Inclusion for Innovation of Meaning

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Abstract

An idea based on employees’ intrinsic goals and values is an important driving force in the inside-out process of Innovation of Meaning (IoM). Nevertheless, little has been done to research potential antecedents that enable employees to create novel ideas in the inside-out process of IoM. This study empirically explores how inclusion is a potential antecedent that has an impact on creativity for inside-out ideation. Inclusion allows us to understand the effect of the balance between belongingness and uniqueness. By using data from a survey of 276 Japanese employees, the present study found that inclusion influences the inside-out process directly and indirectly to promote creativity within the organization. This study underlines that inclusion is a design-oriented strategy to reduce conflict in an organization, and to enhance the creativity for the inside-out process to flourish. The inclusion theory contributes to developing the theoretical understanding of the inside-out process.

**Keywords**: Inclusion; Innovation of Meaning; Inside-out process

# Introduction

Recent successful design practices have spurred innovation research to apply design thinking to the innovation process. Dell’Era et al. (2020) categorized design thinking on innovation research into four streams: creative problem solving, sprint execution, creative confidence, and Innovation of Meaning (IoM). Of these, scholars have focused on IoM to achieve radical innovation (Norman and Verganti, 2014).

IoM starts from ideas based on the intrinsic values and goals of an individual’s daily life (Verganti, 2017). Verganti (2017) developed the *inside-out process* that starts from employees’ intrinsic goals and values. Extant studies assume that employees can generate novel ideas stemming from their intrinsic goals and values in an organization. However, Goto, Ando, and Yaegashi (2020) highlight that dominant organizational values often push employees to ignore their own intrinsic values, and thus, organizational supports are needed to encourage employees to do otherwise.

Nevertheless, little has been done to research potential antecedents that enable employees to create novel ideas in the inside-out process. The inside-out process relies on the employee’s uniqueness (Verganti, 2017). However, as pointed out in diversity research and in organizational identification theory, even if an employee has a high level of uniqueness, they will have no intention to contribute to the organization without already having a high level of belongingness (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004). Employees with a low level of belongingness do not try to perform beyond the required performance level of a job, and externalize their intrinsic values and goals only for the sake of turnover and retention (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004; Galvin, Lange, and Ashforth, 2015). Meanwhile, when an employee may feel disproportionate belongingness to an organization, they tend to excessively internalize an organization’s goals and values, and often sacrifice their intrinsic goals and values to the detriment of their uniqueness (Galvin, Lange, and Ashforth, 2015). Therefore, the organization must seek to achieve a balance between employees’ needs for uniqueness and their belongingness within the inside-out process.

This study aims to empirically explore how *inclusion* can be a variable of a potential antecedent that can cause an impact on creativity for inside-out ideation. Inclusion is defined as “the degree to which an employee perceives that he or she is an esteemed member of the work group through experiencing treatment that satisfies his or her needs for belongingness and uniqueness” (Shore et al., 2011, p. 1265). Mor Barak and Daya (2014, p. 394) highlight that “the inclusive workplace is based on a pluralistic value frame that respects all cultural perspectives represented among its employees.” The proposed effects of inclusion on the inside-out process provide an additional insight regarding how the organization can encourage employees to externalize their own unique values and goals.

# Literature Review and Hypotheses

## Literature review

IoM studies trace back to Verganti’s research on the innovation processes of successful Italian manufacturers (Verganti, 2008). Previous literature has mainly focused on the strategic perspectives of IoM (Bellini et al., 2016; Norman and Verganti, 2014). Recently, however, scholars have shifted their focus to the processes of IoM. Verganti (2017) suggested the “inside-out process” model, which includes a recursive interpretation of the criticism by individual, pair, in-group, and external interpreters. Buganza et al. (2015) suggested a five-step process to create new meaning when using novel technologies. Goto, Ando, and Yaegashi (2020) suggested the outside-inside-out frame creation model for engineers as an alternative process for IoM.

However, the literature has ignored potential antecedents that enable employees to create novel ideas in the inside-out process. The inside-out process assumes that an employee can generate a novel idea stemming from their own values and goals (Verganti, 2017). However, when they are overwhelmed by organizational identity and moved to excessively internalize organizational values and goals, an individual employee’s own goals and values are diminished (Galvin, Lange, and Ashforth, 2015). Thus, the organization is required to have a positive stance on individual differences with regard to organizational goals and values during the inside-out process. An employee with a low level of belongingness may likewise externalize their own values and goals for the sake of turnover and retention (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004; Galvin, Lange, and Ashforth, 2015). The present study suggests that the balance of uniqueness and belongingness are potential antecedents implemented within the inside-out process.

Inclusion allows us to understand the effect of the balance of belongingness and uniqueness. Belongingness is defined as “a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” (Baumeister and Leary, 1995, p. 497). Uniqueness is defined as “employees’ perceptions that they can be different from others in their work group, that they can have different views, and that those differences are valued and respected by other work group members” (Chung et al., 2020, p. 80). Inclusion has garnered attention by scholars who have experienced a conflict between the benefits of diversity, on one hand, and its damages to the organization, on the other (Nishii, 2013).

Literature on the subject of inclusion has found that inclusion increases employees’ commitment to the organization (Shore et al., 2011; Hwang and Hopkins, 2012), creativity (Chung et al., 2020), and innovation by motivating them to externalize their own values and goals (Guillaume et al., 2014). Additionally, inclusion enables the employees to raise cognitive flexibility because it attenuates adherence to the organizational value frame by promoting a pluralistic value frame that respects their cultural perspectives (Mor Barak and Daya, 2014). Figure 1 depicts the present study’s theoretical model.



Figure 1. Theoretical Model

## Hypotheses

### Affective commitment

Belongingness refers to feeling accepted, valued, and cared for by other employees in an organization (Shore et al., 2011). Additionally, an organization encouraging a high-level of individual uniqueness must encourage employees to maintain their distinctive identities, and to have different views valued and respected by other employees (Chung et al., 2020). Inclusion balances the employees’ perceptions, which are esteemed for their unique identity. They must be treated as a valued member in the organization, and motivate them to display their unique values and goals within the organization. Thus, inclusion enhances affective commitment because affective commitment represents an employee’s emotional and affective attachment to the organization, and it nurtures a strong desire to stay in the organization (Allen and Meyer, 1990).

Inclusion scholars have empirically found the relationship between inclusion and commitment. Cho and Mor Barak (2008) found that perception of inclusion is positively related to commitment in Korean companies. Brimhall (2019) emphasized that a climate for inclusion enhances organizational performance through affective commitment in a non-profit-organization. Moreover, Mousa and Puhakka (2019) also found a positive impact of inclusion on affective commitment in the Egyptian health care sector. Therefore, the following hypothesis can be formulated:

Hypothesis 1. Inclusion has a positive effect on affective commitment in an organization.

### Intrinsic motivation

Verganti (2017, p. 10) indicated “if I do not love it, how could customers love it?” The inside-out process requires motivation to engage in work primarily for its own sake. As Hatchuel et al. (2010, p. 15) stated, “creation and self-realization through the shaping of new desirable worlds are the prime movers for self-engagement in and through work.”

Intrinsic motivation is closely associated with personality traits (Amabile et al., 1994). An organization with a low inclusion level compels employees to achieve the dominant organizational values and goals, rather than motivate individuals to pursue their own values and goals. Employees with strong sharing values and internalized organizational goals and values, most often monolithically press through the organization’s projects. However, this type of homogeneous organization encourages employees to conform to the dominant organizational culture and norms (Shore et al., 2011; Galvin, Lange, and Ashforth, 2015). An organization that puts a higher value on inclusion ensures a psychologically safe environment for uniqueness (Javed et al., 2019) and a widening of employee empowerment (Jaafar et al., 2020), and thus motivates the employee to publicly display those intrinsic elements (Shore et al., 2011; Jansen et al., 2014; Guillaume et al., 2014). Therefore, the following hypothesis can be formulated:

Hypothesis 2. Inclusion has a positive effect on intrinsic motivation.

### Cognitive flexibility

Verganti (2017) introduced the case of Nest Labs on his study, an HVAC company who developed a novel thermostat that doesn’t use manual temperature controls. Nest Labs could start its idea-generation process through the personal intrinsic values and goals of Tony Fadell and Mat Rogers—the founders. On the other hand, competitors in the thermostat industry were adherents of the past interface, which allowed people to control their home temperature with a digital and programmable thermostat. Subsequently, they lost a considerable market share amount. The Nest Labs case shows us how individuals have cognitive inflexibility.

Inclusion enhances cognitive flexibility. Cognitive flexibility is defined as “a person’s (a) awareness of communication alternatives, (b) willingness to adapt to the situation, and (c) self-efficacy in being flexible” (Martin and Rubin, 1995, p. 623). Cognitive flexibility enables an employee to consider alternatives from a broad range of information, and then evaluate from those options before choosing the final decision. To follow inclusion theory, organizations must enable employees to have a distinctive self-concept (Jansen et al., 2014). Employees must also strive to have different perspectives from the dominant organizational view, in doing so, they will be valued and respected by other employees (Chung et al., 2020). Therefore, the following hypothesis can be formulated:

Hypothesis 3. Inclusion has a positive effect on cognitive flexibility.

### Creativity for inside-out ideation

Past literature has discussed the relationship between intrinsic motivation and creativity (Amabile et al., 1994; Zhang, Zhang, and Song, 2015). Intrinsic motivation is also crucial for completing a creative task in the inside-out process. The inside-out process involves criticism by individual, pair, in-group, and external interpreters (Verganti, 2017). Employees have the responsibility for rationalizing an idea during the criticism process. Intrinsic motivation is a driver of making an idea creative, without giving in to criticism.

However, extant studies have indicated that employees with a low-level commitment may externalize their intrinsic values and goals for the sake of turnover and retention (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004). In organizational identity theory and diversity theory, a high level of uniqueness is a double-edge sword with the creative department/area and the conflict within an organization (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004; Bassett-Jones, 2005). No matter how employees can bring novel perspectives to the organization, it makes no sense to utilize it unless the organization makes them involved in a high-level commitment decision-making process (Mor Barak et al., 2016). Hwang and Hopkins (2012) found that affective commitment induced by inclusion reduces turnover intentions. Affective commitment encourages employees to display their creativity, which is induced by the perception of an organizational concern for their uniqueness within the organization (Semedo, Coelho, and Ribeiro, 2016).

Cognitive inflexibility induced by technology expertise inhibits idea generation in the inside-out process, because it encourages engineers to be adherent of past technologies (Goto, Ando, and Yaegshi, 2020). Expertise promotes excessive stability in one’s domain schema, it is advantageous for increasing the effectiveness of decision making, for the enhancement of job performance by building on domain memory and problem-solving skills, and for generating ideas and idea implementation in a specific subject matter (Dane, 2010). Yet, the inside-out process requires employees to adapt their individual values and goals to the present situation, instead of their organizational expertise. Therefore, in order to enhance cognitive flexibility, the most important aspect of keeping generating ideas is in the inside-out process.

Additionally, some scholars point out to an existing direct link between inclusion and creativity (Chung et al., 2020; Li, Lin Tien, and Chen, 2015). Inclusion may attenuate cognitive inflexibility. In order to satisfy inclusion, organizations should enable employees to have a distinctive self-concept (Jansen et al., 2014), and to have different perspectives compared to the dominant organizational view. Their individual paradigm should be valued and respected by other employees (Chung et al., 2020). Therefore, the following hypothesis can be formulated:

Hypothesis 4a. Inclusion has a positive effect on creativity for the inside-out process.

Hypothesis 4b. Commitment has a positive effect on creativity for the inside-out process.

Hypothesis 4c. Intrinsic motivation has a positive effect on creativity for the inside-out process.

Hypothesis 4d. Cognitive flexibility has a positive effect on creativity for the inside-out process.

# Research Method

## Sample and data collection

The present study examines the relationship between inclusion and creativity for inside-out ideation using the mediating roles of intrinsic motivation, cognitive flexibility, and commitment. We collected data from Japanese employees who engage in idea generation on new product development (NPD). In Japan, the Ministry of Economy Trade and Industry has encouraged companies to drive diversity and inclusion, and as a result, most companies regard diversity and inclusion as a key for innovation.

The data was collected using an online survey service from April 30, 2021 to May 6, 2021. The questionnaire was in Japanese, it was developed using a translation and back-translation procedure. The questions originally were developed in English, and were translated and back-translated by a professional translation service. We collected 576 completed questionnaires, and excluded 300 because of the extremely short survey response time. The final sample included 276 employees who have worked in the idea generation process in NPD. From the sample, 54 percent were female and 46 percent were male. The average age was 48.8 years. As for company size, 43 percent worked in companies of more than 1,000 employees, 12 percent were in companies with 300-999 employees, 10 percent on organizations with 100-299 employees, 12 percent were on organizations with 30-99 employees, and 23 percent were in companies with less than 30 employees.

## Measures

Some scholars have developed inclusion scales (Mor Barak, 2005; Jansen et al., 2014). The present study uses a 10-item inclusion scale developed by Chung et al. (2020). This scale is subdivided into belongingness and uniqueness, and it is significantly correlated with Mor Barak’s (2005) scale. We measured intrinsic motivation with a 15-item scale developed by Amabile et al. (1994). This scale includes two secondary scales that measure motivation for challenges and work enjoyment. Drawing from Allen and Meyer (1990), we used eight items to measure affective commitment. The scale to measure creativity for inside-out ideation was adapted from four items developed by Farmer, Tierney, and Kung-Mclntyre (2003). This scale has been used and validated to measure self-reported creativity in the context of organizational management studies (Cai et al., 2019). The present study, slightly revised the four items to measure creativity for inside-out ideation: (a) “I try new ideas or methods starting from what I love first;” (b) “I seek new ideas and ways to start from what I love in order to solve problems;” (c) “I generate ground-breaking ideas starting from what I love related to the subject matter;” (d) “I am a good role model to generate ideas starting from what I love.” All items are measured on a five-point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree … 5: strongly agree).

## Data Reliability and Validity

The reliability and validity of the measurement scale construct utilized in the present study was tested. We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using the maximum likelihood method with a Promax rotation. Due to the low level internal consistency and factor loading (<0.4), equal loadings on multiple factors, some items were dropped from all constructs. Table 1 shows the Cronbach's alpha, CR, and AVE. Cronbach's alpha values were all above 0.71, excluding cognitive creativity. The CR of explanatory variables exceeded the threshold of 0.6. The AVE scores were all greater than the threshold value of 0.50, excluding cognitive creativity (Fornell and Lacker, 1981). Due to the exclusion of some items from the cognitive flexibility set, the AVE score was below the threshold. We excluded items from the cognitive flexibility set that had equal loadings on items linked to the uniqueness of inclusion. Results imply that inclusion partly overlaps with the concept of cognitive flexibility.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Constructs | α | CR | AVE |
| Inclusion (three items) | .79 | .75 | .52 |
| Intrinsic motivation (four items) | .87 | .84 | .59 |
| Cognitive flexibility (three items) | .64 | .65 | .38 |
| Affective commitment (three items) | .79 | .79 | .56 |
| Creativity for inside-out ideation (two items) | .71 | － | － |

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 　 | Mean | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| 1. Age | 44.81 | 11.68 | 1 | 　 | 　 | 　 | 　 | 　 | 　 | 　 | 　 | 　 |
| 2. Tenure of industry | 18.18 | 11.82 | .70\*\* | 1 | 　 | 　 | 　 | 　 | 　 | 　 | 　 | 　 |
| 3. Tenure of occupation | 15.15 | 11.16 | .67\*\* | .70\*\* | 1 | 　 | 　 | 　 | 　 | 　 | 　 | 　 |
| 4. Company size | 2.60 | 1.65 | .24\*\* | .03 | .07 | 1 | 　 | 　 | 　 | 　 | 　 | 　 |
| 5. Average NPD period | 12.15 | 14.55 | -.06 | .05 | .05 | -.33\*\* | 1 | 　 | 　 | 　 | 　 | 　 |
| 6. Inclusion | 4.76 | 1.03 | -.01 | -.05 | -.04 | -.02 | .02 | 1 | 　 | 　 | 　 | 　 |
| 7. Intrinsic motivation | 4.37 | 1.13 | .10 | .06 | .04 | -.05 | .00 | .57\*\* | 1 | 　 | 　 | 　 |
| 8. Cognitive flexibility | 4.55 | 1.06 | .14\* | .03 | .03 | .03 | .00 | .29\*\* | .04 | 1 | 　 | 　 |
| 9. Affective commitment | 4.37 | 1.24 | .20\*\* | .14\* | .11 | -.03 | .05 | .55\*\* | .37\*\* | .17\*\* | 1 | 　 |
| 10. Creativity for inside-out ideation | 4.81 | 0.97 | .09 | .02 | .03 | .07 | -.11 | .57\*\* | .61\*\* | .13\* | .41\*\* | 1 |
| Correlation is significant at \*\*0.01 and \*0.05 levels (2-tailed).**Table 2. Mean, Standard Deviation, and Correlation Matrix** |

## Model Testing

The correlation matrix in Table 2 exhibited non-significant correlations between control and explained variables, and all explanatory variables have a significant correlation on dependent variables. Structural equation modeling (SEM) by covariance structural analysis was used to test the hypothesized model. The analysis was conducted based on the maximum likelihood method using SPSS Amos 25. Path analysis was performed without the cognitive flexibility. Thus, H3 and H4d were not supported. Figure 2 shows that the goodness-of-fit indices of the model were χ2/df=2.44(<3.0), GFI=.93(>.90), AGFI=.89(>.85), CFI=.96(>.95), and RMSEA=.072(<.080). The index used for comparison was AIC=176.39. R squared for endogenous variables was of considerable explanatory power, as the model accounted for 71% of the variance in creativity linked to the inside-out ideation.

Table 3 shows the direct and indirect significant relationships among the variables and their statistical measures. Inclusion had a positive direct effect on affective commitment and intrinsic motivation (β=.75, p<.01; β=.66, p<.01). Thus, H1, H2 were supported. H4b was not supported because the path from commitment to creativity for inside-out ideation was non-significant. Inclusion has a positive direct and indirect effect on creativity for inside-out ideation (β=.57, p<.01; β=.23, p<.01), and the intrinsic motivation has a positive direct effect on creativity for inside-out ideation (β=0.34, p<.01). Thus, H4a and H4c were supported.



Figure 2. Path Analysis

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Standardized Effect (β) |  | Regression Weights (direct) |
| Relationships | Total | Direct | Indirect | 　 | Estimate/S.E. | C.R. | p |
| Inclusion → Affective commitment | .75 | .75 | .00 |  | .946/.098 | 9.61 | <.001 |
| Inclusion → Intrinsic motivation | .66 | .66 | .00 |  | .766/.086 | 8.96 | <.001 |
| Inclusion → Self-reported creativity | .81 | .57 | .23\* |  | .426/.116 | 3.73 | <.001 |
| Affective commitment → Self-reported creativity | .02 | .02 | .00 |  | .011/.068 | 0.17 | n.s. |
| Intrinsic motivation → Self-reported creativity | .34 | .34 | .00 | 　 | .215/.057 | 3.73 | <.001 |
| \* p< .01 for indirect effect |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

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# Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of the present study is to empirically explore a potential antecedent that may have an impact on the creativity for an inside-out process. The findings show that inclusion is a key strategy to enhance creativity directly and indirectly. The indirect impact includes an intrinsic motivation, however, there is no significant impact of affective commitment on creativity. The result shows that inclusion enhances creativity not only directly by enhancing employees’ uniqueness, but also indirectly by motivating employees to challenge and enjoy ideation in the inside-out process.

## Theoretical implication

The theoretical implication is that inclusion theory contributes to developing a theoretical understanding of the organizational support for the inside-out process. Goto, Ando, and Yaegashi (2020) underline that idea generation by an inside-out process is different from the dominant organizational views, the difference is seen by a perceptible conflict between an individual who generates an idea and the others who have the dominant organizational perspective. Inclusion literature has discussed the organizational support to reduce conflict, past studies have argued that to enhance teams and individual performance a climate for inclusion and inclusion leadership (IL) should be encouraged. Climate for inclusion refers to a collective perception that there are expectations and norms that allow employees to seek a balance between belongingness and uniqueness (Shore, 2018). Nishii (2013) emphasizes that a climate for inclusion consists of three dimensions: a fair implementation of employment practices, an integration of differences, and an inclusion in the decision making process. Climate for inclusion can reduce employee conflicts (Nishii, 2013), and increases commitment in an organization (Cho and Mor Barak, 2008).

Additionally, inclusion leadership (IL) scholars have found the positive impacts of IL on climate for inclusion (Brimhall, 2019), team performance mediated by psychological empowerment and psychological safety (Khan et al., 2020), and the reduction of turnover (Nishii and Mayer, 2009). The present study underlines that inclusion is a design-oriented strategy to enhance creativity for the inside-out process, inclusion theory can promote developing a theoretical understanding of the inside-out process.

## Managerial implication

The managerial implication is that inclusion enables managers to enhance performance in a critical step of the inside-out process. Verganti (2017) stressed the importance of criticism in pair and team activities because initial ideas from individuals are blurred and vague. He described the criticism process as “clashing and fusing different perspectives” (p. 109), and also advised that the criticizing practice should be conducted between trusted people. That is because of the presence of “sparring partners,” who are individuals that attack the weaknesses in other’s ideas. Nevertheless, extant studies have neglected the practical implication regarding how the sparring partner is developed in an organization.

The present study implies that inclusion is the managerial solution to tackle this problem. Employees generating ideas from inside should have the desire to stay in the organization, even if criticized by others. Meanwhile, a sparring partner should have a different perspective at the same time of having respect for others who generate ideas during the inside-out process. An organization with higher inclusion has employees with a diversity of perspectives and a high-level of commitment. Additionally, the organization that puts higher value on inclusion ensures psychological safety (Javed et al., 2019). Thus, this study concludes that inclusion helps the ideation emanating from the inside-out process, and it also benefits the criticism practice.

## Limitation and Future research

The present study implies that the inclusion scale developed by Chung et al. (2020) overlaps the cognitive flexibility scale. The perception of uniqueness enables employees to have a different perspective compared to the dominant organizational view, and thus, employees enhance their cognitive flexibility. The theoretical similarities amongst items may statistically increase the difficulty to discern the differences between both scales. However, some scales were also dropped from other constructs. Thus, it would be worthwhile to conduct an alternative data collection. It is possible to obtain a higher experimental validity by dividing the survey into two periods, which could be a future study. Despite the limitations, the findings in the present study make a valuable contribution to the IoM literature. We believe that a link between inclusion and IoM will inspire future research.

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