

BEYOND THE BUSINESS CASE: AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION INITIATIVES ON PSYCHOLOGICAL OWNERSHIP

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Abstract

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives have become increasingly important in contemporary organizations, yet their effectiveness is often evaluated through a business-case perspective emphasizing productivity, innovation, and financial performance. This study aims to move beyond such perspectives by examining the relationship between DEI initiatives and psychological ownership through an intersectional lens. Using a qualitative narrative literature review approach, relevant studies from organizational behavior, human resource management, diversity management, and social psychology were analyzed to identify key themes and theoretical insights. The findings indicate that DEI initiatives foster psychological ownership by enhancing employees' perceptions of fairness, inclusion, belonging, recognition, and participation. The review further demonstrates that the impact of DEI initiatives varies across employees with different intersecting social identities, highlighting the importance of intersectionality in understanding workplace experiences. This study contributes to the literature by positioning psychological ownership as a critical employee-centered outcome and advocating for more inclusive and intersectionally informed DEI strategies.

Keywords: *Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI); Psychological Ownership; Intersectionality; Employee Belonging; Organizational Behavior*

INTRODUCTION

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives have become a central component of contemporary organizational strategy as workplaces become increasingly diverse and stakeholders demand greater social responsibility. Organizations worldwide have invested substantial resources in promoting equitable opportunities, inclusive cultures, and diverse representation across all levels of employment (Workman-Stark, 2020). Much of the existing discourse surrounding DEI has been justified through the "business case" perspective, which emphasizes the contribution of diversity and inclusion to organizational performance, innovation, productivity, and competitive advantage. While these outcomes remain important, an exclusive focus on organizational benefits risks overlooking the experiences of employees who are directly affected by DEI policies and practices (Michielsens, 2016). Consequently, scholars have increasingly called for greater attention to employee-centered outcomes that reflect the quality of workplace experiences and relationships.

Among the employee-centered outcomes receiving growing scholarly attention is psychological ownership, defined as the feeling that an organization, job, or work-related target is "mine" or "ours." Psychological ownership has been associated with numerous positive outcomes, including organizational commitment, proactive behavior, job satisfaction, and employee retention (Bendick et al., 2010). Because feelings of ownership are closely linked to perceptions of fairness, belonging, participation, and recognition, DEI initiatives may play a significant role in fostering psychological ownership among employees. However, despite the increasing prominence of DEI programs in organizations, relatively little is known about how such initiatives influence employees' psychological ownership.

Existing studies have predominantly examined outcomes such as engagement, performance, and organizational commitment, leaving the relationship between DEI and psychological ownership insufficiently explored (Kulik & Roberson, 2008).

Furthermore, the current literature often treats employees as homogeneous groups, assuming that DEI initiatives affect all individuals similarly. Such an assumption overlooks the complexity of workplace experiences shaped by multiple and intersecting social identities, including gender, ethnicity, age, disability status, socioeconomic background, and other dimensions of diversity (Butler et al., 2025). Drawing on intersectionality theory, individuals may experience inclusion, exclusion, privilege, or marginalization differently depending on the interaction of these identities. Although intersectionality has gained prominence in social and organizational research, its application to studies examining DEI outcomes remains limited. As a result, there is insufficient understanding of how employees with different intersectional identities perceive DEI initiatives and how these perceptions influence their sense of psychological ownership within organizations (Leigh et al., 2025).

To address these gaps, this study examines the relationship between DEI initiatives and psychological ownership through an intersectional lens. Specifically, the study aims to investigate how employees' perceptions of diversity, equity, and inclusion practices influence their feelings of ownership toward the organization, while also exploring how intersectional identities shape these perceptions and experiences. Additionally, the study seeks to identify the mechanisms through which DEI initiatives foster or hinder psychological ownership, including factors related to inclusion, fairness, belonging, and employee voice. By moving beyond the traditional business-case perspective, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the human and psychological outcomes of DEI initiatives and offers insights for organizations seeking to create genuinely inclusive workplaces that promote both employee well-being and organizational sustainability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) represent interconnected organizational principles designed to foster fair and inclusive workplaces. Diversity refers to the presence of differences among individuals, including demographic characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity, age, disability, and socioeconomic background, as well as cognitive and experiential differences (Monson et al., 2025). Equity focuses on ensuring fair access to opportunities, resources, and rewards by recognizing and addressing structural barriers that may disadvantage certain groups. Inclusion, meanwhile, concerns the extent to which individuals feel valued, respected, accepted, and able to participate fully in organizational processes. Together, these dimensions create workplace environments that promote both individual well-being and organizational effectiveness (Chantarat et al., 2022).

The growing prominence of DEI initiatives has generated substantial scholarly interest in their organizational implications. Research has demonstrated that inclusive and equitable workplaces are associated with higher levels of employee engagement, innovation, creativity, and organizational commitment (Kalavagunta et al., 2025). However, critics argue that DEI programs are often justified primarily through a business-case perspective that emphasizes productivity and financial performance. Such an approach may overlook the broader human and psychological consequences of DEI initiatives. Consequently, recent scholarship has advocated for greater attention to employee-centered outcomes that capture how individuals experience and interpret organizational efforts toward diversity, equity, and inclusion. (Jaiswal & Dyaram, 2019)

Psychological Ownership

Psychological ownership refers to a cognitive and emotional state in which individuals feel as though a particular target, such as an organization, job, project, or idea, belongs to them. According to psychological ownership theory, these feelings emerge when individuals exercise control over a target, invest personal resources into it, and incorporate it into their self-identity (Weaver et al., 2025). Unlike legal ownership, psychological ownership is subjective and reflects an individual's sense of possession and responsibility. Employees who experience strong psychological ownership are more likely to view organizational success and failure as personally relevant, motivating them to contribute positively to organizational goals (Agarwal et al., 2024).

Prior studies have identified psychological ownership as a significant predictor of desirable workplace outcomes. Employees who feel a sense of ownership often demonstrate higher levels of organizational commitment, job satisfaction, citizenship behavior, and proactive performance (Creary et al., 2021). Furthermore, psychological ownership has been linked to stronger emotional attachment and lower turnover intentions. Scholars suggest that organizational environments characterized by trust, participation, fairness, and support are particularly conducive to

the development of ownership feelings. Given that many DEI initiatives seek to enhance inclusion, fairness, and employee voice, psychological ownership provides a useful framework for understanding how such initiatives may influence employees' relationships with their organizations (Levy & Phillips, 2020).

Intersectionality and the Relationship Between DEI and Psychological Ownership

Intersectionality theory offers an important lens for understanding how employees experience workplace diversity and inclusion. Originally developed to explain how multiple social identities interact to shape experiences of privilege and disadvantage, intersectionality argues that identities such as gender, race, ethnicity, age, disability, and class cannot be examined independently (Georgeac et al., 2018). Instead, these identities intersect to create unique experiences that influence how individuals perceive and respond to organizational practices. In workplace contexts, employees occupying different intersectional positions may encounter varying levels of inclusion, exclusion, recognition, and opportunity, even within the same organizational environment (Oberlin et al., 2026).

Applying an intersectional perspective to DEI research suggests that the impact of DEI initiatives on psychological ownership may not be uniform across employee groups. Inclusive policies that strengthen feelings of belonging for one group may not necessarily have the same effect for others whose experiences are shaped by different combinations of identities (Vinluan et al., 2025). Employees who perceive DEI initiatives as genuinely addressing their unique experiences may be more likely to develop trust, identification, and ownership toward the organization. Conversely, employees who perceive DEI efforts as superficial or inattentive to intersectional realities may experience weaker feelings of belonging and psychological ownership. Therefore, examining DEI through an intersectional framework provides a more nuanced understanding of how organizational inclusion efforts shape employees' sense of ownership and attachment to the workplace (Singh et al., 2013).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach using a narrative literature review methodology to explore the relationship between Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives and psychological ownership from an intersectional perspective. A narrative literature review was selected because it allows for a comprehensive and interpretive examination of existing theoretical and empirical studies across multiple disciplines, including organizational behavior, human resource management, diversity management, and social psychology. Unlike systematic reviews that focus primarily on quantitative synthesis, narrative reviews facilitate the integration of diverse conceptual perspectives and enable a deeper understanding of complex social phenomena. The review focuses on scholarly publications discussing DEI practices, psychological ownership, workplace inclusion, employee belongingness, and intersectionality to identify prevailing themes, theoretical developments, and emerging debates within the literature.

The literature was collected from reputable academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, and Google Scholar. Relevant studies published in peer-reviewed journals, books, and conference proceedings were selected based on their relevance to the key concepts of DEI, psychological ownership, and intersectionality. The collected literature was analyzed using thematic analysis, whereby recurring concepts, patterns, and relationships were identified, categorized, and interpreted. Particular attention was given to studies examining employee experiences of inclusion, equity, belonging, and organizational attachment across different social identity groups. Through this qualitative synthesis, the study develops an integrated conceptual understanding of how DEI initiatives may foster or hinder psychological ownership and highlights the importance of intersectional perspectives in evaluating the effectiveness of organizational inclusion efforts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

DEI Initiatives as Antecedents of Psychological Ownership

The narrative review reveals that Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives contribute significantly to the development of psychological ownership by fostering employees' perceptions of fairness, recognition, and belonging. Across the reviewed literature, employees are more likely to develop a sense of ownership toward their organizations when they perceive workplace policies and practices as equitable and inclusive (Rahadian et al., 2023). Diversity initiatives that promote representation and visibility of underrepresented groups create opportunities for employees to feel acknowledged and valued, while equitable systems of recruitment, promotion, and reward allocation enhance perceptions of organizational justice. These factors collectively strengthen employees' emotional and cognitive attachment to the organization (Rahadian et al., 2024).

Furthermore, inclusion emerges as a critical mechanism through which DEI initiatives influence psychological ownership. Studies consistently indicate that employees who feel heard, respected, and involved in organizational decision-making processes are more likely to perceive the organization as an extension of themselves (Alamsyah et al., 2025). Such perceptions encourage employees to invest greater effort, responsibility, and commitment toward organizational goals. The findings suggest that psychological ownership is not merely a consequence of employment but is cultivated through workplace environments that actively support employee participation, respect individual differences, and provide opportunities for meaningful contribution (Alamsyah & Astuti, 2025).

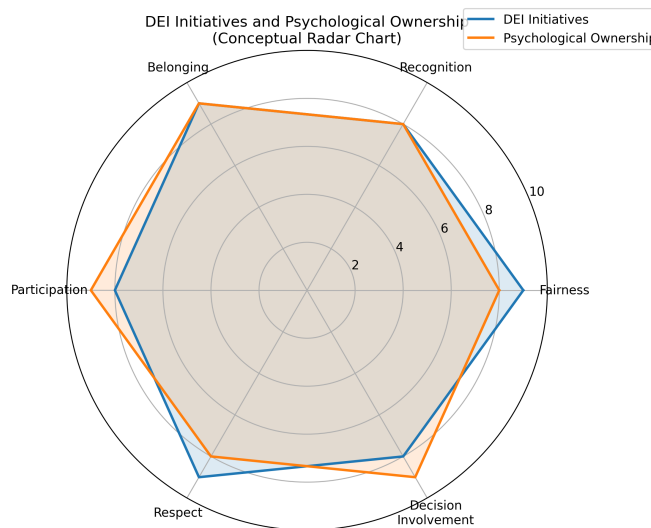


Figure 1. Conceptual Radar Chart of DEI Dimensions and Psychological Ownership Antecedents

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual relationship between Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives and psychological ownership based on the themes identified in the narrative literature review. The radar chart demonstrates that key dimensions of DEI—including fairness, recognition, belonging, participation, respect, and involvement in decision-making—are closely aligned with the antecedents of psychological ownership (Alamsyah & Astuti, 2025). The relatively high scores across all dimensions indicate that employees are more likely to develop feelings of ownership toward their organizations when they perceive workplace practices as inclusive, equitable, and supportive. In particular, belonging and participation emerge as prominent connecting factors, suggesting that employees who feel accepted, valued, and actively involved in organizational processes are more likely to identify with organizational goals and view the organization as an extension of themselves. Overall, the figure reinforces the argument that DEI initiatives contribute not only to organizational performance but also to the development of employee-centered outcomes, particularly psychological ownership, through enhanced perceptions of fairness, inclusion, and meaningful engagement (Nandiya et al., 2025).

The Role of Intersectionality in Shaping Employee Experiences

The literature review demonstrates that employees' experiences of DEI initiatives are strongly influenced by intersectional identities. Rather than experiencing workplace inclusion through a single dimension such as gender or ethnicity, employees navigate organizations through multiple and overlapping social identities (Workman-Stark, 2020). The reviewed studies indicate that individuals occupying marginalized intersectional positions often face unique challenges that may not be adequately addressed by generalized DEI programs. As a result, the effectiveness of DEI initiatives varies considerably depending on employees' lived experiences and social locations within organizational structures (Michielsens, 2016).

The findings further suggest that intersectionality provides a more nuanced understanding of psychological ownership. Employees who perceive DEI initiatives as responsive to their specific identity-related experiences tend to report stronger feelings of belonging and organizational attachment (Bendick et al., 2010). Conversely, when DEI programs focus narrowly on singular identity categories or symbolic representation, employees may perceive these efforts as insufficient or exclusionary. This can weaken trust in organizational commitments to inclusion and reduce employees' sense of ownership. Therefore, organizations seeking to foster psychological ownership must move

beyond one-dimensional approaches and recognize the complexity of employees' intersecting identities (Kulik & Roberson, 2008).

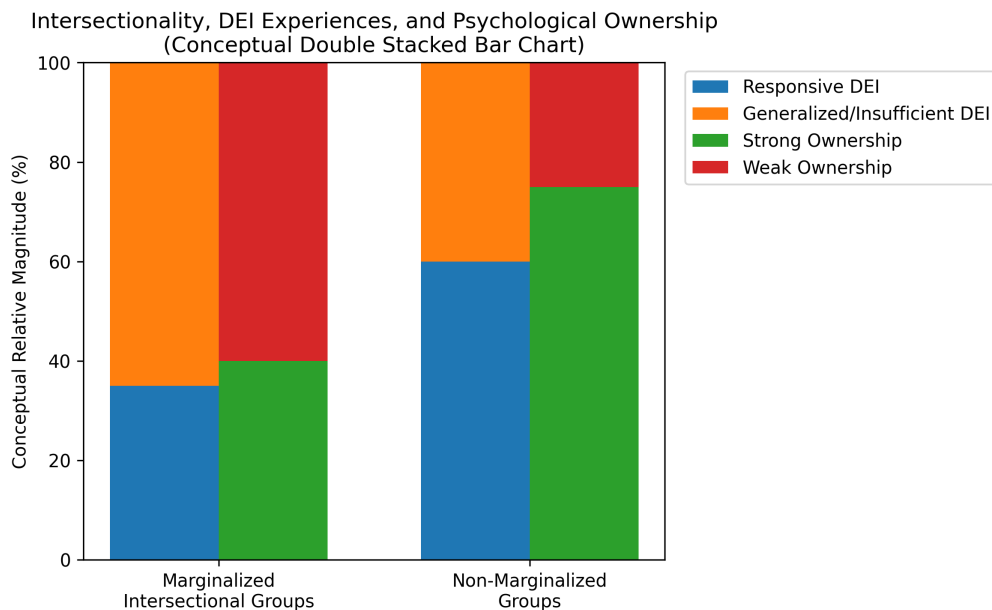


Figure 2. The Influence of Intersectional Identities on DEI Experiences and Psychological Ownership

Figure 2 presents a conceptual comparison of how intersectional identities shape employees' experiences of DEI initiatives and their subsequent levels of psychological ownership. The chart illustrates that employees occupying marginalized intersectional positions are more likely to encounter generalized or insufficient DEI practices that fail to address the complexity of their overlapping identities. Consequently, these employees tend to report weaker psychological ownership, characterized by lower levels of belonging, trust, and organizational attachment (Butler et al., 2025). In contrast, employees who perceive DEI initiatives as responsive to their unique identity-related experiences demonstrate stronger feelings of ownership toward the organization. The figure highlights that the effectiveness of DEI initiatives is not uniform across employee groups but varies according to individuals' social locations and lived experiences. These findings reinforce the importance of adopting an intersectional approach to diversity management, suggesting that organizations must move beyond one-dimensional inclusion strategies and develop more nuanced policies that recognize the diverse realities of employees (Leigh et al., 2025). By doing so, organizations can strengthen psychological ownership and foster a more inclusive and equitable workplace environment.

Beyond the Business Case: Reframing DEI Through Employee-Centered Outcomes

A key finding emerging from the literature is the need to move beyond the traditional business-case justification for DEI initiatives. While previous studies have frequently emphasized the relationship between DEI and organizational outcomes such as innovation, productivity, and financial performance, the reviewed literature highlights the importance of considering employee-centered outcomes (Monson et al., 2025). Psychological ownership represents a valuable outcome because it reflects employees' deeper emotional and psychological connection to the organization. By focusing solely on organizational performance metrics, scholars and practitioners may overlook whether employees genuinely experience inclusion, respect, and belonging within the workplace (Chantararat et al., 2022).

The discussion also reveals that employee-centered outcomes may provide a more comprehensive assessment of DEI effectiveness. Psychological ownership captures dimensions of organizational life that are not easily reflected in financial indicators or workforce diversity statistics. Employees who feel ownership toward their organizations are more likely to engage in discretionary effort, knowledge sharing, collaboration, and long-term commitment (Kalavagunta et al., 2025). Consequently, the development of psychological ownership should be viewed not only as an individual benefit but also as a foundation for sustainable organizational success. These

findings support a broader conceptualization of DEI that prioritizes human experiences alongside organizational objectives and underscores the importance of intersectional inclusion in contemporary workplaces (Jaiswal & Dyaram, 2019).

Table 1. Beyond the Business Case: Reframing DEI Through Employee-Centered Outcomes

Traditional Business-Case Perspective	Employee-Centered DEI Perspective	Implications for Psychological Ownership	Organizational Benefits
Focuses on productivity, innovation, and financial performance as primary indicators of DEI success.	Focuses on employees' experiences of inclusion, belonging, fairness, and respect.	Employees develop stronger emotional attachment and identification with the organization.	Higher employee commitment and engagement.
Measures success through organizational metrics such as profitability, diversity ratios, and market competitiveness.	Measures success through psychological and relational outcomes experienced by employees.	Psychological ownership reflects employees' sense of responsibility and personal investment in organizational goals.	Improved discretionary effort and proactive workplace behavior.
Treats employees as contributors to organizational performance.	Recognizes employees as stakeholders whose well-being and experiences are valuable outcomes in themselves.	Greater trust, voice, and participation strengthen ownership perceptions.	Enhanced collaboration and knowledge sharing.
Emphasizes short-term organizational outcomes and competitive advantage.	Promotes long-term inclusion, belonging, and sustainable workplace relationships.	Sustained psychological ownership encourages loyalty and organizational citizenship behavior.	Increased retention and long-term organizational sustainability.

Table 1 highlights the shift from a traditional business-case perspective of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) toward a more employee-centered approach that prioritizes psychological ownership and workplace experiences. The comparison demonstrates that while conventional DEI frameworks primarily evaluate success through organizational outcomes such as productivity, innovation, profitability, and workforce diversity metrics, an employee-centered perspective emphasizes inclusion, belonging, fairness, and respect as critical indicators of effectiveness (Michielsens, 2016; Workman-Stark, 2020). The table further illustrates that psychological ownership serves as a key mechanism linking DEI initiatives to sustainable organizational outcomes. When employees feel valued, trusted, and actively involved in organizational processes, they are more likely to develop a sense of ownership that fosters commitment, discretionary effort, knowledge sharing, and organizational citizenship behavior (Bendick et al., 2010; Kulik & Roberson, 2008). Consequently, the findings suggest that DEI should not be viewed solely as a strategy for improving organizational performance but also as a means of cultivating meaningful employee experiences that contribute to long-term organizational sustainability. This broader perspective reinforces the importance of balancing business objectives with human-centered outcomes in the evaluation and implementation of DEI initiatives.

CONCLUSION

This narrative literature review examined the relationship between Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives and psychological ownership through an intersectional perspective. The findings suggest that DEI initiatives contribute to the development of psychological ownership by fostering perceptions of fairness, inclusion, belonging, recognition, and employee voice. Employees are more likely to develop a sense of ownership toward their organizations when they feel valued, respected, and actively involved in organizational processes. The review further highlights that psychological ownership represents an important employee-centered outcome that extends beyond conventional measures of organizational performance. Consequently, the effectiveness of DEI initiatives

should not be evaluated solely based on productivity, innovation, or financial outcomes but also on their capacity to strengthen employees' psychological connection to the organization.

The review also demonstrates the importance of adopting an intersectional lens when examining DEI outcomes. Employees experience workplace inclusion differently depending on the interaction of multiple social identities, and these differences significantly shape perceptions of organizational fairness and belonging. DEI initiatives that fail to recognize such complexities may produce uneven outcomes and limit the development of psychological ownership among certain employee groups. Therefore, organizations should design and implement DEI strategies that acknowledge diverse intersectional experiences and prioritize meaningful inclusion rather than symbolic representation. Future research may build upon this conceptual foundation by conducting empirical studies across different organizational and cultural contexts to further explore the mechanisms linking DEI initiatives, intersectionality, and psychological ownership.

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