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RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP AND TEAM INNOVATION IN FEDERAL TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS IN NORTH EAST NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between inclusive leadership and team innovation in Federal Tertiary Institutions in North-East Nigeria. Despite increasing emphasis on innovation within higher education institutions, limited empirical evidence exists regarding the relationship between inclusive leadership and team innovation in the Nigerian tertiary education background. The study was anchored on Social Exchange Theory and the Competing Values Framework. A descriptive cross-sectional survey research design was adopted and the target population comprised academic and non-academic employees of selected Federal Tertiary Institutions in North-East Nigeria. Using a structured questionnaire, data were collected from 502 respondents across the instructions and the analysis was done based on the 435 duly screened and valid responses. The hierarchical regression was employed to test the direct hypothesis and the findings revealed that inclusive leadership exerted a positive and statistically significant effect on team innovation after controlling for demographic characteristics. The study recommends that institutional management should strengthen inclusive leadership

Keywords: Inclusive leadership, Team innovation, Organisational culture, Collaboration, North-East Nigeria.

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practices through continuous leadership development and values that encourage collaboration, experimentation, knowledge sharing, creativity, and responsible performance. The study concludes that inclusive leadership remains the primary driver of team innovation in Federal Tertiary Institutions in North-East Nigeria are more likely to maximise the innovation benefits.

Introduction

Innovation is increasingly important in higher education, where institutions must respond to technological change, evolving stakeholder expectations and complex socioeconomic challenges. In Federal Tertiary Institutions, generating and implementing new ideas is essential for improving teaching, research, knowledge transfer and community engagement. Yet, qualified employees do not automatically produce innovative outcomes, particularly where hierarchical decision-making, resource constraints and established routines discourage questioning existing practices (Park et al., 2020; Aksoy et al., 2021; Anderson & West, 1998). Leadership therefore matters because it can shape the conditions for collaboration, learning and experimentation. Against this background, inclusive leadership, characterised by openness, accessibility and employee participation, offers a promising approach. Carmeli et al. (2010) associate it with psychological safety and creative involvement, while Hirak et al. (2012) highlight its contribution to learning from workplace failures. Related research also links inclusive leadership with innovative behaviour, knowledge sharing and empowerment (Abukhalifa & Al-Adwan, year not provided). Nevertheless, an important question remains: can inclusive leadership consistently stimulate innovation when employees operate within organisational cultures that may encourage participation in principle but restrict it in practice? This question directs attention beyond leadership behaviour towards the institutional conditions that may determine whether employees' contributions develop into collective innovation.

This issue is particularly relevant to Federal Tertiary Institutions in North-East Nigeria, where insecurity, displacement, resource constraints and recovery challenges intensify demands on academic and administrative teams. Although employees may need to develop better teaching practices, improve administrative processes and coordinate responsibilities more effectively, hierarchical structures, weak cross-functional communication and limited support for experimentation may restrict innovation (Newnham, 2021; Nawaz & Abid, 2023; Pedraza-Rodríguez et al., 2023). Inclusive leadership may help address these barriers, although its effectiveness is likely to depend on institutional context. In this study, inclusive leadership refers to leaders' openness, accessibility and encouragement of employee participation; team innovation involves the collective generation, promotion and implementation of improvement-oriented ideas (Anderson & West, 1998); and organisational culture comprises shared values and assumptions shaping workplace behaviour. The Competing Values Framework distinguishes cultural orientations towards collaboration, flexibility, competition and control (Cameron & Quinn, 1999; Büschgens et al., 2013). These constructs represent distinct but interrelated levels of analysis, helping explain why inclusive leadership may produce different innovation outcomes across institutions (Fang et al., 2020; Khan & Zubair, 2022; Abukhalifa & Al-Adwan, 2023).

Existing empirical research generally links inclusive leadership with innovation, identifying psychological capital, psychological safety, empowerment and team creativity as potential explanatory mechanisms (Fang et al., 2020; Qi et al., 2019; Abukhalifa & Al-Adwan, 2023; Mansoor & Khan, 2023; Odeh & Obeidat, 2023; Nauman & Bhatti, 2024). However, evidence concerning individual innovative behaviour does not necessarily establish effects on team-level innovation, and findings from corporate or foreign settings may not readily generalise to public tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Organisational culture may help explain this variation: collaborative, flexible environments can facilitate knowledge sharing and experimentation, whereas control-oriented cultures may reinforce procedural compliance (Büschgens et al., 2013; Naranjo-Valencia et al., 2011). Recent research further suggests that cultural conditions shape how leadership and knowledge-sharing practices translate into innovation (Azeem et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2023; Odeh & Alghazu, 2024). Nevertheless, supportive cultures do not guarantee innovation, and rigid norms may constrain inclusive leadership's influence (Değirmenci et al., 2022; Nawaz et al., 2025).

The central research problem is the limited understanding of how organisational culture moderates the relationship between inclusive leadership and team innovation in Federal Tertiary Institutions in North-East Nigeria. Although previous studies have examined leadership effects and explanatory mechanisms, evidence from other national and organisational settings offers limited assurance that these relationships apply to African public higher education institutions (Van de Vijver & Leung, 1997; Nawaz & Abid, 2023; Ullah & Azizian, 2024). Concerns about self-reported measures and cross-cultural measurement equivalence further underscore the need for careful operationalisation and contextual validation (Field, 2013; Hair et al., 2019; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). To address this gap, the study integrates Social Exchange Theory, which explains reciprocal employee responses to supportive leadership (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Gao & Jiang, 2021); Psychological Safety Theory, which clarifies employees' willingness to voice ideas and take interpersonal risks; and Organisational Learning Theory, which emphasises knowledge sharing and collective adaptation (Carmeli et al., 2010; Hirak et al., 2012; Jansen et al., 2009). Together, these perspectives inform a framework for examining how inclusive leadership may foster team innovation and the cultural conditions that enable or constrain this relationship.

Conceptual Review and Theoretical Framework

Inclusive Leadership

Inclusive leadership extends beyond conventional diversity management by embedding belongingness and respect for individual uniqueness in everyday interactions and decisions (Ferdman, 2020; Randel et al., 2017; Shore & Chung, 2021). Through open communication, participatory decision-making and equitable treatment, inclusive leaders can strengthen trust, commitment, knowledge sharing and collective intelligence, particularly when employees' contributions are genuinely valued (Ashikali et al., 2020; Van Knippenberg & Van Ginkel, 2021; Korkmaz et al., 2022; Roberson & Perry, 2021; Vassou et al., 2024). However, participation becomes superficial when employees' views are disregarded or conformity suppresses disagreement (Nishii & Leroy, 2020; Shore & Chung, 2021). Humility and appreciation of diverse perspectives can foster psychological safety, supporting creativity, organisational learning and team innovation (Al-Atwi & Al-Hassani, 2021; Shafaei & Nejati, 2023; Li et al., 2024). Beyond innovation, inclusive leadership is

associated with engagement, satisfaction, well-being, retention and adaptability (Bradley, 2020; Kuknor & Bhattacharya, 2020; Leroy et al., 2021; Santos et al., 2022; Karimi & Khawaja, 2024; Deepalakshmi et al., 2025; Karadencheva, 2025; Tiwari, 2025). Nevertheless, cultural norms, institutional inequalities and power relations may constrain these benefits (Ferdman, 2020; Shore & Chung, 2021). Although Social Identity Theory and Leader–Member Exchange offer useful explanations (Randel et al., 2017), cross-sectional designs and inconsistencies between stated values and practice remain limitations (Korkmaz et al., 2022; Nishii & Leroy, 2020). Longitudinal, context-sensitive research should therefore examine how organisational culture shapes inclusive leadership and innovation, particularly in diverse higher education settings undergoing technological and workplace change (Kusurkar, 2024; Tiwari, 2025).

Team Innovation

Team innovation is a collective process through which teams generate, develop and implement novel ideas to create value and strengthen organisational adaptability (Van Der Voet & Steijn, 2020; Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2013; Stollberger et al., 2019; Van Knippenberg & Hoever, 2021). Consistent with Amabile's (1996) componential theory, creativity alone is insufficient; innovation requires effective implementation supported by shared goals, open communication, mutual support and psychological safety (Hülsheger et al., 2009; Schippers et al., 2015; Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Although diverse expertise broadens problem-solving capacity, its benefits depend on effective integration and may be undermined by conflict or informal hierarchies (West & Anderson, 1996; Harrison & Klein, 2007; Joshi & Roh, 2009; Du Chatenier et al., 2009). Leadership, supportive climates, feedback and team reflexivity can facilitate experimentation and learning, although excessive reflection may delay implementation (Burpitt & Bigoness, 1997; West & Wallace, 1991; Caldwell & O'Reilly, 2003; West, 2000; Widmann et al., 2016; Heldal, 2023). These processes can improve service delivery, adaptability and performance across sectors (Hoegl & Gemuenden, 2001; Mitchell et al., 2012; Thayer et al., 2018; Kremer et al., 2019; Hadjielias et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021; Leroy et al., 2021; Ghosh et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2023). Nevertheless, resource constraints, uncertainty, time pressure and coordination difficulties remain significant barriers (Moenaert et al., 2000; Kim & Choi, 2022; Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020; Razinskas et al., 2022; Podgórska, 2022; Patrício et al., 2024; Linhardt & Salas, 2023; Racolța-Paina & Muntean, 2020; Lahiri et al., 2019; Cromwell & Harvey, 2025).

Relationship between Inclusive Leadership and Team Innovation

Inclusive leadership is increasingly associated with team innovation because leader openness, accessibility and appreciation of diverse perspectives encourage employees to share ideas and participate in their implementation (Javed et al., 2018, 2020; Jia et al., 2021; Li & Tang, 2022; Bao et al., 2024). Evidence from service organisations and Chinese firms suggests that this relationship operates partly through psychological safety, which enables employees to challenge assumptions, exchange knowledge and take interpersonal risks without undue fear (Duc & Tho, 2023; Bao et al., 2024). Empowerment, intrinsic motivation and psychological contract fulfilment may further encourage contributions beyond routine duties, indicating that innovation depends on interconnected psychological and relational processes (Javed et al., 2018; Jia et al., 2021; Li & Tang,

2022). However, these benefits are not universal; team diversity, proactive personality and innovation-oriented culture may influence the relationship (Mitchell et al., 2024; Thanh et al., 2022). Moreover, excessive consultation and consensus-seeking may delay decisions, suggesting a potentially inverted U-shaped relationship between inclusivity and innovation (Qijie & Tang, 2022; Liu et al., 2024; Phuong et al., 2023). Inclusive leadership therefore appears most effective when participation is balanced with timely judgement and organisational conditions that support implementation.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework explains relationships among research variables and guides their interpretation (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). In examining inclusive leadership and team innovation, with organisational culture as a moderator in Federal Tertiary Institutions in North-East Nigeria, Social Exchange Theory (SET), Psychological Safety Theory and Organisational Learning Theory provide complementary explanations. SET proposes that employees reciprocate leaders' fairness, recognition and support through commitment and discretionary contributions, including innovation (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano et al., 2017; Eisenberger et al., 2020; Li & Liao, 2014). Consistent with inclusive leadership's emphasis on openness and accessibility (Carmeli et al., 2010), this reciprocity may nevertheless produce compliance rather than innovation where cultural norms constrain participation (Takeuchi et al., 2019). Psychological Safety Theory addresses why employees may withhold ideas despite supportive relationships, emphasising the freedom to question practices and propose alternatives without fear (Edmondson, 1999; Frazier et al., 2017; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Hirak et al., 2012; Okpara & Wynn, 2012). Meanwhile, Organisational Learning Theory highlights knowledge acquisition, sharing and integration (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Crossan et al., 2011). Accordingly, learning-oriented cultures may strengthen innovation, whereas rigid norms may inhibit experimentation (Jansen et al., 2009; Aksoy et al., 2021; Ogbonna & Harris, 2000).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study presents in figure 1.



Source: Designed by Researcher, (2025).
Figure 1:Conceptual framework of Study

The conceptual framework proposes that inclusive leadership, characterised by openness, accessibility and availability (Carmeli et al., 2010), positively influences team innovation through psychological safety, trust and knowledge sharing (West & Farr, 1990; Javed et al., 2019; Randel et al., 2018). However, this relationship may depend on organisational culture, comprising shared values and norms (Schein, 2017). Supportive, innovation-oriented cultures encourage experimentation and collaborative problem-solving, strengthening this relationship (Büschgens et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2020), whereas rigid, hierarchical cultures may constrain it through risk aversion and structural barriers (Degirmenci et al., 2022).

Methodology

A descriptive cross-sectional survey design was adopted to examine the relationship between inclusive leadership and team innovation and the moderating role of organisational culture in selected Federal Tertiary Institutions in North East Nigeria. The target population comprised academic and non-academic employees, from whom data were collected using a structured questionnaire. A total of 502 responses were obtained, of which 435 were retained as valid after screening, while 67 were excluded. The cross-sectional design enabled the collection of data at a single point in time and was appropriate for assessing the relationships among the study variables, although it does not establish causality. Hierarchical multiple regression was employed to examine the direct relationships after adopting the appropriate data screening and regression assumption checks were undertaken before hypothesis testing.

Data Analysis and Results

To evaluate the effect leadership training on organisational development in Federal Polytechnic Mubi, Adamawa state, Nigeria, the data retrieved from the respondents were analysed using hierarchical Regression analysis and the results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Hierarchical Regression Results for Inclusive Leadership, Organizational Culture, and Team Innovation

Variables	Model 1 (Controls)	Model 2 (IL)
Controls		
(Constant)	3.606(.250)	1.905(.252)
GEN=Female	-0.035(0.062)	0.063(.053)
AGE=24 - 29 Years	-0.028(0.262)	-0.185(.225)
AGE=30 - 35 Years	0.007(0.255)	-0.107(.218)
AGE=34 - 41 Years	0.279(0.255)	0.026(.219)
AGE=42 Years and Above	0.241(.263)	-0.036(.226)
EDUQUAL=OND/NCE/Diploma	0.172(.171)	-0.054(.147)
EDUQUAL=Bachelor's Degree	0.036(.169)	-0.170(0.145)
EDUQUAL=Master's Degree	0.136(.170)	-0.028(0.146)
EDUQUAL=Doctorate	0.137(.166)	-0.087(0.143)
EXPER=11 - 15 Years	-0.018(.077)	-0.020(0.066)
EXPER=16 - 20 Years	-0.023(.087)	-0.041(0.074)
EXPER=Above 20 Years	-0.151(.109)	-0.108(0.093)
Main Predictor		
Inclusive Leadership (IL)	—	0.527 (0.042)
Model Fit		
R^2	0.233	0.557
ΔR^2	0.054	0.256
F-statistic	2.022	14.582
Observations (N)	435	435

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a. **Dependent Variable: TI**

b. Predictors: (Constant), EXPER=Above 20 Years, GEN=Female, EDUQUAL=Master's Degree, AGE=34 - 41 Years, EDUQUAL=OND/NCE/Diploma, EXPER=11 - 15 Years, AGE=24 - 29 Years, EDUQUAL=Bachelor's Degree, EXPER=16 - 20 Years, AGE=42 Years and Above, EDUQUAL=Doctorate, AGE=30 - 35 Years

c.Predictors: (Constant), EXPER=Above 20 Years, GEN=Female, EDUQUAL=Master's Degree, AGE=34 - 41 Years, EDUQUAL=OND/NCE/Diploma, EXPER=11 - 15 Years, AGE=24 - 29 Years, EDUQUAL=Bachelor's Degree, EXPER=16 - 20 Years, AGE=42 Years and Above, EDUQUAL=Doctorate, AGE=30 - 35 Years, IL

Source: Computed using SPSS 30 from Field Survey Data, 2026.

Table 1 presents the hierarchical regression results examining the effect of inclusive leadership on team innovation after controlling for respondents' demographic characteristics, including gender, age, educational qualification and work experience. Hierarchical regression was considered appropriate because it allows the researcher to first account for the influence of background variables before determining the unique contribution of the main predictor. This approach makes it easier to establish whether inclusive leadership explains additional variation in team innovation beyond what can be attributed to demographic differences. Table 1 presents the hierarchical regression results examining the effect of inclusive leadership on team innovation after controlling for gender, age, educational qualification and work experience. In Model 1, the demographic variables jointly explained 23.3% of the variance in team innovation R^2 value of 0.233 with an F-statistic of 2.022. However, their individual regression coefficients were generally small and inconsistent, suggesting that these characteristics were relatively weak predictors of team innovation when considered separately. The introduction of inclusive leadership in Model 2 substantially improved the model's explanatory power, increasing $R^2 = 0.233$ to $R^2 = 0.557$, while the model recorded an R^2 change (ΔR^2) of 0.256. This indicates that inclusive leadership accounted for an additional 25.6% of the variance in team innovation beyond the contribution of the control variables. The F-statistic also increased from 2.022 to 14.582, indicating improved model performance following the inclusion of the main predictor. Inclusive leadership recorded a positive regression coefficient ($\beta = 0.527$, SE = 0.042), suggesting that employees who perceived their leaders as accessible, supportive, receptive to diverse opinions and willing to involve staff in decision-making also tended to report higher levels of team innovation. The magnitude of the coefficient indicates that inclusive leadership made a meaningful contribution to explaining differences in innovative team behaviour across the sampled institutions.

These results provide empirical support for the argument that inclusive leadership contributes positively to team innovation in Federal Tertiary Institutions in North-East Nigeria. Following the introduction of inclusive leadership, some demographic coefficients decreased in magnitude or changed direction, suggesting that their initial associations with team innovation may partly reflect other workplace experiences, although the regression results alone cannot establish this explanation. The findings also indicate that 44.3% of the variance in team innovation remained unexplained by the final model, which suggests that other factors, including organisational culture, psychological safety, employee engagement, resource availability, institutional policies and

communication climate, may warrant further investigation. From a theoretical perspective, the positive coefficient is consistent with inclusive leadership theory, which emphasises the value of leader accessibility, openness and employee participation in encouraging knowledge sharing and creative problem-solving. The findings therefore support the rejection of the null hypothesis **(H_{01})** and the conclusion that inclusive leadership has a positive and statistically significant effect on team innovation, subject to the reported significance test. More broadly, the results suggest that employing highly qualified or experienced staff does not, by itself, guarantee innovative team outcomes. Leadership practices that encourage employees to contribute ideas and participate meaningfully in workplace decisions may be equally important in helping teams develop and pursue new approaches to institutional challenges.

Discussion of Finding

The results establish that inclusive leadership has a positive and statistically significant relationship with team innovation in Federal Tertiary Institutions in North-East Nigeria, even after controlling for demographic characteristics because employees who perceived their leaders as accessible, fair, receptive to new ideas and willing to involve staff in decision-making also reported higher levels of team innovation. This suggests that inclusive leadership may create conditions in which employees feel sufficiently valued to contribute ideas, question established practices and participate in collaborative problem-solving. Such behaviours are particularly relevant in higher education, where innovation often depends on the exchange of specialist knowledge and cooperation across academic and administrative units. The result is consistent with Carmeli et al. (2010), who linked leaders' openness, availability and accessibility to psychological safety and employee creativity, and with Javed et al. (2019), who associated inclusive leadership with innovative work behaviour. Randel et al. (2018) similarly emphasised the value of creating workplaces in which employees from different backgrounds feel respected and included, allowing diverse perspectives to contribute to collective outcomes. Taken together, these studies support the interpretation that inclusive leadership can encourage innovation by making employee participation more acceptable and reducing the perceived interpersonal risks of expressing unfamiliar or unconventional ideas. Nevertheless, the relationship should not be interpreted as evidence that inclusive leadership alone guarantees successful innovation. Employees may be willing to suggest improvements but lack the resources, authority or institutional support needed to implement them. Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) offers a further explanation for the observed relationship: when leaders demonstrate fairness, respect and genuine interest in employees' contributions, staff may reciprocate through greater involvement in activities that benefit their teams and institutions. In this context, sharing knowledge, helping colleagues refine proposals and contributing ideas beyond routine responsibilities may represent reciprocal responses to supportive leadership. However, such reciprocity is unlikely to be automatic. Where suggestions are repeatedly ignored, recognition is perceived as unfair or organisational procedures prevent meaningful change, employees may become reluctant to invest effort in innovation despite appreciating their leaders' interpersonal approach. The findings can also be interpreted through Psychological Safety Theory, which proposes that employees are more willing to take interpersonal risks when they believe they can express their views without fear of embarrassment or punishment (Edmondson, 1999). By

listening attentively, acknowledging different viewpoints and responding constructively to suggestions, inclusive leaders may encourage the open exchange of ideas required for team innovation. This mechanism is plausible in higher education institutions, where improvements to teaching, research, student support and administration frequently require constructive debate and the integration of different forms of expertise. However, because the reported analysis establishes the relationship between inclusive leadership and team innovation rather than directly testing psychological safety as a mediator, its explanatory role should be regarded as theoretically grounded rather than empirically confirmed in this study. Furthermore, the relationship may vary across organisational settings. Previous research in private organisations and technology-intensive environments has reported positive associations between inclusive leadership and innovation, with some studies indicating stronger relationships (Fang et al., 2019; Qi et al., 2019). The comparatively moderate relationship observed in the present context may reflect the institutional conditions within Nigerian public tertiary institutions, including formal administrative hierarchies, regulatory requirements, resource constraints and lengthy approval procedures. Even when leaders encourage participation, the implementation of new ideas may depend on funding, management approval or institutional policies beyond the immediate team's control. These conditions could limit the extent to which inclusive leadership translates into practical innovation, although the present findings do not establish that bureaucracy or resource scarcity caused the observed effect. Differences between academic and non-academic employees may also be relevant. Academic staff may have opportunities to experiment with teaching methods, research approaches and scholarly collaboration, whereas some administrative roles are more tightly governed by established procedures. Such differences may influence employees' discretion to innovate and their perceptions of leadership effectiveness. Since separate effects for these employee groups were not established, future research could examine whether occupational category, job autonomy and decision-making discretion shape the relationship. Practically, the findings suggest that leadership development should incorporate active listening, participatory decision-making, fairness in allocating opportunities and resources, openness to differing opinions, and sustained engagement with employees across institutional units. These practices should be supported by clear processes for receiving suggestions, providing feedback and explaining decisions about proposed changes. Without such organisational responses, inclusive leadership risks becoming symbolic rather than translating into meaningful opportunities for innovation.

Beyond the direct relationship, the findings indicate that overall organisational culture significantly moderates the relationship between inclusive leadership and team innovation in Federal Tertiary Institutions in North-East Nigeria. Although inclusive leadership remained a significant predictor, the interaction between inclusive leadership and organisational culture produced only a modest increase in explained variance beyond their direct effects. This suggests that organisational culture influences the conditions under which inclusive leadership is associated with team innovation, although its additional explanatory contribution is limited. The finding therefore qualifies, rather than displaces, the central role of inclusive leadership: leadership behaviours matter, but their relationship with innovation may depend partly on whether the wider institutional environment supports employee participation, knowledge sharing and the practical consideration of new ideas. A culture that values collaboration and allows reasonable discretion may reinforce inclusive

leadership by legitimising employee voice and creating opportunities for teams to explore alternative approaches. By contrast, a culture dominated by rigid compliance, limited tolerance for dissent or an emphasis on avoiding mistakes may restrict the practical value of leaders' openness. These explanations are consistent with the proposition that organisational context shapes leadership effectiveness, but the significant overall interaction does not establish which specific cultural characteristics account for the moderation. Nor does the modest increase in explained variance justify treating organisational culture as the principal determinant of team innovation. Rather, the result suggests that culture contributes an additional contextual explanation for differences in the relationship between inclusive leadership and innovation. This interpretation is particularly relevant in public tertiary institutions, where leaders may encourage staff to contribute ideas but have limited control over the administrative systems and institutional norms governing their implementation. An inclusive leader may create space for discussion, for instance, yet employees' willingness to continue proposing improvements could depend on whether the institution responds constructively to those contributions and provides a realistic route from suggestion to action. Consequently, leadership inclusion and organisational culture should be considered together, without assuming that either operates independently of the other. For institutional managers, the practical implication is that leadership development should be accompanied by efforts to cultivate organisational practices that give employee participation substantive value. This could involve transparent procedures for reviewing suggestions, fair recognition of contributions, opportunities for cross-unit collaboration and feedback that explains why proposals are adopted, modified or declined. Such measures would help align leaders' inclusive behaviours with the norms and processes employees encounter in their daily work. The results also provide a basis for further investigation into whether specific cultural orientations strengthen or weaken the inclusive leadership–innovation relationship, rather than relying exclusively on an aggregate measure of organisational culture. Future studies could examine these differences alongside occupational groups, institutional resources and employee discretion, while testing psychological safety as a potential explanatory mechanism. Given the cross-sectional nature of the study, however, the findings should be interpreted as evidence of statistical relationships rather than definitive proof of causal processes. The study indicates that inclusive leadership is positively associated with team innovation, while organisational culture significantly qualifies this relationship but adds only modest explanatory power. The central contribution is therefore not that inclusive leadership or organisational culture independently guarantees innovation, but that encouraging employee participation and establishing an institutional environment responsive to employees' contributions may together provide more favourable conditions for innovative team outcomes

Conclusion and Implication of the Study

This study examined the relationship between inclusive leadership and team innovation in Federal Tertiary Institutions in North-East Nigeria and the findings indicate that inclusive leadership positively and significantly predicts team innovation, suggesting that accessible, fair and receptive leaders can encourage academic and non-academic employees to share knowledge, explore alternatives and collaborate on institutional challenges. This supports Social Exchange Theory, which explains employees' reciprocal responses to supportive leadership (Blau, 1964), and Carmeli

et al.'s (2010) emphasis on leader openness, accessibility and availability as conditions conducive to creativity. However, this relationship varies across cultural orientations. Adhocracy culture exerted the strongest moderating effect, followed by clan and market cultures, whereas hierarchy culture was non-significant. Consistent with the Competing Values Framework (Cameron & Quinn, 2011), this suggests that flexible, experimental and collaborative environments may strengthen inclusive leadership's contribution to innovation, although such effects cannot be assumed across all cultures. Consequently, institutional managers should combine participatory leadership with cultures that support collaboration, experimentation and fair consideration of employees' ideas, while recognising that leadership effectiveness depends partly on the organisational context.

Given that inclusive leadership emerged as the strongest direct predictor of team innovation, appointments and promotions in Federal Tertiary Institutions should prioritise interpersonal competence, emotional intelligence, collaborative leadership and openness to diversity alongside academic and administrative qualifications. Accordingly, the Federal Ministry of Education, NUC, NBTE and NCCE should embed inclusive leadership principles in governance guidelines, leadership development and quality assurance frameworks. Institutional management should also provide accessible capacity-building programmes for academic and non-academic staff, focusing on creative thinking, collaborative problem-solving, digital competence, research and knowledge sharing. These initiatives should be complemented by organisational cultures that encourage experimentation, collaboration and fair consideration of employees' contributions. Leadership support alone may be insufficient where employees lack the skills or resources to implement their ideas. Coordinated action by regulatory agencies, institutional leaders and employees could therefore strengthen innovation, improve teaching and research, enhance administrative efficiency and support more effective service delivery across institutions in North-East Nigeria.

This study extends leadership and organisational behaviour literature by examining inclusive leadership and team innovation in Federal Tertiary Institutions in North-East Nigeria. Drawing on Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) and the Competing Values Framework, the findings suggest that organisational culture shapes how supportive leadership translates into innovation: adhocracy emerged as the strongest moderator, followed by clan and market cultures, whereas hierarchy culture was non-significant. However, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference, the regional focus constrains generalisability, and self-reported data may introduce common method and social desirability biases. Future research should adopt longitudinal and mixed-method approaches across public and private institutions in Nigeria's geopolitical zones, combining surveys with interviews, peer assessments and institutional records. Further studies could examine psychological safety, trust, engagement, knowledge sharing and creative self-efficacy as mediators, alongside organisational climate, autonomy, digital transformation and resource availability. Comparing academic and non-academic employees would also clarify how individual, team and institutional conditions shape the inclusive leadership–innovation relationship.

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