

# The Influence of Inclusive Leadership on Employee Work Engagement: Examining the Mediating Path of Job Satisfaction

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## Abstract

*The purpose of the study is to analyze the relationship between inclusive leadership, employee work engagement, and job satisfaction in the context of public sector universities in Pakistan's educational sector. By applying social exchange theory, this study explores how inclusive leadership impacts job satisfaction and, employee work engagement. Data were collected from 392 lecturers by using questionnaires that were analyzed on SPSS and Smart PLS. Results show the positive impact of inclusive leadership on job satisfaction, and non-significant relationship with employee work engagement. This shows a complete mediation by job satisfaction. Therefore, the mediating role of job satisfaction highlights its significance by promoting interrelated relationships and organizational development. Theoretical implications give a valuable understanding of organizational behavior, on the other hand, practical implications highlight the importance of promoting inclusive leadership practices in educational institutions.*

**Keywords:** *employee work engagement, inclusive leadership, job satisfaction, social exchange theory, Pakistan.*

## 1. Introduction

Leaders are the source of a firm's success (Ireland & Hitt, 1999), in a result of this significance, organizations capitalize on courses of leadership based on the perception that this will enhance the employees' productivity of employees in the presence of trained leaders (Gottfredson & Aguinis, 2017). In addition to these developments, there is a topic of focus i.e. Employee Work Engagement (EWE), as it is a relevant concern of the firm which is interesting (Ly, 2024). For instance, EWE is related to the health of employees and intentions for turnover (Halbesleben, 2010), being creative and performing extra-role (Bakker et al., 2004), a climate of service and loyalty with customers (Salanova et al., 2005), and performance of employee (Halbesleben, 2010). This presents that the productivity and well-being of employees work together. More significantly, EWE helps to provide success to businesses (Choi et al., 2015). Ilyas et al. (2024) discuss that "Employee engagement involves allowing employees to be involved with peers, supervisors, and other organizational aspects. It is the development of an environment in which employees are determined to involve themselves in their work and show a solid dedication to achieve excellence in their tasks". In this context, Bakker et al. (2011) argue that utilizing a

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Specific leadership style can improve the engagement of employees at work and leadership equally contributes to all such achievements. In this context, enhancing inclusiveness is critical to offer an environment that is conducive for teams or individuals. Studies show that Inclusive Leadership (IL) is positively associated with employees, results in engagement, better behavior at work, and performance (Hirak et al., 2012; Mitchell et al., 2015). However, there is a need for organizations to do more study to build a culture in an organization that is inclusive and with a strong commitment to developing an environment where a diverse workforce can work (Winters, 2013). This requires further evaluation regarding the aspect that how an inclusive workplace can be promoted by the organizations. In addition, there are few studies discussing how IL influences the job satisfaction of employees. When there is engagement of employees in work, they are involved in interacting mode where they face challenges, feel proud, and get inspired. This interactive work engagement phase results in Job Satisfaction (JS). Lu et al. (2016) state that "engagement is comprised of individual dimensions, and job satisfaction is the outcome of these dimensions". According to Karanika-Murray et al. (2015), those employees who are engaged in work with positive feelings then they show their commitment and dedication, which leads to JS.

Similarly, JS is also elaborated as a response to the job, which might be expressive or emotional (Buitendach & De Witte, 2005). When there is involvement of employees with their job and culture at work, they feel proud and represent their organization in a better way (Agho et al., 1992), and it is considered that there is more EWE. JS is a major determinant that motivates employees because it is considered that if there is more satisfaction among employees with the job, culture of work, and environment in the organization, then there can be more satisfaction from customers (Garg et al., 2018).

By considering the significance of JS towards EWG this study argues that JS can be a crucial mediator between IL and EWE, as other studies provide attention to other variables in this mechanism such as affective organizational commitment (Ly, 2024), person-job-fit (Bao et al., 2022), procedural justice (Cenkci et al., 2021) and organizational commitment and creativity (Sprouse, 2021). Therefore, this study focuses on mediating the role of JS between IL and EWE in the educational sector and focuses on public sector universities of Pakistan. Getting knowledge of this mediating pathway contributes insights to the organizations that are looking to improve the EWE with practices of IL, ultimately influencing the JS and the entire success of the organization in the educational sector.

After the introduction, the paper presents a review of the literature in the second section, followed by the methodology and results in the third and fourth sections, and finally concludes in the sixth section by discussing limitations and providing avenues for future studies.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Theoretical Foundations**

The exchange of perceived behaviors that are considered to be valuable in response to something valuable was first introduced by Blau (1964) in "social exchange theory (SET). Ly (2024) highlights that "Developing a leader-follower relationship requires mutual respect, trust, and a commitment to provide more for the other". Further, Farh et al. (2017) discuss the important role of SET in organizations, where employees perceive a feeling of commitment and are ready to participate because of the SET perspective and they get satisfied, and with satisfaction, employees keep motivated and show more involvement in their task when there are transparent leaders who are accessible and available to them to build trust because it is a

Notion that more engaged employees produce high-quality results (Bakker et al., 2008). In this way, SET theory is supported by the proposed framework shown in Figure 1.

## **2.2. IL and EWE**

“Work engagement is a positive, affective-motivational state of high energy combined with high levels of dedication and a strong focus on work” (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Only leaders who fully engage by presenting themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during their role performance embody inclusive leadership. According to Lai et al. (2020), such individuals exhibit heightened attentiveness, connectivity, and focus on their task performance. Inclusive leadership pertains to leaders who demonstrate openness, accessibility, and availability when engaging with their followers (Carmeli et al., 2010). In comparison to the existing leadership styles interlinked with work engagement, IL may play an exclusive role in the development of work engagement because it is notable by its essential concentration on meeting employees’ distinctiveness and belongingness necessities, while other forms of leadership differ from this concern (Nordberg, 2020; Rodriguez, 2018). The positive association between IL and EWE is discussed frequently (Bao et al., 2022; Nordberg, 2020). Carmeli et al. (2010) discuss the IL as open to employees who are prepared for new ideas and opportunities, employees are more likely to feel that they are being appreciated and their efforts and ideas will be valued by the organization (Nordberg, 2020). Anticipated outcomes show that these positive emotions will improve employees’ feelings of satisfaction reducing their work (Zhu et al., 2009), which inspires employees to dedicate their full contributions to their work (Nordberg, 2020). Moreover, the availability aspect requires how the leader maintains an ongoing involvement within the team and it is easily available for organizational concerns, matters, and various explorations (Ly, 2024). Prior studies have commended that leader support is significant for innovation and creativity (Hunter et al., 2007; Mumford & Hunter, 2005). IL escalates employee’s contribution for serving the organization (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). As Randel et al. (2018) stated, their belongings are facilitated among employees which shows employees their exclusivity that is valued and welcomed by the organization. The practical impartiality of IL can enhance EWE in the organization (Cenkci et al., 2021). Finally, based on the study, we hypothesized that IL positively affects EWE.

**H1:** IL positively influences EWE

## **2.3. IL and JS**

Li and Zhou (2023) discuss the concept of IL, and researchers have progressively begun to emphasize the impact of IL on employee JS for exploration. Studies revealed that implementing an IL method can improve employees’ motivation for their work in an organization (Li & Zhou, 2023). JS is interlinked with the emotions and sensations about the employees’ experience in connection to their roles in an organization and it is an important psychological display of the excellence of employees’ official life (Gil et al., 2023). JS is defined in studies as a “pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job or job experience” (Locke, 1976). Yang (2019) states that the IL effect positively to workers’ behavior and attitude toward work activities. Those leaders who carefully listen to their employees’ thoughts represent IL, encouraging an environment that appreciates employee input and capability to do work with passion (Ryan, 2006). However, according to Choi et al. (2015); (Ehrencron, 2018) inclusive leaders, are those leaders who amplify sovereignty to their supporters and guide how they complete their duties. As stated by (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), job engagement results in job incomes, like support, feedback, and managerial coaching and leads to JS. Members of organizations face problems in switching their jobs with each other when there is a better mutual relationship among them (Morgan et al., 2003). As addressed by Belias and Koustelios (2014), JS or dissatisfaction influenced by an individual’s job expectations and the achievement

of an individual related to the job. A study by Kennerly (1989) highlighted how JS is affected by IL and organizational culture. Particularly, factors such as amiable relationships between colleagues, respect, mutual trust, and positive interlinkage among supervisors and employees can significantly forecast employee JS in an organization (Belias & Koustelios, 2014). Every person's level of emotional relation and attachment regarding their job also enhances organizational trust and develops confirmation regarding JS of employees (Kanter, 2008; Oh et al., 2023). Therefore, it is connected to organizational commitment, which demonstrates how deeply individuals identify with the organization and show their devotion to it (Oh et al., 2023). So, we predict that IL influences JS.

**H2: IL positively influences JS**

#### **2.4. JS and EWE**

Garg et al. (2018) state that the engagement of employees in their work, engage in a self-motivated environment filled with problems, motivations, and a sense of accomplishment. EWE can be assumed as the range to which employees are interlinked and committed to their work. This link encompasses being dynamically taking part in physical activities, mentally attentive and engaged with their duties, and emotionally devoted to their job, showing devotion and assurance (Garg et al., 2018; Kahn, 1990; May et al., 2004). Caldwell and O'Reilly III (1990) discusses the organizational pressure and unexpected situations for employees to demonstrate how much they are involved and ambitious with their duties; such commitments are the reasons for pressures that are executed without implying inherent quality eventually, this guide towards the reduction in JS. According to Mróz and Kaleta (2016), EWE is related to the employee attitude in the organization. As stated by Orgambidez-Ramos and de Almeida (2017), EWE is a psychological measuring metric assessing persons' connection with the organization and has interlinked to engage with the organization. As addressed by Karanika-Murray et al. (2015), organizations can gain various advantages from having actively engaged employees. For example, by increasing the level of JS, and decreasing employee turnover. Maslach et al. (2001) stated that EWE is characterized by association and efficacy which is opposite to three beliefs i.e. optimism, competence and effectiveness, and vivacity. EWE is a diverse and unique concept to make employees engaged with their jobs that is consistent on emotional, perceptive, and interactive workings and are interlinked with individual performance regarding their job (Saks, 2006; Vorina et al., 2017). Employees who are satisfied with their jobs motivate themselves to engage with work (intention-behavior) by taking actions, living the work, and paying attention to focus on work (Komoche, 1992; Neupane, 2015). DeSimone (2012) can sum up employee performance affected by organizational policies that also disrupt the EWE other than the explicit external environment by itself. Thus it is hypothesizes that;

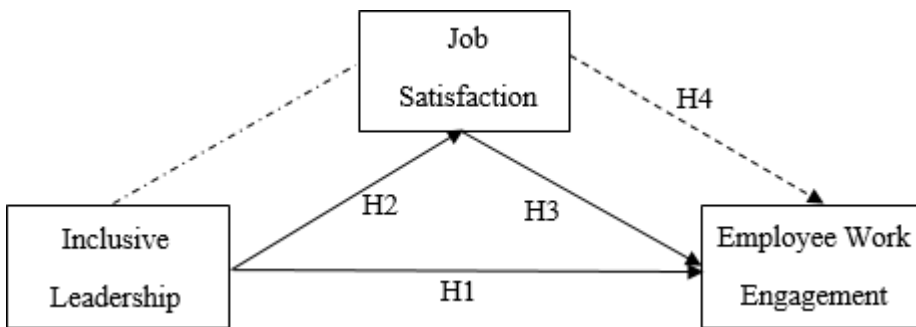
**H3: JS positively influences EWE**

#### **2.5. Mediating role of JS**

According to Sung (2021), certifying justice and equity between the individuals of team is important for fair treatment. IL is prospected as a significant factor that affects employees' JS (Sung, 2021). Prior studies by Kuknor and Bhattacharya (2022) states that, leadership performances emphasizes rude behavior and mitigate employees' JS, self-efficacy, and organizational assurance while intensifying their stress levels and anxiety (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tepper, 2000). JS shows the emotions and feelings that lead jobs to particular outcomes, which enable the psychological and material requirements of employees (Aziri, 2011; Loan, 2020). The individuals' viewpoint relates with their JS and the well-being of doing the job Faragher et al. (2005), as well as their complete life satisfaction (Judge & Watanabe, 1993). Caldwell and O'Reilly III (1990) discussed the organizational pressures and hesitations that

force employees to show their involvement and commitment to work, yet such commitments may raise external constraints rather than self-motivation (Garg et al., 2018). Finally, this dynamically leads towards reduction of JS. A dissimilarity between a person's priorities and external demand intensifies, this results in failure of JS. The mediating role of JS between EWE and IL highlights its importance in facilitating a cohesive interaction, where engaged employees, encouraged by IL performances, find satisfaction in their duties, contributing to complete organizational accomplishment and well-being. Prior studies such as Loan (2020), show the mediating role of JS with organizational assurance on employees' job performance. Lok and Crawford (2001) represent the mediating role of JS with organizational commitment. Vratskikh et al. (2016), discuss the effect of emotional intelligence on job performance with the mediating role of JS. Fewer studies analyzed the relationship between EWE, IL, and JS. In a knowledge-powered employee, the achievement or failure of an inclusive culture of growth pivots upon the individual associations between a leader and their employee (Kuknor & Bhattacharya, 2022). We argue on base of above studies that JS positively affects the relation between IL and EWE. It is hypothesized that:

**H4:** JS mediates the relationship between IL and EWE



**Figure 1** Research Framework

### 3. Methodology

Data was collected from public universities of Pakistan; the unit of analysis was the lecturers serving their respective institutes. The study follows the recommendations of Kline (2015), and according to the "10 times rule", the sample size must be close to 380. The respondents were selected by using the technique of simple random sampling. Further, 500 emails were sent to the public universities containing the questionnaires and 408 were received back, out of them 392 were valid and used for analysis on SPSS and Smart PLS.

To measure IL, the 9-item scale of Carmeli et al. (2010) was adopted, JS was measured by using the Dziuba and Ingaldi (1769) 20-item scale, and lastly for EWE, a 9-item scale developed by Schaufeli et al. (2002) was used.

**Table 1** Demographics

Participant Demographics		Frequency	%
<b>Gender</b>			
	Male	260	66.3
	Female	132	33.7
	Total	392	100.0
<b>Qualification</b>			
	Masters	84	21.4
	PHD	235	59.9
	DBA	39	9.9
	Other advanced degrees	34	8.7
	Total	392	100.0
<b>Age</b>			
	Less than 30	62	15.8
	30-40	124	31.6
	40-50	145	37.0
	50 Above	61	15.6
	Total	392	100.0
<b>Designation</b>			
	Professor	5	1.3
	Associate Professor	111	28.3
	Senior Lecturer	252	64.3
	Lecturer	24	6.1
	Total	392	100.0

The demographics presented in Table 1 show predominantly male respondents that were 66.3% and more people have Ph.D. degrees (59.9%), there was a majority of senior lecturers (64.3%) in professional designation context.

#### 4. Results

##### 4.1. Statistical Analysis

In PLS-SEM, there are two major steps including the evaluation of the measurement model and structural model. For this, firstly, there was the examination of discriminant and convergent validity. Table 2 shows the results of factor loading showing that the values are more than 0.7 and are acceptable. Further, the AVE of EWE, IL, and JS is 0.820, 0.810, and 0.767, fulfilling the acceptability criteria i.e. >0.5. Finally, EWE, IL, and JS have values >0.7 of CR, further validating the convergent validity.

Fornell-Larcker and HTMT ratios were utilized as measures to check the discriminant validity. Table 3 shows the HTMT ratio, which is <0.85 and is acceptable. Similarly, the Fornell-Larcker criterion has larger values in the diagonal than their correlation value, presenting a strong discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

**Table 2** Measurement model CFA

Items	Factor loading			Reliability and convergent validity		
	1	2	3	$\alpha$	CR	AVE
EWE1	0.859			0.973	0.975	0.820
EWE2	0.882					

<b>EWE3</b>	0.905				
<b>EWE4</b>	0.886				
<b>EWE5</b>	0.916				
<b>EWE6</b>	0.926				
<b>EWE7</b>	0.892				
<b>EWE8</b>	0.921				
<b>EWE9</b>	0.961				
<b>IL1</b>	0.929	0.971	0.972	0.810	
<b>IL2</b>	0.925				
<b>IL3</b>	0.871				
<b>IL4</b>	0.924				
<b>IL5</b>	0.870				
<b>IL6</b>	0.887				
<b>IL7</b>	0.916				
<b>IL8</b>	0.885				
<b>IL9</b>	0.888				
<b>JS1</b>		0.875	0.984	0.985	0.767
<b>JS2</b>		0.921			
<b>JS3</b>		0.908			
<b>JS4</b>		0.893			
<b>JS5</b>		0.856			
<b>JS6</b>		0.876			
<b>JS7</b>		0.866			
<b>JS8</b>		0.875			
<b>JS9</b>		0.890			
<b>JS10</b>		0.927			
<b>JS11</b>		0.840			
<b>JS12</b>		0.873			
<b>JS13</b>		0.826			
<b>JS14</b>		0.877			
<b>JS15</b>		0.867			
<b>JS16</b>		0.858			
<b>JS17</b>		0.840			
<b>JS18</b>		0.895			
<b>JS19</b>		0.845			
<b>JS20</b>		0.902			

**Table 3** Discriminant Validity – Fornell-Larcker & HTMT

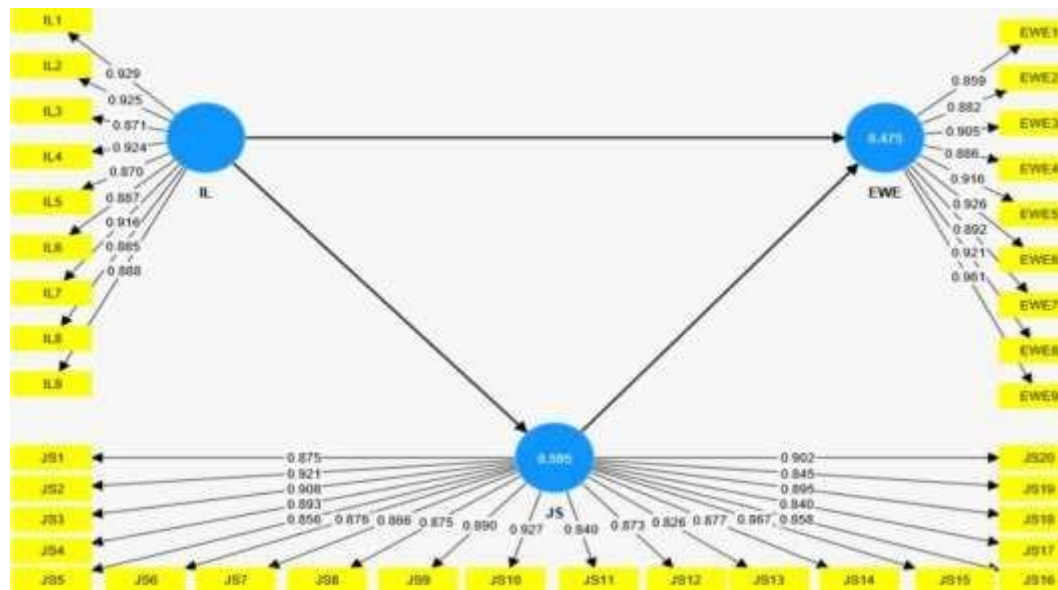
	<b>EWE</b>	<b>IL</b>	<b>JS</b>		<b>EWE</b>	<b>IL</b>	<b>JS</b>
<b>EWE</b>	0.906			<b>EWE</b>			
<b>IL</b>	0.574	0.900		<b>IL</b>	0.585		
<b>JS</b>	0.686	0.771	0.876	<b>JS</b>	0.694	0.787	

Path coefficient from IL to EWE is shown in Table 4 and is estimated at 0.112 with a S.D of 0.097, showing a p-value of 0.248, here t and p values does not meet the standards which shows an insignificant impact of IL on EWE, not supporting H1. Secondly, the path from IL to JS has a 0.771 estimated value, SD of 0.022, and a p-value of 0.000. This strongly supports H2. Thirdly, the JS and EWE direct path is estimated at 0.599, with an SD of 0.070, and a p-value of 0.000, supporting H3.

**Table 4** Hypothesis testing

Effects	Estimate	STDEV	T statistics	P	Decision
<b>Direct Effects</b>					
IL --> EWE	0.112	0.097	1.156	0.248	Not Supported
IL --> JS	0.771	0.022	34.539	0.000	Supported
JS --> EWE	0.599	0.070	8.572	0.000	Supported
<b>Indirect Effects</b>					
IL --> JS --> EWE	0.462	0.061	7.606	0.000	Supported

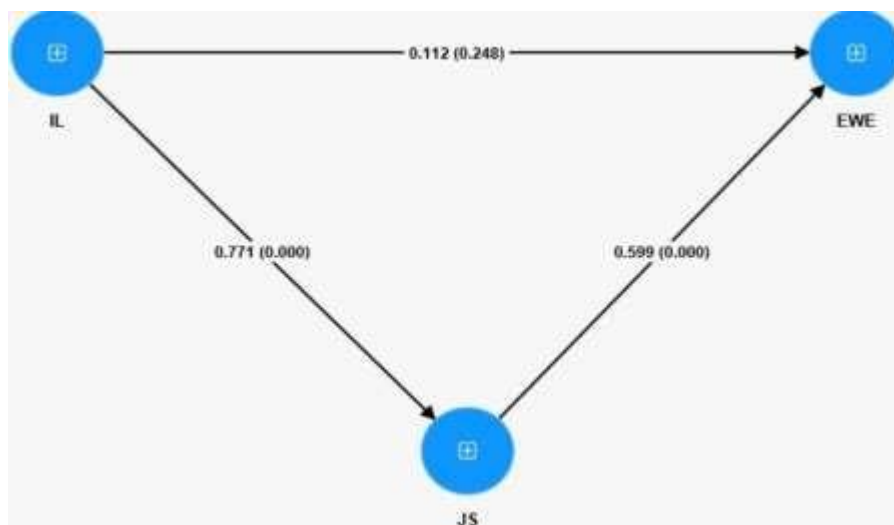
**Figure 2** PLS algorithm result



Finally, the IL's indirect effect on EWE through the JS is estimated at 0.462, SD of 0.061, and 0.000 As the p-value; supporting the mediating effect of JS and showing the complete mediation of JS between IL and EWE.

**Figure 3** Structural Model





## 5. Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to the existing literature on leadership and employee outcomes by highlighting the significant relationships between IL, EWE, and JS, and the mediating role of JS in the IL-EWE connection. Despite not finding direct support for H1, which posited a positive influence of IL on EWE, the results align with the theoretical perspective of SET which shows that commitment or satisfaction is necessary to engage employees and IL is not significant in this relationship. Blau (1964) SET, as discussed in the literature review, highlights the exchange of perceived behaviors that are valuable in response to something valuable. The findings, supporting H2 and H3, show that IL has a positive influence on JS and, subsequently on EWE. In line with Ly (2024) insights, “the development of a leader-follower relationship, marked by mutual respect, trust, and commitment, aligns with the principles of SET”. The study aligns with Farh et al. (2017) argument that employees' perception of commitment leads to satisfaction, motivation, and increased task involvement.

The mediating role of JS resonates with the SET perspective, reinforcing the importance of reciprocity and mutual benefit in organizational relationships. The study's results suggest that IL practices enhance positive emotions and commitment among employees, which, in turn, positively influence work engagement. This is consistent with SET's emphasis on the reciprocal nature of social exchanges, where positive actions from leaders lead to positive outcomes for employees.

The findings of this study hold potential theoretical and practical implications for the educational sector. In the discussion of theoretical implication, the study enhances our dynamic understanding within educational environments by applying SET to explain the mutual interactions among IL behaviors and student outcomes. This enhances our knowledge of organizational behavior in the educational sector and focuses on the importance of promoting positive social exchanges among teachers and students. In the discussion of practical context, the study highlights the significance of encouraging IL performances within educational institutions. By encouraging honesty, and supportiveness between the professors, institutions can create an encouraging learning environment where students feel valued and motivated to engage actively in their studies. Identifying the mediating role of JS in the relationship between IL and student engagement underlines the importance of highlighting strategies to improve student satisfaction and well-being. These findings provide a valuable understanding for

educational leaders and policymakers seeking to improve the educational experience and results of students.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research highlights the dynamics between IL, EWE, and JS in the educational sector of Pakistan, emphasizing public sector universities. Specifically, relating to SET to explain the mutual relations among leadership behaviors and employee outcomes. Data was collected from the lecturers of public sector universities of Pakistan and the respondents were 392 lecturers, SPSS & Smart PLS were used for data analysis. The finding of this study shows the non-significant impact of IL on EWE, the results show a significant positive impact of IL on JS, and consequently, JS on EWE. It highlights the importance of encouraging positive leader-follower relationships and organizational environments motivating employee satisfaction. The JS mediating role highlights its importance in facilitating organized connections, where engaged employees, motivated by IL practices, find satisfaction in their duties, ultimately contributing to organizational development.

### 6.1. Limitations and Future Research

In the context of limitations of our study, there is confined generalizability of the study because the research is based on the education sector of Pakistan and particularly focusing on employees of public sector universities which may limit the findings to private or other sectors. In addition, the data was collected in one-shot which may not explain the causality among the relationship. Future studies can test this framework in another sector such as private sector universities, telecom, or banking sector to enhance the generalizability of the study. Further, a longitudinal approach can be considered to check the causal relationship. Lastly, the researchers should consider perceived organizational support as a mediator in the proposed theoretical framework.

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