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The Influence of Inclusive Leadership on Innovative Work Behavior: The Mediating Role of Job Autonomy and Psychological Safety (A Study of Start-Up Industry Employees in Semarang)

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the influence of inclusive leadership on employees' innovative work behavior, with job autonomy and psychological safety as mediating variables. In today's highly competitive and rapidly changing business environment, innovation is a critical factor for organizational success, especially in start-up companies dominated by millennials. Inclusive leadership, which emphasizes appreciation, employee involvement, and emotional support, has been shown to enhance job autonomy and create a psychologically safe work environment, encouraging employees to take risks and contribute fully to innovation. A multi-level approach analyzing interactions among individual, team, and psychological contexts is employed to understand these mechanisms. Focusing on start-up employees in Semarang, a rapidly growing hub with a strong millennial workforce, the study demonstrates that inclusive leadership plays a vital role in sustaining growth through fostering innovative behavior. The findings provide both theoretical and practical contributions for developing effective leadership strategies to support innovation in modern organizations.

KEYWORDS: Inclusive Leadership, Innovative Work Behavior, Job Autonomy, Psychological Safety

I. INTRODUCTION

Organizations today face rapid uncertainty and change, making the ability to innovate in the workplace a key factor for organizational success and survival (Anderson et al., 2004; Cangialosi et al., 2020). Employees' innovative work behavior, which includes the development and implementation of new ideas, techniques, and methods (Afsar & Umrani, 2020; Guo et al., 2023), is an important factor in determining an organization's competitive advantage. Research shows that the interaction between supervisors and employees, particularly leadership style, significantly influences employees' innovative behavior (Javed et al., 2019; Anser et al., 2020). Therefore, appropriate leadership is essential to foster creativity (Watts et al., 2020) and innovation within organizations (Yukl, 2002; Hirst et al., 2009; De Jong & De Hartog, 2010).

Inclusive leadership is a leadership style that emphasizes appreciation (Robertson, 2006) and employee involvement through actions and statements that encourage contributions from all members in the workplace (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Inclusive leaders demonstrate visibility, accessibility, and availability in their interactions with followers (Carmeli et al., 2010), as well as build high-quality relationships with employees (Ye et al., 2019). Inclusive leadership can enhance employees' job autonomy by providing opportunities to participate in decision-making and constructive dialogue (Slemp et al., 2018), which ultimately promotes innovative work behavior (Fang et al., 2019). Moreover, inclusive leaders also provide emotional support and psychological safety that are crucial for employees to take risks in innovation (Shakil et al., 2021).

Job autonomy is vital in encouraging innovative behavior (Hernaus & Mikulic, 2014) because it grants employees freedom and discretion in scheduling and determining how to perform their tasks (Vegt & Janssen, 2003; Burcharth et al., 2017). With autonomy, employees can experiment with new approaches and feel motivated to discover and apply creative solutions. Previous studies have shown that work autonomy mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and employees' innovative behavior (De Spiegelaere et al., 2016), thereby enhancing workplace innovation (West & Richter, 2008; Hernaus & Mikulic, 2014; De Spiegelaere et al., 2016).

Psychological safety also serves as an important mediating factor in the relationship between inclusive leadership and innovative work behavior (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Shakil et al., 2021). Psychological safety is defined as a condition in which employees

feel comfortable being themselves and freely express ideas without fear of negative consequences. Inclusive leadership creates a psychologically safe work environment by providing emotional support and protecting employees from the risks of innovation failure. This condition encourages employees to be more open, take risks, and actively engage in innovation, thereby significantly enhancing innovative work behavior (Edmondson, 2004; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Javed et al., 2017).

Inclusive leadership plays a crucial role in promoting employees' innovative work behavior through the mechanism of work autonomy (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Job autonomy, defined as the freedom and independence to schedule and determine work procedures, mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee innovation. Social exchange theory supports that leaders provide motivation and autonomy accepted by employees to innovate (Blau, 1964; Kim et al., 2017), enabling them to discover and implement new ideas effectively (De Spiegelaere et al., 2014).

In addition to job autonomy, psychological safety is also an important mediator in the relationship between inclusive leadership and innovative behavior (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Inclusive leadership creates a psychologically safe environment (Hollander, 2009), where employees feel comfortable expressing ideas and taking risks without fear of negative consequences (Kahn et al., 2020). Emotional support and leader accountability for innovation outcomes (Rank et al., 2004), including failures, increase employee trust, encouraging them to be more innovative (West & Richter, 2008; Javed et al., 2017).

In the era of industrial revolution and intense business competition (Rajah et al., 2019), innovation has become the key to company success, especially for rapidly growing start-ups dominated by millennials (Randel et al., 2018). Millennials are known to be innovative and require inclusive leadership to support their ideas and creativity (Carmeli et al., 2010). Open and accessible inclusive leadership can motivate employees to contribute maximally to innovation, enabling companies to sustain growth (Zaky et al., 2018; Ngotngamwong, 2019).

This study adds psychological safety as an additional mediator alongside work autonomy to explain the relationship between inclusive leadership and innovative work behavior (Shakil et al., 2021; Javed et al., 2019). The multi-level approach used also examines interactions between individual, team, and psychological contexts (Dollard & Bakker, 2010). The focus on start-up employees in Semarang, dominated by millennials, provides relevant literature contributions (Reslan, 2021; Farhan, 2021), considering the rapid global growth of start-ups and Indonesia ranking fifth worldwide with a total of 2,831 start-ups where 46.8% of employees are millennials. The success of local start-ups in national and international competitions demonstrates high innovation potential within the context of inclusive leadership (Zaky et al., 2018).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Exchange Theory (SET)

Social Exchange Theory (SET) by Blau (1964) describes the reciprocal and dynamic relationship between leaders and employees, where appreciation through inclusive leadership practices such as openness and participation encourages employees to respond with innovative work behavior. Fair and balanced relationships between leaders and employees enhance work autonomy, which in turn motivates innovation (Hussain et al., 2019; Mahmood et al., 2019; Javed et al., 2019). Inclusive leaders ensure inclusion, permission, and necessary resources so that employees feel motivated and have high autonomy to innovate (Booysen, 2014; Qi et al., 2019). Partial mediation in this relationship indicates the possibility of other influencing variables, where inclusive leadership provides socio-economic outcomes such as openness and accessibility that increase work engagement, positive mindset, and employee dedication to work (Zhao et al., 2010; Schaufeli et al., 2002).

Inclusive Leadership

The definition of inclusion according to Shore et al. (2011) is employees' feeling as respected members with a sense of belonging in their work group, theoretically based on optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 2012). Inclusive leadership represents leader behaviors that create a sense of inclusion and psychological safety so that all team members can contribute their unique perspectives, involving experiences of both belonging and individuality within the group (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Shore et al., 2011; Randel et al., 2018; Shore & Chung, 2021). Inclusive leadership, as a form of relational leadership, is built through two-way social interactions between leaders and employees, promoting norms of consultation, active participation, and shared decision-making that make members feel valued and treated fairly (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Hollander, 2009; Torres et al., 2017).

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Edmondson (2004) adds that leaders who are physically and psychologically available and accessible create an open climate that encourages employees to share ideas and receive feedback, while Carmeli et al. (2010) emphasize the importance of leader attention and encouragement to improve work processes and create openness norms that embolden employees to take risks.

Innovative Work Behavior

Highly competitive environments demand innovation as key to improving competitiveness at individual, group, and organizational levels. Innovation is defined as the translation of new ideas or inventions into products or services that add value for customers (Kuhn & Marisck, 2010) and the development, introduction, and application of new ideas in work or organizations to improve performance (Momeni et al., 2014). Innovative work behavior comprises three main dimensions: idea generation, idea promotion, and idea implementation (Janssen, 2000), which together enable organizations to respond effectively to changes and win market competition (Robbins & Judge, 2013). Research shows that employee innovative work behavior is an important sustainable competitive advantage for organizations' long-term survival and success, yet this behavior is susceptible to organizational factors such as fairness and knowledge sharing, which can enhance or diminish innovation (Abstein & Spieth, 2014; Agarwal, 2014).

Job Autonomy

Job autonomy is the freedom and control given to employees to determine when, where, and how work is done, including scheduling tasks and choosing completion methods (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Shahzad et al., 2018; Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). Complex jobs require employees to make appropriate and innovative decisions, so autonomy enables them to provide effective solutions and handle problems wisely, ultimately improving performance (Chung-Yan, 2010; Gozukara & Nurdan, 2016; Naqvi et al., 2013; Mahmood et al., 2012). High autonomy also increases motivation, willingness to develop, and employee future planning according to self-determination theory, contributing to positive work attitudes and higher efficiency (Humphrey et al., 2007; Gagné & Deci, 2005). Additionally, autonomy strengthens individual responsibility for work outcomes and acts as a buffer against job pressure, thus positively impacting employee performance, attitudes, and well-being (Dysvik & Kuvaas, 2011; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is the shared perception that individuals are safe from negative consequences when taking interpersonal risks in the workplace, allowing employees to feel free to express ideas and opinions without fear of criticism (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Newman et al., 2017; Frazier et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2016). This condition significantly influences employee behavior, performance, and well-being by increasing engagement, creativity, and motivation, while reducing work stress and fatigue (Obrenovic et al., 2020; Idris et al., 2014). Psychological safety plays a crucial role in learning and knowledge creation at individual, team, and organizational levels, which in turn supports productivity and innovation (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Carmeli, 2007; Newman et al., 2017). In today's competitive and dynamic business environment, psychological safety becomes a crucial factor for company success in promoting sustainable exploration and innovation (Newman et al., 2017; Dess & Picken, 2000).

Conceptual Framework

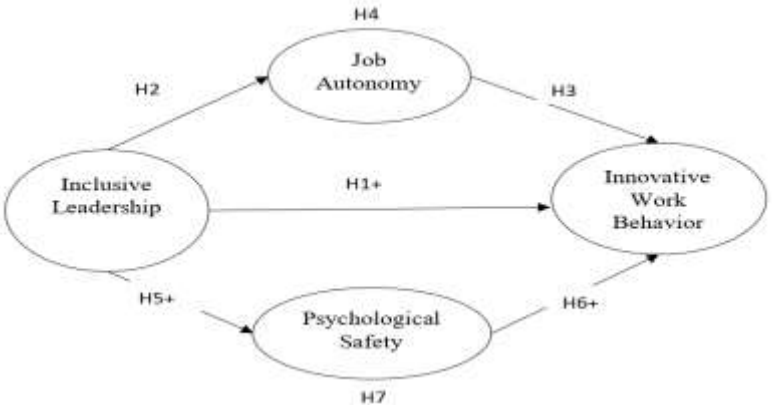

Figure 1. Research Concept Model

(**Sources:** Shakil et.al (2021),Javed et.al (2017)).

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III. METHODOLOGY

Research design is a planning and investigation structure arranged to obtain answers to research questions (Cooper and Schlinder, 2018). This study aims to examine the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee work innovation mediated by work autonomy and psychological safety. The types of data collected in this study are primary and secondary data, where primary data is data collected directly by researchers from respondents (Sekaran, 2006). Secondary data in this study is data sources or information obtained or collected by other people or other parties that researchers use in their research (Sekaran, 2006). Secondary data in this study was obtained from the MIKTI database. Researchers distributed questionnaires using an online survey in the form of Google Forms. The data collection technique used was an online questionnaire. The questionnaire used in this study employs a Likert scale. The Likert scale is a variation of accumulated scales that requires respondents to agree or disagree with given questions (Cooper & Schindler, 2014). The Likert scale assessment uses weights of 1-5, where scale 1 indicates strongly disagree, scale 2 indicates disagree, scale 3 indicates neutral, scale 4 indicates agree, and scale 5 indicates strongly agree. The sampling technique used in this study is snowball sampling to identify, select, and take samples that have similarities (Cooper & Schendler, 2014).

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Startup Characteristics

Startups developing in Semarang have unique characteristics that reflect local conditions and economic potential in the city. Here are several main characteristics of startups in Semarang:

a. Social and Environmental Orientation: Many startups in Semarang prioritize solutions for social and environmental issues, such as Plastikinia which focuses on plastic waste reduction or CROWDE which supports small farmers through access to funding and technology.

b. Technological Innovation in Education: Many startups in Semarang also operate in the education sector, offering digital solutions to improve learning quality, such as SiPAUD Guru which provides applications for early childhood education assessment, and NgeIELTS, an IELTS preparation learning platform.

c. Local Ecosystem Support: Semarang has a startup community and support from business incubators and local government, creating a supportive climate for startup growth. Many startups gain access to mentoring and investor networks through local acceleration programs.

d. Agriculture and Tourism Sectors: Several startups in Semarang focus on sectors typical to Central Java, such as agriculture and tourism. For example, GOLEVAT provides digital training for skills needed in local agriculture and tourism sectors.

e. Varied Business Scale: Startups in Semarang range from micro to medium enterprises, with many still in the product development and market validation stages. They tend to start with small capital but have high growth potential.

Overall, these characteristics show that startups in Semarang strive to provide solutions relevant to local community needs while utilizing technology to deliver innovations that create positive impact.

Outer Model Analysis

Validity Test

The tests conducted on the outer model analysis in this study used convergent validity, discriminant validity, composite reliability, and Cronbach's Alpha. For the validity test, an indicator is declared valid if the loading factor measurement is above 0.70 so that if there is a loading factor below 0.70 it will be dropped from the model (Hair et al, 2019).

Table 1. Outer Loading

	Outer loading
IL1	0,798
IL2	0,769
IL3	0,768
IL4	0,781
IL6	0,780

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IL7	0,773
IL8	0,761
IL9	0,719
IWB1	0,788
IWB2	0,891
IWB3	0,790
IWB4	0,729
IWB5	0,882
IWB6	0,875
IWB7	0,855
IWB8	0,805
IWB9	0,871
JA1	0,787
JA2	0,713
JA3	0,795
JA4	0,796
JA5	0,828
JA6	0,803
JA7	0,833
JA8	0,796
PS1	0,836
PS4	0,776
PS5	0,782

It is known that all variable items are valid. This is because the loading factor value is above 0.60 (Hair et al, 2019). In addition to the loading factor value, to analyze the validity of research data, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) value can be used. The following are the results of the validity test using the AVE value.

Table 2. AVE Test Results

	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Inclusive Leadership	0,591
Innovative Work Behavior	0,694
Job Autonomy	0,631
Psychological Safety	0,638

It is known that all research variables are valid. This is because the AVE value is above the provision of 0.50 (Hair et al, 2019). The following are the results of the cross-loading value.

Table 3. Cross Loading Value Results

	Inclusive Leadership	**Innovative Behavior**	**Work Job Autonomy**	**Psychological Safety**
IL1	**0,798**	0,533	0,523	0,433
IL2	**0,769**	0,592	0,473	0,443
IL3	**0,768**	0,487	0,408	0,349

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IL4	**0,781**	0,524	0,436	0,346
IL6	**0,780**	0,522	0,451	0,380
IL7	**0,773**	0,570	0,535	0,434
IL8	**0,761**	0,571	0,559	0,427
IL9	**0,719**	0,529	0,535	0,468
IWB1	0,580	**0,788**	0,556	0,576
IWB2	0,622	**0,891**	0,649	0,589
IWB3	0,634	**0,790**	0,584	0,562
IWB4	0,447	**0,729**	0,534	0,463
IWB5	0,598	**0,882**	0,631	0,626
IWB6	0,582	**0,875**	0,690	0,598
IWB7	0,570	**0,855**	0,626	0,532
IWB8	0,601	**0,805**	0,613	0,528
IWB9	0,646	**0,871**	0,604	0,536
JA1	0,611	0,641	**0,787**	0,641
JA2	0,409	0,446	**0,713**	0,478
JA3	0,462	0,582	**0,795**	0,545
JA4	0,519	0,589	**0,796**	0,530
JA5	0,521	0,528	**0,828**	0,438
JA6	0,506	0,565	**0,803**	0,478
JA7	0,506	0,648	**0,833**	0,501
JA8	0,519	0,624	**0,796**	0,455
PS1	0,509	0,681	0,639	**0,836**
PS4	0,394	0,437	0,393	**0,776**
PS5	0,356	0,427	0,458	**0,782**

It can be seen that the correlation value of the indicators on this variable is greater than the correlation on other variables, therefore it is concluded that all variables are valid for use.

Reliability Test

Reliability Test in PLS can use 2 methods, namely Cronbach's alpha and Composite reliability. The following are the results of the research reliability test.

Table 4. ***Composite Reliability***

	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Cronbach's alpha
Inclusive Leadership	0,901	0,920
Innovative Work Behavior	0,944	0,953
Job Autonomy	0,916	0,932
Psychological Safety	0,725	0,841

All constructs in the study were declared Reliable because the Composite Reliability value for all constructs was above 0.70 (Hair et al, 2019). Then, all constructs in the study were also declared Reliable because the Cronbach's Alpha value for all constructs was above 0.60.

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Inner Model Analysis

After the estimated model meets the Outer Model criteria, the researcher then tests the Structural Model (Inner Model). The following are the R-Square (R2) values for the research constructs:

Table 5. Determination Coefficient Test

	R-square
Innovative Work Behavior	0,672
Psychological Safety	0,289
Job Autonomy	0,413

R-Square values reflect how much change or variance in the dependent variable can be explained by independent variables in the model. The higher the R-Square value, the better the model explains data variability. In this case, innovative work behavior has an R-Square value of 0.672, meaning approximately 67.2% of the variance in innovative work behavior can be explained by other variables in the model, namely job autonomy and psychological safety. This indicates that the model is quite good at explaining factors that influence innovative work behavior.

On the other hand, psychological safety shows a lower R-Square value of 0.289, indicating that only 28.9% of the variance in psychological safety can be explained by the analyzed independent variable, which is inclusive leadership. This suggests that there are many other factors that might play a role in influencing psychological safety that are not represented in the model. As for job autonomy, the R-Square value of 0.413 indicates that 41.3% of the variance in work autonomy can be explained by other variables. Overall, these results provide insight into the model's effectiveness in explaining the variance of each variable and indicate potential areas for further research.

Goodness of Fit (GOF)

Table 6. GOF Test

	Saturated Model	Estimated Model
SRMR	0,069	0,084
d_ULS	1,949	2,879
d_G	0,964	1,048
Chi-Square	780,705	804,485
NFI	0,776	0,770

The SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual) value indicates how large the difference is between the expected and observed covariance matrices. In this study, the SRMR value of 0.069 indicates that the model has a good fit, as the ideal value is below 0.08. Additionally, the d_ULS value of 2.879 and d_G value of 0.964 also provide positive indications, where a lower d_ULS indicates a better fit. The d_G value approaching 1 also shows that the model can explain the data well.

Meanwhile, the recorded Chi-Square values are 780.705 for the saturated model and 804.485 for the estimated model. Although a lower Chi-Square value indicates a better fit, it is important to consider the ratio between Chi-Square and degrees of freedom for a more accurate assessment. Finally, the NFI (Normed Fit Index) value of 0.776 indicates that the model has above-average fit, although values above 0.90 are considered more ideal. Overall, the results in this table indicate that the proposed model has a relatively good fit with the data used.

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Hypothesis Testing

Table 7. Direct Influence Hypothesis Test

	Original sample (O)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P Values
Inclusive Leadership Innovative Work Behavior	0,345	5,252	0,000
Inclusive Leadership Job Autonomy	0,643	14,111	0,000
Job Autonomy Innovative Work Behavior	0,341	4,217	0,000
Inclusive Leadership Psychological Safety	0,538	9,997	0,000
Psychological Safety Innovative Work Behavior	0,266	4,299	0,000

The results show a significant positive influence of "Inclusive Leadership" on "Innovative Work Behavior." This is indicated by an original sample value of 0.345, T-statistic of 5.252, and P-value of 0.00 or below 0.05. This demonstrates that hypothesis 1, which states that Inclusive Leadership positively influences Innovative Work Behavior, is supported by empirical data. Thus, Hypothesis H1 is declared accepted.

The influence of "Inclusive Leadership" on "Job Autonomy" shows significant positive results. With an original sample value of 0.643, T-statistic of 14.111, and P-value of 0.00, hypothesis 2, which states that Inclusive Leadership positively influences work autonomy, is supported by empirical data. So Hypothesis H2 in this study is accepted.

The analysis results regarding the influence of "Job Autonomy" on "Innovative Work Behavior" show significant positive results. With an original sample value of 0.341, T-statistic of 4.217, and P-value of 0.00, hypothesis 3, which states that Job Autonomy positively influences Innovative Work Behavior, is supported by empirical data. With these results, Hypothesis H3 is declared accepted.

The influence of "Inclusive Leadership" on "Psychological Safety" shows significant results. With an original sample value of 0.538, t-statistic of 9.997, and p-value of 0.00, hypothesis 5, which states that inclusive leadership positively influences psychological safety, is supported by empirical data. Therefore, Hypothesis H5 in this study is declared accepted.

The influence of "Psychological Safety" on "Innovative Work Behavior" shows significant findings. With an original sample value of 0.266, t-statistic of 4.299, and p-value of 0.00, hypothesis 6, which states that psychological safety positively influences innovative work behavior, is supported by empirical data. Based on these results, Hypothesis H6 is declared accepted.

Table 8. Hypothesis Test of Indirect Influence

	Original sample (O)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
Inclusive Leadership Job Autonomy Innovative Work Behavior	0,219	3,846	0,000
Inclusive Leadership Psychological Safety Innovative Work Behavior	0,143	3,896	0,000

The analysis of the mediating effect of "Work Autonomy" on the influence of "Inclusive Leadership" on "Innovative Work Behavior" shows significant results. With an original sample value of 0.219, a T-statistic of 3.846, and a P-value of 0.00, Hypothesis 4, which states that Work Autonomy mediates the effect of Inclusive Leadership on Innovative Work Behavior, is supported by the empirical data. Based on these results, Hypothesis H4 is declared accepted.

The analysis of "Psychological Safety" as a mediator on the influence of "Inclusive Leadership" on "Innovative Work Behavior" also shows significant results. With an original sample value of 0.143, a T-statistic of 3.896, and a P-value of 0.00, Hypothesis 7, which states that Psychological Safety mediates the effect of Inclusive Leadership on Innovative Work Behavior, is supported by the empirical data. Thus, Hypothesis H7 in this study is declared accepted.

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Discussion

This study found that inclusive leadership has a positive and significant effect on the innovative work behavior of start-up employees in Semarang (Hoegl & Parboteeah, 2006; Demerouti et al., 2015; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Nielsen & Daniels, 2012). Leaders who involve employees in creative processes and provide support are able to create a work environment conducive to innovation. Furthermore, inclusive leadership has been shown to increase work autonomy, where employees feel more freedom and control over their work (Langfred & Moye, 2004; Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014; Qurrahtulain et al., 2022; Cenkci et al., 2021).

Job autonomy itself has a significant influence on innovative work behavior because the freedom given enables employees to experiment and explore new ideas (Dong et al., 2019; Shalley et al., 2017; Volmer et al., 2012; Gong et al., 2013; Zhou & George, 2001). The findings also show that job autonomy mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and innovative work behavior, so the higher the perceived autonomy, the greater the tendency of employees to innovate (Škerlavaj et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2018; Zhang & Zhou, 2014; Gong et al., 2013; Zhou & George, 2001).

In addition, inclusive leadership also has a significant effect on employees' psychological safety, making them feel safe to share ideas and take risks (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Carmeli et al., 2014; Leroy et al., 2015; Carmeli & Gittell, 2009; Mazzola et al., 2016). Psychological safety has been proven to enhance innovative work behavior because employees who feel safe tend to be more creative and brave in exploring new ideas (Frazier & Fainshmidt, 2012; Baer & Frese, 2015; Shalley et al., 2017; Javed et al., 2019).

Finally, both job autonomy and psychological safety have been proven to mediate the effect of inclusive leadership on innovative work behavior (Škerlavaj et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2018; Kark & Carmeli, 2009; Newman et al., 2017; Carmeli et al., 2014; Javed et al., 2019). This underscores the importance of inclusive leadership in creating a work environment that supports innovation through enhancing employees' autonomy and psychological safety.

V. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study concludes that inclusive leadership has a positive and significant effect on the innovative work behavior of start-up employees in Semarang. This effect is mediated by work autonomy and psychological safety, where inclusive leadership enhances employees' freedom and control over their work and creates a psychologically safe environment for sharing ideas and taking risks. Thus, inclusive leadership plays a crucial role in fostering a sustainable culture of innovation within the organization.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that start-up management develop and implement an inclusive leadership style that encourages active employee participation and provides autonomy in their work. Additionally, it is important to build a psychologically safe work environment where employees feel comfortable experimenting and innovating without fear of negative consequences. These measures are expected to enhance employees' innovative behavior and support the sustainable growth of the company.

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