EMPLOYEE PERCEPTIONS OF INCLUSION PRACTICES IN US TECH COMPANIES: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

Background and Rationale:

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) have become central themes in the strategic agendas of US technology companies. While diversity metrics are often publicly tracked, inclusion—the subjective experience of belonging, fairness, and respect—remains less visible. Employees may interpret inclusion practices differently based on role, background, or organizational culture. This study explores how individuals within US tech companies perceive inclusion efforts and how these perceptions influence their engagement and sense of workplace belonging.

Research Objectives:

- To develop a grounded theory explaining how employees in US tech firms experience and interpret inclusion practices.

- To identify the organizational and interpersonal factors that shape perceived inclusion.

- To explore perceived gaps between DEI policies and daily workplace realities.

Research Questions:

1. How do employees define and experience inclusion in the context of US technology companies?

2. What factors enhance or hinder the perception of inclusion across different employee groups?

3. How do formal DEI policies translate into actual lived experiences?

Methodology:

- **Research Design:** Qualitative grounded theory study

- **Approach:** Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014)

- **Participants:**

    o 15 employees working in US-based tech companies, across roles (engineering, product, HR, operations)

- o Recruited via LinkedIn and diversity-focused Slack communities
- **Data Collection:**
  - o In-depth semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom
  - o Follow-up email clarifications where needed
  - o Field notes and analytic memos maintained throughout
- **Data Analysis Strategy:**
  - o Open coding followed by focused coding
  - o Constant comparison method across transcripts
  - o Core categories identified and theory constructed inductively
  - o NVivo used for coding and category development

Key Findings:

1. **Inclusion as a Daily Experience, Not a Policy**
   - o Employees valued subtle daily behaviours (e.g., being invited to speak, visible listening, mentorship) over formal training or announcements.

2. **Leadership and Managerial Influence**
   - o Immediate managers played a key role—either enabling inclusion through support and recognition or undermining it through indifference or bias.

3. **Symbolic vs Substantive Inclusion**
   - o Many perceived DEI efforts as symbolic (e.g., public statements, affinity groups) but lacking in meaningful career progression opportunities for underrepresented staff.

4. **Intersectional Barriers**
   - o Women of colour described heightened challenges, including performative inclusion and lack of sponsorship, even within otherwise "diverse" teams.

Conclusion and Theoretical Implications:

Inclusion is not experienced through policy alone but emerges from a constellation of everyday interpersonal interactions, leadership behaviour, and organizational culture. This grounded theory reveals that inclusion, to be effective, must be co-constructed with employees and translated into

tangible actions, not just strategic frameworks. The study contributes to the literature by offering a dynamic, process-oriented model of inclusion grounded in employee narratives.

Future Research Scope:

- Application of the grounded theory across other sectors (e.g., finance, healthcare)

- Quantitative follow-up study to test the model's generalizability

- Deeper exploration of inclusion experiences in remote or hybrid tech teams

- Managerial case studies examining how individual leaders operationalize inclusion

Academic and Corporate Suitability:

- **Academic:** Ideal for qualitative dissertations in HRM, organizational psychology, and leadership studies.

- **Corporate:** Useful for DEI teams, people analytics departments, and HR consultants seeking employee-driven insights into inclusion effectiveness.