindered amongst remote workers as virtual team members are more hesitant to speak up in meetings or discussions. The authors reported that this is because they were focused on listening intensively. In addition, technical delays in communication hold people hold back from contributing out of fear of interrupting others.

The relationship between virtual work and its impact on persons can be influenced by the distinctive dynamics of virtual work and the specific qualities of those who are inclined towards it. In teams that are focused on technical aspects, the emphasis placed on psychological safety may be somewhat lower in relation to the importance given to achievement or status. Moreover, the differentiation that you have emphasised between leader behaviour and team dynamics is of utmost importance. Although a leader's inclination towards inclusivity is commendable, it should be noted that this attribute alone does not guarantee the establishment of a psychologically secure environment inside the team. The observed discrepancy indicates the necessity for leaders to not only exemplify inclusivity but also proactively cultivate an atmosphere that promotes transparent and supportive exchanges among individuals within a team. This method will play a crucial role in guaranteeing that psychological safety is not solely a manifestation of the leader's disposition but rather a ubiquitous element of the team's culture, particularly in distant work environments.

## **5.2. Practical Implications for Managers**

The aim of this study was to investigate the how two key behaviours namely facilitation belongingness and uniqueness, in their follower. Since there is positive relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement. Therefore, leaders in the workplace, should consider taking on more inclusive leadership workstyles. Leaders should consider the following behaviours to implement in their teams; relationship building, recognitions and empathy. Since the inclusive leadership style is not transactional but rather relational in the virtual working space leaders should focus on building relationship with their followers. This

can be done virtually, by having virtual check-in with their teams and consistently having team building with their teams.

Research has demonstrated that inclusive leadership, which places emphasis on fostering a sense of belongingness and recognising individual uniqueness, has a beneficial effect on employee engagement. This observation indicates a transition away from conventional, transactional leadership methods towards more relational and empathetic methodologies, particularly within virtual work settings. The significance of social identity theory in the workplace is underscored in theory, as leaders who recognise and appreciate the distinct identities of their team members have the potential to enhance group cohesion and performance. Furthermore, it is crucial to emphasise the significance of psychological safety, as leaders must establish a conducive atmosphere that fosters a sense of security for employees to freely articulate their own thoughts and viewpoints. This method is consistent with transformational leadership theories, which prioritise the involvement of leaders in inspiring and motivating their followers through establishing personal ties and providing acknowledgment. Moreover, the use of emotional intelligence within leadership strategies is crucial, namely in the identification and addressing of the varied emotional requirements of team members inside a virtual environment. Hence, this study emphasises the necessity of a paradigmatic change in leadership styles to adapt to the growing dynamics of the contemporary, progressively virtual work environment.

### **5.3. Limitations and implications for further study**

The present study, which adopts a cross-sectional design, is subject to certain constraints and carries implications for future research. A noteworthy constraint of the study is in the sampling methodology employed. It is suggested that a bigger and more diversified sample size, spanning across different countries, would have been beneficial to improve the generalizability of the study's results. Moreover, the utilisation of self-report questionnaires as a means of assessing factors such as psychological safety and employee engagement has significant biases, including social desirability bias. Future research endeavours could mitigate these biases by integrating more objective or mixed-method techniques. The constraints emphasise the necessity of conducting longitudinal research and employing more diverse and comprehensive sample procedures to delve further into the complex dynamics of inclusive leadership within diverse work settings.

#### **5.4. Conclusion**

The purpose of this research was to investigate and gain a better understanding of the roles that psychological safety and belonging in the workplace play as mediators in the connection between inclusive leadership and employee engagement, specifically regarding the virtual workplace. According to the findings of the research, inclusive leadership has a considerable positive impact on employee engagement, particularly regarding the concept of belonging in the workplace. On the other hand, the research found that psychological safety did not act as a mediator in the connection between the two variables. Based on these findings, inclusive leadership practises in virtual workspaces should probably place a greater emphasis, in general, on cultivating a sense of belonging to increase employee engagement.

This study provides some insight into the complicated dynamics of leadership and team involvement in remote working situations, despite the exploratory nature of the study. The reliance of this study on self-reported data and the fact that it was designed using a cross-sectional methodology are the two primary limitations, both of which reduce the generalizability of the findings to different situations. In the future, research could profit by taking a longitudinal approach and using a sample population that is more varied, both of which could offer significant insights into the rapidly developing field of remote work and employee engagement.

In conclusion, the value of this study has been to confirm the substantial role that workplace belonging plays in mediating the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement in the virtual workspace. This provides a deeper insight into effective leadership methods for teams that are geographically dispersed.

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