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Research article

A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON SOCIAL INCLUSION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AMONG EMPLOYEES BASED ON COMPANY ESG STANDARDS

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Abstract:

This study examines the relationship between social inclusion and psychological well-being among employees in organizations adhering to Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) standards. Utilizing a sample of 348 employees categorized by their company ESG performance, the research employs the Social Inclusion Scale (SIS) and the Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS) to quantify the levels of inclusion and well-being experienced by participants. Findings demonstrate that employees in companies with high ESG standards reported significantly higher levels of social inclusion (M = 5.2) and psychological well-being (M = 6.7) compared to those in organizations with average (M = 4.5, M = 5.2) and low (M = 3.9, M = 4.5) ESG standards. A positive correlation (r = 0.584) was found between social inclusion and psychological well-being across all groups, strongest in high ESG organizations (r = 0.659). The study further reveals significant differences in social inclusion and psychological well-being based on gender, age, and educational background, particularly in organizations with high ESG ratings. These findings underscore the strategic importance of social inclusion as not only a moral imperative but as a catalyst for employee satisfaction, engagement, and overall organizational success. Companies are encouraged to integrate social inclusion initiatives into their ESG strategies to enhance workforce well-being and foster a more equitable workplace culture.

Keywords: *Social inclusion, Psychological well-being, ESG standards, individual differences*

1. Introduction

Social inclusion is a critical component of organizational behavior that has gained prominence in recent years, especially among companies adhering to Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) standards. From a psychological perspective, social inclusion can significantly impact employee satisfaction, retention, and overall organizational performance. This article explores how psychological principles intersect with social inclusion efforts among employers operating within ESG standards.

Social inclusion refers to the processes and practices that ensure individuals feel valued, respected, and recognized within a social context. It goes beyond mere representation and encompasses an environment where diverse voices are heard and acknowledged. According to the United Nations (2016), social inclusion plays a crucial role in sustainable development as it contributes to economic resiliency and social justice.

At its core, social inclusion is rooted in human psychology. Theories such as Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs emphasize the importance of belongingness as a fundamental human requirement (Maslow, 1943). When employees perceive their work environment as inclusive, it fulfills this need for belonging and significantly increases their motivation and job satisfaction (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Consequently, organizations that prioritize social inclusion can see enhanced employee engagement and productivity.

Companies following ESG principles recognize that social inclusion is not just a moral obligation but a strategic advantage. The social component of ESG focuses on labor practices, diversity, and community engagement (Eccles, Ioannou, & Serafeim, 2014). Employers who cultivate an inclusive environment tend to attract a more diverse pool of talent, fostering innovation through varied perspectives.

Moreover, organizations committed to ESG standards often implement training programs designed to raise awareness about the importance of social inclusion. These initiatives tap into the psychological principle of cognitive dissonance, which suggests that individuals strive for internal consistency between their beliefs and behavior (Festinger, 1957). When employees are educated about the value of inclusivity yet experience discrimination or exclusion, they may feel psychological discomfort that can be alleviated by embracing inclusive practices.

Research has consistently shown that diverse and inclusive workplaces yield better performance outcomes. A report by McKinsey & Company (2020) illustrates that organizations with higher diversity levels are more likely to outperform their peers in terms of profitability. Such evidence underlines the psychological benefits of inclusive practices, as employees who feel they belong are more likely to participate actively and contribute to their companies' success.

In addition, social inclusion enhances corporate reputation, making organizations attractive to consumers and investors mindful of ethical considerations. Positive corporate image and reputation can further reinforce employee pride and commitment (Brammer & Millington, 2008), creating a virtuous cycle of employee engagement and social responsibility.

2. Research design

2.1. Aim: To investigate the relationships between social inclusion and psychological well-being among employees, examining how these associations are influenced by organizational ESG standards, and to explore potential moderating effects of gender, age, and educational background on these relationships.

2.2. Hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Higher levels of social inclusion are associated with greater psychological well-being among employees, and this relationship is particularly strong in organizations with high ESG standards, indicating that supportive and inclusive work environments contribute significantly to employees' mental status.

Hypotheses 2: There are significant gender differences in attitudes towards social inclusion and psychological well-being moderated by the level of ESG standards within a company.

Hypotheses 3: There are significant age differences in attitudes towards social inclusion and psychological well-being moderated by the level of ESG standards within a company.

Hypotheses 4: There are significant educational differences in attitudes towards social inclusion and psychological well-being moderated by the level of ESG standards within a company.

2.3. Method and Procedure

The study involved 348 employees working in various companies categorized by their ESG standards performance. Participants were divided into three groups based on their company's ESG standards scores: 1) High level of ESG standards: 83 participants; 2) Average level of ESG standards: 97 participants; 3) Low level of ESG standards: 68 participants

To measure social inclusion, we utilized the Social Inclusion Scale (SIS) developed by Cutts et al. (2012). The scale consists of 10 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, assessing feelings of belonging, acceptance, and support within the workplace. Example items include: "I feel accepted by my colleagues" and "I have strong connections with my coworkers."

The Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS) created by Ryff (1989) was employed to gauge participants' psychological well-being through 18 items. Each item is rated on a 6-point Likert scale that assesses six dimensions, including self-acceptance, positive relationships, and purpose in life. Sample items include: "I feel like I am in charge of the situation in which I live" and "I have a sense of direction and purpose in life."

Statistical analysis involved descriptive statistics to summarize the demographic data and responses to the scales. Correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between social inclusion and psychological well-being across different ESG standards groups. Data were analyzed using SPSS software, and significance levels were set at $p < 0.05$.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics

The results indicated varying levels of social inclusion and psychological well-being among employees in different ESG standards categories. Employees from high ESG standards companies reported higher social inclusion (M = 5.2, SD = 0.58) and psychological well-being (M = 6.7, SD = 0.62), while those in average ESG standards companies reported moderate levels of social inclusion (M = 4.5, SD = 0.7) and psychological well-being (M = 5.2, SD = 0.83). Workers in low ESG standards companies showed the lowest levels of social inclusion (M = 3.9, SD = 0.68) and psychological well-being (M = 4.5, SD = 0.74).

3.2. Correlation Analysis

A Pearson correlation analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between social inclusion and psychological well-being ($r = 0.584$, $p < 0.01$). The correlation was consistent across all ESG standards levels. Notably, employees from high ESG standards companies exhibited the strongest correlation ($r = 0.659$ $p < 0.01$), suggesting that a supportive and inclusive work environment can significantly enhance psychological well-being.

3.4. Individual differences

Table 1. Gender Differences and Levels of Company ESG Standards in relation to Social inclusion and Psychological well-being of Staff

Social Inclusion	**Gender**	**N**	**M**	**SD**	**df**	**t**	**p**
High ESG standards	female	52	5.78	1.83	99	5.886	0.0001
	male	49	4.24	0.06			
Average ESG standards	female	68	4.18	1.22	120	1.231	0.2207
	male	54	3.86	1.65			
Low ESG standards	female	61	1.24	0.89	123	6.045	0.0001
	male	64	2.67	1.63			
Psychological well-being	**Gender**	**N**	**M**	**SD**	**df**	**t**	**p**
High ESG standards	female	52	2.19	0.96	99	4.683	0.0001
	male	49	3.18	1.16			
Average ESG standards	female	68	4.82	1.45	120	0.518	0.6053
	male	54	4.98	1.96			
Low ESG standards	female	61	3.84	2.36	123	1.342	0.1821
	male	64	3.36	1.58			

Significant gender differences were found in companies with high ESG standards, where females showed a markedly greater emphasis on social inclusion compared to males. In companies categorized with average ESG standards, there were no notable gender differences among employees concerning social inclusion. However, in companies with low ESG standards, males demonstrated a significantly greater concern for social inclusion than females.

In organizations with high ESG standards, significant gender differences were also observed in terms of psychological well-being, with males scoring higher than females. No significant gender differences were found among employers in companies with average or low ESG standards concerning the psychological well-being of their staff.

Table 2. Age differences and Levels of Company ESG Standards in relation to Social inclusion and Psychological well-being of Staff

Social Inclusion	**Age group**	**N**	**M**	**SD**	**df**	**F**	**p**
High ESG standards	20 to 35	32	6.44	1.45	2, 109	33.979	0.0001
	36 to 46	46	5.39	0.79			
	47 to 57	34	4.24	1.03			
Average ESG standards	20 to 35	36	4.28	2.27	2, 126	1.145	0.3213
	36 to 46	54	4.25	1.68			
	47 to 57	39	3.74	1.44			
Low ESG standards	20 to 35	24	0.92	0.07	2, 104	8.749	0.0003
	36 to 46	39	3.42	1.04			
	47 to 57	44	4.56	1.16			
Psychological well-being	**Age group**	**N**	**M**	**SD**	**df**	**F**	**p**
High ESG standards	20 to 35	32	6.94	0.91	2, 109	37.236	0.0000
	36 to 46	46	3.83	0.59			
	47 to 57	34	2.47	0.86			
Average ESG standards	20 to 35	36	4.85	1.08	2, 126	80.969	0.0000
	36 to 46	54	5.42	1.39			
	47 to 57	39	2.46	0.73			
Low ESG standards	20 to 35	24	2.21	1.02	2, 104	2.743	0.0690
	36 to 46	39	2.93	1.48			
	47 to 57	44	3.08	1.72			

Tukey HSD Post-hoc test shows that social inclusion varies significantly according different age group from High Levels of Company ESG Standards where the comparison between those from 20 years to 35 years and those from 36 years to 46 years is: Diff=-1.0500, 95%CI=-1.6434 to -0.4566, p=0.0002. The comparison between those from 20 years to 35 years and those from 47 years to 57 years is: Diff=-2.2000, 95%CI=-2.8349 to -1.5651, p=0.0000. The comparison between those from 36 years to 46 years and those from 47 years to 57 years is: Diff=-1.1500, 95%CI=-1.7330 to -0.5670, p=0.0000.

Tukey HSD Post-hoc test shows that social inclusion does not vary significantly according different age group from Average Levels of Company ESG Standards where the comparison between those from 20 years to 35 years and those from 36 years to 46 years is: Diff=-0.0300, 95%CI=-0.9491 to 0.8891, p=0.9948. The comparison between those from 20 years to 35 years and those from 47 years to 57 years is: Diff=-0.5400, 95%CI=-1.5273 to 0.4473, p=0.3994. The comparison between those from 36 years to 46 years and those from 47 years to 57 years is: Diff=-0.5100, 95%CI=-1.4076 to 0.3876, p=0.3718.

Tukey HSD Post-hoc test shows that social inclusion varies significantly according different age group from Low Levels of Company ESG Standards where the comparison between those from 20 years to 35 years and those from 36 years to 46 years is: Diff=2.5000, 95%CI=0.3821 to 4.6179, p=0.0163. The comparison between those from 20 years to 35 years and those from 47 years to 57 years is: Diff=3.6400, 95%CI=1.5684 to 5.7116, p=0.0002. The comparison between those from 36 years to 46 years and those from 47 years to 57 years is: Diff=1.1400, 95%CI=-0.6554 to 2.9354, p=0.2905.

Tukey HSD Post-hoc test shows that psychological well-being varies significantly according different age group from High Levels of Company ESG Standards where the comparison between those from 20 years to 35 years and those from 36 years to 46 years is: Diff=76.0600, 95%CI=50.1755 to 101.9445, p=0.0000. The comparison between those from 20 years to 35 years and those from 47 years to 57 years is: Diff=-4.4700, 95%CI=-32.1652 to 23.2252, p=0.9222. The comparison between those from 36 years to 46 years and those from 47 years to 57 years is: Diff=-80.5300, 95%CI=-105.9616 to -55.0984, p=0.0000.

Tukey HSD Post-hoc test shows that psychological well-being varies significantly according different age group from Average Levels of Company ESG Standards where the comparison between those from 20 years to 35 years and those from 36 years to 46 years is: Diff=0.5700, 95%CI=-0.0112 to 1.1512, p=0.0559. The comparison between those from 20 years to 35 years and those from 47 years to 57 years is: Diff=-2.3900, 95%CI=-3.0144 to -1.7656, p=0.0000. The comparison between those from 36 years to 46 years and those from 47 years to 57 years is: Diff=-2.9600, 95%CI=-3.5277 to -2.3923, p=0.0000.

Tukey HSD Post-hoc test shows that psychological well-being does not vary significantly according different age group from Low Levels of Company ESG Standards where the comparison between those from 20 years to 35 years and those from 36 years to 46 years is: Diff=0.7200, 95%CI=-0.2060 to 1.6460, p=0.159. The comparison between those from 20 years to 35 years and those from 47 years to 57 years is: Diff=0.8700, 95%CI=-0.0358 to 1.7758, p=0.0626. The comparison between those from 36 years to 46 years and those from 47 years to 57 years is: Diff=0.1500, 95%CI=-0.6350 to 0.9350, p=0.8926.

As Table 3. shows: Tukey HSD Post-hoc test shows that social inclusion varies significantly according different educational degree group from High Levels of Company ESG Standards where the comparison between those with PhD degree and those with MA degree is: Diff=-2.1600, 95%CI=-2.9813 to -1.3387, p=0.0000. The comparison between those with PhD degree and those with BA degree is: Diff=-3.1400, 95%CI=-4.0202 to -2.2598, p=0.0000. The comparison between those with MA degree and those with BA degree is: Diff=-0.9800, 95%CI=-1.8754 to -0.0846, p=0.0284.

Tukey HSD Post-hoc test shows that social inclusion does not vary significantly according different educational degree group from Average Levels of Company ESG Standards where the comparison between those with PhD degree and those with MA degree is: Diff=-0.5300, 95%CI=-1.7045 to 0.6445, p=0.5337. The comparison between those with PhD degree and those with BA degree is: Diff=-0.6900, 95%CI=-1.9666 to 0.5866, p=0.407. The comparison between those with MA degree and those with BA degree is: Diff=-0.1600, 95%CI=-1.2917 to 0.9717, p=0.9398.

Tukey HSD Post-hoc test shows that social inclusion varies significantly according different educational degree group from Low Levels of Company ESG Standards where the comparison

between those with PhD degree and those with MA degree is: Diff=-1.1400, 95%CI=-1.8541 to -0.4259, p=0.0007. The comparison between those with PhD degree and those with BA degree is: Diff=-1.1000, 95%CI=-1.7909 to -0.4091, p=0.0007. The comparison between those with MA degree and those with BA degree is: Diff=0.0400, 95%CI=-0.5588 to 0.6388, p=0.9862.
Tukey HSD Post-hoc test shows that psychological well-being does not vary significantly according different educational degree group from High Levels of Company ESG Standards where the comparison between those with PhD degree and those with MA degree is: Diff=-0.6400, 95%CI=-1.7988 to 0.5188, p=0.3908. The comparison between those with PhD degree and those with BA degree is: Diff=-0.7100, 95%CI=-1.9519 to 0.5319, p=0.3657. The comparison between those with MA degree and those with BA degree is: Diff=-0.0700, 95%CI=-1.3333 to 1.1933, p=0.9905.

Table 3. Differences in Educational Degrees and Levels of Company ESG Standards in Relation to Social Inclusion and Psychological Well-Being of Staff

Social Inclusion	**Educational degree**	**N**	**M**	**SD**	**df**	**F**	**p**
High ESG standards	PhD Degree	39	5.98	1.96	2,100	39.792	0.0001
	MA Degree	36	3.82	1.45			
	BA Degree	28	2.84	0.36			
Average ESG standards	PhD Degree	31	5.36	2.58	2,115	0.905	0.4073
	MA Degree	52	4.83	2.09			
	BA Degree	35	4.67	1.91			
Low ESG standards	PhD Degree	28	3.82	1.38	2,124	8.735	0.0003
	MA Degree	45	2.68	1.25			
	BA Degree	54	2.72	1.18			
Psychological well-being	**Educational degree**	**N**	**M**	**SD**	**df**	**F**	**p**
High ESG standards	PhD Degree	39	5.86	2.36	2,100	1.235	0.2952
	MA Degree	36	5.22	1.16			
	BA Degree	28	5.15	2.62			
Average ESG standards	PhD Degree	31	4.82	1.27	2,115	46.825	0.0001
	MA Degree	52	3.78	0.86			
	BA Degree	35	3.25	0.68			
Low ESG standards	PhD Degree	28	2.24	1.54	2,124	1.509	0.2251
	MA Degree	45	2.59	0.86			
	BA Degree	54	2.32	0.51			

Tukey HSD Post-hoc test shows that psychological well-being varies significantly according different educational degree group from Average Levels of Company ESG Standards where the comparison between those with PhD degree and those with MA degree is: Diff=-2.0400, 95%CI=-2.5470 to -1.5330, p=0.0000. The comparison between those with PhD degree and those with BA degree is: Diff=-1.5700, 95%CI=-2.1211 to -1.0189, p=0.0000. The comparison between those with MA degree and those with BA degree is: Diff=0.4700, 95%CI=-0.0185 to 0.9585, p=0.0620

Tukey HSD Post-hoc test shows that psychological well-being varies significantly according different educational degree group from Low Levels of Company ESG Standards where the comparison between those with PhD degree and those with MA degree is: Diff=0.3500, 95%CI=-0.1886 to 0.8886, p=0.2753. The comparison between those with PhD degree and those with BA degree is: Diff=0.0800, 95%CI=-0.4411 to 0.6011, p=0.9296. The comparison between those with MA degree and those with BA degree is: Diff=-0.2700, 95%CI=-0.7217 to 0.1817, p=0.3348.

Results from Student t-test and ANOVA show significant individual differences among employers from different Levels of Company ESG Standards. High levels of company ESG standards are closely linked to enhanced social inclusion and psychological well-being among diverse groups, including varied genders, ages, and educational backgrounds. When organizations prioritize sustainable practices and equitable policies, they tend to foster a more inclusive workplace culture where all employees feel valued and empowered. This inclusive environment can lead to improved mental health outcomes, as individuals from different demographic backgrounds find a sense of belonging and purpose. Ultimately, companies committing to high ESG standards not only benefit their bottom line but also contribute to a more equitable society that nurtures the well-being of its workforce.

4. Discussion

The findings highlight the importance of social inclusion in promoting psychological well-being among employees, particularly in organizations with high ESG standards. The results support the growing body of research indicating that socially responsible companies foster more supportive environments, resulting in positive psychological outcomes (Short & Tilley, 2022).

Employees in low ESG standards organizations reported lower levels of both social inclusion and psychological well-being, suggesting that a lack of emphasis on social governance may lead to detrimental effects on employee morale and engagement. This may imply that addressing social inclusion in workplace practices can significantly enhance employee satisfaction and performance.

The findings presented in this study highlight a crucial intersection between organizational behavior, psychological well-being, and corporate responsibility via Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) standards. The results underscore the positive relationship between social inclusion and psychological well-being, suggesting that fostering an inclusive environment is not just beneficial from a moral standpoint but also strategically advantageous for companies.

The evidence demonstrates that employees in organizations with high ESG standards exhibit substantially higher levels of social inclusion and psychological well-being when compared to those in organizations with average or low ESG ratings. This aligns with existing literature that posits social inclusion enhances employee engagement, job satisfaction, and overall productivity (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Furthermore, social inclusion is typically associated with improved mental health outcomes, as individuals feel part of a group that acknowledges and respects their contributions. This sense of belonging often leads to positive workplace dynamics that can drive innovation and collaboration.

The correlation between social inclusion and psychological well-being ($r = 0.584$ overall, $r = 0.659$ among high ESG companies) is particularly noteworthy, as it emphasizes the critical role of a supportive work environment in enhancing employee mental health. The strong correlation found in high ESG organizations suggests that these companies not only attract diverse talent but also validate their contributions, empowering employees to perform at their best. The psychological principles discussed, such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, become evident as employees' basic social needs are met, paving the way for higher levels of motivation and satisfaction.

The study found significant variations in social inclusion and psychological well-being across different demographics, including gender, age, and educational background. For instance, gender differences emerged in high ESG companies, where females reported greater social inclusion, while older employees in low ESG organizations had notably lower levels of both social inclusion and psychological well-being. These findings highlight the complexity of workplace dynamics and the importance of tailoring inclusion initiatives to meet the varied needs of diverse employee groups.

What emerges from this research is a strong business case for companies to adopt robust social inclusion strategies as part of their ESG framework. Organizations must consider how they can actively build inclusive cultures, not merely to comply with standards but to enhance overall employee satisfaction and business outcomes. Proactive measures might include creating mentorship programs, implementing diversity training, and instituting policies that ensure all voices are heard. Such actions can reinforce the commitment of high ESG organizations to social responsibility, translating into a sustainable competitive advantage.

Moreover, the educational background of employees also plays a significant role, reflecting the need for organizations to recognize the multifaceted nature of social inclusion. The differences observed among employees with varying educational qualifications suggest that inclusivity isn't a one-size-fits-all approach. Companies should employ strategies that consider these differences and engage all demographic groups meaningfully.

This study lays the foundation for further investigations into the mechanisms underlying the relationships between social inclusion, psychological well-being, and organizational principles. Future research could expand the sample size and scope across different industries, capturing a broader spectrum of employee experiences. Longitudinal studies examining the long-term impacts of enhanced social inclusion initiatives on employee well-being and organizational performance could provide deeper insights into the outcomes of strategic ESG implementations.

Additionally, qualitative research methods could offer nuanced understandings of individual experiences in relation to organizational culture, providing a richer, more comprehensive view of the challenges and successes pertaining to social inclusion practices.

5. Conclusion

This study emphasizes the significant role of social inclusion in workplace environments across varying ESG standards levels. Companies with high ESG standards tend to promote more inclusive practices, which positively correlate with psychological well-being. Given these insights, organizations should prioritize social inclusion initiatives as part of their ESG strategies to enhance employee welfare and achieve sustainable business success. In summary, from a psychological perspective, social inclusion is a vital factor influencing not just the wellbeing of employees but also the overall health and performance of organizations, particularly those adhering to ESG frameworks. As companies increasingly recognize the interplay between social inclusion and employee performance metrics, the psychological principles of belongingness and cognitive dissonance will continue to shape policies and practices in the workplace. The growing emphasis on social inclusivity should be viewed not merely as compliance with ESG standards but as a transformative approach to fostering a supportive and productive work environment.

In conclusion, the interplay of social inclusion and psychological well-being presents a powerful narrative about the evolving role of organizations in fostering equitable workplace cultures. As we move towards a more conscious business landscape, organizations that prioritize social inclusion as part of their ESG commitments are likely to see not only improvements in employee well-being but also flourished organizational success. The evidence gathered in this study reinforces the idea that social inclusion is a categorical must-have in the modern workplace, shaping the narrative for what constitutes a sustainable, responsible, and ethical organization.

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