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Examining the Impact of Employees' Mental Models on Organizational Citizenship Behavior in Iran Air Using Structural Equation Modeling

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to examine the impact of employees' mental models on organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) in the Iran National Airline (Homa). To achieve this objective, a survey research method was employed. Data were collected through standardized questionnaires that assessed mental models and organizational citizenship behaviors. These questionnaires were distributed among 380 managers and employees of Iran Air. Data analysis was conducted using SMARTPLS software and appropriate statistical measures such as Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE). By applying partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM), the causal relationships between independent variables and organizational citizenship behavior were tested. The results revealed that key factors—including self-efficacy, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, organizational culture, leadership support, organizational justice, the quality of internal communications, and motivational and reward systems—have a positive and significant impact on organizational citizenship behavior. Model validation indices such as Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and convergent and discriminant validity confirmed the quality of the constructs and the explanatory power of the model. The conceptual model accounted for more than 60% of the variance in organizational citizenship behavior, indicating a high predictive capacity of the examined variables.

Keywords: Employees' Mental Models, Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB), Iran National Airline (Homa)

Introduction

In recent decades, organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) has emerged as a critical construct in understanding how employees voluntarily go beyond their formal job descriptions to support organizational effectiveness. As global competition intensifies and service industries confront complex operational environments, organizations must cultivate conditions that encourage discretionary behaviors such as cooperation, knowledge sharing, and proactive problem-solving [1]. These behaviors—although not explicitly recognized by formal reward systems—are indispensable for improving service quality, strengthening adaptability, and sustaining long-term competitiveness [2]. In knowledge-intensive and safety-critical sectors such as aviation, where teamwork, innovation, and trust directly influence service performance and customer satisfaction, OCB becomes even more vital [3].

The conceptual foundation of OCB has evolved significantly since its original formulation, with research expanding into antecedents such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and psychological capital [4, 5]. Job satisfaction remains one of the most robust predictors of OCB, as satisfied employees are more likely to engage in supportive actions that benefit their colleagues and the organization as a whole [6]. Organizational commitment, defined as the psychological attachment

employees feel toward their organization, also plays a central role in shaping discretionary behaviors. When employees internalize organizational values and identify strongly with their institution, they are more motivated to act beyond formal obligations [2, 7]. Recent scholarship has also highlighted the relevance of affective commitment, which captures the emotional dimension of attachment, particularly in high-pressure and dynamic work settings such as aviation [8].

Another vital antecedent of OCB is psychological capital, encompassing self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience. Employees with strong psychological capital are better equipped to handle challenges, adapt to change, and demonstrate proactive citizenship behaviors [4, 9]. These positive psychological resources can mediate the effect of organizational support on OCB by fostering engagement and resilience in the face of demanding job conditions [5]. Moreover, leadership style significantly shapes the social and motivational environment in which OCB emerges. Inclusive and servant leadership, by providing fairness, empowerment, and developmental support, have been found to encourage employees to go beyond task requirements [10, 11]. When leaders demonstrate moral responsibility and authentic concern for employee well-being, the psychological safety and trust necessary for OCB flourish [12].

Within this context, mental models—deeply held cognitive frameworks through which individuals interpret and respond to their work environment—offer an especially promising but underexplored perspective. Mental models represent the ways employees make sense of organizational structures, roles, and processes, thereby shaping their behavioral intentions and discretionary contributions [13]. Inside-out mental models emphasize internal beliefs and assumptions, while outside-in models integrate external expectations, customer needs, and environmental change [13]. In organizations such as national airlines, where both safety and service excellence are paramount, employees' mental models can determine how effectively they collaborate, adapt, and take initiative in unpredictable operational conditions.

The role of mental models in fostering OCB is particularly relevant when considering the dynamic and high-stakes context of the aviation industry. Airlines must continually innovate to enhance safety, efficiency, and customer satisfaction while navigating economic volatility, international regulations, and technological disruption [3]. Employees who hold shared and adaptive mental models about organizational goals, leadership intentions, and teamwork processes are better positioned to respond constructively to change and exhibit citizenship behaviors that sustain service reliability and innovation [1]. Moreover, the digital transformation of global industries is reshaping organizational dynamics, making the alignment of mental models even more critical [14, 15]. In aviation, advanced digital systems—from predictive maintenance to passenger analytics—require not only technical adoption but also shared cognitive understanding among employees.

OCB research has increasingly highlighted mediating and moderating mechanisms that clarify how individual and organizational factors translate into discretionary behaviors. Engagement, for example, functions as a key psychological bridge: employees who feel energized and dedicated are more likely to enact OCB [7, 16]. Work engagement not only strengthens the link between affective commitment and OCB but also supports knowledge sharing and collaborative innovation [16]. In addition, trust—both interpersonal and organizational—is central to creating the psychological safety necessary for employees to go beyond their formal roles [15]. A climate of fairness and inclusion reinforces this trust, encouraging employees to contribute ideas, assist colleagues, and voluntarily participate in organizational improvement initiatives [6, 10].

Beyond internal psychological and cultural dynamics, broader contextual forces shape OCB as well. Economic turbulence and competitive labor markets challenge employees' sense of stability and loyalty, sometimes weakening their motivation to

engage in extra-role behaviors [2]. Conversely, organizations that invest in employee growth and foster meaningful work experiences can counter these external threats and maintain high citizenship engagement [16]. Similarly, corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and ethical business practices can strengthen the psychological contract between employees and employers, enhancing OCB by signaling alignment with personal and societal values [14]. In the digital age, CSR programs integrated with technological innovation reinforce employees' identification with the organization and willingness to go the extra mile [14].

Leadership approaches aligned with modern motivational frameworks also play a pivotal role in reinforcing OCB. Servant leadership, for example, encourages a culture of support and empowerment that positively influences teacher and employee performance while indirectly promoting OCB [11]. Similarly, inclusive leadership that fosters fairness, transparency, and psychological empowerment has been found to reduce perceptions of exclusion and stimulate constructive discretionary behaviors [10]. The integration of Herzberg's two-factor theory with OCB studies has also drawn attention, suggesting that meeting hygiene and motivational needs can foster loyalty and reduce turnover while indirectly reinforcing OCB [12].

Research in Asian and emerging market contexts adds important nuance to OCB theory, demonstrating how cultural and institutional factors influence the psychological and behavioral mechanisms involved [5, 17]. Studies on Indonesian nurses, for example, highlight how psychological capital and organizational support interact to promote OCB even in resource-constrained healthcare systems [4, 17]. Likewise, investigations in Vietnam and Indonesia show that engagement, trust, and CSR-driven identification play key roles in mediating the OCB process in manufacturing and service industries [14, 15]. These insights are valuable for the Iranian aviation industry, which faces both local and global pressures while striving to maintain high safety and service standards.

Despite the robust body of work on OCB, several gaps remain. First, while the influence of psychological and organizational factors such as job satisfaction, leadership, and engagement on OCB is well-documented [1, 5, 6], the role of employees' mental models remains relatively unexplored in applied contexts like aviation. Given that mental models underpin how employees interpret organizational strategies and respond to operational challenges, understanding their impact on OCB could unlock new strategies for workforce development and organizational learning [13]. Second, there is a need to integrate digital transformation and CSR considerations into OCB models, as technology adoption and social legitimacy increasingly shape employee motivation and discretionary contributions [14, 15]. Third, there is limited research on how OCB models validated in global contexts perform within Iran's unique socio-cultural and institutional environment, particularly in service-critical sectors such as aviation.

This study seeks to address these gaps by investigating the impact of employees' mental models on organizational citizenship behavior in Iran Air, employing structural equation modeling to capture complex relationships among psychological, organizational, and contextual factors.

Methodology

The present study employs a descriptive–correlational research design. In this investigation, the convenience random sampling method was used. This method is appropriate when access to the population members is difficult or when there is no precise list of the entire population. In this study, the statistical population consisted of the employees and managers of Iran Air (Homa), who were considered as clusters.

The data collection instrument in this research was a standardized questionnaire comprising three main sections: demographic information (including gender, age, education level, work experience, etc.) and the study variables measured using a five-point Likert scale. This questionnaire was specifically designed to measure the research variables. Its validity and reliability were confirmed using different methods, including face validity and content validity. For face validity, five professors and experts in the field of branding evaluated the questionnaire's appearance and, after necessary modifications, approved it. For content validity, Lawshe's coefficient and the indices of CVR (Content Validity Ratio) and CVI (Content Validity Index) were applied to assess the level of agreement among experts. The findings from CVR and CVI analysis demonstrated that the questionnaire had acceptable content validity, as all items were deemed suitable and relevant to the research topic by the experts.

The reliability of the questionnaire was examined using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which indicates the internal consistency among the items of the questionnaire. The results showed that Cronbach's alpha for all variables was above 0.8, indicating a high level of reliability for the measurement tool. These findings firmly establish that the questionnaire has strong internal consistency and measurement reliability.

Findings and Results

To analyze the relationships among the research variables and test the formulated hypotheses, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using the Partial Least Squares (PLS) approach was applied. This method is particularly suitable when data distribution is non-normal and the conceptual model is complex. In this study, the non-normality of the data distribution was confirmed using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test. Consequently, the PLS technique was selected as a robust and practical statistical modeling method, offering high accuracy and interpretability for non-normally distributed data. PLS is also capable of simulating complex relationships among variables in nonlinear models, making it highly recommended for applied and survey-based research involving multiple variables and complex structures.

In this study, SmartPLS software (version ...) was used for analyzing both the measurement and structural models. This software provides advanced capabilities to simultaneously evaluate relationships between latent variables (constructs) and observed variables (items). It also enables researchers to assess path coefficients, model fit indices, and factor loadings to validate the theoretical framework of the proposed model.

For evaluating the validity and reliability of the measurement models in Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), four main criteria were used, summarized as follows:

1. **Cronbach's Alpha (CA):** This coefficient measures the internal consistency of the variables. Its value ranges between 0 and 1, with values above 0.7 considered acceptable and those below 0.6 considered undesirable.
2. **Composite Reliability (CR):** This index provides a more accurate measure of reliability compared to Cronbach's alpha because it considers the indicator loadings. CR values also range from 0 to 1, and values above 0.7 are deemed acceptable; values below 0.6 are undesirable.
3. **Average Variance Extracted (AVE):** AVE assesses convergent validity, indicating whether the measurement instrument effectively measures the intended construct. An AVE value greater than 0.5 is required to confirm convergent validity.

4. **Rho Coefficient:** This coefficient evaluates the internal reliability of constructs and is considered more accurate than Cronbach's alpha. A Rho value greater than 0.7 is recommended.

Table 1

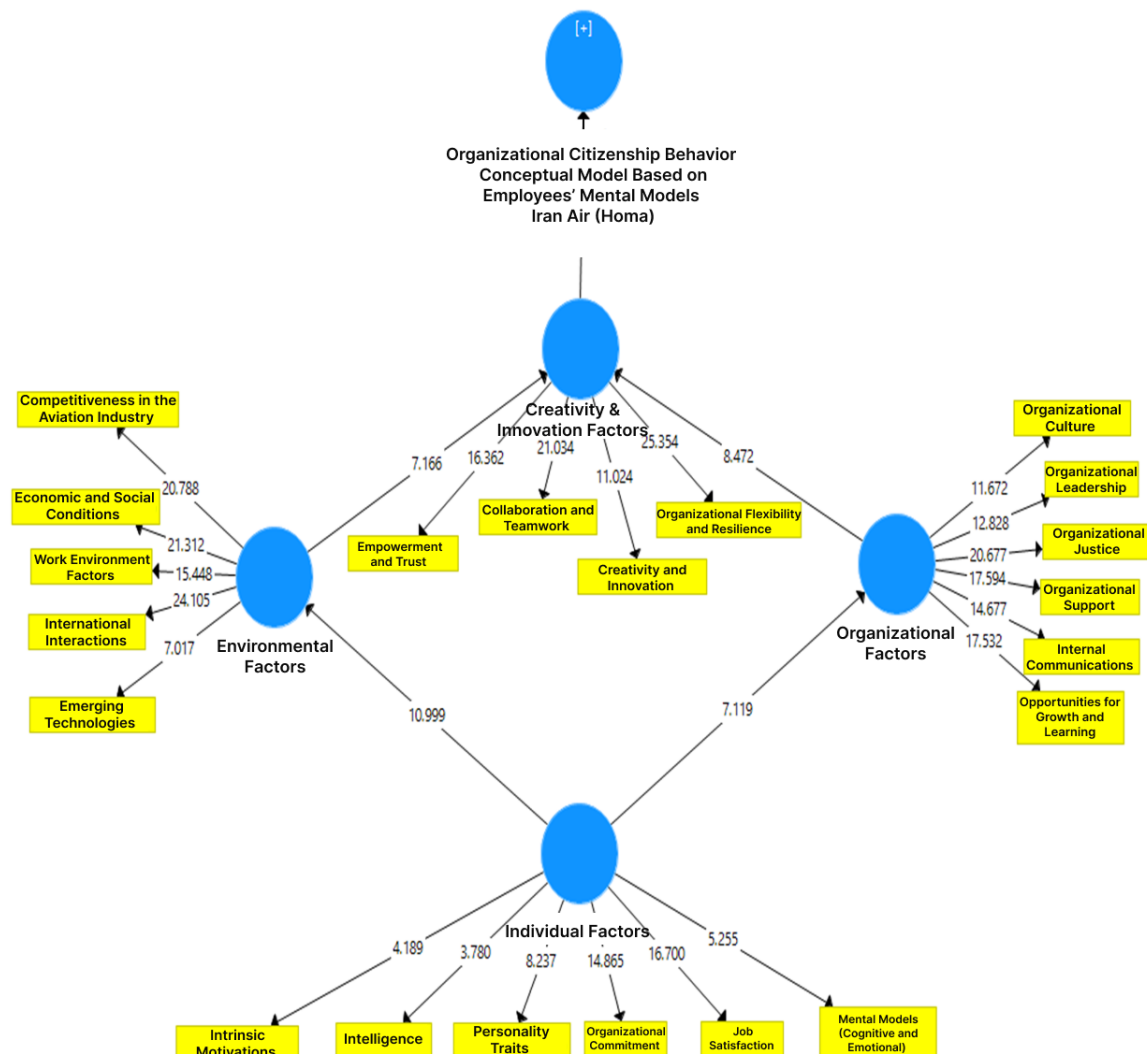
Convergent Validity and Reliability of Research Variables

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	AVE	CR	Rho
Individual Factors	0.772	0.569	0.797	0.795
Organizational Factors	0.773	0.569	0.841	0.774
Environmental Factors	0.715	0.510	0.806	0.746
Process Factors	0.780	0.520	0.724	0.788
Organizational Citizenship Behavior and Employees' Mental Models	0.735	0.589	0.825	0.747

According to the results presented in Table 1, Cronbach's alpha values for all variables were greater than 0.7, confirming their reliability. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were all above 0.5, indicating adequate convergent validity. Additionally, the Composite Reliability (CR) values were greater than both AVE and 0.7, confirming the reliability and validity of each construct. The Rho coefficients were also higher than 0.7, further supporting the internal consistency and measurement reliability of the constructs.

Figure 1

Overall Research Model in the Significance State



Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study provide robust empirical evidence that employees' mental models significantly and positively influence organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) within the context of Iran Air. Using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM), the findings confirmed that cognitive frameworks held by employees—shaped by their understanding of organizational goals, processes, and relational dynamics—are essential drivers of discretionary work behaviors. In particular, employees who possessed adaptive and integrated mental models about their roles and the broader organizational mission demonstrated higher levels of altruism, helping behavior, and initiative beyond their formal job descriptions. These results align with previous conceptualizations that mental models form the interpretive lens through which employees perceive organizational expectations and opportunities to contribute proactively [13]. When employees make sense of their work environment in ways that emphasize collective goals and shared responsibility, they become more likely to engage in extra-role behaviors that support organizational performance.

Furthermore, the study validated the influence of several psychological and organizational antecedents of OCB. Self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment emerged as strong predictors of mental models that promote OCB. This is consistent with earlier findings showing that psychological capital and affective commitment strengthen employees' identification with organizational values and willingness to contribute beyond prescribed duties [2, 4, 5]. Employees with higher psychological capital appear better equipped to adapt to complex aviation industry demands and maintain proactive, citizenship-oriented behavior even under pressure [9]. This echoes research suggesting that positive psychological states such as resilience and optimism create fertile ground for mental frameworks that support trust, engagement, and discretionary effort [4, 5].

The positive role of organizational support mechanisms—such as leadership support, organizational justice, effective internal communication, and motivational reward systems—was also strongly confirmed in this study. These findings are in line with evidence that inclusive and servant leadership cultivates psychological safety and fairness perceptions, encouraging employees to express extra-role behaviors [10, 11]. In high-stakes industries like aviation, where error reduction and service reliability are crucial, supportive leadership that communicates clear values and provides recognition seems to strengthen the cognitive alignment of employees with the organization's mission [10, 12]. Additionally, organizational justice plays a mediating role in building trust and fairness perceptions, which have been shown to be indispensable for sustaining OCB [6, 10]. The observed significant effects of internal communication quality reinforce previous research indicating that transparent and efficient information exchange fosters shared understanding and mental alignment, which in turn encourage voluntary cooperative behaviors [1].

The research also highlights the importance of engagement as an underlying mechanism through which mental models and psychological resources are translated into OCB. Employees with high engagement levels—marked by vigor, dedication, and absorption—appeared to enact their mental models into practical supportive behaviors. This is consistent with studies demonstrating that work engagement functions as a psychological bridge linking affective commitment and job satisfaction to OCB [7, 16]. When employees experience meaningfulness in their roles and feel empowered, their cognitive frameworks support an expanded sense of responsibility, making them more likely to assist colleagues, offer creative solutions, and

contribute to organizational adaptability [16]. Moreover, the presence of innovative and collaborative climates reinforced the translation of mental models into proactive actions, echoing findings that innovation-oriented environments empower employees to think and act beyond their formal job scope [14, 15].

A noteworthy contribution of this research is its demonstration that digital transformation and external competitiveness indirectly shape OCB through their influence on employees' mental models. The aviation industry faces rapid technological change, safety demands, and customer experience expectations, which require employees to develop adaptive thinking and learning-oriented mindsets. This observation resonates with studies in manufacturing and service sectors showing that digitalization and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives enhance employees' identification with organizational purpose and willingness to invest discretionary effort [14, 15]. By fostering shared cognitive frames about digital adaptation and social value creation, organizations can help employees translate complex change into meaningful action. For Iran Air, which operates in a volatile global market and must maintain competitive service standards, ensuring that employees understand and embrace digital and market-driven transformations appears crucial for sustaining OCB.

The findings also reinforce the relevance of cultural and contextual nuances in OCB research. Prior studies conducted in emerging markets, including Indonesia and Vietnam, have demonstrated that socio-cultural values, trust dynamics, and contextual pressures influence how employees interpret their organizational environment [5, 15, 17]. Our results suggest that in the Iranian aviation industry, similar dynamics apply: employees' mental models are shaped by organizational fairness, leadership behaviors, and the cultural emphasis on collective responsibility. These findings extend the applicability of global OCB frameworks to the Iranian context while highlighting the importance of cultural adaptation. Moreover, they support the assertion that OCB cannot be fully understood without considering employees' subjective interpretations of organizational life and their cultural predispositions [13].

Another significant implication concerns leadership development and managerial practices. The strong influence of leadership support and fairness perceptions on OCB underlines the importance of equipping managers with relational and inclusive leadership capabilities. Studies have shown that leaders who empower, communicate transparently, and show individualized consideration can cultivate trust and psychological safety [11, 12]. This research suggests that such leadership practices shape employees' cognitive frameworks, aligning them with organizational objectives and stimulating citizenship behaviors. Additionally, the role of mental models points to the need for leadership-driven sensemaking practices, where managers continuously clarify organizational purpose and help employees integrate changing strategic priorities into their personal work frameworks [13].

Finally, the study underscores that OCB is not only a byproduct of individual motivation but also an outcome of systemic alignment across psychological, cultural, and structural dimensions. Organizational citizenship is fostered when employees' internal beliefs (self-efficacy, commitment), social experiences (trust, fairness), and cognitive frames (mental models) converge to produce voluntary, prosocial behaviors. This aligns with contemporary integrative OCB research advocating multi-level approaches that combine psychological capital, leadership, and organizational climate [4-6]. By empirically confirming this interplay in the Iranian aviation context, the study contributes to refining global OCB theory and underscores the need to address both individual cognition and organizational environment simultaneously.

Despite the significant contributions of this research, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study adopted a cross-sectional design, capturing employees' perceptions and behaviors at a single point in time. Such a design limits the

ability to make causal inferences or assess how mental models and OCB evolve in response to organizational change or industry shocks. Second, data were collected through self-reported questionnaires, which may introduce common method bias and social desirability effects, particularly in a hierarchical and highly regulated industry like aviation. Although statistical checks such as reliability and validity analyses were performed, more objective measures of OCB (e.g., supervisor ratings or behavioral tracking) could strengthen future conclusions. Third, the research was confined to one airline—Iran Air—which may limit the generalizability of findings to other aviation companies or service organizations operating under different competitive, cultural, or technological conditions. Fourth, the sample composition included both managers and non-managerial employees but did not differentiate between occupational groups or hierarchical levels; this could obscure potential differences in mental model development and OCB expression across organizational strata.

Future studies could address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs to track how employees' mental models and OCB shift over time, particularly in response to digital transformation initiatives, leadership changes, or external crises. Incorporating multi-source data—including peer and supervisor assessments of OCB—would also provide a more nuanced and objective understanding of discretionary behaviors. Additionally, comparative research across different airlines, service industries, and national contexts would help clarify the role of cultural and environmental factors in shaping the relationship between mental models and OCB. Experimental or intervention-based studies could test the effectiveness of leadership development programs, communication strategies, and sensemaking workshops in shaping employees' mental frameworks and enhancing OCB. Future scholars might also explore the intersection of CSR, digital transformation, and mental models more deeply, investigating how ethical and technological narratives influence employees' discretionary engagement. Furthermore, integrating qualitative approaches such as interviews or cognitive mapping could enrich understanding of how mental models are formed and how they interact with organizational changes to impact OCB.

For practitioners and organizational leaders, the findings underscore the importance of investing in employee sensemaking and cognitive alignment. Managers should actively communicate organizational vision, strategic priorities, and digital transformation goals to help employees build coherent mental models that support adaptive and proactive behaviors. Leadership development programs should emphasize inclusive and servant leadership competencies that foster fairness, trust, and empowerment, creating the psychological safety necessary for OCB to flourish. Human resource policies could integrate psychological capital development—such as resilience training, self-efficacy coaching, and engagement-building initiatives—to strengthen the individual foundations for citizenship behavior. Moreover, internal communication systems should be designed to promote transparency and collaboration, ensuring that employees have the information needed to align their mental models with organizational objectives. Finally, aligning reward and recognition systems with citizenship-oriented contributions can reinforce discretionary efforts and create a culture in which going beyond formal roles is valued and celebrated.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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