

# Social Identity, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in Asian Organizations

Implications for Human Resource Management

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## ABSTRACT

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) has become a prominent agenda in human resource management (HRM), particularly in Asian organizations experiencing increasing workforce diversity. However, DEI initiatives often remain symbolic, resulting in tokenism rather than meaningful inclusion. This study employs a conceptual review approach grounded in Social Identity Theory and in-group-out-group bias to analyze DEI implementation in Asian organizational contexts. Drawing on recent empirical and theoretical studies, this paper examines how social identity dynamics influence recruitment, promotion, anti-discrimination policies, and diversity management. The findings suggest that deeply embedded cultural norms, high power distance, and collectivist orientations in Asia intensify social categorization processes, leading to resistance toward superficial DEI practices. This paper contributes to HRM literature by proposing a socially grounded perspective on DEI internalization and offering implications for strategic HRM in Asia.

## Keywords

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## Introduction

Globalization, labor mobility, and digital transformation have intensified workforce diversity across Asian organizations [1], [2]. The expansion of multinational enterprises, cross-border employment, and digitally mediated work arrangements has brought together employees from diverse cultural, ethnic, religious, and gender backgrounds. In response to these changes, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) has been increasingly adopted as a strategic agenda within human resource management (HRM) [3]. Many organizations in Asia have introduced DEI-related policies in recruitment, promotion, and employee development to signal commitment to fairness and inclusivity. However, despite this growing institutional attention, a substantial body of evidence suggests that DEI initiatives in Asian contexts often remain performative, emphasizing numerical representation rather than genuine inclusion and equitable participation [4].

From a social psychological perspective, organizational diversity cannot be understood merely as a structural or policy-driven phenomenon. Instead, it is deeply embedded in identity processes that shape how individuals perceive themselves and others in the workplace. Social Identity Theory explains that individuals categorize themselves into social groups based on salient characteristics such as ethnicity, religion, gender, or organizational affiliation, deriving a sense of self-esteem and belonging from these memberships [5]. This categorization process frequently leads to in-group favoritism, where individuals favor members of their own group, and out-group bias, where those perceived as different are evaluated less positively [6]. In organizational settings, such biases can subtly influence interpersonal relations, decision-making, and access to opportunities, even when formal HRM policies emphasize equality.

These social identity dynamics are particularly salient in Asian organizational contexts, which are often characterized by collectivist cultural orientations, high power distance, and strong respect for hierarchical authority [7]. In many Asian societies, social harmony and loyalty to the in-group are highly valued, which can reinforce implicit boundaries between dominant and minority groups within organizations. Additionally, ethnic, religious, and gender identities tend to carry significant social meaning, shaping expectations about leadership, competence, and appropriate workplace behavior [8]. As a result, DEI initiatives that are introduced without addressing these underlying identity-based norms may be perceived as externally imposed or culturally misaligned.

When DEI policies focus primarily on symbolic actions—such as appointing minority representatives or celebrating diversity events—without challenging entrenched power relations, they risk becoming forms of tokenism [4]. Tokenistic DEI practices may generate resistance among majority group members who perceive DEI as preferential treatment, while simultaneously fostering frustration and disengagement among minority employees who

experience limited voice and influence. From an HRM perspective, this resistance undermines trust, psychological safety, and organizational commitment.

This paper aims to critically examine DEI practices in Asian organizations through a social psychological lens, emphasizing the role of social identity and in-group–out-group bias in shaping HRM outcomes. By linking social identity processes to recruitment, promotion, and anti-discrimination practices, the paper seeks to highlight why DEI initiatives often fail to achieve substantive inclusion. Ultimately, it argues that effective DEI in Asia requires HRM strategies that move beyond symbolic compliance toward the internalization of inclusive values that are culturally grounded and psychologically informed.

## **Literature Review**

### **A. Social Identity Theory and Organizational Life**

Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive a significant portion of their self-esteem, values, and sense of meaning from membership in social groups such as professional roles, departments, gender, ethnicity, religion, or nationality [5], [9]. Within organizational settings, these group affiliations shape how employees interpret norms, construct belonging, and evaluate the legitimacy of authority. Prior research demonstrates that strong organizational identification can enhance trust, cooperation, and collective commitment, particularly when employees perceive alignment between personal identities and organizational values [9], [10].

Social identity salience is not static but increases under conditions of heightened diversity, intergroup competition, or perceived threat [6], [10]. In diverse workplaces, individuals become more conscious of group boundaries, which may strengthen internal cohesion while simultaneously intensifying intergroup tension. In Asian organizational contexts, where collectivist orientations and hierarchical authority structures prevail, social identity processes are often reinforced through informal networks, seniority systems, and shared cultural norms [7], [15]. While these dynamics may promote harmony within dominant groups, they can also marginalize individuals whose identities diverge from established organizational prototypes.

Leadership perceptions are similarly shaped by social identity processes. Leaders who embody prototypical characteristics of dominant in-groups are more likely to be perceived as credible and competent, regardless of objective performance [9], [11]. This phenomenon has important implications for equity and inclusion, as minority employees may face structural disadvantages in leadership recognition and career advancement. Accordingly, Social Identity Theory offers a robust framework for understanding how inclusion and exclusion are socially constructed within organizational life.

### **B. In-group and Out-group Bias in the Workplace**

In-group and out-group bias represent behavioral and cognitive consequences of social categorization. In-group bias manifests through preferential treatment of individuals perceived

as similar, whereas out-group bias involves stereotyping, social distancing, or exclusion of those viewed as different [6], [11]. These biases frequently operate at an implicit level, shaping judgments and interactions without conscious awareness.

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that in-group and out-group biases influence key HRM processes, including recruitment, performance evaluation, and promotion decisions [12], [13]. Decision-makers may unconsciously associate similarity with competence, trustworthiness, or cultural fit, leading to systematic advantages for dominant groups. Performance appraisals are also susceptible to biased interpretations, where identical behaviors are evaluated differently depending on an employee's social identity [11], [12].

Importantly, the presence of formal equality or anti-discrimination policies does not eliminate these biases. Research indicates that implicit bias often persists even in organizations with strong formal commitments to fairness and meritocracy [13]. In many Asian organizations, where interpersonal relationships, loyalty, and seniority are emphasized, in-group favoritism may be further reinforced through informal mentoring and patronage networks [7]. Such practices reproduce inequality while maintaining an appearance of procedural fairness.

### **C. DEI in the Asian Context**

DEI frameworks adopted in Asian organizations are frequently derived from Western management models, emphasizing regulatory compliance, policy documentation, and numerical indicators of diversity [14]. While these approaches may satisfy external stakeholders or multinational corporate standards, they often fail to engage with the deeper cultural and psychological dynamics that shape inclusion. Asian organizational cultures tend to prioritize harmony, respect for hierarchy, and implicit norms, which may conflict with DEI principles encouraging open dialogue and critical reflection on power relations [7], [15].

Furthermore, ethnic, religious, and gender identities often carry strong normative expectations in Asian societies, influencing perceptions of leadership suitability and appropriate workplace behavior [8], [15]. When DEI initiatives do not account for these contextual realities, they risk being perceived as symbolic or externally imposed. As a result, employees may comply formally while resisting substantive change. This gap between policy and practice highlights the need for DEI strategies in Asia to be grounded in social psychological insights that recognize the central role of identity, bias, and group dynamics in organizational life.

## **Methodology**

This study adopts a conceptual and integrative literature review methodology to examine Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in Asian organizational contexts through a social psychological lens. Peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2025 were systematically identified from major academic databases, with selection criteria emphasizing relevance to Social Identity Theory, in-group and out-group dynamics, DEI practices, and human

resource management (HRM). The reviewed studies include both theoretical contributions and empirical research conducted in diverse Asian settings. Data analysis involved categorizing the literature into key thematic areas, including recruitment and promotion, anti-discrimination policies, tokenism, and cultural and religious diversity management. These themes were then critically synthesized to identify recurring patterns, conceptual gaps, and contextual challenges in DEI implementation. By integrating insights across disciplines and study designs, this review develops a coherent and critical interpretation of why DEI initiatives in Asia often remain symbolic and how identity-based dynamics shape HRM outcomes.

Fig. 1 presents a conceptual framework for a literature review on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in Asian contexts. It begins with a *Conceptual & Integrative Literature Review*, followed by clearly defined *Article Selection Criteria (2015–2025)*, which include Social Identity Theory, in-group and out-group dynamics, DEI practices in Asia, and human resource management in Asian settings. The process then moves into *Thematic Analysis and Synthesis*, where key themes are identified: recruitment and promotion, anti-discrimination policies, tokenism in DEI, and cultural and religious diversity. The framework culminates in a *Critical Interpretation of DEI Challenges in Asia*, highlighting the synthesis of findings into broader analytical insights.

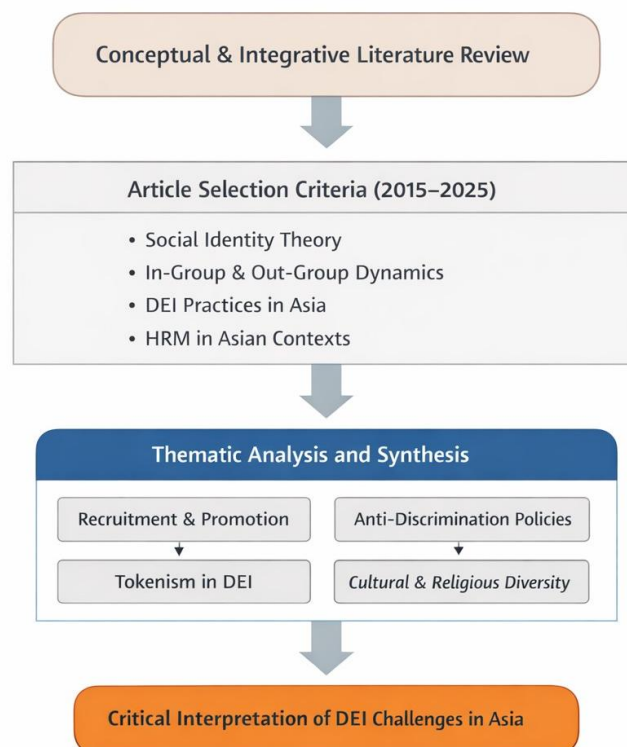


**Fig. 1.** Conceptual framework illustrating the literature review process and thematic synthesis of DEI challenges in Asian contexts (2015–2025).

## **Results and Discussion**

### **A. Recruitment and Promotion Practices**

Recruitment and promotion represent critical stages in human resource management where principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion are either reinforced or undermined. Empirical research indicates that recruitment and promotion practices in many Asian organizations are frequently influenced by shared cultural background, gender norms, and informal social networks [16], [17]. While formal HRM systems often emphasize merit-based evaluation and objective criteria, actual decision-making processes tend to reflect implicit preferences for candidates who align with dominant social identities within the organization.

Implicit identity bias plays a significant role in shaping judgments about competence, leadership potential, and organizational fit [12]. Decision-makers may unconsciously associate similarity in ethnicity, religion, educational background, or gender with trustworthiness and capability. In Asian contexts, where collectivist values and relational ties are highly emphasized, such biases are often reinforced through informal recommendations and seniority-based endorsement. As a result, recruitment and promotion outcomes may systematically favor members of dominant in-groups while disadvantaging minority employees, even in the absence of overt discrimination.

This gap between formal meritocratic ideals and informal identity-based practices highlights a key challenge for DEI implementation. When employees perceive that advancement depends more on social alignment than performance, perceptions of inequity increase, potentially undermining motivation, engagement, and organizational commitment.

### **B. Anti-discrimination Policies and Organizational Justice**

Anti-discrimination policies constitute a central component of DEI-oriented HRM frameworks. In many Asian organizations, such policies are introduced in response to regulatory requirements, multinational corporate standards, or global reputational concerns. However, research suggests that these policies often remain procedural, lacking psychological legitimacy among employees [18]. That is, while policies exist on paper, they are not necessarily internalized as fair or meaningful by organizational members.

From the perspective of organizational justice, employees evaluate not only the existence of rules but also the fairness of decision-making processes and interpersonal treatment [18], [19]. When anti-discrimination policies are perceived as externally imposed or disconnected from local cultural values, they may fail to generate trust. In hierarchical Asian organizational settings, where authority and seniority are deeply respected, employees may be reluctant to challenge discriminatory practices or report violations, even when formal mechanisms are available.

Moreover, poorly communicated or inconsistently enforced policies can produce unintended consequences. Employees may interpret DEI policies as symbolic gestures rather than genuine

commitments, leading to skepticism and reduced confidence in management [19]. In such cases, anti-discrimination initiatives may paradoxically weaken perceptions of fairness instead of strengthening them, particularly when discrepancies between policy rhetoric and everyday practice become evident.

### **C. Tokenism and Resistance to DEI**

One of the most frequently cited limitations of DEI implementation is tokenism. Tokenism occurs when organizations symbolically include individuals from underrepresented groups without redistributing decision-making power, authority, or voice [4], [20]. Tokenistic practices may involve appointing minority representatives to visible positions, highlighting diversity in corporate communications, or organizing diversity-related events without addressing structural inequalities.

Social psychological research indicates that tokenism can intensify identity threat among minority employees [21]. When individuals perceive that their inclusion is symbolic rather than substantive, they may experience heightened pressure, social isolation, and role strain. This often leads to disengagement, reduced job satisfaction, and lower organizational commitment. At the same time, majority group members may perceive tokenistic DEI initiatives as preferential treatment, triggering resentment and resistance [22].

In Asian organizational contexts, where harmony and social stability are highly valued, overt resistance to DEI may not always be expressed openly. Instead, resistance may manifest through passive compliance, withdrawal, or subtle undermining of DEI objectives. Such dynamics further entrench in-group and out-group boundaries, making genuine inclusion more difficult to achieve.

### **D. Cultural and Religious Diversity Management**

Asia's extensive cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity presents unique challenges for HRM [8]. Employees often bring deeply held beliefs and values into the workplace, shaping expectations about leadership, communication, and acceptable behavior. Effective diversity management therefore requires approaches that are both inclusive and culturally sensitive.

Contextualized diversity management emphasizes respect for local values while promoting equity and fairness [23]. Rather than applying standardized DEI models developed in Western contexts, Asian organizations need to adapt strategies that acknowledge hierarchical norms, collective identities, and religious sensitivities. For example, flexibility in work arrangements, culturally informed conflict resolution mechanisms, and inclusive leadership practices can help bridge identity differences.

Failure to adopt such contextualized approaches risks reinforcing in-group boundaries and exacerbating exclusion. When diversity initiatives are perceived as culturally inappropriate or misaligned with organizational realities, employees may disengage or resist participation.

Consequently, effective cultural and religious diversity management is essential not only for inclusion but also for sustaining organizational cohesion and performance.

### **Implications for Human Resource Management**

To move beyond symbolic DEI initiatives, human resource management (HRM) in Asian organizations must adopt a more substantive and psychologically grounded approach. One critical strategy is the integration of social identity awareness into leadership development programs [24]. Leaders who understand how identity, group membership, and power relations shape workplace interactions are better equipped to recognize exclusionary practices and to model inclusive behaviors. Such awareness is particularly important in Asian contexts, where hierarchical authority and collectivist values can intensify in-group dynamics and silence minority voices.

In addition, HRM should address implicit bias through reflective and culturally sensitive training rather than relying solely on compliance-based programs [13]. Training that encourages self-reflection, perspective-taking, and dialogue allows employees to critically examine unconscious assumptions rooted in social and cultural norms. This approach is more likely to produce lasting attitudinal change than standardized diversity workshops that lack contextual relevance.

Aligning DEI strategies with local socio-cultural and religious contexts is equally essential [15]. DEI initiatives that are perceived as externally imposed or culturally misaligned risk generating resistance and superficial compliance. Contextualized strategies that respect local values while promoting equity can enhance legitimacy and employee engagement. Finally, fostering psychological safety is vital to enable open intergroup dialogue and mutual learning [25]. When employees feel safe to express concerns and share experiences without fear of social or career-related repercussions, DEI initiatives are more likely to be internalized, sustained, and translated into everyday organizational practices.

### **Conclusion**

This paper argues that Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in Asian organizations is fundamentally a social psychological issue rooted in social identity dynamics rather than merely a managerial or regulatory concern. In contexts characterized by strong collectivism, hierarchical authority, and salient cultural and religious identities, in-group and out-group biases continue to shape workplace interactions, decision-making, and access to opportunities. When these identity-based dynamics are not explicitly addressed, DEI initiatives risk remaining symbolic, focusing on representation and compliance rather than meaningful inclusion. Such approaches may inadvertently generate resistance, undermine trust, and weaken organizational commitment among both majority and minority employees. By integrating Social Identity Theory into human

resource management (HRM) strategies, organizations can better understand how identity salience, bias, and group boundaries influence employee behavior. Socially informed HRM practices enable leaders to design recruitment, promotion, and development systems that are perceived as fair and legitimate. Ultimately, grounding DEI in social psychological theory offers a pathway toward more authentic, culturally responsive, and sustainable inclusion in Asian organizational contexts.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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