

Symbolic inclusion in Indian information technology: The role of tokenism in psychological safety and job performance

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Dates:

Received: 22 July 2025

Accepted: 07 Dec. 2025

Published: 21 Jan. 2026

How to cite this article:

Kataria, A., & Verma, M.K.
(2026). Symbolic inclusion
in Indian information
technology: The role of
tokenism in psychological
safety and job performance.
*SA Journal of Human Resource
Management/SA Tydskrif vir
Menslikehulpbronbestuur*,
24(0), a3250. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v24i0.3250>

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Orientation: Diversity and inclusion (D&I) are increasingly central to corporate strategies in India's Information Technology (IT) sector; however, representational inclusion may conceal deeper challenges of perceived tokenism that undermine employee well-being and performance.

Research purpose: This study examines the relationships between perceived tokenism, psychological safety and contextual performance, and considers the role of selected workplace factors and demographic variables.

Motivation for the study: Despite the expansion of D&I initiatives in Indian IT, limited empirical research has examined the psychological and behavioural consequences of symbolic inclusion.

Research approach/design and method: A cross-sectional quantitative design was used. A 28-item survey, informed by two pilot studies, was administered online to 344 IT professionals in India.

Main findings: Perceived tokenism was negatively associated with psychological safety and contextual performance, while psychological safety was positively associated with contextual performance. Burnout, communication and social support were significantly associated with both tokenism and psychological safety. No gender-based differences were observed, whereas experience-related differences were partially evident, with early-career professionals reporting higher tokenism and lower contextual performance.

Practical/managerial implications: Human resource strategies should move beyond numerical representation to address symbolic inclusion. Interventions focused on communication, burnout and inclusive leadership are particularly important for early-career employees.

Contribution/value-add: The study offers a perspective on tokenism and extends HRD and organisational psychology research by linking symbolic inclusion to employee outcomes in a non-developed, high-performance context.

Keywords: perceived tokenism; psychological safety; contextual performance; Indian IT sector; burnout; workplace inclusion; human resource development.

Introduction

Diversity and inclusion (D&I) have become central to corporate and human resource development (HRD) strategies worldwide, particularly in the information technology (IT) sector, where global operations, agile teamwork and innovation demand psychologically safe and inclusive environments. However, while most initiatives focus on improving demographic representation, a deeper challenge lies in translating this representation into meaningful inclusion (Loden & Rosener, 1991; Mazur, 2010). The key question for HRD practitioners is whether these inclusion efforts truly foster trust, interpersonal learning and long-term employee development (Okatta et al., 2024).

Despite visible progress, many employees still experience perceived tokenism, the sense of being included symbolically to meet diversity metrics rather than on merit. Such symbolic inclusion can erode morale, reduce trust and hinder collaboration among minority groups. Employees who see themselves as 'tokens' often experience stress, detachment and diminished belongingness, especially in high-pressure, performance-driven sectors such as IT. Understanding how perceived tokenism affects workplace relationships, learning and discretionary performance remains a critical yet underexplored issue in both HRD research and practice (Childress et al., 2023; Jain et al., 2023).

The association between perceived tokenism, psychological safety and contextual performance can be better understood through established theoretical perspectives. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) posits that individuals derive a sense of self and belonging from group membership; when employees feel they are included symbolically rather than on merit, they experience *identity threat* and weakened in-group belonging. Such threats diminish interpersonal trust and suppress voice behaviour, thereby lowering psychological safety.

Complementarily, the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989) explains that employees seek to conserve psychological and social resources, such as respect, recognition and inclusion. Perceived tokenism signals a potential loss of these resources, triggering stress and withdrawal behaviours that impair the contextual performance. When employees perceive authentic inclusion, they invest their resources time, effort and creativity more willingly, reinforcing a positive cycle of safety and contribution. These theoretical perspectives clarify why symbolic inclusion can erode both psychological and behavioural workplace engagement.

Parallel to this, recent HRD and organisational research has highlighted the importance of psychological safety as a contextual condition that translates inclusion into actual engagement. Psychological safety refers to the collective perception that expressing opinions, asking questions or admitting mistakes will not result in negative consequences (Edmondson, 1999). It serves as the interpersonal foundation that allows diverse teams to function effectively in high-pressure, innovation-driven sectors, such as IT, where collaboration, agility and learning are central to success. When teams foster this sense of safety, employees are more likely to share new ideas, learn from feedback and experiment without fear of failure behaviours central to adaptive expertise and developmental growth (Sharma & Mehta, 2023; Subhakaran et al., 2020).

Additionally, contextual performance encompasses voluntary and discretionary behaviours that strengthen the social and psychological environment of the workplace, such as helping colleagues, maintaining cooperation and upholding organisational values (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997; Griffin et al., 2000). Such behaviours extend beyond formal job roles and are crucial indicators of employee engagement and organisational citizenship. Inclusive and psychologically safe workplaces nurture these behaviours, while environments marked by exclusion or perceived tokenism suppress them, thereby limiting both individual development and collective performance (Lester, 2008; Prakoso, 2022).

In contrast, those who experience exclusion or burnout may pull back from developmental opportunities, limiting both the effectiveness of training and its application in the workplace (Lester, 2008). Although these three constructs

perceived tokenism, psychological safety and contextual performance have been individually studied in organisational behaviour literature, very few empirical studies have explored their interrelationships within a single framework, especially within the Indian IT sector. This study addressed this gap. It examines how perceptions of tokenism influence psychological safety and contextual performance and how workplace factors such as communication, supervisor support, coworker relations and burnout shape these dynamics. Furthermore, it investigates whether gender and years of experience influence perceptions and outcomes.

This study links psychological safety and contextual performance to inclusion frameworks, offering valuable insights for HRD practice. It highlights how addressing tokenism can inform more inclusive training, leadership development and performance strategies in diverse organisational settings.

The Indian IT sector, which employs over 5 million professionals, is an ideal setting for such research. With rapid digitalisation, evolving workforce demographics and increasing global integration, questions of diversity, inclusion and well-being are no longer peripheral; they are essential. Yet, empirical research in this space remains limited, especially studies that move beyond surface-level representation to examine the psychological experiences of employees in diverse workplaces (Maj, 2023).

This article aims to:

- explore the relationships between perceived tokenism, psychological safety and contextual performance
- examine the influence of key workplace factors (burnout, communication supervisor and coworker support) on these outcomes
- assess whether demographic variables such as gender and experience significantly affect these relationships.

By examining these constructs within a unified conceptual perspective, this study provides novel insights into psychology, human resource (HR) management and organisational leadership. This underscores the need for organisations to move beyond numeric diversity towards cultivating environments that are psychologically safe, performance-enabling and meaningfully inclusive.

Research design

This study adopted a cross-sectional quantitative survey design. The research was grounded in a detailed literature review and examined three core constructs: perceived tokenism, psychological safety and contextual performance. To refine these constructs and evaluate empirical item performance, two pilot surveys were administered using Google Forms: Pulse Survey ($n = 57$) and the Snap Survey ($n = 55$), targeting IT professionals of diverse genders, functions and experience levels. Analysis of pilot survey responses, specifically item correlations, reliability patterns

and instances where correlations were weaker than theoretically expected, guided the refinement of item wordings, removal of statistically weak items and clarification of construct boundaries. These empirical insights were used to develop the final comprehensive 28-item structured questionnaire, which underwent an academic review process to ensure that the instrument was both theoretically robust and contextually grounded for the Indian IT sector. The study evolved from doctoral-level academic investigation.

The subsequent quantitative phase involved administering a 28-item structured questionnaire developed from the literature and quantitative insights. The main objective was to examine the relationships between perceived tokenism, psychological safety and contextual performance, while the secondary objective was to explore the role of workplace and demographic factors in these relationships.

The survey comprising 28 items across seven constructs: perceived tokenism (8 items, $\alpha = 0.851$), psychological safety (7 items, $\alpha = 0.848$), contextual performance (6 items, $\alpha = 0.876$), burnout (2 items, $\alpha = 0.942$), supervisor support (2 items, $\alpha = 0.911$), coworker support (2 items, $\alpha = 0.866$) and communication (2 items, $\alpha = 0.829$). Respondents rated items on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The survey was sent online and shared via email and LinkedIn over 6 weeks, resulting in responses from 344 IT professionals. The main goal was to examine the relationships between perceived tokenism, psychological safety and contextual performance. The secondary goal was to explore the impact of workplace factors, such as burnout, communication and support from supervisors and coworkers, along with the moderating effects of gender and professional experience. Data were analysed using SPSS (version 27).

Participants and sampling

While purposive and snowball sampling were appropriate for accessing diverse IT professionals across organisations and experience levels, these techniques have inherent methodological limitations. Participants were recruited primarily through professional networks as IT organisations follow strict global data privacy and compliance regulations, which restricted conducting academic studies directly within companies. As a result, no qualitative sampling or participant level feedback was collected during the pilot surveys. There was a risk of sample homogeneity, where respondents may have shared similar organisational cultures, socioeconomic backgrounds or perspectives on inclusion. In addition, the non-probability nature of the sample restricts the extent to which the findings can be generalised to the wider Indian IT workforce. These constraints were mitigated by deliberately targeting respondents from companies of different sizes, functions and career stages. All refinements to the measurement constructs were based solely on quantitative item diagnostics. However, the study recognises that future research employing random or stratified sampling would enhance representativeness and external validity.

Instrumentation

The final version consisted of 28 items across seven constructs:

- Perceived tokenism (8 items, $\alpha = 0.851$)
- Psychological safety (7 items, $\alpha = 0.848$)
- Contextual performance (6 items, $\alpha = 0.876$)
- Burnout (2 items, $\alpha = 0.942$)
- Supervisor support (2 items, $\alpha = 0.911$)
- Coworker support (2 items, $\alpha = 0.866$)
- Communication (2 items, $\alpha = 0.829$)

Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Items retained in the final instrument had acceptable item-total correlations and internal consistency during pilot testing. Items with low correlations or inconsistent patterns were removed or revised to strengthen the construct representation.

Although several constructs (burnout, supervisor support, coworker support and communication) were assessed using two-item subscales, this approach was both theoretical and practical in nature. Short scales were selected to minimise survey fatigue and maintain response quality in a multi-construct questionnaire (Beierlein et al., 2013). Previous studies have shown that two-item measures can adequately represent unidimensional constructs when items are highly correlated and conceptually consistent (Eisinga et al., 2013). Each pair of items was developed through the study's iterative academic review process comprising two subject matter experts in organisational psychology and one management expert who assessed theoretical alignment, clarity, relevancy and contextual appropriateness. Revisions were consolidated through consensus, ensuring that the final items adequately represented each construct despite the brief subscale format, drawing on theoretical concepts and prior literature related to burnout, workplace communication and social support. All four subscales demonstrated Cronbach's alpha values above 0.80, exceeding the recommended reliability standards (Hinkin, 1998). The use of two-item measures, therefore, balanced psychometric soundness with reduced participant burden, which is consistent with best practice for applied organisational research.

However, because two-item scales cannot assess dimensionality, their use reflects a trade-off between respondent burden and construct breadth. Future research should employ longer, validated multi-item scales to assess dimensional structure more comprehensively.

Data collection procedure

The survey was administered online and circulated through email and LinkedIn over a 6-week duration. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before they began the questionnaire. Responses were automatically captured, anonymised and then exported to SPSS (version 27) for statistical analysis. No descriptive comments or qualitative feedback were collected, and all survey responses remained fully anonymised.

Variables and operational definitions

- *Perceived tokenism*: The extent to which individuals believe their inclusion in the workplace is symbolic rather than merit based (Maj, 2023).
- *Psychological safety*: A shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking (Edmondson, 1999).
- *Contextual performance*: Discretionary work behaviours that contribute to the social and psychological environment of the organisation (Griffin et al., 2000).
- *Burnout*: A state of emotional exhaustion caused by prolonged stress or overload (Rožman et al., 2019).
- *Supervisor and coworker Support*: Perceived emotional and instrumental support from managers and peers (Snyder, 2009).
- *Communication*: Openness, transparency and feedback mechanisms in internal communication (Kimani, 2024).

Statistical analyses

The data were examined using a combination of descriptive and inferential statistical methods:

Reliability was assessed through Cronbach's alpha to evaluate internal consistency of the scales. No exploratory or confirmatory factor analysis was conducted, and scale structure was not tested beyond internal consistency. Factor analysis was also not conducted because the short subscales (two items each) and refined post-pilot item sets did not provide the breadth required for stable factor extraction or dimensionality assessment.

Correlations between key variables were analysed using Pearson's correlation coefficients.

Regression analyses were performed to explore how workplace factors predicted perceived tokenism, psychological safety and contextual performance. Each regression model controlled for gender and years of professional experience to account for demographic variability. These regression analyses assessed associations among variables and were not intended to validate or estimate relationships within an integrated structural model.

Group comparisons were conducted using independent-sample *t*-tests (to assess gender differences) and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) (to evaluate differences across experience levels), with post hoc analyses carried out using Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) and Bonferroni adjustments. All analyses applied a two-tailed significance level of $p < 0.05$.

Bivariate correlations among predictors were reviewed (Figure 1). Several support-related variables were strongly correlated ($r = 0.72$ – 0.84), suggesting potential multicollinearity. Variance-inflation-factor (VIF) statistics were not computed in the present analysis. However, this overlap likely reflects the conceptual proximity of workplace communication and support constructs rather than measurement redundancy. Future research should explicitly

assess multicollinearity (e.g. via VIF) to confirm this. Predictors were therefore retained following theoretical justification.

No structural equation modelling (SEM) or integrated model testing was undertaken; therefore, all results should be interpreted as correlational.

Ethical considerations

This study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee, India (Approval No. LPU/IEC-LPU/2025/2/13). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their inclusion in the study. Participants were clearly informed about the study's objectives, procedures and their right to withdraw at any time without any consequences.

To maintain confidentiality, all data were anonymised prior to analysis. Unique identification codes were assigned to participants' responses, and no personally identifiable information was stored with the dataset. Access to the data was restricted to the core research team only.

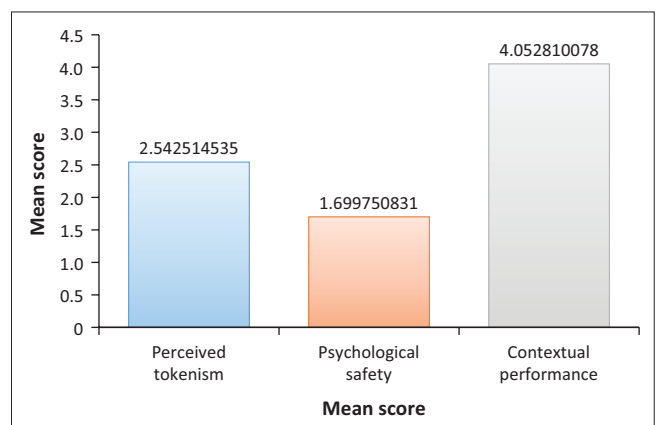
This research involved human participants, and all procedures complied with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee.

Results

Descriptive statistics and reliability analysis

The mean score for perceived tokenism was 2.93 (standard deviation [SD] = 0.85), reflecting a moderate level of symbolic inclusion reported by participants. Psychological safety had a mean of 3.21 (SD = 0.78), indicating a somewhat positive perception of team dynamics. Contextual performance scored higher, with a mean of 3.67 (SD = 0.82), suggesting that respondents generally engaged in supportive and discretionary workplace behaviours (Figure 1).

Reliability testing showed strong internal consistency across all scales. Cronbach's alpha values were above 0.80 for each



IT, information technology.

FIGURE 1: Mean levels of perceived tokenism, psychological safety and contextual performance among Indian information technology professionals.

construct: perceived tokenism ($\alpha = 0.851$), psychological safety ($\alpha = 0.848$), contextual performance ($\alpha = 0.876$), burnout ($\alpha = 0.942$), supervisor support ($\alpha = 0.911$), coworker support ($\alpha = 0.866$) and communication ($\alpha = 0.829$). These results confirm that the measurement tools used were statistically reliable (Figure 2).

Correlation analysis

Perceived tokenism showed significant negative correlations with both psychological safety ($r = -0.426, p < 0.01$) and contextual performance ($r = -0.402, p < 0.01$), suggesting that individuals who perceived higher symbolic inclusion tended to feel less psychologically secure and engaged in fewer discretionary work behaviours.

In contrast, psychological safety was strongly and positively associated with contextual performance ($r = 0.519, p < 0.01$), indicating that teams perceived as safe and inclusive tended to demonstrate greater voluntary and constructive employee contributions.

Multiple regression analysis

To examine the influence of workplace factors on key outcomes, multiple linear regression analyses were conducted.

Workplace factor associated with perceived tokenism

A regression analysis examining the relationships of burnout, communication, supervisor support and coworker support with perceived tokenism produced an adjusted R^2 of 0.384, $F(4, 339) = 54.81, p < 0.001$. Among these factors, burnout showed the strongest positive association with perceived tokenism ($\beta = 0.479, p < 0.001$), indicating that higher burnout levels were linked to stronger perceptions of symbolic inclusion. Lower levels of communication were significantly associated with higher tokenism ($\beta = -0.254, p < 0.001$). Both coworker support ($\beta = -0.103, p < 0.05$) and supervisor support ($\beta = -0.112, p < 0.05$) also showed meaningful negative associations, suggesting that limited support from colleagues and supervisors corresponded with greater perception of tokenism (Figure 3).

Workplace factor associated with psychological safety

Workplace factors were significantly associated with psychological safety, with the model yielding $R^2 = 0.417$, $F(4, 339) = 61.09, p < 0.001$. Communication demonstrated the strongest positive association ($\beta = 0.462, p < 0.001$), followed by coworker support ($\beta = 0.284, p < 0.001$) and supervisor support ($\beta = 0.173, p < 0.001$). In contrast, burnout had a notable negative association ($\beta = -0.199, p < 0.001$), indicating that higher emotional exhaustion was related to reduced perceptions of psychological safety. The correlation matrix summarising these relationships is presented in Figure 2.

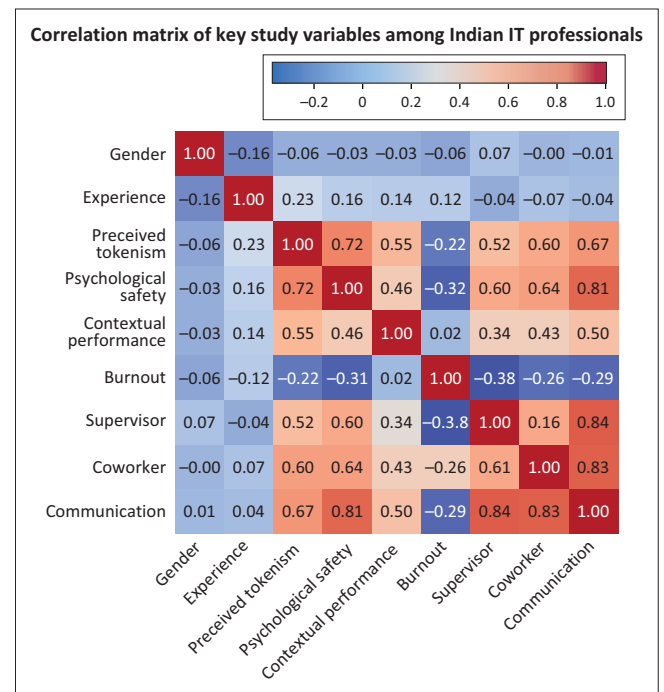
Workplace factor associated with contextual performance

The regression model for contextual performance was statistically significant, with $R^2 = 0.328$, $F(4, 339) = 42.00$,

$p < 0.001$. Psychological safety demonstrated the strongest positive association ($\beta = 0.472, p < 0.001$), followed by supervisor support ($\beta = 0.207, p < 0.001$) and coworker support ($\beta = 0.168, p < 0.01$). Burnout showed a negative association ($\beta = -0.135, p < 0.01$). These findings align with theoretical perspectives suggesting that psychologically safe and supportive environment are associated with discretionary performance behaviours (Figure 4).

Group differences across gender and experience

This study explored group differences in perceived tokenism, psychological safety and contextual performance across gender and levels of professional experience. Independent-sample t -tests and one-way ANOVA were used for comparisons. This approach tested whether perceptions and outcomes differed significantly between groups rather than



IT, information technology.

FIGURE 2: Correlation matrix showing associations among key study variables (perceived tokenism, psychological safety, contextual performance and workplace factors).

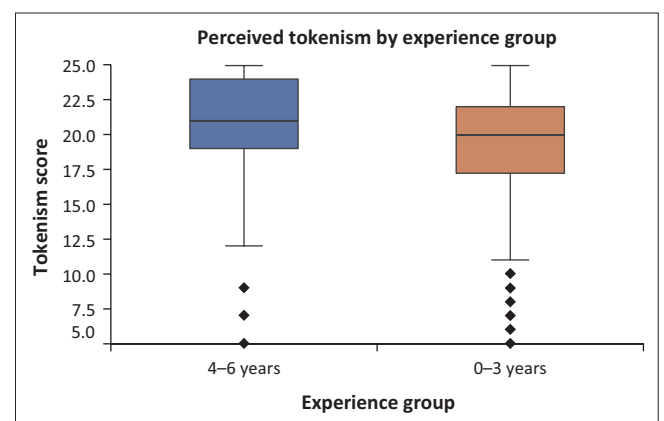


FIGURE 3: Group differences in perceived tokenism by years of professional experience among Indian information technology professionals.

examining interaction effects through regression. No significant sex-based differences were found for any of the core constructs (all $p > 0.05$). However, female participants reported slightly higher psychological safety and marginally lower tokenism scores than males.

One-way ANOVA results indicated significant differences across experience groups for both perceived tokenism ($F(2, 341) = 4.22, p < 0.05$) and contextual performance ($F(2, 341) = 3.76, p < 0.05$). Post hoc Tukey's tests revealed that early-career professionals (0–3 years) experienced significantly higher levels of tokenism and lower contextual performance than those with more than 6 years of experience did. These findings suggest that experience is associated with differences in workplace inclusion at the group level rather than through direct statistical interactions.

Hence, H7 was not supported, and H8 was partially supported in terms of group differences, not regression-based moderation.

Summary of hypothesis testing

- **H1:** Perceived tokenism is negatively associated with psychological safety – *Supported*
- **H2:** Perceived tokenism is negatively associated with contextual performance – *Supported*
- **H3:** Psychological safety is positively associated with contextual performance – *Supported*
- **H4–H6:** Burnout, communication and social support are significantly associated with perceived tokenism and psychological safety – *Supported*
- **H7:** Gender differences in key study variables – *Not supported*
- **H8:** Years of experience-based difference in key study parameters – *Partially supported*

The results represent correlational associations and should not be interpreted as causal or mediational effects.

Note: Burnout might also operate as an outcome variable and identify this as an avenue for future research.

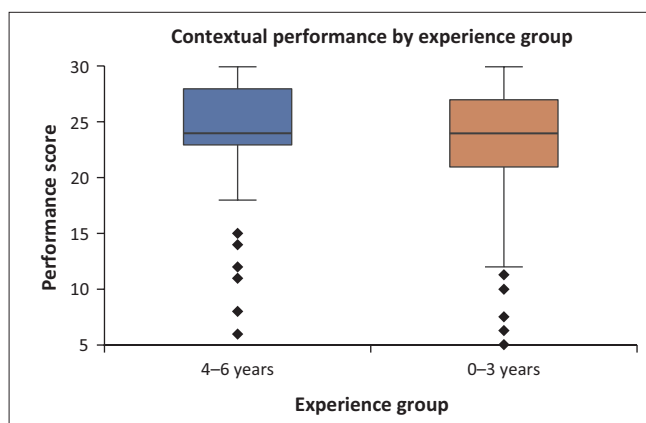


FIGURE 4: Group differences in contextual performance by years of professional experience among Indian information technology professionals.

Discussion

This study offers an empirical examination of the links between perceived tokenism, psychological safety and contextual performance within the Indian IT sector. It also investigates how workplace factors, including burnout, communication and support from supervisors and peers, as well as demographic variables such as gender and experience, shape these outcomes. As discussed in the introduction, much of the conversation around diversity in India remains focused on numbers rather than experiences. This research addresses that gap by exploring how symbolic inclusion can impact employees' psychological well-being and workplace behaviour. It provides data-driven insight into the patterns through which tokenism is associated with psychological safety and contextual performance-related behaviours.

Findings indicate significant negative associations between perceived tokenism and both psychological safety and contextual performance, supporting earlier warnings by Kanter and Yoder about the pitfalls of surface-level inclusion (Conquergood, 1991; Strauss & Kanter, 1978). Employees who feel included merely to fulfil diversity goals are less likely to feel secure in their teams, which lowers their willingness to contribute ideas, take initiative or go beyond basic job expectations. This issue is particularly relevant in the Indian IT context, where success depends heavily on collaboration, agility and shared problem-solving. When tokenism is present, it creates barriers to open participation and disrupts team dynamics.

The study also reinforces the idea that psychological safety plays a critical role in turning inclusive intentions into meaningful performance outcomes. The strong link between psychological safety and contextual performance is consistent with Edmondson's foundational work, suggesting that when employees feel secure, they are more likely to engage in proactive, collaborative and discretionary behaviours that benefit the team (Edmondson, 1999). In IT environments where speed, adaptability and interdependence are vital, such behaviours are often key to successful project execution.

Workplace conditions, especially communication and support from colleagues and supervisors, also proved essential. These factors not only helped reduce feelings of tokenism but also fostered psychological safety. This aligns with previous research emphasising that inclusion is shaped less by identity categories and more by daily interactions, transparency and how support is extended within teams (Detert & Burris, 2007; Singh & Vinnicombe, 2004). Clear communication builds trust and shared understanding, while strong interpersonal support provides emotional and cognitive stability in high-pressure environments.

It is also important to recognise that burnout may not only act as a predictor but also as a potential outcome variable within this framework. Persistent experiences of perceived

tokenism and low psychological safety can deplete emotional and cognitive resources, leading to heightened exhaustion and disengagement over time. Future studies using longitudinal or cross-lagged designs could examine this reciprocal pathway to better understand the cyclical nature of inclusion, safety and well-being at work.

On the other hand, burnout emerged as a strong negative influence on psychological safety. Employees experiencing emotional exhaustion appeared less likely to feel secure enough to fully engage with their teams. This finding is consistent with Hobfoll's COR theory, which suggests that when individuals are emotionally drained, they withdraw from situations that require further interpersonal risk or energy (Hobfoll, 1989). Thus, even well-intentioned inclusion efforts may falter if not paired with strategies to address workload and well-being.

Although gender did not significantly alter the study's key relationships, professional experience did. Those with less than 3 years of experience reported higher levels of tokenism and lower contextual performance compared to their more experienced peers. These patterns suggest that early-career employees particularly those from underrepresented groups may be especially sensitive to symbolic inclusion and feel less empowered to contribute fully. This highlights the need for onboarding, mentorship and inclusion initiatives that are specifically designed for junior staff (Mackey et al., 2017).

The findings must also be understood within the cultural and organisational context of India, where hierarchical structures, collectivist values and high-power distance influence workplace dynamics. In such settings, employees often defer to authority and avoid open disagreement, which can limit upward communication and reinforce perceived tokenism in the workplace. Hierarchical decision-making and seniority-driven respect norms may make it difficult for junior or minority employees to voice dissenting views, thereby suppressing psychological safety, even in teams that are nominally diverse. Furthermore, collectivist expectations for group harmony may discourage individuals from highlighting inequities or perceived symbolic inclusion, as doing so may be viewed as disrupting the social balance. These cultural dimensions suggest that inclusion strategies in Indian organisations cannot simply replicate Western models; instead, they must actively address power asymmetries and create explicit structures for feedback, mentoring and safe voice expression to mitigate tokenism and enhance employees' psychological safety.

From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes by proposing a conceptual framework in which psychological safety is considered a potential relational link between tokenism and workplace performance. While previous studies have explored these variables independently, this approach underscores how organisational climate, individual perception and behavioural outcomes interact, especially within India's complex social and corporate

structures. It also brings attention to the importance of studying inclusion within emerging economies, where cultural hierarchies and collective norms may influence how inclusion is experienced.

Practically, these findings offer actionable guidance for HR professionals and organisational leaders. Firstly, inclusion strategies should go beyond representation metrics to assess how employees perceive tokenism and psychological safety. Secondly, line managers need training not only in task execution but also in inclusive practices such as active listening, empathy and shared decision-making. Thirdly, organisations might benefit from incorporating psychological safety assessments into routine performance or team reviews to gauge whether employees feel supported. Fourthly, greater attention should be given to supporting early-career professionals, especially those who may be the 'only' representatives of a particular identity on their teams.

In conclusion, this study emphasises that genuine inclusion is not a one-time goal but an ongoing, relational process. For the Indian IT sector to fully leverage its diverse talent, it must prioritise building a supportive and inclusive work culture where all employees not just the experienced or majority groups have the opportunity to grow and succeed.

Limitation

The cross-sectional design of this study limits causal interpretation, as data were collected at a single point in time. Longitudinal or multiwave studies would allow stronger inferences about the temporal relationships among perceived tokenism, psychological safety and contextual performance.

The questionnaire was self-developed through an iterative academic review process and was not directly drawn from standardised instruments. Although this ensured contextual and theoretical relevance to the Indian IT sector, it may limit the comparability of results with studies using fully validated international scales.

The exclusive use of self-report measures collected at a single time point may have introduced shared-method or common-method variance, potentially inflating associations among the study variables.

Several constructs were measured using two-item subscales. While these scales demonstrated strong internal consistency, they may constrain construct breadth. Future research could benefit from using longer validated instruments to capture additional dimensions of these variables.

Additionally, the study did not conduct exploratory or confirmatory factor analysis, mediation analysis or SEM. As a result, the proposed conceptual relationships were not tested within an integrated structural model and should be interpreted

strictly as correlational. Future research could employ SEM or longitudinal modelling to validate the full structural pathways among perceived tokenism, psychological safety, contextual performance and performance-related outcomes.

Conclusion

This study highlights the critical role of psychological inclusion in the Indian IT sector, showing that perceived tokenism is associated with lower psychological safety and contextual performance, particularly among early-career professionals. Communication, social support and burnout emerged as key factors influencing these outcomes. By situating tokenism within a non-Western, high-performance context, the research shows the need to move beyond representation towards relational inclusion. Future efforts should focus on fostering psychologically safe environments where all employees feel genuinely empowered to contribute, grow and lead.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank IntelliMed Healthcare Solutions Pvt Ltd. for medical writing support.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRedit authorship contribution

Anand Kataria: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Visualisation, Writing – original draft. Manish K. Verma: Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Anand Kataria, upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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