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Regular Article

Enhancing organizational development: The role of green empowerment and participation and inclusive leadership after COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Existing literature demonstrates that inclusive leadership significantly promotes employee work engagement. Nevertheless, research on addressing the connection between inclusive leadership and employee work engagement through the lens of green empowerment in contemporary emerging markets is scarce. The present study draws on the leader-member exchange theory to investigate how inclusive leadership influence employees' green empowerment and work engagement. Using a survey instrument, a quantitative methodology was applied to gather data from 500 public sector employees in Ghana. The hypothesised relationships were analysed using the partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) technique. It was revealed that inclusive leadership directly and positively impacts employee work engagement. Also, green empowerment and participation also positively affect employee work engagement. The results further indicate that employees' green empowerment affects and mediates the inclusive leader and employee work engagement relationship. The present research extends the literature on LMX theory and adds to the current research by exploring the role of the theory in elucidating the inclusive leadership and employee engagement relationship within an environment characterised by green empowerment and active participation. Consequently, it offers factual evidence supporting the applicability of the LMX theory in explaining how employees' green empowerment and participation clarify how inclusive leadership relates to employee work engagement, especially in the context of a developing country during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. Introduction

Amid the rise and global impact of the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic and its negative effect on individuals, such as psychological distress (Olaseni et al., 2020) and anxiety about uncertainty (Jean-Baptiste et al., 2020), organisations were 'forced' to expeditiously adjust and make changes in how they handle their human resource (Collings et al., 2021). While some university managers developed new rapid tests (Thiry et al., 2022), organisations adopted various strategies to safeguard the well-being and safety of employees who needed to be physically present. These measures included restructuring jobs to facilitate teleworking or remote work whenever feasible, providing remote work training for employees, implementing total or partial business closures and, in some instances, downsizing (Harney & Collings, 2021; Oh & Han, 2021; Obuobisa-Darko, 2022).

Having engaged employees is crucial to navigate the unprecedented disruptions and changes in work arrangements effectively. Some studies have indicated that employee work engagement can help reduce employees' scepticism towards change (Watt & Piotrowski, 2008). Researchers consistently acknowledge such employees as individuals who can put up innovative behaviour during periods of change in organisations (Kwon & Kim, 2020; Palumbo, 2021). Employee engagement is a dynamic state where individuals bring their complete selves to work, striving to make a unique impact (Kwon & Kim, 2020). Engaged employees harness their full resources, including skills, knowledge and energy, and wholeheartedly dedicate themselves for an extended period (Macey, Schneider, Barbera, & Young, 2011, p. 23). They also exhibit a deep commitment to their roles and embrace change. Hence, researchers and experts are interested in examining and understanding the antecedents of employee work engagement (Monje-Amor et al., 2021; Saks, 2019; van Tuin et al., 2020).

Given the significant role engaged employees play towards organisational success, the literature has identified leadership as essential. The relationship quality between leaders and subordinates significantly

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influences behaviours at work (Bao, Xiao, Bao, & Noorderhaven, 2022; Breevaart et al., 2014; Koon & Ho, 2021). There exist different leadership styles and, therefore, there may be variations in the influence of the differences. One contemporary leadership style, the inclusive leadership style, has positively impacted employee work engagement (Bao et al., 2022; Vakira et al., 2023). The question then is, why is this so? Inclusive leadership is perceived as a relational approach that establishes interactive discussions and engagement norms to foster collaborative decision-making to achieve goals (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006).

Much research has explored the connection between different leadership approaches and employee engagement, including transformational and transactional-oriented approaches (Besieux et al., 2018; Breevaart et al., 2014), visionary (Cheema et al., 2015) and authentic (Goestjahjanti et al., 2020; Koon & Ho, 2021). However, inclusive leadership has received limited focus in general and, more importantly, in an emerging economy context, post-COVID-19 pandemic. Again, theoretically, the dearth of studies on inclusive leadership and employee engagement within emerging economies using the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory has created a gap in the inclusive leader-employee engagement literature that needs to be filled. Additionally, other relevant factors that affect employee work engagement, such as green employee empowerment, are yet to be fully explored and addressed, with limited studies exploring this connection (Monje-Amor et al., 2021). Employee Green empowerment is a psychological state of mind which causes personnel to perceive empowerment from their organisation toward environmental initiatives and other activities and this positive psychological mindset makes them feel obligated to reciprocate (Kularathne, 2020). Moreover, Renwick et al. (2013) suggested investigating whether employee empowerment may mediate the impact on employee motivation, i.e., engagement, which the study fulfils.

Recognising that a mediating variable can provide insights into the connection between a dependent and an independent variable, this study aims to investigate the role of employee green empowerment as a mediator in explaining the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee work engagement. Accordingly, the objective of this study is twofold. Our first objective is to investigate the impact of inclusive leadership on employee work engagement. The second is to explore the mediating role of employee green empowerment in the inclusive leadership–employee engagement relationship. Adopting the LMX theory, the present research examines how the attributes of inclusive leadership explain the quality of the employee-leader relationship, consequently enhancing employee empowerment and engagement. Specifically, the research addresses the following inquiries: Does inclusive leadership influence employee engagement? "Does the connection between inclusive leadership and employee engagement alter when factors like green empowerment and participation come into play following the COVID-19 pandemic?

1.1. The strengths of the study

This study makes a valuable contribution to the LMX theory literature by indicating that inclusive leaders, characterised as being accessible, open, and available in relating to their subordinates, cultivate a positive relationship with the leader and subordinate, resulting in the latter reciprocating the former's support and trust by exhibiting strong commitment, engagement, loyalty and trust. The argument is that employees get engaged when their leaders build a positive relationship with them by empowering them and allowing them to participate in organisational activities. While prior research has assessed the importance of inclusive leadership in promoting employee work engagement, this study investigates how employee green empowerment affects the connection between inclusive leadership and employee work engagement. It seeks to elucidate how employee engagement and the acceptance of organisational changes brought about by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic are explained within this context.

The following sections of this document are organised as follows. It starts with reviewing the literature on the Leader-Member Exchange theory and other key constructs such as employee engagement, inclusive leadership, and empowerment, how these are related and proposes the relevant hypothesis. Next is a description of the methods used in the research, which is followed by data analysis and discussion. The last section presents the implications of the conclusion of our findings and recommends areas for further studies.

2. Literature review and formulation of hypothesis

2.1. The leader-member exchange theory

According to Brower et al., (2000) and Pellegrini and Scandura (2006), the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory is one of the most prominent theories that examines the dual mutual relationship shared by leaders and their subordinates. At its core, LMX posits that both parties' mutual investment of effort in the dyadic relationship is pivotal for developing the leader-follower dynamic (Erdogan & Bauer, 2014, pp. 407–433; Maslyn & Uhl-Bien, 2001). Reciprocity, a central tenet of LMX, dictates that subordinates follow their leaders because they receive something in return and kind leaders guide and act in specific ways as they benefit from their subordinates. As a result, the core emphasis in LMX theory centres on the quality of the exchange relationship.

Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) assert that the theory clarifies the differing levels of relationship quality between leaders and their followers, spanning from high to low quality. In high-quality exchanges, followers have a stronger rapport with their supervisors (Dienesch & Liden, 1986). These high-quality exchanges yield improved communication channels, heightened trust, increased engagement and enhanced support (Ahmad, 2008; Nguyen, 2020). Conversely, a low-quality LMX relationship results in limited interaction, reduced empowerment, diminished support and job-related stress (Harris et al., 2005; Wang & Yi, 2011; Lebrón et al., 2018).

The present research contributes to the ongoing discourse surrounding the LMX theory. It investigates the possible mediating effect of employee green empowerment on the relationship between inclusive leadership and its outcome of employee work engagement within the public sector, utilising the LMX theory. Given the above, we posit that when an inclusive leader demonstrates openness, accessibility, and availability, it fosters a high-quality relationship, prompting employees to feel empowered and execute their duties with enthusiasm, dedication and absorption.

2.2. Employee work engagement and inclusive leader

According to Kahn (1990), employee engagement is the "harnessing of organisation members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively and emotionally during role performances" (p. 694). A decade later, Schaufeli et al. (2002) shifted the discourse from the perspective of role performance to a state of mind. From this perspective, employee engagement describes to "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption" (Schaufeli et al., 2002, p. 74). Vigour entails a heightened level of energy and mental fortitude during work; dedication involves a deep engagement with one's tasks, accompanied by purpose, interest and challenge, and absorption pertains to complete concentration and immersion in one's work (Saks, 2019, p. 20). Macey et al. (2011, p. 5) explain it as "the psychic kick of immersion, striving, absorption, focus and involvement". Welch (2011), on his part, characterises employee engagement as an active and fluid mental phenomenon that connects personnel with their organisations. Employee engagement is manifested in employees' role performance, expressed physically, cognitively and emotionally and is influenced by internal communication at the organisational level. Thus, engaged employees have a beneficial and fulfilling state of mind related to their duties and express themselves physically by working with

vigour, cognitively and emotionally by being dedicated and absorbed in their work.

There are several antecedents of employee engagement, such as leadership. As a whole, leaders wield substantial influence in fostering employee engagement (Obuobisa-Darko & Domfeh, 2019; Alam et al., 2022). Nembhard and Edmondson (2006), acknowledged for introducing inclusive leadership, characterise these leaders as actively seeking and valuing input from their followers. Building on this, Hollander (2009) utilises the leader-member exchange theory to clarify further that inclusive leadership is centred around the followers, emphasising leaders who comprehend and respect their subordinates. Subsequently, Carmeli et al. (2010) refined the definition, identifying inclusive leaders demonstrating openness, accessibility and availability. To be open involves being ready to receive and consider different ideas and perspectives from people. Open-minded individuals allow their ideas to be challenged, empathise with others and are curious. Being accessible and available involve leaders keeping personal connection with their followers. More recently, Fang et al. (2021) characterised inclusive leaders as encouraging their followers to freely express their views and ideas through openness, availability and accessibility. This practice contributes to employees' feeling and perception that their voices are genuinely acknowledged. Even though other leadership styles relate to employee engagement, inclusive leadership plays a distinctive role in ensuring employee engagement and such leaders tend to meet employees' unique and belongingness needs (Randel et al., 2018).

An inclusive leader's positive relationship with an employee's work engagement may be understood from various angles. First, the unique characteristic of inclusive leaders is openness, which makes them available to their subordinates, encourages open communication and shows interest in their contributions (Choi et al., 2017). When employees perceive the leader to be interested in their contributions and thus listen, it facilitates engagement (Karanges et al., 2015; MacLeod & Clarke, 2009). Openness is a leadership behaviour that ensures employee engagement (Obuobisa-Darko & Domfeh, 2019; Bhutto et al., 2021). When the inclusive leader is open in relating to his/her subordinates, they are encouraged to communicate and share ideas and the leader, in turn, listens to their suggestions. This cordial interaction created due to the open and effective communication makes employees feel valued, respected and engaged. This is because organisational communication facilitates employee engagement development and maintenance (Welch, 2011). Secondly, the inclusive leader is known to be available, accessible and devoted to their subordinates' desires (Carmeli et al., 2010). This makes such employees feel and perceive their leader as interested in their well-being and ready to support them. From the theoretical perspective, an inclusive leader can meet the employees' job resource needs by providing physiological, psychological and social support to help them function and achieve goals. An inclusive leader can influence employees to be engaged with vigour and dedication since achieving goals motivates employees to put in more. The hypothesis is thus formulated.

H1. Inclusive leadership will positively impact employee engagement.

2.3. Inclusive leadership and green empowerment and participation

According to Dutta (2012), managing the human resource of an organisation involves two fundamental issues. First, eco-protection, which is the environmental aspect, such as pollution control. The second aspect involves safeguarding the organisation's knowledge assets, focusing on the employee dimension. The environmental and employee aspects require green employee empowerment (Tariq et al., 2016). Green empowerment is a novel concept with extensive research on "employee empowerment" introduced by Tariq et al. (2016) in a systematic review.

Empowerment is a concept that takes on various interpretations depending on one's profession and field of study. In healthcare, it is often referred to as health empowerment, while population studies emphasise women's empowerment. In development studies, the focus shifts towards community empowerment and within the context of organisational studies, it is typically denoted as employee empowerment (Sekhar & Anjaiah, 2005). Employee empowerment involves the "transfer and acceptance of power to the lowest appropriate level to create an opportunity for maximum individual initiatives, responsibility and commitment which carries risks" (Sekhar & Anjaiah, 2005, p. 374). It involves granting employees the autonomy to promptly address and resolve guest (patrons or customers) issues or grievances "on the spot" and to implement necessary enhancements in work procedures (Sekhar & Anjaiah, 2005, p. 374). As explained earlier, employee green empowerment describes a psychological state of mind which makes staff perceive the empowerment provided by their organisation regarding environmental matters (within and outside the organisation), initiatives and other activities to feel obligated to reciprocate (Kularathne, 2020). Therefore, green employee empowerment exists in organisations involved in green practices that allow employees to participate in decision-making identify and solve customers' and colleagues' problems for organisational success.

Green human resources practices primarily focus on improving procedural competencies, minimising environmental waste and updating HR-related products, techniques and tools to boost efficiency while lowering costs. Some of these practices include online recruitment, employee management where details of employees are supervised in a manner that minimises paper consumption, i.e., computerised, training and developing employees concerning knowledge, skills and attitudes about environmental conservation, reward systems designed to encourage and reinforce pro-environmental behaviour and practice (Jackson et al., 2011; Jerónimo et al., 2020), use the recycle stationery, bottles, among others. These sustainable practices lead to improved outcomes, cost reduction and heightened employee engagement levels. Therefore, adoption is encouraged.

Adopting a top-down relational approach to employee management is one of the means to build and develop employee empowerment, as this allows the manager to assign tasks and engage in collaborative information-sharing with their subordinates (Tariq et al., 2016). Since the inclusive leader is available, open and accessible, managers can collaborate, share information and cultivate a positive rapport with their subordinates, which causes them to feel empowered. Additionally, through the openness attribute, the IL shares their vision and leads subordinates to embrace it, fostering an environment where subordinates feel confident providing feedback on the vision. This will ultimately enhance the quality of the relationship (Bailey et al., 2017) and perception of empowerment.

Further, employee empowerment involves empowering individuals with positions and the necessary knowledge to make well-informed choices and thoughtful actions (Sekhar & Anjaiah, 2005). The frequency and relevance of information are crucial aspects of EWE (Cook, 2008; Obuobisa-Darko & Domfeh, 2019). Employees become engaged when they are empowered with adequate information to make decisions. Empowerment becomes a means to a destination, so when employees are empowered, it causes them to be engaged. We, therefore, hypothesise that.

H2. Inclusive leadership will positively affect Green Empowerment and Participation.

H3. Green empowerment and participation will positively affect employee engagement.

2.4. Green empowerment and participation, inclusive leadership and employee engagement

Identifying a mediating variable in a relationship is significant, as it helps clarify how an independent variable relates to a dependent variable. In this study, employee green empowerment and participation is

considered potential mediator that explains how inclusive leadership e influences employee work engagement.

Empowerment, referred in the present research as employee green empowerment (EGE), is conceptualised as "the extent to which employees perceive that their organisations provide them with exposure to new ways of learning, improving and experimentation with their skills and knowledge while performing self-determined tasks and assignments with responsibility" (Sekhar & Anjaiah, 2005, p. 375). EGE competencies can be used when managers delegate authority to employees, which will cause them to act most advantageously for the organisation (Rothenberg, 2003). Consequently, when the inclusive leader ensures he is accessible and available and openly discusses subordinates' individual needs, the leader identifies their training needs and offers the opportunity to experience these new ways of doing things, which leads to improved employee empowerment (Sekhar & Anjaiah, 2005).

Employee engagement is a dynamic and fluid psychological condition (Welch, 2011). It represents the positive mental state, behaviours and attitudes employees exhibit in the workplace (Vakira et al., 2023). Consequently, with the adoption of appropriate strategies by the inclusive leader, an adverse psychological condition of employees because of the changes introduced due to the COVID-19 pandemic transforms into a positive mental state that encourages dedication and absorption in their tasks. When employees are psychologically empowered, it leads to a cognitive state where they believe they have control a sense of competence and internalise the organisation's goals and objectives (Menon, 1999). When inclusive leaders foster an environment of openness, encourage subordinates to challenge ideas, demonstrate empathy and involve employees in decision-making, it helps employees perceive a sense of control and competence. As a result, this leads to increased engagement levels. We, therefore, hypothesise that.

H4. Green employee empowerment and participation will mediate the connection between inclusive leadership and employee engagement.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Participants

This research employed a survey-based methodology to gather data from Ghana's public sector employees. The study sample comprised trained professionals, technocrats and civil servants playing various roles at the upper, middle and lower management levels. In this research, the primary focus of the analysis was on employees, aiming to investigate the interaction effects of green empowerment, participation and inclusive leadership on employee engagement. Respondents were contacted at work, mostly during lunch breaks, to complete the questionnaire. Respondents who could not complete the questionnaire immediately were provided a two-week window to return the filled questionnaire. At the end, 511 completed questionnaires were received. However, 11 questionnaires were not adequately responded to, so they were excluded from the analysis.

3.2. Measures

The study used pre-validated five-point Likert scale constructs (i.e., 1 = = strongly disagree to 5 = = strongly agree) to measure the constructs adapted from previously published scales. We assessed *green employee empowerment* using a five-item scale modified by Masri and Jaaron (2017). Sample items include "Providing opportunities to the employees to involve and participate in green suggestion scheme and joint consultation for problem-solving", "The organisation offers workshops or forums for staff to improve environmental behaviour and exchange their tacit knowledge" and "Involve employees in formulating environmental strategy". Consistent with existing studies, *employee engagement* was quantified utilising a 17-item scale developed by Schaufeli et al. (2002). Sample items include "At my work, I always persevere, even when things do not go well", "I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose" and "I am enthusiastic about my job". Also, *inclusive leadership* was measured using a nine-item scale modified by Hollander (2009). Sample items include "The manager is attentive to new opportunities to improve work processes", "The manager is an ongoing 'presence' in this team—someone who is readily available", and "The manager is open to hearing new ideas".

Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM Version 4) was used to examine the mediation role of green empowerment and participation in inclusive leadership and employee engagement. PLS is an effective method for applying SEM since it is unaffected by sample size or data distribution (Hair et al., 2017). Again, SEM has emerged as the preferred analytical tool for testing connections between constructs (Gefen et al., 2000). PLS-SEM was chosen as it enables researchers to tackle interconnected research questions comprehensively through a unified and systematic analysis, thanks to its capability to simultaneously model multiple independent and dependent constructs (Gefen et al., 2000).

4. Results

Data were obtained from public sector workers for analysis. Table 1 presents respondents' demographic characteristics, including gender, age and educational background.

4.1. Demographic characteristics

4.2. Measurement model analysis

The two primary stages involved when using PLS-SEM, the measurement model analysis and the structural model analysis (Hair et al., 2014), were undertaken. The measurement model, a test of the psychometric qualities of the scales and constructs, including reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity, was performed (Hair et al., 2017). Items with weak loadings (loadings below 0.50) and those with significant cross-loadings were omitted (Hair et al., 2017). The item (cross) loadings of the revised measurement model are presented in Table 2. All the retained item loadings per construct were higher than 0.709 (Hair et al., 2017), showing they were significant.

4.3. Reliability and convergent validity

The psychometric characteristics of the updated measurement model were evaluated, as displayed in Table 3. For each of the three constructs

Table 1
Background information.

Variables	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	279	55.8
Female	221	44.2
Total	**500**	**100.0**
Age group		
21–30	95	19
31–40	182	36.4
41–50	150	30
51–60	53	10.6
Above 61	20	4
Total	**500**	**100.0**
Educational level		
Diploma	82	16.4
Bachelor's degree	217	43.4
Master's degree	199	39.8
PhD	2	0.4
Total	**500**	**100**

Table 2
Item Cross loadings.

Items	Employee Engagement	Green Empowerment and Participation	Inclusive Leadership
EE1	0.812	0.407	0.248
EE2	0.746	0.274	0.284
EE3	0.915	0.422	0.277
EE6	0.713	0.230	0.239
EE7	0.822	0.397	0.236
EE10	0.840	0.453	0.230
GEP1	0.435	0.820	0.204
GEP2	0.327	0.781	0.266
GEP3	0.468	0.884	0.270
GEP4	0.273	0.735	0.159
GEP5	0.339	0.872	0.178
IL1	0.174	0.182	0.781
IL2	0.291	0.247	0.757
IL3	0.298	0.256	0.835
IL7	0.185	0.136	0.752
IL9	0.211	0.191	0.807

examined in this study, Cronbach's alpha, rho A and composite reliability scores exceeded 0.70, meeting the criteria set by Hair et al. (2016). Furthermore, Table 2 reveals that all the constructs in the study had AVE values exceeding 0.50. Therefore, the three-construct model's reliability and convergent validity requirements have been satisfied.

4.4. Discriminant validity

After evaluating the test's reliability and convergent validity, the next step involves assessing the test's discriminant validity. Discriminant validity, in the context of this study, showcases the distinctiveness of the constructs used. The Fornell and Larcker criterion and the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) of correlations between the constructs (Henseler et al., 2015) were employed to assess discriminant validity. As indicated in Table 3, the square roots of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for all three constructs exceeded the Pearson correlations. Consequently, according to the Fornell-Larcker criterion, discriminant validity has been confirmed. The HTMT analysis also supports discriminant validity, as all HTMT correlations were below 0.85 (Henseler et al., 2015).

4.5. Structural model analysis

Using PLS (version 4), we estimated the structural model, following the approach by Sharma et al. (2022). To determine the significance of each path, bootstrapping was employed with 5000 subsamples, as suggested by Sarstedt et al. (2022). Figs. 1 and 2 and Table 4 reveal that the first three hypotheses garnered support, as all three structural paths were statistically significant. There was a substantial positive relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement in the

Table 3
Reliability convergent and discriminant validity.

Construct	Reliability & Convergent Validity				Discriminant Validity					
					Fornell-Larcker			HTMT		
	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho a)	Composite reliability (rho c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)	1	2	3	1	2	3
1. Employee Engagement	0.895	0.909	0.919	0.657	**0.810**					
2. Green Empowerment and Participation	0.879	0.899	0.911	0.673	0.462	**0.820**		0.494		
3. Inclusive Leadership	0.850	0.870	0.890	0.620	0.308	0.268	**0.787**	0.341	0.291	

NB: square root of AVEs in bold diagonal.

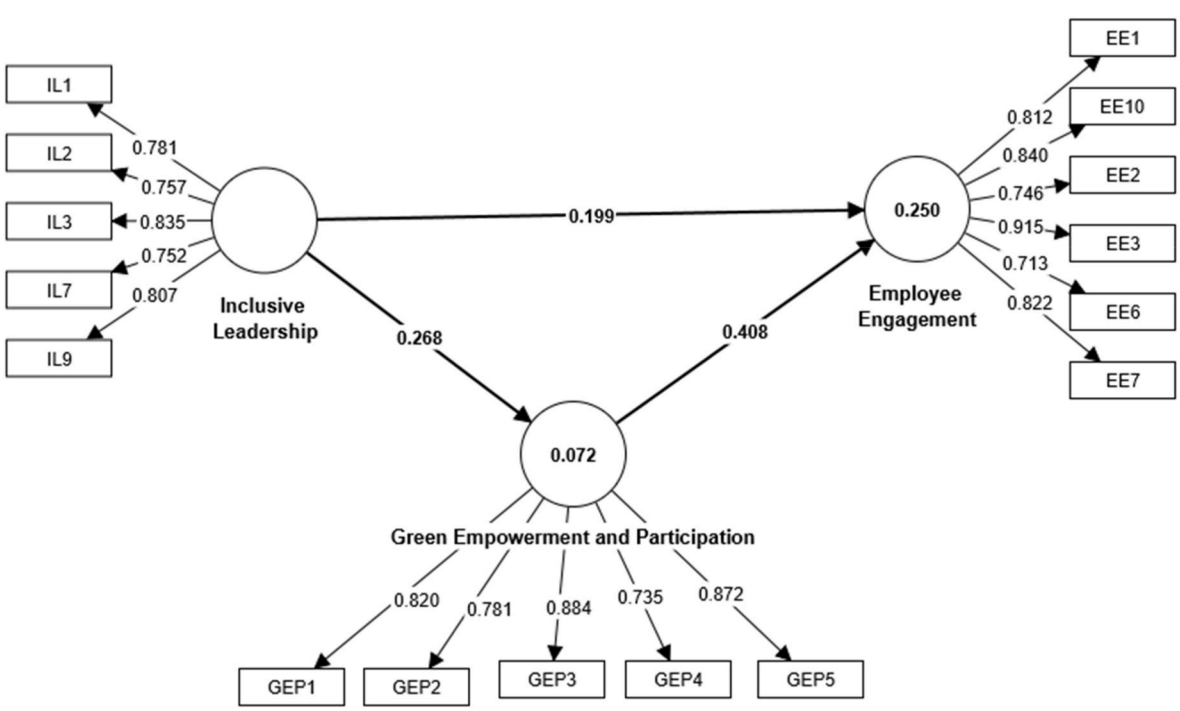

Fig. 1. Structural path-regression weight.

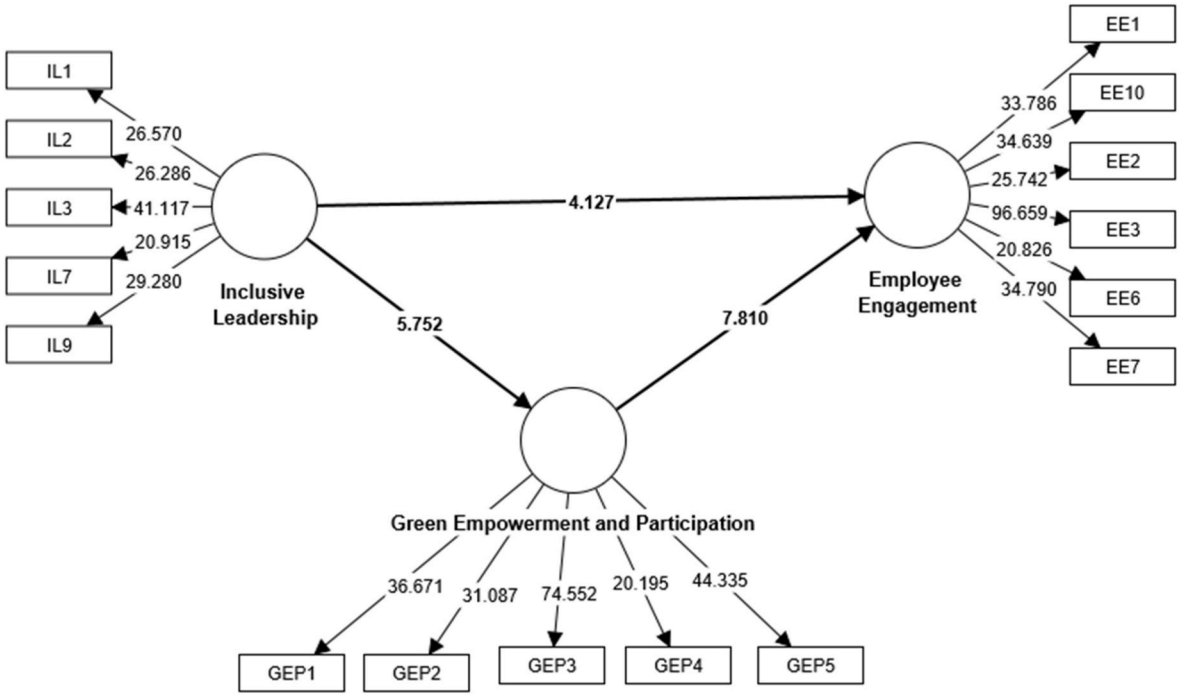

Fig. 2. Structural path-*t*-values.

Table 4
Path analysis-hypothesis testing.

Hypothesis	Structural Path	Path Coefficients	t-value	p-value	Hypothesis Result
H1	Inclusive Leadership - > Employee Engagement	0.199***	4.127	0.000	Supported
H2	Inclusive Leadership - > Green Empowerment and Participation	0.268***	5.752	0.000	Supported
H3	Green Empowerment and Participation - > Employee Engagement	0.408***	7.810	0.000	Supported

***p < 0.001.

direct hypotheses (β = 0.199, t = 4.127, p < 0.001), thus confirming hypothesis H1.

Additionally, there was substantial positive connection between inclusive leadership and green empowerment and participation (β = 0.268, t = 5.752, p < 0.001) supported hypothesis H2. Finally, the relationship between green empowerment and participation and employee engagement was also significantly positive (β = 0.408, t = 7.810, p < 0.001), supporting hypothesis H3.

4.6. Mediation test

In PLS-SEM, the assessment of mediation entails scrutinising the significance of the indirect impact of inclusive leadership on employee engagement through the mediation of green empowerment and participation (Hair et al., 2017). As outlined in Table 5, the influence of inclusive leadership on employee engagement via green empowerment and participation was statistically significant (β = 0.110, t = 5.07, p=<0.001), affirming the existence of mediation. Consequently, we can infer and conclude that green empowerment and participation mediate the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement, thereby supporting hypothesis H4.

Table 5
Test of mediation.

Paths	Path Coefficients	t-value	p-value
Total Effects			
Green Empowerment and Participation - > Employee Engagement	0.408***	7.810	0.000
Inclusive Leadership - > Employee Engagement	0.308***	6.701	0.000
Inclusive Leadership - > Green Empowerment and Participation	0.268***	5.752	0.000
Specific Indirect Effect			
Inclusive Leadership - > Green Empowerment and Participation - > Employee Engagement	0.110***	5.073	0.000

5. Discussion

In the present research, we examined how employee green empowerment and participation contribute to explaining the connection between inclusive leadership and employee work engagement. Using quantitative data from public sector employees, the study's findings supported the hypothesis model. Accordingly, it was discovered that inclusive leadership is significantly and positively related to employee engagement, mediated by green empowerment and participation. This adds to the existing literature on organisational behaviour, which consistently highlights the positive impact of inclusive leadership on employee work engagement (e.g., Bao et al., 2022; Bhutto et al., 2021; Cenkci et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2019).

Inclusive leaders are recognised for their distinctive roles in enhancing work engagement due to their openness and readiness to explore new ideas and opportunities with their employees (Malik et al., 2017; Vakira et al., 2023). These leaders demonstrate a genuine interest in fulfilling employees' needs for belongingness and uniqueness (Randel et al., 2018). When employees perceive their leaders as attentive to their unique requirements and well-being, fostering collaboration satisfies

their desire for belongingness and individuality (Shore et al., 2011). This fulfilment of these needs motivates employees to reciprocate with dedication, absorption, and heightened work enthusiasm (Sharma & Kumra, 2020; Shuck & Reio, 2014). Consequently, an open and accessible inclusive leader who despite the diversity accept the diverse views of the different employees makes them feel accepted. It increases their level of engagement, resulting in employees demonstrating enthusiasm, dedication and full engagement in their work. Also, it was revealed that inclusive leadership positively relates to employee green empowerment and participation. This supports the conclusions drawn in the studies conducted by Uzair-ul-Hussan and Hassan (2018) and Javed et al. (2019), both of which established a positive correlation between inclusive leadership and employee empowerment. Theoretically, from the LMX theory's perspective, the inclusive leader is characterised as one who offers his subordinates the opportunity to share their views and inputs (Fang et al., 2021) as he relates with them. In this relationship, the IL tends to empower its followers by accepting their views and creating the opportunity for them to take the initiative (Sekhar & Anjaiah, 2005), which makes the followers feel empowered.

Findings from the data analysed show that green empowerment and participation positively affected employee work engagement. When employees are empowered, thus, given the authority to identify and solve customers' challenges (Sekhar & Anjaiah, 2005), they feel valued (Greasley et al., 2005) and obligated to reciprocate (Kularathne, 2020) by working with vigour, and dedication and get absorbed in their work. Thus, leaders are encouraged to provide employees with opportunities to engage in decision-making and collaboratively address problems, which will enhance their level of work engagement and behave in an environmentally friendly manner. Therefore, green empowerment and participation motivate employees to contribute to environmental management by supporting the organisation in pollution prevention and identifying environmental opportunities (Renwick et al., 2013) as they perform their tasks.

Our study offers several theoretical contributions. First, this research explores inclusive leaders' role in enhancing employee work engagement. It illustrates how inclusive leadership connects with workplace engagement via green empowerment and participation. Thus, this research extends the limited studies on the arbitrating role of green empowerment and participation in the inclusive leadership–work engagement relationship. Second, the present research enhances the knowledge of green empowerment and participation (Jabbour et al., 2010; Masri & Jaaron, 2017), a construct that requires further attention.

Similarly, earlier research have not examined how inclusive leadership is associated with green empowerment and participation. Examining previously unexplored relationships makes a theoretical contribution to research. Third, this study enhances our understanding of the theoretical perspective of inclusive leadership research from the LMX theory's perspective. While prior researches have explored the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee work engagement, basing its arguments mainly on the social exchange theory, the present research anchored its arguments on the LMX theory. Exploring this connection through the LMX perspective offers an opportunity for integrating the LMX theory in future research.

5.1. Practical implications

The present study has considerable significance for managers and practitioners. The findings underscore the positive influence of inclusive leadership on employee work engagement. Thus, inclusive leaders are intrinsically motivated to meet employees' uniqueness and belongingness needs. This leadership style often relies on an open-door policy and effective communication, encouraging employees to express their views and contribute to organisational decisions freely; this directly affects employees' engagement at work. To guarantee effective service delivery in public institutions, employees must proactively create unique customer experiences as they meet their needs and expectations. The study's findings underscore the need for inclusive leaders to create a supportive work environment to enable employees to feel included. Thus, inclusive leaders must pay attention to employees' opinions and value their views in decision-making. Highlighting the impact of inclusive leadership on employee work engagement is of great value for both the organisation and individual employees. We recommend that institutions in the public sector should create awareness and train managers at all levels to be responsive to their employees' unique and belonging needs. They must be open, invite and appreciate employees' contributions and must consider those contributions to improve work processes and outputs (Roberson & Perry, 2022). In addition, leadership development programmes, including coaching, mentoring and role-playing, must provide opportunities for managers and supervisors to practice inclusive leadership behaviours at their workstations to ensure employee engagement.

The intermediary role of green empowerment and participation in the relationship between inclusive leadership and work engagement suggests that green HRM practices should be incorporated into organisations' strategic direction to achieve sustainable competitive advantage (Saeed et al., 2019). Accordingly, we admonish leaders in public sector organisations to initiate or formulate green empowerment and participation policies and share the policy among employees for fruitful implementation.

Finally, our study demonstrates that green empowerment and participation notably and positively influence employee work engagement. As green employee empowerment plays a critical role in organisational outcomes, including work engagement, we recommend that the management of organisations should create channels of formal and informal communication among employees that ensure their views are heard on various issues in the organisation for them to feel empowered and engaged.

5.2. Limitations and areas for future research

Although this study possesses several strengths, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations when interpreting its findings. The study focused on green empowerment and participation as mediators in the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee work engagement. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that there are other potential mediator variables to explore, including intrinsic motivation and trust in leadership and organisational climate. Also, the characteristics of public sector organisations are quite different from those of the private sector. Hence, future studies should extend this research by comparing the public and private sector organisations to provide more insights. Lastly, the study used only quantitative data. Hence, it is advisable for future research to employ a mixed-methods research design. Employing quantitative and qualitative data might provide additional insights regarding the relationships between the variables in our study.

6. Conclusion

The study aimed to explore the effect of employees' green empowerment on the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee work engagement, particularly in the context of the uncertainties brought about by the post-COVID-19 pandemic. Using the LMX theory as the theoretical lens, the argument was that inclusive leaders being open, accessible, and available would result in a high-quality relationship, resulting in employees feeling empowered and working with vigour, being dedicated and being absorbed in their work. Given the scarcity of literature addressing employee engagement and inclusive leadership in the emerging and evolving economic landscape, this study was prompted by the additional challenges posed by COVID-19. The pandemic necessitated alterations in employees' work schedules and for these changes to be embraced and executed effectively, employees needed to feel engaged, empowered and motivated to work with enthusiasm and

dedication. Since public sector employees play a significant role in implementing government policies, these employees must be engaged to offer the services effectively.

Using the quantitative approach, self-designed questionnaires were administered to participants. Respondents who could not answer all the questionnaires immediately were given two weeks to complete. Data analysis findings showed a positive association between inclusive leadership and employee engagement (H1). Additionally, there was a substantial positive connection between inclusive leadership and green empowerment and participation, supporting H2. Also, a significantly positive correlation exists between green empowerment and participation and employee engagement was shown to be significantly positive, supporting H3. Finally, green empowerment and participation mediate the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement, thus supporting H4. Thus, findings from the study have established that when there exists an inclusive leader in an organisation who, in relating with their subordinates, allows and ensures the participation of employees and their empowerment, it results in employee engagement and, as a result, such employees work with vigour, be dedicated and get absorbed, as they work and offer their services to the public, amid the unpredictability following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Credit author statement

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by Prof. Theresa Obuobisa—Darko, Dr. Evans Sokro and Dr. Ophelia Delali Dogbe Zungbey. Literature review section of the manuscript was written by Prof. Theresa Obuobisa—Darko, Dr. Evans Sokro took care of the introduction and Dr. Ophelia Delali Dogbe Zungbey worked on the discussion. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Professor Theresa Obuobisa-Darko, while Dr. Ophelia Delali Dogbe Zungbey and Dr Evans Sokro commented on first draft of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Declaration of competing interest

All the authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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