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Designing with Edge Consumers: How Inclusive Design Orientation Transforms New Product Development

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How Inclusive Design Orientation Transforms New Product Development**

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Please access the supplementary web appendix [here](#)

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Abstract

Industry leaders and academics increasingly recognize the importance of addressing the needs of underrepresented and underserved consumers. Yet, little is known about how organizations transform their new product development (NPD) processes to create inclusive products. Adopting a theories-in-use approach, we draw on interviews with industry experts and multiple secondary data sources to develop grounded insights into how inclusion can be embedded in NPD. We introduce Inclusive Design Orientation (IDO)—a novel organizational orientation that shifts firms away from designing for the “average” consumer toward intentionally engaging edge consumers whose experiences inspire innovations that can benefit all consumers. IDO comprises shared organizational beliefs and inclusive NPD practices that function as a reinforcing cycle. Shared beliefs—such as recognizing exclusion and practicing empathetic identification—shape inclusive practices like co-optive consumer immersion and participatory research. These practices, in turn, strengthen inclusive beliefs, creating a feedback loop that drives inclusive innovation. Our findings underscore the importance of inclusive design champions and identify moderators and consequences of IDO adoption. Our research develops organic theory by introducing IDO, offers a blueprint for organizational transformation that advances inclusive design, and contributes to marketing practice by demonstrating how engaging edge consumers can fuel co-creation and inclusive product innovation.

Sam Farber had an “aha” moment when he saw his wife, Betsey, struggling to use a peeler due to arthritis. Determined to help, Sam partnered with Smart Design, a New York–based industrial design firm, to develop a new line of cooking tools—OXO Good Grips—featuring wide, oval-shaped handles that were easy to hold and control, regardless of hand size or grip strength. Kitchen tools hadn’t previously been designed with inclusivity in mind. To make the chunky black handles more engaging, Sam added “fins”- soft ridges on the sides that flexed with touch - to create a beneficial effect that was both tactile and functional. OXO soon became a popular product not only helpful for people with arthritis but also loved by the mass market. What began as a tool to help one person with arthritis transformed into a corporate philosophy: design for the margins and benefit the masses. OXO’s mission— “making everyday life easier”—has since driven its expansion into other categories.

In another example of product innovation, Microsoft’s Xbox Adaptive Controller for the Xbox One console has a unique modular design and allows for individual customization with peripheral attachments. The console comprises an oversized buttoned strip and 19 ports for plugging in specialized external devices like switches, mounts, and joysticks that can link to any part of the gamer's body. While designing the product, Microsoft collaborated with numerous gamers with disabilities ranging from cerebral palsy to limb loss as well as key stakeholders—Warfighter Engaged, who provides gaming devices for wounded veterans; AbleGamers Charity, who focus on disability inclusion in game design; and the Cerebral Palsy Foundation.

The OXO Good Grips line and the Microsoft Xbox adaptive controller represent an industry shift towards inclusive design in which product teams involve individuals who occupy the fringes of the target market (often called extreme or edge consumers) and are frequently

overlooked in the product design process because they have unique needs or accessibility constraints. See Web Appendix Tables WA1 & WA2 for additional examples.

Industry leaders and the business community increasingly recognize the importance of representing the needs of these underrepresented and underserved consumers in the product design and development process. Acknowledging this long overdue pivot, the American Marketing Association (AMA) and Disability:IN joined forces to convene practitioners “to share guidance in adopting sustained inclusion practices within marketing and communications.”¹ Likewise, the Marketing Science Institute (MSI Research Priorities 2022-24, p. 10) and recent editorials (e.g., Shulman, Toubia, and Saddler 2023) underscore the significance of inclusive product design.

Yet, despite these calls to action, academic research in inclusive design from the firm’s perspective remains limited. While some prior research (e.g., Childers and Kaufman-Scarborough 2009; Patrick and Hollenbeck 2021) details consumer experiences with marketplace exclusion and its impact on consumer well-being, there is scant research that identifies how and why organizations pivot to inclusive design practices, and what the challenges and outcomes of this pivot are for firms. We provide a detailed review of related research in Web Appendix WA3-WA5.

To address this gap, we examine *how firms transform their NPD processes to create inclusive products* - products intentionally designed, developed, and implemented to meet a wide range of user needs and are thus accessible, usable, and beneficial to a broad range of potential users. Consequently, *inclusive design* is a design approach in which a diverse set of consumers with a wide range of user needs are involved in all stages of the product development process to

¹ <https://disabilityin.org/event/disability-and-accessibility-in-marketing-webinar/>

facilitate the creation of products that are relevant to and usable by the broadest possible range of people, regardless of their abilities, backgrounds, circumstances, or identities.

We utilize a theories-in-use approach (Zeithaml et al. 2020) to seek answers to this research question by the elicitation of theories held by individuals close to the problem. We capture the knowledge and experiences of product managers, designers, and other inclusive design champions who have led successful inclusive design NPD transformations or are helping their organizations navigate this journey. Our interview data, complemented with extensive secondary sources (e.g., company websites, news articles, and panel/forum transcripts), inform the development of a comprehensive framework that captures the organization-level dynamics associated with developing inclusive products.

While a few pioneering companies have begun to master inclusive product development, the broader business community remains largely unaware of how to tackle the challenges inherent in designing and developing inclusive products. Our findings indicate that organizations often face three inter-related trade-offs that could discourage the adoption of inclusive design.

The first trade-off involves *customer focus*. Traditional new product development (NPD) processes are optimized for efficiency, often relying on market segmentation to identify relatively homogeneous target groups that can be reached cost-effectively and whose needs align closely with the firm's offerings. Consequently, mainstream NPD initiatives frequently overlook the distinct needs of consumers at the market periphery (Avery and Norton 2014; Patrick and Hollenbeck 2021; Patrick and Shulman 2024). Inclusive design, by contrast, requires a deliberate broadening of the marketer's perspective to account for "edge consumers."

The second trade-off arises within the *NPD process* itself. Conventional research methods yield precise insights into existing customers but fail to capture the lived realities of excluded

groups. Edge consumers are harder to reach, and few research firms have the expertise to study them rigorously, leaving little systematic data on their distinctive needs, and making their market potential difficult to evaluate.

The third trade-off arises in *balancing short-term costs with long-run benefits*. Operational budgets, KPIs, and incentives typically reward predictable returns from serving mainstream consumers. Shifting resources towards excluded or edge consumers often entails uncertainty, pitting the predictability of existing revenue streams and short-term performance metrics against the moral imperative and latent commercial potential of inclusive design.

Our research addresses these challenges by introducing *inclusive design orientation* (IDO) as a foundation for developing inclusive products. We conceptualize IDO as the extent to which members in an organization (1) share the belief that designing with a diverse set of consumers needs in mind, including those of underserved or historically overlooked populations is an organizational imperative, and (2) engage in product design and development practices that align with this belief. Thus, IDO is a “by people for people” process that draws on the personal values of empathy, compassion, and morality of product managers (Hemingway and Maclagan 2004), distinguishing it from other ongoing organizational change processes and constructs (e.g., digital transformation, see Web Appendix WA6).

The inclusive design orientation (IDO) framework we offer delineates four inter-related elements: (1) the core components of IDO—encompassing both the shared beliefs and the coordinated practices that collectively shape inclusive approaches to NPD; (2) the antecedent conditions that foster the emergence of IDO; (3) the external (environmental) and internal (organizational) factors that enable or constrain its adoption; and (4) the short- and long-term business outcomes associated with IDO (see Figure 2). Conceptually, IDO represents a flexible

and adaptive framework for inclusive NPD—one that emphasizes continuous listening, learning, and adapting to generate deeper insights, refine processes, and iteratively expand products to embrace new excluded customer groups.

Our findings offer guidance to organizations who want to develop inclusive products. We aim to capture the mindset that characterizes IDO and offer a set of actionable insights that help address the perceived challenges that practitioners face in initiating the pivot to inclusive design, as well as underscore the potential short and long-term benefits of adopting an inclusive NPD approach. Although inter-organizational differences are inevitable, our goal is to distill insights that can be applied across organizations.

Marketplace Inclusion and Inclusive Design: A Brief Review

In recent years, the concept of inclusion has garnered significant attention across various academic fields from social work and psychology to diversity studies and education. Inclusion is conceptualized as “the degree to which an individual perceives that the group provides an individual with a sense of belonging and authenticity” (Jansen et al. 2014, p. 373). As such, inclusion involves “creating a culture that fosters belonging and incorporation of diverse groups and is usually operationalized as opposition to exclusion or marginalization” (Arsel, Crockett, and Scott 2022, p. 920). Thus, an inclusive marketplace is one that recognizes the inherent worth and dignity of all consumers, and increases belongingness, especially of historically marginalized and systematically overlooked customer groups (Lteif et al 2025). In what follows, we synthesize prior research on marketplace exclusion, as well as inclusive design, which has predominantly centered on consumer experiences and responses.

Marketplace Exclusion

Marketplace exclusion refers to the mechanisms through which individuals and communities are unable to fully participate in the marketplace, experience restricted choice/consumption options and/or perceive a mismatch between their usage preferences and the way a product, service, experience or platform is designed and/or delivered (Holmes 2018; Lteif et al. 2025; Patrick and Hollenbeck 2021).

While any consumer can experience exclusion in the marketplace, such experiences are especially prevalent among individuals from historically marginalized and underrepresented communities. Extant research highlights how retail environments can either enable or constrain consumers' ability to function effectively. For example, Kaufman-Scarborough and Childers (2009) show that online shopping can heighten feelings of vulnerability among visually impaired consumers, whereas accessible websites foster a sense of normalcy and promote inclusion. Importantly, research also indicates that different disabilities require distinct forms of accommodation; enhancements that benefit one group may inadvertently hinder another (Childers and Kaufman-Scarborough 2009). Exclusion often stems from a lack of awareness during design—for instance, apps and websites that fail to incorporate accessibility features for visually impaired consumers (Cohen, Fresneda, and Anderson 2020) or narrow aisles and fitting rooms in retail spaces that render shopping inaccessible for individuals using wheelchairs (Kaufman-Scarborough 1999).

Prior research demonstrates that marketplace exclusion undermines both physical and mental well-being (Baker, Holland, and Kaufman-Scarborough 2007; Patrick and Hollenbeck 2021). When marketplace cues signal devaluation, consumers may disengage from beneficial consumption opportunities or turn to riskier behaviors (Harmeling et al. 2021). To cope, many adopt adaptive but limiting strategies—such as shifting to online shopping, delegating tasks to

others, or relying on heuristics for decision-making (Viswanathan, Rosa, and Harris 2005)—rather than fully participating in the marketplace. Although these strategies can address immediate needs, they ultimately constrain autonomy, reduce opportunities for social integration, and restrict consumer choice, thereby diminishing overall well-being.

Consumer Response to Inclusive Design

Addressing consumers by their true, personal identity rather than an average or false self results in positive marketplace consumption experiences (Henderson and Rank-Christman, 2016). Patrick and Hollenbeck (2021) propose that when products are designed inclusively, the mismatch between the user and the design object is diminished. Lteif et al. (2025) build on this work to propose that consumer-product mismatches can be sensory, cognitive behavioral and social and can have a profound impact on consumer wellbeing. Notably, these works examine the importance of inclusive design *from a consumer perspective*, rather than how an organization might design and develop inclusive products (the focus of the current research). Patrick and Hollenbeck (2021), for instance, offer the Design, Appraisal, Response, Experience (DARE) framework that captures *the consumer's* cognitive and emotional response to inclusive design. The DARE framework suggests that perceived mismatches between consumer needs/preferences and products exist on a continuum. At one end, consumers might experience products designed to merely conform to basic accessibility guidelines (Level 1). At the next level, historically marginalized consumers feel that their unique needs and preferences are considered (Level 2). The ideal state is where all consumers benefit from equitable access and feel included, with seamless consumption access (Level 3).

While Patrick and Hollenbeck (2021) develop a conceptual understanding of inclusive design from a consumer perspective, our IDO framework focusses on the development of products

using inclusive design principles from a NPD perspective, with the goal of understanding how a marketer can design inclusive products, and the forces and facilitators that come into play as marketers shift from traditional to more inclusive product development. See Appendix Table 1 for a summary of the differences in the goals and approach of the DARE and IDO frameworks.

Focus of Current Research: How Organizations Develop Inclusive Products

The current research seeks to develop a theoretical framework that explains how organizations transform their new product development process to create inclusive products. Substantively, it aims to offer a living blueprint to guide organizations in making this transition and identifies best practices for overcoming challenges that might arise.

Since our research centers on the role of inclusive design in new product development from an organizational perspective, we address two noteworthy issues. First, we clarify that an *inclusive design approach is distinct from classic marketing strategies such as market segmentation*. Appendix Table 2 outlines the key differences between traditional segmentation, which typically consists of dividing up a heterogeneous market into several smaller homogeneous groups of consumers based on specific criteria to help focus the efforts of the market on a segment of consumers whose needs the product can best meet (the target market). An inclusive design approach, in contrast, views the chosen target market more holistically, taking care to acknowledge edge consumers, with the ultimate goal of serving all consumers in the target market better. Second, we highlight how inclusive design differs from adjacent design practices. Clarkson and Coleman (2015), for instance, distinguish inclusive design from universal design and “design for all” approaches, noting that inclusive design begins with the recognition that no single design can serve everyone perfectly. This perspective emphasizes the need to identify who is excluded by a given design and to seek opportunities to reduce that

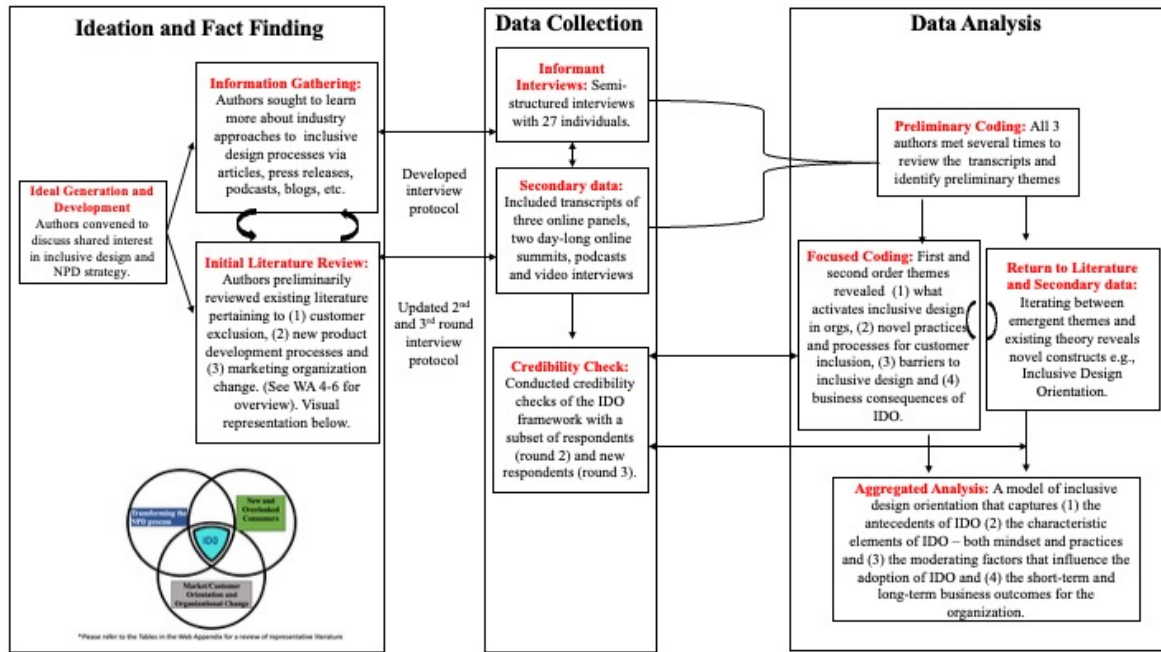
exclusion. Patrick and Hollenbeck (2021) contrast inclusive design with user-centered design, arguing that inclusive design aims to enhance quality of life for the broadest range of people by making products accessible, rather than tailoring solutions to narrow, ad hoc user groups. Accordingly, our focus is on inclusive design—as opposed to other design practices—as a pathway for firms to adopt inclusive NPD approaches.

Methodology

Given the emergent nature of inclusive design, we utilize a theories-in-use (TIU) approach to uncover the theories and beliefs that individuals and organizations hold and put into practice when making decisions and taking actions (e.g., Kohli and Jaworski 1990; Zeithaml et al. 2020). This methodology is designed to capture how people think and behave in response to the demands of real-world situations. It does so by engaging interviewees—viewed as theory holders—in conversations that elicit the ideas they regard as most important and the ways in which those ideas are interconnected. The TIU method typically relies on a small number of participants (15–20; Zeithaml et al. 2020) and follows an iterative process, whereby researchers interpret and refine what they learn from participants while integrating additional insights from relevant archival sources, such as websites, online discussions, and the extant literature. A key strength of this approach is its capacity to generate theory that is both grounded in lived experience and enriched by established scholarship, thereby bridging practice and academic knowledge.

See Figure 1 for a visual overview of our methodology.

Figure 1: Visual Depiction of Data Collection and Research Methodology



Study Sample

The expertise for developing inclusive products remains concentrated among a small group of forward-thinking organizations. Since the TIU approach relies on elicitation of theories held by individuals with proximity to the problem (Zeithaml et al. 2020), we began by identifying thought-leaders and experts in inclusive design, as well as a combination of design executives, product managers, consultants, and research practitioners whose pioneering work had been showcased by the business press or on social media. We cold-contacted these thought-leaders and experts via LinkedIn or via email with an interview request. Many of these executives work at some of the most heralded organizations in the world that are pursuing inclusive design. When we obtained a positive response, we followed up with a brief note on our research objectives and an assurance of confidentiality and anonymity. After each interview, we asked our interviewees for referrals to other experts who we contacted in a similar manner. To ensure generalizability,

our sample consisted of interviewees from large and small firms, private and public companies, and represented various industries (design, technology, retail, consulting, communications, etc.) who (1) have first-hand experience with successful inclusive product design and development, (2) belong to organizations that have adopted an inclusive design approach, or, (3) are in external support and/or advisory roles for these firms. We followed McCracken’s (1988) guidance regarding theoretical saturation and continued to interview individuals until little new and/or significant insights were being uncovered; our sample size of 27 conforms with the recommendations of Zeithaml et al. (2020) for theories-in-use studies. See Table 1 for interviewee profiles and a brief description of the organizations.

Table 1: Interviewee Profile and Affiliated Organizations

Interviewee	Interview	Title	Job Responsibility and Expertise
1*	1	Director of Inclusive Design	Oversees inclusive design (ID) for one of the largest US retailers.
2	2	Director of Inclusive Design	Developed and executed ID strategy for one of the largest technology firms in the world
3	3	Founder and Chief Creative Officer	Founded an ID strategy consultancy. Advocate/Author/ TED speaker on transformative and innovative design.
4	4	Vice President of Global Product Design	Responsible for global design innovation of equipment, packaging and food design
5	4	Global Human Resources Director	Works with the global design leadership team to expand the design team at a large multinational food company.
6	4	Director of Global Innovation	Oversees the implementation of physical and digital design at a large multinational food company
7	5	Strategy Director	Directs strategy and design efforts at a large design firm
8	6	Head of Inclusive Design	Oversees ID initiatives for a large global software firm.
9	7	Director of Strategy	Currently the global head of ID for a large consultancy
10	8	Inclusive Design Researcher	Conducts ID research for design teams at a large software technology company
11	9	Vice President of Marketing	Inclusive-based human resource consultancy
12	10	MD, Inclusive Design and Accessibility	Oversees ID efforts for a large management consulting division
13	11	CEO	Leads a media production and technology training firm
14	11	Consultant	Advises firms on ID and customer experience practices.
15	12	Global Director	Oversees global initiatives for an organization that assesses standards in healthcare and patient safety
16	12	Director of Design	Leads the design efforts for a large design organization

17	13	User Experience Research Manager	Oversees all customer research for new software design for one of the world’s largest gaming consoles
18*	14	Head of Platform Equity	Heads platform equity and product strategy for a large asset-sharing website
19*	15	Senior Product Manager	Manages software development and product release for a large multinational telecommunications company
20	16	Product Manager	Consumer IT space for a multinational telecom firm
21	17	Product Manager	Full stack software engineer for multinational telecom firm
22	18	Sr. Tech Solutions Manager	IoT NPD team for a large multinational telecom firm
23*	19	Sr. Product Manager	Consumer IoT space for a large multinational firm
23	20	Executive Director	Consultant and executive director for 25+ years for a leading NGO and center for design that focuses on compliance and best practices related to inclusive design.
25	21	Senior Director of Disability Resources	Works in the intersection of disability, civil rights and law for a leading private university
26	22	Director of the Student Accessibility Center	Accessibility expert, supports and advocates for university’s disability community
27	23	Lead accessibility specialist	Expertise in digital accessibility.

*interviewee contacted again to participate in a second-round interview

First round interviews and coding method

Following Zeithaml et al. (2020), we started each interview with a brief introduction, followed by general questions (e.g., What does inclusive design mean to you, what motivated you to pursue inclusive design), and then questions about the person’s role and responsibilities with respect to inclusive design. We followed up with a set of specific probes designed to generate insights into our overarching research questions, tailored to the expertise of each individual. Our interviews were conducted over Zoom and lasted 30-60 minutes; notes were taken, and the calls were recorded and then professionally transcribed. In two cases, interviewees preferred not to be recorded, so notes were carefully taken and typed. After each interview was completed, the transcripts and notes were compiled, interpreted, and categorized into main themes using inductive coding. To ensure methodological rigor and dependability, the authors independently reviewed all the transcripts to identify relevant concepts and themes. After several

discussions and going back to the relevant literature (outlined in the Web Appendix Tables WA3-WA5) and additional data sources, such as case studies, panel discussions, company websites, podcasts and videos (detailed below), we iterated, combined, and finally converged onto the framework that appeared in the paper. We used industry examples to sharpen our thinking and refine our arguments. Our coding methodology is similar to that followed by Micheli et al. (2018) and involved categorizing the insights into second-order codes (over-arching themes) and first-order codes (e.g., sub-themes). Table Web Appendix WA7 presents the themes and sub-themes, as well as exemplar quotes.

Second and Third round of interviews

Consistent with recent advances in TIU and qualitative methods (Berry et al. 2024; Zeithaml et al. 2020), we conducted a second round of “credibility” interviews with four practitioners who had participated in the first phase. One week before each interview, we emailed them a draft of our conceptual framework and an executive summary of the research. Since the framework was created based on multiple practitioner perspectives to be a “living blueprint”, the purpose of the second round of interviews was two-fold: (1) to further refine our understanding of IDO (a construct that emerged from round 1 interviews), and (2) to obtain feedback on the viability, validity, and practicality of our proposed framework, ensuring that is flexible and adaptable across time and circumstances.

Overall, interviewees expressed enthusiasm for our framework and the insights it could offer to organizations (e.g., “*this framework that you are building, it's very good, and it's going to help make a lot of products successful*”). They also provided constructive feedback that informed some refinements (e.g., reflect a stronger focus on disability inclusion as the current industry imperative, change some long-term outcomes to short-term, and vice-versa).

To further validate the framework, we conducted a third-round interviews with new respondents, leaders in disability inclusion and accessibility, to explore emerging questions and corroborate model findings. Our final conceptual model (Figure 2) draws from all three interview phases, supplemented by additional secondary data.

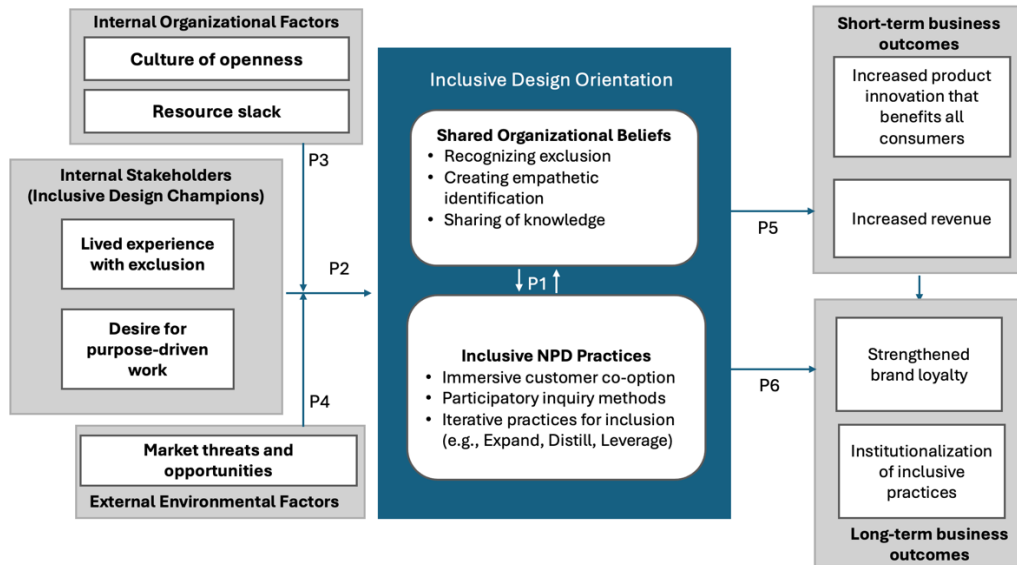
Additional data and observations

Our research team also spent several months reviewing and compiling secondary and archival reports to supplement the insights from our interviews, enhancing the validity of our research (e.g., Berry et al. 2024). Specifically, we (1) created a database of inclusive design products and practices from popular/business press articles assembled over a period of several months on industry practice related to inclusive product or service design and/or accessibility from Lexis Nexis/Nexis Uni/LinkedIn sources between 2016 to 2024, that we content coded to identify the industry, organization involved, product/service, marginalized group and a brief description, (2) compiled information on inclusive design and/or accessibility practices of more than 20 companies by examining the content on their websites on inclusive design and/or accessibility practices, reports and examples/cases provided by our interviewees as well as publicly available reports, and (3) obtained transcripts of (a) publicly available videos on inclusive design practices featuring key practitioners, and (b) attended and obtained the transcripts of four online panel discussions and two day-long online summits on inclusive design.

In addition, one of the authors visited the Google Inclusive design lab (London) and Microsoft Inclusive design lab (Seattle) to gain an immersive and deep understanding of inclusive design implementation and inclusive design practices in action. The database and reports support our study observations that (1) Disability inclusion has become a key industry priority, given its strong intersection with aging, minority communities, and the fact that it

represents the only group anyone may become part of at some point in life, and (2) While inclusive design efforts span a range of consumer-centric businesses, technology firms are increasingly at the leading edge of accessibility and inclusive design.

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework



Inclusive Design Orientation (IDO)

Definitions

We began our interviews by asking some variation of the question: what does inclusive design mean to you? In keeping with TIU research (Zeithaml et al. 2020), our goal was to examine how practitioners conceptualized and discussed inclusive design. We found that respondents used the term broadly, referring not only to a design philosophy, but also to the processes and product development approaches that flow from this philosophy. In other words, our interviewees discuss inclusive design both as a mindset and a practice.

This insight revealed that adopting inclusive design depends on two inter-related dimensions- cultivating a shared belief and engaging in practices that support this belief. Drawing on these

practitioner theories and insights, we develop the new construct of *inclusive design orientation* (IDO). We define IDO as the extent to which members in an organization (1) share the belief that designing with a diverse set of consumers needs in mind, including those of underserved or historically overlooked populations is an organizational imperative, and (2) engage in product design and development practices that align with this belief.

Interview data vividly illustrate this orientation. One manager emphasized the moral foundation of inclusion: *“first and foremost, it's a human imperative because it's the right thing, doing the right thing for society and your audience that you serve.”* Another echoed this sentiment, *“100% of my team, yes, we are fully committed to that.”*

It appears that IDO develops gradually and diffuses throughout the organization over time. We thus characterize IDO as a continuum, not a dichotomous construct; reflected in our phrasing “the extent to which” in the definition. Organizations may vary in their position in this continuum depending on how widely this belief system is shared and how deeply the corresponding practices become embedded in the NPD process. IDO thus comprises of two mutually reinforcing dimensions- the belief that inclusion is an organizational imperative and the translation of that belief into NPD practices, forming the feedback loop illustrated in Figure 1.

To establish IDO as a unique construct, we distinguish it from similar and/or related constructs such as market orientation, ecological responsiveness and social profit orientation (in terms of their definitions, focus, antecedents, impact, and potential challenges) in Web Appendix Table WA6. Next, we elaborate on the two facets that comprise the IDO construct.

Shared organizational beliefs

The insights obtained through the interviews and supplemental observations of secondary data described earlier unveiled an intentional creation of a belief system that centers on

promoting inclusion by recognizing exclusion, creating empathy with excluded groups, and sharing knowledge and creating awareness. We discuss these key elements of shared organizational beliefs next.

Recognizing exclusion. First, managers underscored that inclusive design started with acknowledging and understanding that exclusion exists. Designers typically design based on their own lived experience (a designer-centric approach) or for users whose needs are familiar and similar to their own (Patrick and Hollenbeck 2021). Thus, the first step in any inclusive process is recognizing who is being excluded. While this may seem obvious, interviewees emphasized that this process is quite difficult for managers (see also Patrick and Shulman 2024). Exclusion is not intentional, and thus managers often are not even sure what they are looking for. To overcome this, some interviewees suggested the practice of **provocative questioning** to draw attention to consumers whose needs might be overlooked. For instance, as one interviewee said, *“it is a journey to be more mindful about who is being excluded and being more mindful as an organization. I think there’s perhaps a new deliberate intention that we should have before we begin anything, before we even map what our process or work plan should be...Who’s been excluded? Who are we intending to serve?”* Other interviewees suggested creating a **coalition of the willing**, to help advocate for inclusive design. For instance, an interviewee from the third round of interviews noted her difficulties in advocacy *“sometimes it is hard to always be that champion. It can be tiring to keep hammering down doors and trying to get folks to listen, and trying to create buy-in, and trying to convince folks that it is the right thing to do day in and day out. And so, we try to partner with folk so that they can also do that in their departments and be that peer-to-peer information sharing so it's not just us.”*

Creating empathetic identification. A second component of a shared belief system involves cultivating an empathetic identification with the consumer's unmet needs and experiences of exclusion. If a manager is pressured to be compliant with accessibility regulations, they are likely to do only the minimum required by law. In contrast, our interviewees emphasized the importance of going beyond the minimum required and identify the mechanism of **storytelling** to motivate stakeholders. This insight is congruent with related research where storytelling is used to generate empathy by uncovering the reality of living with a permanent disability (Trevisan 2017). Within organizations, these stories shared by internal champions are often reiterated in various ways to echo their congruence with the brand's image (see evidence of storytelling through brand videos in WA2). As one interviewee noted, *"If a brand does not at its base level have some type of story arc that is based on moral values that employees of the brand can stand behind, that designers of the brand can stand behind, that consumers can stand behind...it's not going to have a value connection like other brands."*

Sharing of Knowledge. The third element is creating a culture of learning by actively sharing knowledge, tools, and best practices across teams and functions that goes beyond mere compliance to accessibility regulations and towards making inclusive design an organizational imperative. Knowledge sharing enables individuals to have (often difficult) conversations about inclusive design and secure buy-in from key stakeholders. As one interviewee noted: *"That's a really important element, I think, of inclusive design in general, is the education part, and making teams, hiring teams, CEOs, CFOs, [who] really understand why it's important and how it can just be integrated into what they're already doing, but in a more efficient way."*

We also observed that awareness diffuses not only within the organization but across individuals from different industries, firms and business units. IDO is different from other

organizational mindsets in that, many organizations seem eager to adopt an “open design” mentality (Maier et al 2025) to help inclusive design gain a strong foothold in the industry, rather than view it as a competitive advantage. For example, Microsoft’s employees were frequently identified in various interviewees for sharing ideas that have energized the industry. Microsoft outlines its beliefs and practices in detail on their website and hosts an inclusive design summit which has been held annually for the past 15 years wherein individuals from other organizations and advocacy groups are invited.

Inclusive NPD Practices

The second component of IDO is the translation of shared beliefs into new practices. We specifically asked our interviewees about practice(s) they followed to reorient their new product design processes to create inclusive products. We identify below the common themes that we uncovered. Our interviews revealed that inclusive design operates as an iterative cycle: organizational beliefs shape practices, practices generate new beliefs, and as beliefs evolve, so too do practices—creating a reinforcing feedback loop illustrated in Figure 2.

Immersive customer co-option. Guided by a core tenet of the disability movement “Nothing about us, without us,” practitioners affirmed that inclusive design requires co-opting excluded consumers right from the start of the NPD process. Many interviewees observed that accessibility is often tacked on (often for compliance purposes) at the tail end of the traditional product development process. Then, the product team might just seek a quick fix just before the product goes to market. Instead, several ID practitioners spoke about the concept of “day one inclusion” for co-opting excluded consumers into NPD processes from the very beginning, rather than as an add-on afterthought invoking a baking metaphor for this practice: “*you can't bake the cake well if you don't have the eggs, and you can't add eggs later on as an afterthought.*”

Managers noted that this practice requires *“including those voices and perspectives from the beginning of the design process and really integrating it into not just the finished product and the way that the product works, but also into the way that processes [are] done as well. Are you including those people as you're doing user research testing, are you making sure that those perspectives are being thought about when you're coding or designing?”*

Industry experts similarly highlight early collaboration with excluded individuals, non-profit and other partnering organizations as being beneficial in engineering products early in the process to meet diverse needs and considerations. They also note tensions with proprietary design considerations triggered by traditional closed innovation processes. These insights echo research on crowdsourcing, co-creation and lead users (for example, Allen et al. 2018; von Hippel 1986) but our findings suggest that IDO involves a deeper relational process wherein excluded users are seen as partners from beginning to end. As one manager noted, *“Can we co-create together? Can we drop the “I'm observing you” or “I'm designing for you” to “can you just design with me,” and give people some autonomy and license to co-create to find a better path.”*

Participatory inquiry methods. Managers noted that organizations with IDO often wrestle with the question: How do I reach and understand excluded consumers? Interviewees readily recognized that traditional marketing research methods, such as traditional surveys and historical customer data, are ineffective, because excluded consumers are often not captured in these data. To ensure that design decisions are informed by the lived realities of those typically excluded from mainstream research, companies need to consider participatory inquiry methods, which we define as grassroots, qualitative research approaches that actively engage excluded or marginalized consumers in the process of understanding their experiences, needs, and barriers.

Grounded theory techniques that utilize personas, in-person interviews, or digital diaries, and mixed methods approaches where ethnographic inquiries are matched with observational data can highlight important needs that might otherwise slip through the cracks. For example, a manager noted it is “*important . . . to be embedded with the community...I need to meet people, get into this network, talk to folks because that’s where you get the ideas, the innovation, that’s where you see the mismatches.*”

However, challenges may arise even in these processes. One UX researcher noted in a podcast interview the challenge they had the first time they conducted in-person research sessions with participants who were hard of hearing; it was difficult for the participants to follow them (the speaker), operate the technology, and watch the interpreter at the same time. The learning was to not to try do all at once, but to design a sequence: first read out the instructions, then have the participants watch the interpreter, and then do the demo and then offer feedback and explanation. Therefore, there is a need to iterate and learn from the research experience while working on design approaches with participants who have diverse needs.

Iterative practices for inclusion. A challenge voiced by managers that we interviewed and reiterated in online interviews and panel discussions is that managers feel overwhelmed with trying to design a product for everyone in the first attempt given the broad spectrum of human experiences. A recurring sentiment is that while this is a great goal, it is difficult, in fact, almost impossible, to meet the needs of all possible consumers in a single attempt. Managers often need to prioritize certain groups initially, such as older adults or visually impaired individuals based on feedback, group size or potential for positive impact. Rather than striving to include all groups simultaneously, organizations can adopt design processes that balance innovation with efficiency. A key takeaway from the interviews is that inclusion is best pursued as an iterative

journey, not a one-time achievement. We describe this approach as a form of **design kaizen**, building on the continuous improvement philosophy, whereby inclusion is never “done,” but continually deepened through reflection, testing, and adaptation.

Iterative practices for inclusion refer to the continuous improvement of products, services, and organizational processes to expand accessibility, usability, and relevance for an ever-wider range of consumers over time. We outline three illustrative strategies that we identified in our interviews to that can be adopted to broaden the impact of inclusive design to include more consumer groups.

First, *expansion of product options*. This approach starts by developing a basic version of the product with a focus on meeting one set of unmet needs. After the product is designed to meet these needs of this group, other needs are considered by adding expandable selections. These often take the form of product options that can be turned off or on based on the preferences or needs of the user. One manager explained this process as such: “*For my product, the approach what I will take is expandability.... It's not one-size-fits-all...I have this basic (version) ready for everyone and then we will expand it through different experiences for different abilities. I'll give you a simple example. Our watch is a basic smart watch for small kids, 2 to 11 years...[some] cannot read well. They are still learning. So think of [it] this way, if I bring in a voice to text, a text to voice ability on the watch. If you can turn on the watch to be in a mode which can start reading what is written in text... It will be helpful for those (small) kids as well as dyslexic kids...[Or the] visually impaired.*”

Second, *distill core experiences*. To tackle the challenge that due to the substantial diversity in needs, there is no one group that is ideal to target, some product managers advised distilling core customer experiences that emphasize the common and most important inclusive aspect of

product usage that overlaps in various use-case scenarios. This logic of distilling core experiences – by finding common stages and situations that similar, yet different, customers find themselves in – is used by Microsoft (specifically their Persona Spectrum) to justify the business case for their products. By designing for a range of customer experiences, the product can be designed to meet the core needs of multiple groups, as an executive noted: *“actually looking at this one case can cover lots of many different cases...understanding what are the main barriers that people experience ...with few different diverse groups or diverse customers and seeing if there is an overlap.”* In the recruitment process, one piece of advice is to *recruit for barriers* (e.g. respondents who report they have motor or vision barriers while playing video games) rather than for specific disabilities (because every individual disability is uniquely experienced).

Third, *leverage intersectionality*. Inclusive design acknowledges the overlaps between disability, gender, race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, neurodiversity, etc. The term “intersectionality” was coined by Crenshaw (1991, p. 1244) to describe “the various ways race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of black women’s employment experiences.” Praslova (2022) points out that historically, organizations often approach inclusion sequentially: “gender this year or two, race next, then sexual orientation, and maybe someday disability and age.” However, sequential inclusion leaves out people at the margins and those who straddle different groups. The recommendation therefore is to consider intersectionality. For instance, one respondent recommended a focus on disabilities due to the natural intersectionality that disability affords: *“If they focus on disability, they're going to hit into women, they're going to hit people of color, it's going to intersect more than just going after someone for gender, or for race. That's what they've learned, that if they focus on disability, it's one in four, and then they*

can home in on that.” Product managers can cover multiple excluded minority groups by focusing on the intersection of these groups.

Taken together, IDO emerges through the mutual reinforcement of shared organizational beliefs about inclusion and the enactment of inclusive design practices. Formally, we propose, **P1:** An inclusive design orientation develops when shared organizational beliefs about inclusion and inclusive design practices are reciprocally enacted and reinforced.

Next, we outline the antecedents, consequences, and moderators of IDO.

Antecedents: Drivers of Inclusive Design Orientation

Our interviews made it clear that people are at the heart of IDO. We find that individuals and groups of employees – from senior managers to frontline staff – champion inclusion motivated by their own lived experiences and desire for purpose driven and meaningful work². We describe each of these antecedent factors next. We note that organization-level factors can facilitate IDO adoption, but these are not enough to ignite the IDO engine. Instead, as we will later discuss, we categorize organization-level factors as moderators that can either work to hinder or facilitate the adoption of IDO.

Lived experience with exclusion

Based on our interviews, we define *lived experience with exclusion* as the extent to which individuals, either personally or through supporting a close other, encounter marginalization or exclusion from products and services due to identity-related attributes that differ from those of

²This is consistent with prior research which finds that internal champions often spearhead organizational change processes, but their motivations might differ. For instance, Gebhardt, Carpenter and Sherry (2006) find that organizational change towards a market orientation is driven by a few powerful stakeholders who recognize an external threat – the loss of competitive advantage – by not adopting a market orientation and who perceive the firm’s existing culture to be a major impediment to change.

mainstream consumers. In many of the organizations we studied, IDO was initiated by individual agents of change – who we label *inclusive design champions*. These champions are motivated by their own life experiences as members of excluded groups or by the experiences of those close to them (e.g., children). Their lived experiences of marketplace exclusion and knowing what it feels like to be an edge consumer fostered a strong commitment to advancing inclusive design.

Moreover, we observed that when there were a greater number of employees within the organization who also shared similar lived experiences with exclusion, the efforts to promote inclusive design tended to be more effective. For example, Satya Nadella, the CEO of Microsoft who made accessibility a core part of the company's business model (Casey 2020), was partly driven by his personal connection to disability. Nadella emphasizes that “accessibility is a result of inclusive design and that it enables the over one billion people with disabilities to participate in modern society.” Similarly, one interviewee explained, “*[It] starts with people...how it moves the needle is oftentimes there are individuals within the diversity and belonging space, or the diversity, equity, and inclusion space...there may be individuals internally that want to be able to champion that. But oftentimes, it doesn't start with allyship. It starts with individuals internally that have a disability.*”

Desire for purpose-driven work

IDO is also fostered by a desire for purpose-driven work which we define as the extent to which stakeholders seek meaning in their work- specifically, when they are engaged in work that offers value to society and serves a higher purpose beyond self. We find that these champions are often motivated by the need to integrate personal and work identities, making the advancement of inclusion not just a professional responsibility, but a personal mission. As one interviewee explained: “*When I look back at my career [I want] to say, ‘The field that I worked in is in some*

way better because of the work that we've done.' That it's not a sandcastle. I spent my 30- or 40-years building sandcastles and I turned my back and it's all gone, and back into the sea... So, that's the part that resonates with me. I want to feel like there's something that's making things better for a larger population of people, by my engaging in this work."

The insight that IDO is grounded in purpose and reflects the identity of individuals within the organization distinguishes it from other organizational transformation processes. Our research suggests that transforming the NPD process to develop inclusive products rarely begins with the profit motive or a drive to outperform rivals in the marketplace. Instead, it reflects a deeper aspiration to improve the marketplace for all consumers.

Individuals with this intrinsic motivation are the ones able to persist through the difficulties of creating awareness about inclusive design and create the mindset shift needed. These champions view inclusive design, not only as good business, but as a moral imperative: *"that's just something that I need as a human being, as a person who became disabled and has thought a lot about it. I need that sense of connection with other people with disabilities. And I get that by listening to them and understanding challenges and barriers but also understanding how resilient [they are] ...even in a world that doesn't want them to thrive all the time. So that's just something I need."*

To summarize, we propose,

P2: Organizations with a higher prevalence of internal stakeholders (inclusive design champions) (a) whose internal motivations stem from lived experiences with exclusion, and (b) who have a desire for purpose-driven work, are more likely to adopt an inclusive design orientation.

Moderating Factors

Our study also uncovered critical forces that can enable or constrain IDO: External environmental conditions (i.e., market threats and opportunities) and internal organizational factors (i.e., culture of openness and resource slack). While environmental forces lie outside a firm's direct control, internal factors can be strategically managed to support IDO adoption.

External Environmental Factors: Market Threats and Opportunities

The literature defines managers' perceptions of threats and opportunities as "the extent to which an organization's operating environment promises losses versus gains" (Voss et al. 2008, p. 151). Our findings suggest that IDO champions gain traction when external pressures, particularly regulatory mandates like the American Disabilities Act (ADA), or more recently, the WCAG standards 2.1 or the 2025 European Accessibility Act, are viewed as non-negotiable. Many interviewees described compliance to these standards as table stakes for brands today and warned that failure to comply could elicit consumer and regulatory backlash and serious legal repercussions. As one interviewee noted, "*external pressure can be incredibly motivating for a company to realize we need to respond in some way, shape, or form.*"

At the same time, champions are more effective when their efforts to advocate for inclusive design are aligned positively with perceived opportunities in the environment, such as shifting demographic, societal and market trends. For example, one interviewee captured this by saying: "*there's generational paradigms, there's diversity paradigms, there's globalization. Realize your audience is shifting under your feet, and you may not even realize it.*" Another emphasized the ethical considerations of the emerging generation as: "*The new generations that are entering the workforce, the designers...have an ethical drive that is distinctive and exciting...they just feel very strongly about inclusivity. I think to them, including people with arthritis is table stakes and*

including people who have been systemically kept out of participating economically and otherwise in our societies globally are what they're most passionate about and champion." We observed that in the presence of these strong perceived opportunities (threats), champions are less constrained by the potential risks of shifting customer focus or product development initiatives. Hence,

P3: The lesser (greater) the level of perceived threats (opportunities) in the external environment, the stronger the positive association between internal stakeholder (inclusive design champion) motivations/desires and the adoption of an inclusive design orientation.

Internal Organizational Factors: Culture of Openness and Resource Slack

A recurring insight from our interviews is that while inclusive design is often viewed favorably by the stakeholders, the capacity to embed it into practice, especially in new product development, is frequently constrained by organizational culture of openness and the availability of resources. Although these factors may not directly influence IDO adoption, they either enable or hinder the efforts of champions.

Culture of Openness. A critical factor highlighted across interviews was the important role leadership can play in fostering a culture of openness, which we define as the extent to which organizational leaders promote open communication, transparency in decision-making, and authenticity in behavior. Prior research on inclusive culture (Ortlieb and Sieben 2014) similarly emphasize openness to individuals with diverse backgrounds and different circumstances.

As an illustrative example, Brian Chesky, CEO of Airbnb, argues that for a business to be successful, it needs a culture of belonging, reflected in Airbnb's mission is for 'create a world where anyone can belong anywhere' (Amponsah 2023). Our findings suggest that organizations

led with such openness are more likely to adopt inclusive design, since it requires welcoming consumers who are different from traditional norms.

As one interviewee explained, *it starts from internal culture and what the company stands for and overall principles of the leadership, and they should come from the top, from the leaders.*” In another interviewee, when asked where the idea to send managers to an intensive six-week inclusive design executive training class came from, the respondent noted: *“Our former boss...wanted to have something about inclusivity taught at [company]. At least that's what he told me. He was sort of prodding to get it to happen... [name] was a very big supporter of doing inclusive product management.”*

Resource Slack. In the strategic management literature, resource slack refers to “resources available to the firm above-and-beyond those necessary to meet immediate business requirements, fund ongoing programs, or meet explicit objectives” (Herold, Jayaraman, and Narayanaswamy 2006, p. 373). In the case of IDO, resource slack can take the form of time, skilled employees, access to employee resource groups (ERGs), and/or flexible budgets that allow for training and experimentation.

Managers noted that some of the biggest challenges they faced were time or resource constraints that hindered them from making any substantial changes to typical processes. Embedding inclusive design into NPD can sometimes seem like ‘one step forward, two steps back’ because the organization (team) had to slow down the process while it struggled to redesign it. When asked about challenges to inclusive design, one manager said: *“time of delivery or go to market time is now, it's a big question....So right now what I'm seeing that would be a challenge for us product managers to figure out the balance where we can go to our leaders and say, hey, we are adding these steps.”* Another manager pointed out: *“none of us have*

unlimited resources, you do need to prioritize...be very intentional...Because it's an iterative process, and you kind of have to prioritize it with the metrics in mind.” The interviews highlighted that organizations willing to use excess resources to invest in new NPD processes, training new hires, providing incentives or adjust the pace of the R&D process enough to redesign it are more likely to adopt IDO. One individual noted: *“Individuals may all be trained on these wonderful ways to incorporate inclusive design, but time constraints, team constraints, money constraints are all going to start to come into play, where they kind of shrug their heads and they're like, ‘Well, this isn't part of our standard process, and so I just need to get this done...I don't have the time to do this.’”*

In sum, culture of openness and resource slack represent organization-level moderators that catalyze or hinder the work of champions in fostering IDO. Thus, we propose:

P4: The greater the culture of openness and resource slack in the organization, the stronger the positive association between internal stakeholder (inclusive design champions) motivations/desires and the adoption of an inclusive design orientation.

Business Outcomes of Inclusive Design Orientation

Based on insights from the interviews, we theorize that an inclusive design orientation can improve business outcomes. Our interviews, as well as observations from practice (see Web Appendix tables WA1 and WA2), highlight important tangible benefits of IDO. Our interviews revealed important short- and long-term outcomes for companies, which we describe next.

Short-term Business Outcomes

Increased product innovation that benefits all consumers. Inclusive design fosters product innovation that enhances the usability and overall experience for a broad spectrum of consumers,

regardless of their abilities. Respondents emphasized that while inclusive design processes served the unmet needs of previously excluded consumers, they also led to generate benefits for all consumers, a phenomenon known as a “curb-cut effect”, e.g., sidewalks with curbs designed for wheelchair uses but also benefit people riding bikes and parents with strollers. Such innovations improve customer satisfaction, empowerment, and well-being. One interviewee noted: *“I truly believe that my team’s insights and the way in which we can actually help improve the product is more about innovation and helping teams to actually just make things better.”* Therefore, as summarized in the Appendix Table 2, inclusive design should not be viewed as a type of segmentation rather as a catalyst for widespread product improvement.

Importantly, the strategies (life hacks) used by excluded consumers can be a rich and untapped source of innovative ideas. For example, one manager noted that, *“the folks that I encounter and talk with have really clever ways to live and exist in the world, even in a world that doesn’t want them to thrive all the time... disabled people [are] the original life hackers...like this person is a nearly blind videographer and they’ve figured out how to hack our technology...and we can make the product so much easier.”* By observing these “life-hacks,” firms can generate solutions with widespread benefits. For example, Herbal Essences introduced tactile labelling of bottles, inspired by a hack that blind consumers use, pasting chewing gum or putty on bottles, to distinguish shampoo from conditioner (Reynolds 2021).

Increased revenue. Based on the insights from our interviewees and secondary data, we propose that the adoption of IDO will be associated with an increased revenue from new and mainstream markets, products, and collaborations. For instance, one thought leader who we interviewed noted that *“Currently while people with disabilities makeup a significant portion of the general public. They’re vastly underrepresented in corporate branding, people with*

disabilities represent a considerable share of the consumer market. According to the American Institute for Research, working age people in the United States have \$490 billion after-tax disposable income, this represents significant market share, and an amazing opportunity for businesses to tailor their branding towards people with disabilities.” This potential value is congruent with industry data that suggests that excluded customers represent a large potential income stream for businesses. For instance, ThisAbles was conceived by IKEA in 2019 and realized with the help of two non-profit organizations, Milbat and Access Israel. The goal was to create user-friendly products for disabled people where a regular IKEA product was made accessible using an “add-on product” that was made available for free in Ikea stores in 127 countries or via 3D printable downloads from Ikea’s website (Shah 2021). The ThisAbles campaign saw a 37% increase in sales for products that had adaptive add-ons, as well as a 33% increase in revenue (Eckler 2020). Marginalized consumers have money to spend, they are just waiting for brand that speak to them: *“That research and data connected to diversity, equity, and inclusion is starting to anchor in businesses to not turn away from those audiences, but rather turn towards them and say, look, these are loyal customers. These are people who have dollars to spend, either with us or with someone else.”* Consider Fenty Beauty’s commitment to inclusive design and its “Beauty for All” campaign. Fenty reportedly made \$100m in its first 40 days (Wingard 2019). In sum, as evidenced by these examples, there appears to be a strong business case for inclusive design.

Despite this, we observed that firms often find it difficult to accurately forecast the additional income of IDO initiatives because of the lack of data on excluded consumers, or how new innovations will impact traditional consumers. Initially, interviewees emphasized that financial outcomes usually will not serve as a strong enough motivation. It is usually after firms take a

chance that they find that the market was much larger than originally thought: *“a challenge for us product managers [is]to figure out the balance where we can go to our leaders and say, hey, we are adding these steps...these are the advantages that we get because of the lost timeline. So initially we were thinking there are only 10 million customers for this product. Now by doing this, we are opening it to another 10 million.”*

P5: Higher levels of inclusive design orientation are positively associated with short term business outcomes such as (a) increased product innovation that benefits all consumers, and (b) increased revenue.

Long-term Business Outcomes

Our study also uncovered additional benefits for the organizations that fostered IDO, many of which are likely to be realized in the long term. We highlight a few below:

Strengthened brand loyalty. Millions of historically excluded consumers are looking for brands that speak to them. These consumers are overlooked in the marketplace, despite their significant purchasing power. They tend to respond with deep loyalty when they encounter brands that make them feel seen and heard. As one manager noted: *“It’s like if someone’s been left out for a long time and you show them that you see them, that could be pretty powerful...I think it’s a perfect example of like, ‘We were invisible and now you see us and now I will buy your products...I’m going to buy all your stuff because you’re paying attention to me.’”*

Further, inclusive design also builds loyalty among allies and mainstream consumers who value a socially inclusive marketplace. When consumers observe a previously excluded loved one (child or sibling) being recognized in the marketplace, it tends to garner greater loyalty to the brand. As one manager put it: *“people want to buy from brands that they feel are doing a good job socially. So, though this brand might not be for me specifically, or this product might not be*

for me specifically when I see that they're doing something for a group that I believe has not gotten enough design or business attention, I want to support them."

Institutionalization of inclusive practices. We define institutionalization of inclusive practices as the extent to which organizations normalize and embed inclusive design processes within their NPD systems such that it becomes an organizational capability. This may be a slow process at first but can accelerate quickly. For example, one manager that we interviewed initially worked alone on IDO implementation. When we interviewed the manager again a year later, the team has grown from to nearly 25 people, and over half of their SKUs had inclusion built in. As these practices get normalized, eventually the goal is that "inclusive design" becomes just "design". As one interviewee put it: *"I don't think it needs to be like a value broadcast. I think if we have to do that, then we're not doing our job. Good design is often invisible...But if we're talking about inclusivity, as far as sight and hearing and ergonomics and usability in that sense, then we shouldn't need to label it."*

Over time, the institutionalization extends beyond individual firms to permeate the industry. Passionate advocates play a central role in this cross-firm diffusion of inclusive design practices, encouraging a participatory movement rather than the traditional purely competitive strategies. As one design expert put it, there is *"a sense of deep urgency about not wanting people to waste time replicating what has already been done and to build on the shoulders of others. And to promote the value in our extensive experience about participatory research in this field."* Some managers likened the diffusion of inclusive design to the trajectory of sustainability: *"I think it's going the same route as sustainability...Where it used to be that it's like, 'Oh, it's nice to have. It would be great to add it in at the end.' And I think now it's becoming a must-have and it's*

becoming a kind of table stakes. Right? So, if you don't have that, you're not in business."

Accordingly, we propose the following:

P6: Higher levels of inclusive design orientation are positively associated with long term business outcomes such as (a) strengthened brand loyalty, and (b) the institutionalization of inclusive practices.

General Discussion

According to the 2024 Global Economics of Disability Report, 1.6 billion people—22% of the world's population—live with a disability, representing an \$18.3 trillion market that *only* 4% of businesses actively serve. By 2050, one in six people will be over 65, and more than 2.5 billion will need assistive products, a figure expected to grow with global aging (Patrick et al. 2024). Reflecting this shift, Euromonitor has identified “inclusive for all” as a major global consumer trend (Angus and Westbrook 2020). Despite these demographic and market forces, little systematic research has examined how organizations can transform their traditional NPD processes to intentionally design and develop products that meet a wide range of user needs and are accessible, usable, and beneficial to a broad range of potential users.

To address this gap, we studied product managers, designers, consultants, and other inclusive design champions who have led or guided such transformations. Our goal was to build both a theoretical understanding and a practical blueprint for navigating the tensions inherent in adopting inclusive design. In doing so, we highlight the pivotal role of inclusive design orientation and its link to positive business outcomes. We next outline key theoretical contributions and managerial implications.

Theoretical Contributions

Our study introduces and conceptualizes inclusive design orientation (IDO) as a novel organizational orientation. Like market or social profit orientation, IDO provides a structured lens for understanding how inclusivity can be embedded in the product design and development process. We propose a comprehensive conceptual framework that characterizes IDO through its dual components of shared beliefs and embedded product development actions. This framework identifies antecedent conditions that foster the emergence of IDO, identifies enabling and constraining factors that influence its adoption, and articulates outcomes by linking IDO to both short- and long-term outcomes for the organization. Collectively, this framework positions IDO as a novel and distinct orientation that complements existing perspectives on marketplace inclusion of marginalized consumers, market orientation, and open innovation, while offering a new lens for understanding how inclusivity can be systematically embedded into product development processes.

Unlike traditional segmentation strategies that fixate on average consumers, or frameworks such as DARE that focus on consumer response to inclusive design, IDO centers on how organizations themselves develop capabilities to continuously widen their marketplace lens to co-opt edge consumers into the new product design and development process. Appendix Table 1 contrasts IDO with the DARE framework to highlight the distinctive contributions each brings to inclusive design research—IDO from a firm perspective and DARE from a consumer perspective. Appendix Table 2 contrasts IDO with traditional segmentation to highlight how these approaches may differ from a practice standpoint.

Our research contributes to multiple streams of scholarship. It extends work on consumer responses to perceived mismatches between their needs and usage and the way a product,

service, experience or platform is designed and/or delivered. Marketplace exclusion can trigger emotional and cognitive responses, leading to profound negative effects on well-being. Whereas this research stream examines design mismatches from the perspectives of excluded and vulnerable consumers, our research complements this stream by understanding about how socially responsive organizations can pivot to understanding and addressing these mismatches.

We also contribute to the growing scholarship around the development of organic theories in marketing (Berry et al., 2025, Gebhardt et al. 2006; Kohli and Jaworski 1990) by developing a conceptual understanding of IDO and the role it plays in the design and development of inclusive products. Specifically, we shed light on factors that enable inclusive design champions to spearhead a mind-set shift, pivoting from a traditional segmentation lens of designing for narrow and well-defined target markets toward innovation processes that benefit an ever-widening spectrum of consumers, while balancing the need for short-term sales and revenue goals with long-term loyalty and design-for-all practices.

We add to the growing literature on open design and innovation (e.g., Maier et al 2025, von Hippel 1986) by identifying how organizations can harness valuable ideas from overlooked or marginalized consumers. Importantly, we introduce the notion of *design kaizen*, a philosophy that emphasizes continuous, iterative improvement in the product development process. Rather than aiming to account for the needs of all excluded groups at once, this approach advances inclusivity step by step, steadily expanding access. This dynamic approach ensures that consumer input, intersectional needs, and product options evolve in tandem. Specifically, our research uncovers insights relating to iterative need discovery and inclusion, the identification of intersectionalities and expandability of product options.

By bridging these streams, IDO advances theory by positioning inclusive design as both an organizational orientation and a co-creative process, where marginalized consumers serve as vital sources of innovation. We point to multiple promising avenues for future research and highlight some of these opportunities in Table 2.

Managerial Implications

We began this research by articulating three challenges that constrain organizations seeking to pivot toward inclusive design or those unsure of where to begin. Here we circle back to those concerns and summarize the insights and actionable solutions we uncover in our research to overcome them and to spark meaningful change.

Shift in customer focus towards inclusion. Traditional new product development (NPD) processes rely on market segmentation to identify and target homogeneous groups of consumers. In contrast, an inclusive design approach intentionally broadens perspective to include “edge consumers”, who are often overlooked. We find that organizations can initiate the shift to inclusive design by *empowering inclusive design champions* and *formalizing their role* in shaping inclusive NPD practices. A critical step is to identify blind spots where consumers might be excluded. As Annie Jean-Baptiste, Google’s Head of Product Inclusion & Equity, advises: Always ask, “Who else?” (Jamie 2020). By neglecting to ask this question, marketers risk marginalizing consumers.

Our research thus identifies *provocative questioning* as a viable strategy to recognize exclusion. A third insight is to *gain a coalition of individuals* who create a sense of ‘shared’ beliefs by spreading knowledge via *empathetic storytelling*, educational and training days, design sprints, conferences, newsletters and employee resource groups.

Transformation of the NPD process. The pivot to inclusive design often exposes tensions within the NPD process. Traditional NPD is linear, optimized for efficiency, and focused on serving “average” consumers. Inclusive design, in contrast, is iterative and relies on continuous feedback and adaptability. We use the term *design kaizen*, drawing on the Japanese philosophy of kaizen or continuous improvement, to reflect this approach emphasizing small, ongoing refinements that expand inclusion over time. Examples uncovered in our research include *expanding product options, refining core experiences, and leveraging intersectionalities to capture diverse perspectives*. Rather than tacking on inclusion on at the end, we find that successful organizations practice “*day-one inclusion*”: co-opt edge consumers from the start, using grounded and participatory methods.

Balancing short-run objectives with long-term goals. Organizations often struggle to balance short-term performance metrics with long-term gains in innovation, market growth, and reputation. Embedding inclusive design requires patience; progress may feel like “one step forward, two steps back” as teams climb the learning curve. Champions play a critical role in educating colleagues on the potential size of excluded markets, while leadership must commit resources without insisting on immediate ROI. To sustain this shift, organizations must *establish new metrics and incentive structures* that track both internal (e.g., process improvement, employee engagement) and external (e.g., reach, usage, satisfaction) outcomes.

Our research highlights that successfully navigating these challenges relies on the *availability of resources, the support of top leadership* and a *culture of openness*. Employees are quick to notice when stated values do not align with leadership intent, and in such cases, inclusive efforts risk being reduced to mere legal compliance with minimal standards instead of creative endeavors to meet the diverse needs of all consumers. By contrast, a culture of openness fosters

psychological safety, ensuring that individuals from diverse backgrounds and with varying abilities are not only represented but also empowered to contribute authentic voices to the new product development process.

We identify a distinct opportunity to encourage employees to view inclusive design as aligned with their pursuit of purpose-driven work. Our findings highlight that inclusive design champions' motivation to engage in meaningful, purpose-oriented work is central to advancing IDO, yet such champions remain relatively few and far between. Most are individuals with lived experience of exclusion—those who, either personally or through close others, have confronted barriers to accessing products and services.

Future Research Directions

The IDO framework we present in this paper offers an architecture to make sense of the complex and evolving challenge of embedding inclusive design within organizations. In Web Appendix table WA8 we offer potential operationalizations of the key constructs proposed in this research which can serve as a starting point for future research. Notably, the goal of our research was not to define precise constructs, but rather to (1) provide a lens for understanding how organizations might adopt inclusive design and address the barriers that impede its adoption, and (2) stimulate future research to empirically examine the proposed relationships.

Table 2 summarizes the challenges and tensions that motivated us to engage in this research. It also provides a summary of some of the key insights that emerged to help alleviate these tensions and help firms pivot to a more inclusive NPD process. In the process of developing this work, gaps in our existing knowledge and future research questions constantly emerged. We believe that we have only scratched the surface in understanding IDO and the role it can play in

contemporary marketing organizations. To this end, Table 2 lists important questions for future research to address.

What we do know about IDO is that it is fueled by people. Indeed, inclusive design champions are at the heart of our IDO framework. What this means is that if we want to see more inclusive products in the marketplace, we need to identify, educate, train and empower inclusive design champions who can lead the way. To broaden this pool of champions, several interviewees underscored the importance of business education. Embedding inclusive design within marketing pedagogy can help prepare the next generation of marketers and product designers to enter organizations already attuned to exclusion and equipped with the mindset, tools, and practices detailed in this research. In doing so, inclusive design can be “normalized” as simply good design. As educators, each of us can bring these ideas into our classrooms, using case studies and examples such as those presented here as practical exemplars to help foster IDO among business students entering the workforce.

As Apple CEO Tim Cook noted, “Accessibility is a fundamental right, and we’re always pushing the boundaries of innovation so that everyone can learn, create, and connect in new ways.”³

Please access the supplementary web appendix [here](#)

³ https://twitter.com/tim_cook/status/1395074896791674885

Table 2: Challenges, Solutions and Future Research Questions

	Tensions/Challenges faced by Managers in Pivoting to Inclusive Design	Actionable Solutions from our Research	Questions for Future Research
Antecedents & Moderators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where do we begin? • Do we need/have resources in place? • Do we have leadership buy-in and support? • How can the current political/regulatory environment influence our efforts? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify (and empower) inclusive design champions - employees with a desire for purpose-driven work and/or having lived experience with exclusion. • Develop an organizational culture of openness. • Obtain organizational resources needed to foster IDO. • Be cognizant of external environmental factors that can affect IDO. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are ‘carrot’ (e.g., incentives) or ‘stick’ (e.g., regulations) measures more effective in developing an inclusive design orientation? • What factors (firm size, industry type, stage of product cycle, top leadership support financial resource availability, environmental trends) influence the time it takes for an organization to pivot to inclusive design? • How do different organizational structures (e.g., flat vs. hierarchical) or market position (e.g., market leader vs. follower) impact IDO adoption? • What role do middle managers play in translating top-level inclusive design strategy into practice? • How to empower and sustain the efforts of inclusive design champions?
Inclusive Design Orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is needed for the organization to pivot to inclusive design? • Does inclusion need to be prioritized from the get-go, or can it be an “add-on”? • How do we identify and work with the excluded or marginalized consumers? • Do we have to create infinite variations? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop practices like provocative questioning and empathetic identification. • Day one inclusion - inclusion integrated from the start of the NPD process • Employ grounded research and immersive research techniques to obtain insights throughout the design process. • Achieve inclusivity by a) expanding product options to meet unmet needs, b) distilling core customer experiences through journey barriers, c) leveraging intersectionalities. • Adopt a design kaizen philosophy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can champions more effectively advocate for inclusive design? • How does inclusive design diffuse across firms, industries and countries? What organizational, environmental and cultural factors spur ID diffusion across different contexts and over time and why? • How can firms ethically navigate data collection from marginalized communities? • How can intersectionalities amongst excluded consumers be better accommodated in the NPD process? How can users with invisible disabilities be better co-opted into the design process? • How can generative AI be used to simulate inclusive design scenarios before implementation? • What are the risks of algorithmic bias in inclusive design tools
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there a business case for inclusive design? • Do societal outcomes come at the expense of business outcomes? • How to justify – short-run costs for longer run benefits. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in product innovation that provides benefits for all consumers • Increase in revenue from a larger and more diverse customer base • Increase in brand loyalty • Institutionalization of inclusive practices, including cooperation across firms within an industry. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does IDO affect employee engagement and retention? • What other “soft” ROI metrics (publicity, reputation, etc.) can be expected from IDO? Are there cultural differences? • Are products that are created with co-opting excluded consumers more novel/innovative? Do they result in better financial performance? • How do ideas for new products and design generated by diverse teams differ (qualitatively and quantitatively) from those generated by homogeneous teams?

Appendix Table 1: Differences between DARE framework and IDO framework.

	DARE	IDO
Description	A framework to capture consumer responses to being excluded by the design of a product	A framework to guide organizations in their efforts to design inclusive products
Goal of Research	To introduce the concept of inclusive design to consumer psychology and present an emotional appraisal framework to understand how consumers respond to being included/excluded in the marketplace.	To provide understanding and insight to organizations about how they can shift away from designing for the “average” consumer toward intentionally engaging edge consumers whose experiences inspire innovations that can benefit all consumers, and to identify the business outcomes of this pivot.
Theoretical underpinning	Appraisal theory of consumer emotions	Develops new organic marketing theory
Key construct(s)	Mismatch (between user and product); Levels of Design (degree of mismatch)	Inclusive design orientation (IDO)
Managerial Implications	Could be applied by marketers to audit products/brands for level of inclusion and to calibrate their inclusion efforts. Implications peripheral to the goals of the paper.	Offers marketers a blueprint to transform the NPD to develop inclusive products, gives managers actionable insights to navigate common challenges and tradeoffs and underscores the value of co-creating with edge consumers. Implications central to the goals of the paper.
Conceptual basis	A conceptual paper that reviews existing research.	Theories in use approach with 27 in-depth interviews supplemented by secondary data from panel discussions, websites, podcasts, events and corporate white papers.

Appendix Table 2: Comparing Inclusive Design and Marketing Segmentation

Category	Segmentation Approach	Inclusive Design Approach
Definition and Implications	Views the market as multiple homogeneous segments based on shared preferences (e.g., Smith 1956; Brandt 1966). Enables targeting sub-markets with similar preferences resulting in clusters of consumers that respond similarly to tailored marketing mixes.	Recognizes exclusion from the start. Designs for a full spectrum of user diversity, creating solutions usable by all—including traditionally excluded groups.
Criteria for Strategy Success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifiability: Use of segmentation bases to identify distinct customer groups based on measurable traits • Substantiality: Target segments should be large enough to ensure profitability • Accessibility: Target segments be reachable via media/data • Responsiveness: Segments should be responsive to marketing efforts • Stability: Persistence of segments over time • Actionability: Guides marketing tactics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifiability: Requires immersive, iterative research • Substantiality: Driven by goals to benefit as many as possible, not just profit • Accessibility: Requires active outreach, ERG input • Responsiveness: Not a one-way street- co-creation from day one • Stability: Needs evolve iteratively • Actionability: Informs inclusive NPD strategies
Bases for Identification	<p>Observable: Culture, geography, demographics (Appel 1970)</p> <p>Unobservable: Needs, psychographics, values (Plummer 1974, Wedel and Kamakura 2000)</p>	Persona spectrum (Microsoft); intersectional identities; Consider universal needs across excluded groups (e.g., contrast, voice input, zoom)
Methodological Approaches	Quantitative techniques: cluster/conjoint analysis	Qualitative methods: ethnography, co-creation, open innovation, AI-enabled insights
Targeting strategies	Mass, differentiated, niche, or micromarketing strategies	Iterative targeting with scalable options; focuses on shared core experiences
Examples: Design Differences	E.g., Leftybook notebook for left-handed users only	E.g., Keyboards/matchboxes usable by both left- and right-handed users
Examples: Scope Differences	Niche products may exclude broader audiences (e.g., Braille books)	Designs with excluded users in mind to inform features that can be valuable to many, without aiming for a 'one-size-fits-all' solution. E.g., captions for the hearing impaired also benefit others.

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