

# Union Commitment: Setting into Oblivion or Rising in the Industrial Relations Landscape of India

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*In this digital age, trade unionism is on a descending path in most developed economies. This study has explored the factors contributing to union commitment in the pharmaceutical selling sector. This sector was chosen due to its growing importance in the Indian macroeconomic landscape. Further, we investigated how industrial relations climate moderated the relationship between the factors and the members' commitment. The empirical research draws on 376 data from a national craft union. The findings depict that procedural justice at the workplace and union effectiveness emerged as significant factors. The industrial relations climate partially moderated the relationship between union commitment and its determinants. The article contributes to the literature by unpacking the evolving industrial relations issues in the dynamic business environment.*

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## Introduction

Globally, trade unions have been encountering a relentless onslaught from the rise of the neoliberal economy for more than a decade. However, the Indian picture shows a degree of resilience. Extant studies have explored the prospect of union revival from the lens of socio-cultural factors, political opportunities, and legal frameworks in developing economies (Brown & Kai, 2017). The present study attempts to capture the micro perspectives, such as the members' commitment and the factors contributing to the potential union movement in the Indian industrial relations landscape.

While studying the employment relations aspect, a broad-brush approach might render less conclusive outcomes (Fairbrother & Warn, 2003). Therefore, the current study mainly focuses on

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the pharmaceutical selling sector in India, as the country enjoys a significant position in the global pharmaceutical arena. The pharmaceutical industry contributes to the nation's economy through export earnings and employment generation. It contributes around 8 percent to the nation's total merchandise exports and around 2 percent to India's GDP (RBI Bulletin, 2021). The market has been steadily growing over the last few years. The success of the particular industry partly rests upon the shoulders of the sales promotion employees.

The expansion of the Indian pharmaceutical industry accelerated the growth of its craft union, the Federation of Medical and Sales Representatives' Associations of India (FMRAI), a national craft union that has a reach to every state and every district of this vast nation.

It is of significant academic interest to search for the factors driving union commitment in this profession and the impact of members' commitment on the citizenship behavior toward fellow members.

With the structural changes in the labor market, the role of the service sector is gaining importance in the macro-economic picture of India (Majid, 2019). Few empirical researches focused on

trade unionism in the service sector (e.g. Sarkar & Charlwood, 2014). Therefore, the current work is designed to empirically validate the determinants of union commitment when the Indian industrial relations arena is about to witness the impact of new labor codes.

Besides, ambiguous findings on the climate of industrial relations (Snape & Redman, 2012) offer considerable scope for exploring the way industrial relations regulates the relationship between union commitment and its antecedents. In addition, past studies on Indian industrial relations have focussed mainly on macro-level analysis of econometric data to investigate the effects of labor market policies on industrial output and employment generation (Karak & Basu, 2020). The present study is based on a sample representing a multi-workplace setting of a particular occupation and capturing perceptions of the professionals.

### **Commitment to the Union**

Marxist belief holds that alienation of the workers from their workplace setting might lead to workers' participation in trade unions (Buchholz, 1978). Gordon and his colleagues (1980) proposed a theoretical framework and measurement tool for union commitment. The researchers subdivided union commitment into four dimensions: union loyalty reflecting a sense of pride and realization of its instrumentality, responsibility to the union, willingness to work for the union, and belief in unionism. Later studies pointing out the methodological issues with union commitment studies have suggested ex-

cluding belief in unionism dimension in future work (Bayazit et al., 2004). The other three dimensions have largely been used in later studies. It remains central to the present study: Under what conditions are medical sales representatives associating with the union?

### Procedural Justice

Procedural justice refers to the perceived fairness of policies and processes used to make organizational decisions. Equity theory (Adams, 1963) comes close to explaining the perception of fairness. It puts forward that people perceive a result as fair when their output-to-input ratio matches their referent group. However, in practice, there is often little information or almost no information available about the outcome of others. In such cases, people may use information about the procedure as a heuristic alternative to estimate the fairness of their outcomes (Bos et al., 1997). When employees perceive organizational treatment as fair, they feel valued in the group; they reciprocate it with an increased level of commitment (Colquitt, 2001). According to the mobilization theory (Kelly, 1998), a sense of workplace injustice prompts workers to unite and, later on, collective action. When workers attribute maltreatment to an agency, particularly the employer, they think it can be improved, and it enhances union commitment. However, the theory has reoriented the research direction, but it is drawn on a set of interconnected logical concepts rather than empirically verified. Few researchers have empirically explored the possibilities of cross-influence, i.e., if the percep-

tion of procedural justice at the workplace impacts union commitment (Johnson & Jarley, 2004). Thus it is proposed:

H1: Procedural justice at work will negatively impact employees' union commitment.

### Job Demands & Job Resources

The work environment can be classified under two heads: job demands and job resources. 'Job demands refer to physical, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort' (Demerouti et al., 2001). It may include workload or time pressure. Job resources refer to the physical, psychological, and social or organisational aspects of work that enable an employee to meet the target (Demerouti et al., 2001). Job demands and resource paradigms filled the gaps in job design and job stress theories. These two aspects of work generate two separate lines of processes. Job demand requires effort and energy from an employee and can cause exhaustion and burnout (Bakker et al., 2014). Researchers have noted that perceived deprivation and dissatisfaction with employment terms and conditions drive workers to unionize (Kelly, 1998). The literature also indicates that workplace stress causes low job satisfaction (Fairbrother & Warn, 2003). However, there are mixed results regarding the relationship between job satisfaction and union commitment. Job satisfac-

**Workplace stress causes low job satisfaction.**

tion is positively linked (Sarkar, 2012) and negatively linked (Davis, 2013) with union commitment.

Furthermore a few studies are related to union commitment and the job demand-resources paradigm. For the present study, the following dimensions of job demands are proposed:

**Management often imposes arbitrary sales targets and noncompliance, leading to punitive actions such as withholding wages, deductions, and others.**

*Workload.* Workload may include any factor that reflects the difficulty in completing a work (Bowling & Kirkendall, 2012). Often the time frame plays a crucial role in perceiving workload (Kyndt et al., 2013). For medical sales representatives, the workload can be defined as meeting the doctors, achieving the sales quota, reporting the sales figures on time, and so on (Saha, 2016). Management often imposes arbitrary sales targets and noncompliance, leading to punitive actions such as withholding wages, deductions, and others (FMRAI News, 2019). Hence it is hypothesized:

H2: Workload will positively impact members' union commitment.

The following dimension of job resource is proposed for the study:

*Job Insecurity.* Job security refers to an employee's psychological state, which varies with his or her expectation of continuity with the organization in the future

(Kraimer *et al.*, 2005). There are two key factors that impact employers' dealing with trade unions. First is the level of competition in the product market. The current pharmaceutical market is characterized by a high level of competitiveness, with more than three thousand players (India Brand Equity Foundation, 2020). At the same time, the labor market is very favorable to the firms; they recruit mostly science graduates as medical sales representatives, and it also does not require any special knowledge. It is quite evident that the management can easily replace the existing workforce when the unemployment rate is pegged at 8.54% (Somayya, 2023). The instances of unlawful retrenchment are quite common in this occupation (Porecha, 2023). The employees join a union to establish their rights in their company, for legal help in times of crisis.

Few studies have attempted to explore the impact of job insecurity on trade unionism (Sverke & Goslinga, 2003). Hence it is hypothesized:

H3: Employees with high levels of perceived job insecurity will be more committed to the union than employees with low levels of perceived job insecurity.

### **Union Effectiveness**

Union effectiveness is a dynamic and multi-dimensional process (Clark, 2009). Two prominent features of union effectiveness are: a) the capacity of the union to represent its members as an organization, b) advancing members' issues in improving work-related terms and conditions (Bryson, 2005). While deciding to

join the union, participating in the union activities, employees weigh the effectiveness of the union in terms of whether it can deliver benefits for its members (Zacharewicz *et al.*, 2016). When the benefits of membership outstrip the costs, that is, higher levels of effectiveness, employees will be more likely to join a union and remain committed to the union (Tetrick *et al.*, 2007). As the recent trends of labor reform disproportionately confer more power in the hands of the employer, trade unions are facing challenges in establishing their footing in the industrial relations landscape of India (Badigannavar, 2019). In addition to this, most of the studies have considered the perception of union leaders (Burchielli, 2004) and bypassed the perspectives of rank-and-file members. The present study included the views of ordinary members. In particular, we need to know more about how sales employees perceive union effectiveness in India, a business context where management is unwilling to negotiate directly with the craft union, as they do not represent the particular organization.

#### Hence it is hypothesized:

H4: Union effectiveness will positively impact members' union commitment.

*Industrial Relations Climate:* The researchers considered industrial relations climate a spin-off resulting from organizational structure, human resource management policies, and the broader business context (Dastmalchian, 2008). Often industrial relations climate is distinguished based on the level of competition between the parties involved. When both

parties approach an issue with a cooperative outlook, they discuss the options and try to reach a win-win solution. A competitive work situation triggers competitive behavior (De Prins *et al.*, 2018).

Conversely, for trade unions to remain influential, they must operate in an agreeable industrial relations climate with statutory recognition and mechanisms for attaining these goals (Gall & Fiorito, 2016). The employees also experience less conflict between two roles: an employee and a union member, inducing an enhanced level of union commitment (Deery & Iverson, 2005).

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In contrast, a conflicting climate might compel an individual towards competing loyalties. Another stream of climate research demonstrated negative associations between industrial relations climate and union commitment. It indicates that in a cooperative climate, employees experience less uncertainty and, as a result, a lesser degree of commitment toward their union (Snape & Redman, 2012). It shows inconsistent results, which calls for further research in different cultures and sectors to evaluate this relationship. Especially the Indian industrial relations arena has been undergoing a sea change with the amendment of the labour regularisation framework, allowing employers greater flexibility in lay-off and

ease of running business. It remains uncertain; to what extent the Industrial Relations Code could balance the ease of doing business quotient and, at the same time, maintain a cooperative industrial relations climate (Sundar, 2020).

Moreover, previous research has focused only on a sample drawn from a single workplace and examined individual differences in perception (Kim & Rowley, 2006). However, industrial relations refer to a broader employment canvas (Ackers & Wilkinson, 2008). It was found in a meta-analytic study that the industrial relations climate moderated the relationship between job satisfaction and union commitment. The relation is positive in a less adversarial climate and negative in an adversarial climate. Additionally, the industrial relations climate moderated the relationship between union effectiveness and union commitments (Fuller & Hester, 1998). It has been criticized that rather than considering job satisfaction as an antecedent, future studies should focus on the factors related to job satisfaction and union commitment (Tan & Aryee, 2002). A later study found no significant moderating effect of IR climate on union commitment and its precursors (Snape & Redman, 2012). These ambiguous findings offer considerable scope for exploring how industrial relations climate moderates the relationship between union commitment and its antecedents. On these grounds:

H6: H6abcd: Industrial relations climate will moderate the relationship between procedural justice (6a), workload (6b), job insecurity (6c), union effectiveness (6d) on the one hand and union com-

mitment on the other.

### Sample & Procedure

Purposive and snowball sampling method was adopted for data collection from medical sales representatives. The survey included the professionals working in different states of the country and affiliated to the regional body of the national craft union, the Federation of Medical and Sales Representatives' Associations of India. A standard questionnaire and a cover letter were sent to respondents offline and online. The cover letter explained the purpose of the survey and assured the participants of the confidentiality of their responses. A total of 550 questionnaires were distributed, and 390 were returned. After discarding incomplete questionnaires, 376 responses were used for analysis. The sample comprised 293 male respondents (78%) and 83 female respondents (22%). Regarding educational qualifications, 17% of the professionals are postgraduates, and the rest have bachelor's degrees. Most respondents (37%) have work experience (and union tenure) in the range of 14-20 years.

### Measures

Standard scales were adapted for measuring the variables. The items were anchored on a five-point Likert scale (1-Never to 5 –Always).

*Union commitment:* Assessed using the scale developed by Gordon et al. (1980). A sample item was "I feel a sense of pride being part of the local association."

*Procedural justice:* Colquitt’s (2001) scale on procedural justice was adopted in the present study. A sample item was “The procedures are applied consistently.”

*Workload:* Measured by items from Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (Kristensen et al., 2005). A sample item was “My workload unevenly distributed, so it piles up.”

*Job insecurity:* Items are taken from scales developed by Hellgren, Sverke, and Isaksson (1999) and Låstad et al. (2015). One sample item was “I worry about being able to keep my job.”

*Union Effectiveness:* Items were taken from Chacko(1985); Ganesan (2015). One sample item was “The union helps in negotiating for better wages”.

*Industrial Relations climate:* Scale by Dastmalchian (2008) was used to measure IRC. One sample item was “Joint union-management committees are a common means of implementing important changes in conditions.”

*Control variables:* Work experience and union tenure has been used as control variables. As previous studies high-

light these two variables predict the relationship between union commitment and its precursors (Kim & Rowley, 2006; Bayazit et al., 2004).

**Preliminary Analysis & Measurement Model**

Structural equation modeling was conducted using AMOS 22.0. Moderation analysis was tested using SPSS Process 3.5 (Hayes, 2018).The complete measurement model indicated adequate fit.It is ( $\chi^2/df=1.44$ , CFI =0.966, NFI=0.89, SRMR = 0.042, RMSEA= 0.034). All the factor loadings are significant and exceed 0.70, indicating acceptable level of internal consistency. The average variance extracted for all constructs exceeded 0.50 and composite reliability values exceed 0.70; demonstrating convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). (Table I).

A multicollinearity test was used to check common method bias (Gaskin, 2020). When all variance inflation factor (VIF) values are equal or lower than 3.3, the model can be considered free from common method bias (Kock, 2015). Tolerance values should be more than 0.2 (Weisburd & Britt, 2013).

**Table I Results of Convergent validity &Discriminant Validity**

	Mean	SD	Cronbach’s á	CR	AVE	MSV	UE	PJ	IR	UC	WL	JI
<b>UE</b>	3.84	0.35	0.86.	0.869	0.626	0.15	<b>0.791</b>					
<b>PJ</b>	1.78	0.97	0.9	0.889	0.667	0.384	0.005	<b>0.816</b>				
<b>IR</b>	2.1	1.03	0.87.	0.871	0.629	0.384	-0.024	0.62	<b>0.792</b>			
<b>UC</b>	3.2	0.54	0.92	0.922	0.663	0.151	0.218	-0.104	-0.174	<b>0.814</b>		
<b>WL</b>	2.91	0.44	0.78.	0.79	0.558	0.102	0.108	-0.272	-0.294	0.049	<b>0.746</b>	
<b>JI</b>	1.94	0.61	0.83	0.836	0.565	0.252	0.179	-0.502	-0.501	0.058	0.319	<b>0.751</b>

**Table 2 Collinearity Statistics**

Construct	Collinearity Statistics	
	Tolerance	Variance Inflation Factor(VIF)
Procedural Justice	0.437	2.287
Work load	0.773	1.294
Job Insecurity	0.573	1.744
Union Effectiveness	0.683	1.465
Industrial Relations	0.413	2.421

**Hypothesis Testing**

After ensuring the validity and reliability of the measurement model, the hypothesized model was estimated.

**Testing the Moderation Analysis**

The interaction effect of the Industrial Relations climate was evaluated using the PROCESS module proposed by

**Table 3 Results of Multiple Regressions**

			$\beta$	S.E.	P
Union Commitment	←	Procedural Justice	-0.252	0.024	***
Union Commitment	←	Workload	0.229	0.03	***
Union Commitment	←	Job Insecurity	0.0851	0.0333	**
Union Commitment	←	Union Effectiveness	0.2659	0.0666	***

Notes: \*Pd>0.05; \*\*P d> 0.01; \*\*\*P d> 0.001

Hayes (2013). To avoid multicollinearity problems with interaction terms, the variables were centered and interaction terms were created (Jose, 2013). It also facilitates the interpretation of regression parameters (Hayes, 2018).(Table 4). The

interaction plots were done using online resources<sup>1</sup>

**Discussion**

The present study context is substantially different from the extant in-

**Table 4: Summary of Moderation Analysis**

	$\beta$	p	R <sup>2</sup> -chng	p	Product terms key:
WL	0.229	***	0.0892	***	Workload *Industrial relations climate (M) to Union Commitment (Y)
IR	-0.296	***			
Int_10.24		***			
UE	0.2659	***	0.0095	**	Union Effectiveness *Industrial relations climate (M) to Union Commitment (Y)
IR	-0.3036	***			
Int_10.1268		**			

\*Pd0.05; \*\*P d 0.01; \*\*\*P d0.001

<sup>1</sup><http://www.jeremydawson.com/slopes.htm>

Fig.1 Interaction of Workload and Industrial Relations Climate on Union Commitment

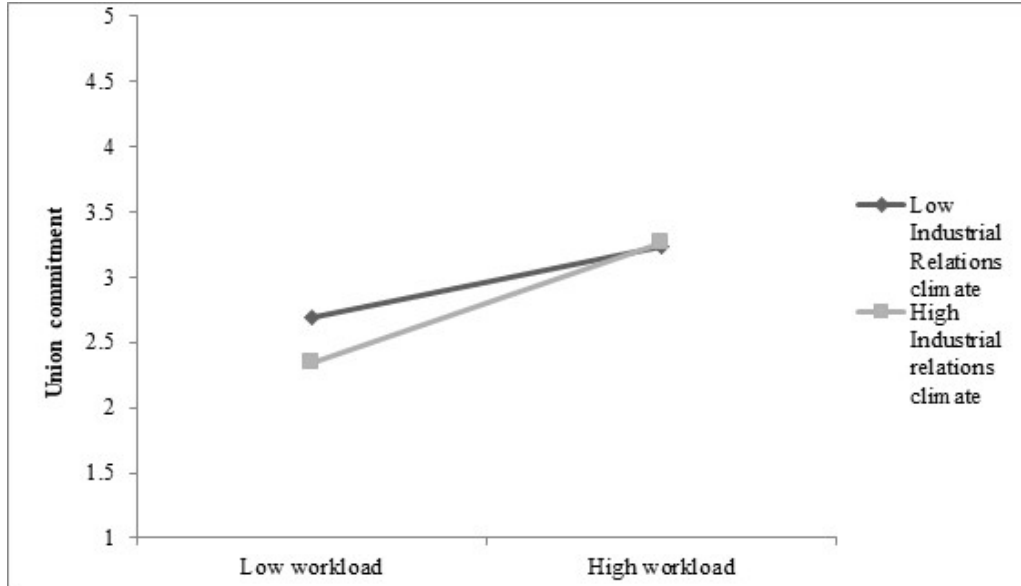
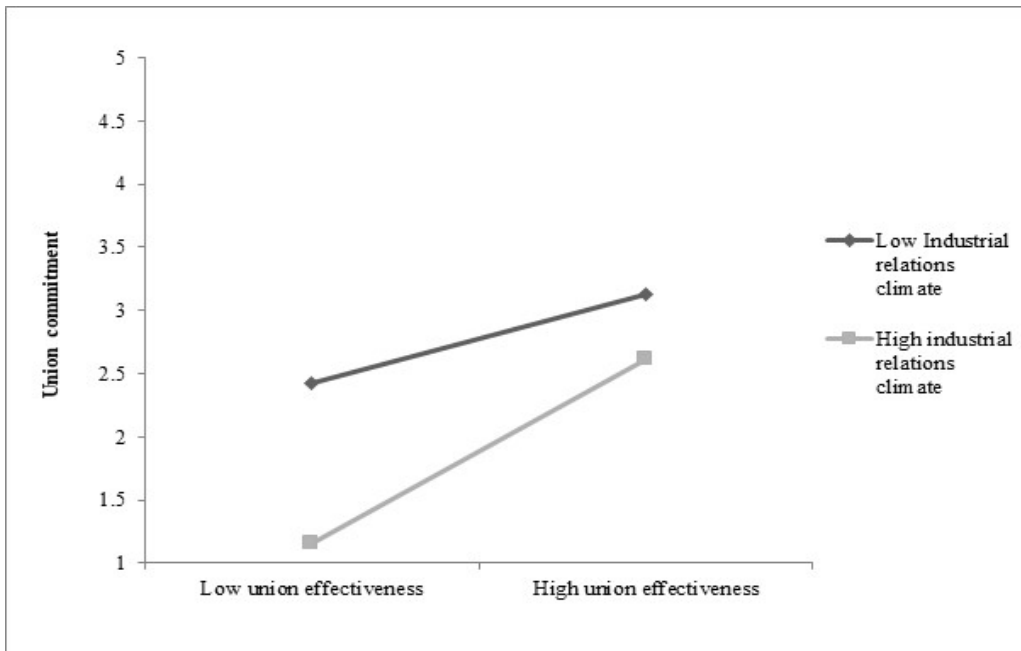


Fig.2 Interaction of Union Effectiveness and Industrial Relations Climate on Union Commitment.



dustrial relations literature. Previous studies indicated that work dissatisfaction triggered unionization (Iverson & Kuruvilla, 1995). When the employees individually failed to reach the management, they would unionize to reach the management and redress their issues collectively. Employee relations studies are often more effective when focused on a particular industry or profession than a broad-brush approach (Fairbrother & Warn, 2003). The present study aimed to identify a set of predictor variables relevant to the pharmaceutical selling industry. Then the variables are grouped into two categories viz; organization-related and union-related. The impact of organization-related variables, such as procedural justice, job demands viz; workload and job resource viz; job insecurity on union commitment were assessed. Furthermore, the second variable category, i.e., union-related variable viz; union effectiveness on union commitment, was observed.

Most union-related studies considered only job resources (Lee, 2004) and job satisfaction (Kim & Rowley, 2006). The seminal studies of Tan and Aryee, (2002) showed that using job satisfaction as a proxy measure instead of specific factors rendered the analyses less conclusive.

The data showed that procedural justice, workload, and job insecurity significantly impact union commitment among the organization-related variables. The dominant explanatory vari-

able is procedural justice ( $\beta = -0.25$ ,  $P \leq 0.001$ ). Employees often perceive a breach of procedural justice as a deliberate tactic where more fair processes remain available to the management. This sense of injustice might trigger union participation (Kelly, 1998). This may have been due to the nature of the sample, which consists of medical sales representatives. The salary and pay incentives of the professionals are mostly tied up with the performance appraisal process. Implementing the appraisal process, territory allocation, and related issues are more salient features for the sample. Workload was the second most important determinant of union commitment ( $\beta = 0.23$ ,  $P \leq 0.001$ ). In most cases, the management decides the sales target and unilaterally attributes it to the sales team. So, the employees fall back on the craft union to settle the issue through bargaining where a company-specific union is not in existence. Again failure to meet the sales target questions the continuity of the job.

Among the union-related predictors, union effectiveness is the dominant predictor ( $\beta = 0.26$ ,  $P \leq 0.001$ ). The results are supported by prior findings (Tetrick, 2007). More precisely, the present study measures the delivery effectiveness of the union (Bryson, 2005). A significant relationship between union effectiveness and union commitment also indicates that the achievement of a valued outcome is one of the prime reasons behind the commitment of rank-and-file members. The organization and union-related antecedents jointly explained 68

percent of the variance in union commitment.

The present study makes a novel attempt by introducing industrial relations climate as a moderator and measuring its role in union commitment and a specific set of determinants. Examination of the interaction plot showed that industrial relations climate moderates and increases the positive relationship between workload and union commitment. The higher commitment in the cooperative industrial relations climate results due to the members' belief that benefits could not be achieved without the union's intervention with the management (Barling et al., 1992).

**The industrial relations climate moderates and increases the positive relationship between union effectiveness and commitment.**

The industrial relations climate moderates and increases the positive relationship between union effectiveness and commitment. It contradicts earlier findings (Snape & Redman, 2012), which showed members are less inclined toward a union where the workplace context is positive. The study was done on British employees; now, as a highly individualistic society (Hofstede, 2009), British people are less invested in their society. The present study sample consisted of Indian professionals; as a society, Indian culture shows more collectivistic traits (Hofstede, 2009); here, the employees remain committed to the union even

when the industrial relations climate is cooperative. On the other way, trade unions to remain effective; they must operate in a cooperative industrial relations climate, providing them with statutory recognitions and other machinery to achieve functional efficiency (Gall & Fiorito, 2016). However, the study did not include cultural dimensions in the model. The inconsistency in findings suggests that further research is needed to evaluate this relation, conducted in different cultural contexts.

### Managerial Implications

The study assessed a model of union commitment specific to sales promotion occupations in the pharmaceutical industry. At the same time, the industrial relations arena in India is undergoing a sea change with labor law reforms, structural changes in the labor market, and other factors. In such a context, the study makes a novel attempt to examine the moderating role of industrial relations climate on the antecedents of union commitment. Procedural justice, workload, and job insecurity emerged as significant antecedents in stimulating union commitment. Management's expectations are rising, and employees strive to meet them; therefore, a heightened desire for fairness is only normal from employees' perspectives. Transparency in the performance management system can be enhanced by giving employees a clear picture of how individual targets are linked to business priorities. Discussing the targets with the employees

can bring many nuanced pictures of specific markets. The reliance on objective data points and reduction of subjective elements is likely to improve the fairness factor. It can advance towards 360 degree feedback, like including the peers and clients in the performance management system.

Moreover, past studies on the Indian industrial relations climate captured a macro-level picture focusing on labor market policies and industrial output (Karak & Basu, 2020). The present study shifted the lens towards a more humane perspective of the variable. The study captures medical sales representatives' heightened union commitment in the pharmaceutical industry. It would be imprudent for the other players of the employee relations landscape to consider the union as a spent force. The legal framework of the country (The Industrial Disputes Act, 1947; Industrial Relations Code 2020) provides for joint consultative committees. But in many cases, the implementation process needs to be more robust. Non-recognition of the entity would lead to a more disruptive and conflictual climate. Conflict in the forms of strikes and labor unrest hampers normal functioning. Management should recognize the in-company council bodies (unions) as legitimate entities and treat the members as genuine stakeholders in the organization to promote a cooperative climate. In the long run, union-management collaboration stimulates workplace behavior that matches the company's interest.

## Limitation

Some limitations need to be considered while generalizing the results. There are certain constraints while inferring the causal relationships as the data reflects the perception of a small sample of sales promotion employees and of a cross-sectional nature. The present study has contributed to bridging the knowledge gap in issues relating to employee allegiance toward unions in a specific industrial relations climate.

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