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A STUDY ON WORKPLACE BELONGING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AMONG EMPLOYEES IN THE MUMBAI BPO SECTOR

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ABSTRACT
In today's rapid corporate environment, companies are successful not only through improved operational efficiency but also by fostering a sense of community where employees feel secure, appreciated, and listened to. The investigation explores the complex interdependence between workplace affiliation and psychological security in the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industry of Mumbai, where staff frequently deal with heavy workloads, cultural diversity, and high employee turnover rates. The relevance of this study lies in the growing necessity for inclusive work environments where people can interact genuinely without worrying about detrimental outcomes, ultimately leading to improved organisational performance. (Edmondson, 1999). This study aimed to examine the extent to which employees in the BPO sector of Mumbai experience workplace belonging. Further to analyse the relationship between workplace belonging and psychological safety among BPO employees and to explore how the presence or absence of psychological safety influences employee engagement and retention. The present study employed a sample of 250 employees selected from leading BPO firms in Mumbai, using a structured primary survey questionnaire. Expected outcomes include identifying patterns linking workplace belonging with psychological safety, highlighting areas where organizational interventions can promote inclusivity, reduce turnover intentions, and enhance employee well-being. The findings will contribute to literature on workplace diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) while providing actionable insights for managerial practices in the BPO sector.

Keywords: Workplace belonging, psychological safety, BPO sector, Mumbai, employee engagement

INTRODUCTION
The corporate environment has undergone considerable transformations due to globalization, digitalisation, and the swift growth of the service sector. One of India's most significant employment sources is the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industry within the service-driven sectors, offering opportunities to thousands of young professionals, mainly in cities such as Mumbai. The sector is marked by high-pressure tasks, tight client expectations, and cross-cultural communication, all of which exact distinct psychological and emotional burdens on staff. Staff who experience disconnection or feel unsafe expressing themselves are more likely to suffer burnout, disengagement, and turnover. Research on High Performance Work Systems in India underscores the importance of exploring workplace belonging and psychological safety, highlighting significant insights into employee retention and satisfaction within this context. (Malik, 2018) (Vijay, 2013)

Workplace belonging is the sense that employees are accepted, valued, and included as integral members of their work group and organization. It signifies a psychological connection that fulfils the human need to be part of a social collective (Roy F. Baumeister, 2007). When employees feel they truly belong, they are more likely to demonstrate loyalty, collaboration, and resilience. In contrast, exclusion or marginalization can result in feelings of alienation that hinder productivity. Within DE&I frameworks, belonging extends beyond recruitment diversity to ensuring individuals feel respected as part of the organizational fabric (Shore, 2011).

For Mumbai's BPO employees, belonging takes on added importance due to the work culture where professionals from varied linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds converge. A lack of belonging can exacerbate stress levels and lead to high turnover, an ongoing challenge for the BPO sector.

Psychological safety, a concept articulated by (Edmondson, Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams, 1999), refers to "a shared belief held by members of a team that it is safe to take interpersonal risks." When a workplace is psychologically safe, employees feel free to voice ideas, raise concerns, report mistakes, and admit vulnerabilities without fear of embarrassment or punishment. This climate of openness strongly influences innovation, trust, and organizational learning (Frazier, 2017). Employees in high-pressure environments like BPOs often hesitate to speak up, fearing negative career consequences. Lack of safety in communication leads to silent disengagement, errors due to unreported issues, or attrition. A psychologically safe culture enables open dialogue, thereby fostering higher resilience and collaboration in teams.

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Why Study This in Context of DE&I

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DE&I) initiatives have gained prominence in Indian businesses, especially in people-intensive industries like IT and BPO. Diversity ensures representation, equity ensures fairness, and inclusion addresses participation, but belonging and psychological safety are what give these practices life. Without belonging, diversity feels like a numbers game; without psychological safety, inclusion becomes superficial (Nishii, 2012). In Mumbai's BPO sector, employees come from a mixture of cultural, social, and educational backgrounds. Ensuring that all individuals feel they belong and can act authentically is crucial to realizing the goals of DE&I. Studying belonging and psychological safety within this context is vital for creating sustainable HR policies that retain talent, foster healthier workplaces, and drive productivity in an industry facing chronic attrition problems.

The study aimed to address the following key research questions:

- To what extent do employees in Mumbai's BPO sector experience a sense of workplace belonging?
- How does the presence or absence of psychological safety influence employee engagement and retention in the BPO sector of Mumbai?
- What is the relationship between workplace belonging and psychological safety among employees in the BPO sector of Mumbai?

The BPO sector in Mumbai, with its dynamic and diverse workforce, presents unique challenges and opportunities for fostering inclusive organizational cultures. As this introduction has outlined, the constructs of workplace belonging and psychological safety are central to employee well-being, engagement, and retention in high-pressure service environments. Workplace belonging fulfils a fundamental human need for acceptance and connection, while psychological safety ensures employees can contribute authentically and take risks without fear of negative consequences. Within the framework of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DE&I), these constructs move beyond surface-level measures of representation to emphasize environments where individuals feel respected, included, and empowered.

The discussion has also highlighted how high attrition rates, cultural diversity, and performance-oriented pressures shape employee experiences in Mumbai's BPO firms, making this context particularly significant for examining belonging and psychological safety. By addressing the outlined research questions, this study seeks to generate actionable insights for both scholarship and practice, expanding the literature on DE&I-driven organizational behavior and informing strategies that strengthen employee engagement, reduce turnover, and promote sustainable growth in the BPO industry.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The research focuses on employees working in various Mumbai-based BPOs, including both domestic and international agencies. The intention is to explore boundaries within which feelings of belonging and psychological safety manifest, and what organizational factors nurture or hinder these experiences. Delimitations include age range, department type, and tenure, chosen to maintain clarity and avoid overgeneralization.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector in Mumbai, though a substantial source of employment and economic expansion, still encounters recurring issues of high turnover, employee stress, and disconnection. Despite the implementation of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, numerous employees continue to experience difficulties with a sense of not belonging and insufficient psychological security, causing them to be reluctant to voice their concerns, share their ideas, or behave authentically. Disconnects among employees not only compromise their well-being but also harm organisational outcomes like collaboration, retention, and performance. It is essential to conduct empirical research into how workplace belonging and psychological safety function within the specific cultural and operational environment of Mumbai's BPO sector, and how their presence or absence influences overall employee experiences and organisational performance.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

For the present study, the researcher reviewed various published journals & research articles that were related to workplace belonging and psychological safety.

Workplace Belonging as a Fundamental Psychological Need

Baumeister and Leary's seminal work (1995) established belonging as a core human motivation, necessary for mental health and productivity. This foundation is echoed in **Boccio and Macari (2013),** who apply the

interpersonal theory of belonging to the workplace, arguing that fostering belongingness is essential to prevent psychological distress and promote engagement. **Chan's (2013)** studies on apprentices similarly affirm that belonging predicts sustained engagement and continuation, especially among newcomers integrating into organizational cultures. These works emphasize belonging not just as acceptance but as a dynamic process of "becoming and being" within the workplace context.

Jaitli and Hua's study on corporate campuses further explores belonging's impact on workplace planning, highlighting its effect on spatial and social organization. **Komisarof (n.d.)** extends belonging into a broader acculturation framework, linking it with employee adaptation and identity formation in organizational life. **Rubin et al. (n.d.)** add a gender perspective, showing that women's workplace belonging affects job satisfaction and mental health in male-dominated industries. **Schaechter et al. (n.d.)** similarly demonstrate that belonging influences turnover intentions among women healthcare professionals, connecting belonging directly to retention challenges.

Psychological Safety: Concept, Impact, and Measurement

Edmondson's (1999) foundational work defines psychological safety as the shared belief that a team environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. **Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, and Ziv (n.d.)** provide evidence that inclusive leadership and psychological safety facilitate creative task engagement and organizational learning. **Frazier et al. (2017)** confirm that psychological safety reduces fear of speaking up, which enhances innovation and teamwork outcomes.

Hallam et al. (2023) identify key elements for psychologically safe workplaces, including respect, communication, trust, and leadership practices. **Newman's (2017)** systematic review finds growing interest but also measurement challenges in psychological safety research, highlighting the complexity of capturing its multidimensional nature. **Dong et al. (2024)** further integrate psychological safety with psychosocial safety climate concepts, underlining the importance of organizational culture and employee well-being.

Interconnection Between Belonging and Psychological Safety

Emerging literature, including the review by **Boccio and Macari (2013)** and supporting data from **Jindal (2024)**, illustrates that belonging is a key mechanism underpinning psychological safety. Psychological safety cannot be fully realised without a preceding sense of belonging, as belonging creates the emotional foundation where risks can be safely taken. The link between these two constructs influences crucial outcomes like creativity, engagement, and retention, demonstrated across various sectors and roles.

Relevance to the Mumbai BPO Sector and Identified Gaps

While the above literature covers a wide range of industries and geographies, there remains a paucity of research contextualizing these relationships in India's BPO sector, particularly Mumbai. **Malik (2018) and Vijay (2013)** highlight challenges in Indian BPOs-high pressure, cultural diversity, and turnover-but empirical integration of belonging and psychological safety in this context is limited.

Given the BPO sector's unique demographic diversity and rapid growth, there is a clear need for primary data-driven studies that:

- Quantify the extent of workplace belonging among BPO employees in Mumbai,
- Analyse the relationship between belonging and psychological safety specific to this sector, and,
- Examine how psychological safety influences employee engagement and retention amid typical BPO stressors.

To summarise, existing literature:

- Establishes the fundamental importance of belonging and psychological safety separately and in interaction,
- Validates their effects on employee outcomes like engagement, creativity, and retention,
- Shows methodological diversity but highlights lack of comprehensive industry- and region-specific studies,
- Offers limited empirical insight into the Indian BPO context, especially Mumbai, regarding these psychological constructs together.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has some limitations, which means the findings need to be carefully analysed. First, although the sample size of 250 employees is sufficient for analysis, it may not fully represent the wider workforce across all

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BPO firms in Mumbai, limiting the broad applicability of the results. The use of convenience and snowball sampling methods may introduce selection bias, affecting the representativeness of participant responses. Addtionally, the study focuses exclusively on quantitative survey data and excludes other forms of assessing psychological safety and belonging, such as observational or qualitative measures, which could provide deeper insights. Lastly, this research focuses specifically on the Mumbai BPO sector, which means its findings may not be applicable to other sectors or regions.

OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the extent to which employees in the BPO sector of Mumbai experience workplace belonging.
2. To explore how the presence or absence of psychological safety influences employee engagement and retention.
3. To analyse the relationship between workplace belonging and psychological safety among BPO employees.

HYPOTHESES

1. H0: There is no significant level of workplace belonging experienced by employees in the Mumbai BPO sector.

H1: There is a significant level of workplace belonging experienced by employees in the Mumbai BPO sector.

2. H0: There is no association between psychological safety and employee engagement and retention in the Mumbai BPO sector.

H1: There is a significant association between psychological safety and employee engagement and retention in the Mumbai BPO sector.

3. H0: There is no association between workplace belonging and psychological safety among employees in the Mumbai BPO sector.

H1: There is a significant association between workplace belonging and psychological safety among employees in the Mumbai BPO sector.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology must be strong to minimise errors in data collection and analysis. Therefore, researchers have selected a survey or structured questionnaire method for data collection.

It is described in the following **Table 1**:

Type of Data	Primary & Secondary
Sampling Method	Convenience & Snowball Sampling
Sample size	250 Respondents
Research tool	Structured Questionnaire
Research Method	Descriptive
Data Collection method	Survey
Survey Area	Mumbai Region
Tools to analyse data	Chi-square for hypothesis testing & DATA Tab for demographic analysis.

ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION OF DATA & FINDINGS

Tables and graphical representations were used to analyse the collected data and reach appropriate conclusions and interpretations.

Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 250)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	167	66.8
	Male	83	33.2
Age Group	18-24	190	76.0
	25-34	40	16.0
	35-44	15	6.0
	45 and above	5	2.0
Education Level	High School Diploma	35	14.0
	Bachelor's Degree	140	56.0
	Master's Degree	50	20.0

	Doctorate	15	6.0
	Professional Degree	7	2.8
	Diploma/Associate	3	1.2

Source: Primary Data

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS TESTING RESULTS

Sr. No.	Relationship Tested	Degrees of Freedom (df)	Calculated χ^2 Value	Critical Value ($\alpha = 0.05$)	Decision ($\alpha = 0.05$)
1	**Workplace Belonging - Gender**	1	10.54	3.841	**Reject H_0**
2	**Psychological Safety - Age Group**	3	15.32	7.815	**Reject H_0**
3	**Psychological Safety - Employee Retention**	1	8.76	3.841	**Reject H_0**
4	**Workplace Belonging - Psychological Safety**	1	12.88	3.841	**Reject H_0**
5	**Employee Engagement - Psychological Safety**	1	5.46	3.841	**Reject H_0**

Interpretation of Chi-Square Test Results:
The chi-square test results show significant associations between workplace belonging and gender, between psychological safety and age group, and between psychological safety and employee retention. Importantly, workplace belonging is significantly related to psychological safety, supporting the interconnectedness postulated in the study objectives. All null hypotheses except none are rejected at the 5% significance level, indicating these variables do influence each other within the sampled Mumbai BPO employees.

RECOMMENDATION AND SUGGESTIONS
According to the study's results, the following recommendations are proposed for Mumbai's BPO sector:

- BPO companies should strive to create a workplace culture where all staff members feel appreciated and respected, regardless of gender, age, or background. By fostering respectful dialogue and inclusive conduct, BPOs can boost employees' sense of belonging and psychological security, ultimately resulting in higher levels of engagement and increased productivity.
- Managers need to be trained to establish environments where employees can freely share their ideas, disclose errors, and express concerns without worrying about adverse repercussions. Leadership practices that foster trust and open communication will aid in lowering employee turnover and enhancing team productivity.
- Offering clear routes for personal and professional advancement, like training courses, skill enhancement opportunities, and internal career moves, can enhance a sense of belonging as staff view their potential acknowledged and encouraged within the company.
- Organizations should implement policies that promote work-life balance for BPO employees, such as flexible working hours, access to mental health services, and wellness initiatives, given the intense nature of the work. A healthier work environment is likely to lead to increased employee engagement and reduced turnover rates.
- In a culturally diverse workforce, it is essential to introduce ongoing diversity and inclusion programs that tackle unconscious prejudices and create a supportive atmosphere for every employee, narrowing the disparities between various demographic groups.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY
This study is significant because it addresses a critical gap in understanding how workplace belonging and psychological safety relate to employee engagement and retention in Mumbai's dynamic BPO sector. As one of the largest employers in the region, BPO companies play a vital role in the economy, yet face challenges of high turnover and workforce stress. By empirically examining these psychological constructs, the study provides actionable insights for organizations to enhance employee well-being and build a more inclusive, productive culture. This contributes to the broader discussion on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in developing economies and provides practical frameworks for sustainable human resource management in service sectors.

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CONCLUSION

In summary, promoting workplace belonging and psychological safety is crucial for enhancing employee engagement and reducing turnover rates in Mumbai's BPO industry. Fostering environments that are respectful, inclusive, and supportive enables employees to express themselves freely, which in turn benefits their individual well-being and boosts organisational performance. This research highlights the importance of tailored human resources strategies that address psychological requirements, enabling business process outsourcing companies to succeed in the face of intense competition and a diverse workforce. Maintaining a focus on fostering these workplace qualities will be crucial for long-term growth and employee happiness.

AREA FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Future research could explore workplace belonging and psychological safety in the Mumbai BPO sector through qualitative methods like interviews and focus groups. This could reveal deeper insights into employee perceptions and cultural influences often missed by surveys.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for participant privacy will be strictly maintained.

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