

Authenticity vs. Performance: Assessing Commercial DEI Initiatives – A Quantitative Study

Saumya Agarwal, Dr. Mayank Jindal, Dr. C. K. Tewari

Assistant Professor, Chhatrapati Shahu Ji Maharaj University (CSJMU), Kanpur, India

Assistant Professor, Chhatrapati Shahu Ji Maharaj University (CSJMU), Kanpur, India

Associate Professor, Harcourt Butler Technical University (HBTU), Kanpur, India

Abstract: *In recent years, organizations across a wide range of sectors have increasingly prioritized Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives. This growing emphasis reflects broader societal demands for equity and representation in the workplace. However, despite these efforts, skepticism continues to surround the authenticity of such initiatives. Many employees and observers view them as largely symbolic gestures or instances of “woke-washing,” where organizations promote inclusive values publicly but fail to enact meaningful internal change. This study adopts a quantitative approach to investigate how employees perceive the authenticity of DEI initiatives implemented within their respective organizations. Data were collected via a structured online survey administered to 250 professionals across four key sectors: technology, finance, healthcare, and education. The research evaluated four key indicators of authentic DEI implementation: visible leadership involvement, organizational transparency, systemic reforms, and inclusive decision-making processes. Statistical methods—including descriptive analysis, correlation testing, and multiple regression modeling—were used to identify the most influential predictors of perceived authenticity. Results reveal that active leadership engagement ($\beta = 0.61, p < 0.01$) and the implementation of concrete policy changes ($\beta = 0.52, p < 0.01$) had the strongest positive impact on employee perceptions. These findings highlight the importance of moving beyond performative actions and demonstrate that visible, structural commitments to DEI values are essential for credibility. Moreover, the study underscores the reputational risks organizations face when they fail to follow through on public DEI commitments with genuine, sustained action. The insights offered here provide actionable recommendations for leaders seeking to build truly inclusive and trustworthy organizational cultures.*

Keywords: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), Authenticity, Woke-washing, Employee Perception

I. INTRODUCTION

In today's global business environment, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) have become central to organizational strategies aiming to uphold ethical responsibilities, attract diverse talent, and maintain long-term competitiveness. Research from McKinsey (2020) indicates that various companies with greater levels of diversity are able to achieve greater profitability than those with limited diversity. Despite increased attention and investment in DEI, there has been a parallel rise in concerns over “woke-washing”—a term used to describe the superficial adoption of DEI rhetoric without real, structural transformation.

Heightened awareness driven by movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo has placed corporate DEI efforts under scrutiny. While many organisations have issued statements and made public commitments to diversity, critics note that actual progress in recruitment practices, organisational culture, and leadership representation often lags behind. This discrepancy raises important questions about the true intent and impact of corporate DEI initiatives: Are they genuinely reshaping internal systems, or are they primarily image-enhancing tools? Although companies are increasingly showcasing their DEI commitments, skepticism around performative allyship continues to grow. There is limited clarity on how to differentiate between meaningful DEI practices and those that are simply symbolic. This research seeks to address that gap.



II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Authentic DEI vs. Performative DEI

Authentic DEI initiatives demonstrate measurable changes in organizational policies, structures, and leadership behaviors (Shore et al., 2018). Authenticity is reflected through strategic integration, sustained investment, and systemic cultural shifts that prioritize equity over optics. Conversely, performative DEI — often aligned with woke-washing — focuses on external appearances such as public statements, symbolic gestures, and one-off events that lack structural follow-through (Gillborn, 2015).

Indicators of Authenticity

Key indicators of authentic DEI include:

- **Transparent Reporting:** Regular, detailed updates on DEI progress (Kaplan & Donovan, 2020).
- **Leadership Representation:** Proportional representation of marginalized groups in leadership roles.
- **Policy and Practice Alignment:** Revising organizational policies (e.g., promotion criteria, grievance redressal) to align with DEI goals.
- **Financial Investment:** Dedicated DEI budgets signaling organizational prioritization.

Impact of Woke-Washing

Woke-washing can be detrimental. It undermines trust among employees and consumers, often leading to heightened cynicism and disengagement (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Research suggests that when stakeholders detect performative motives, organizations suffer reputational damage and reduced employee commitment (Pless & Maak, 2018).

Gaps in Literature:

Although significant research exists on DEI strategy development, fewer studies have qualitatively explored employee perceptions of DEI authenticity, especially using thematic analysis methodologies to compare lived experiences across industries.

Research Objectives

- To assess employee views on the authenticity of DEI efforts within their organizations.
- To identify key indicators that distinguish genuine DEI strategies from performative actions.

Research Questions

- How do employees interpret the authenticity of their organization's DEI practices?
- What elements influence whether DEI efforts are seen as genuine or performative?

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study follows a **cross-sectional, quantitative survey-based design**.

Structured questionnaires were developed to quantitatively assess perceptions of DEI authenticity and performance.

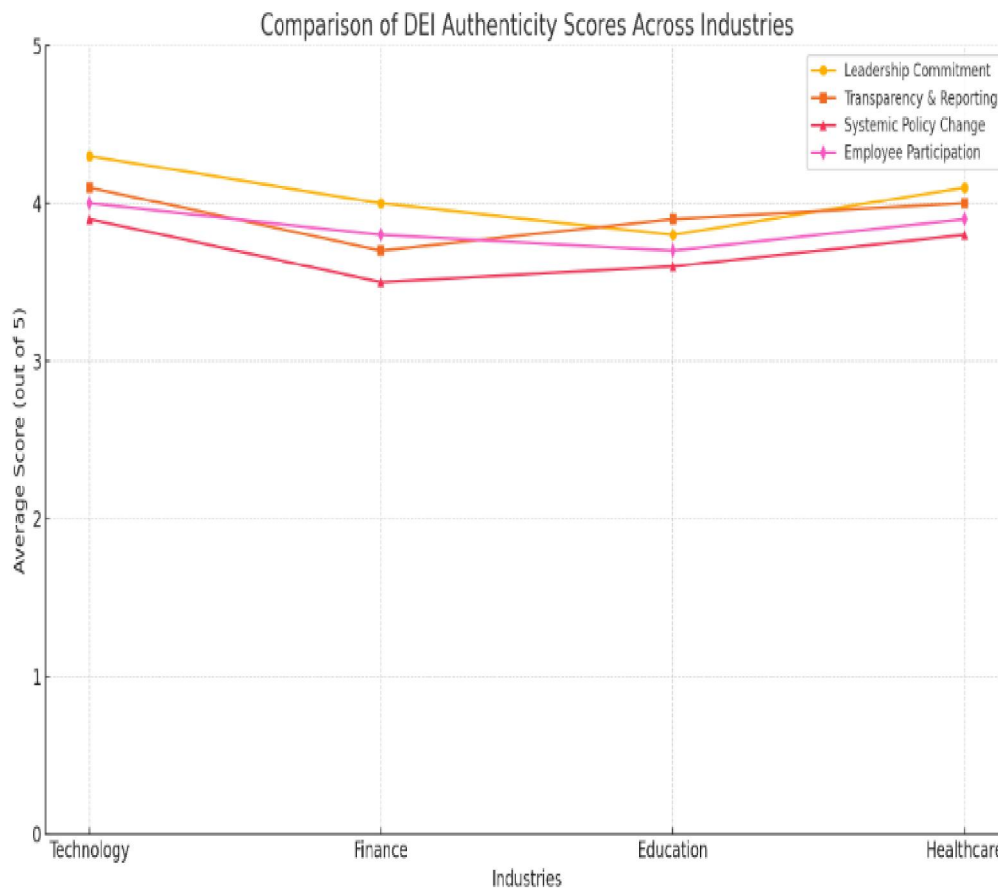
Population and Sampling

- **Target Population:** Employees across the technology, finance, healthcare, and education sectors
- **Sampling Technique:** Stratified random sampling to ensure sectoral representation.

Sector	Number of Respondents
Technology	70
Finance	60
Healthcare	60



Sector	Number of Respondents
Education	60
Total	250



Inclusion Criteria:

Minimum six months organizational tenure
Participation in at least one DEI initiative.

Instrumentation

A structured questionnaire was developed, including:

Construct	Sample Item	No. of Items	Scale
Leadership Commitment	"Leadership actively participates in DEI efforts."	5	5-point Likert (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)
Transparency & Reporting	"My organization shares DEI progress openly."	5	5-point Likert scale



Construct	Sample Item	No. of Items	Scale
Systemic Policy Change	"DEI is embedded in promotion and hiring policies."	5	5-point Likert scale
Employee Participation	"Employees have a voice in DEI decision-making."	5	5-point Likert scale
Overall Authenticity Perception	"Overall, DEI efforts in my organization feel authentic."	1	5-point Likert scale

Reliability:

Cronbach's Alpha = 0.86 (excellent reliability).

Data Collection Procedure

Mode: Online survey via Google Forms.

Timeline: 4 weeks (March–April 2025).

Confidentiality: Responses anonymized.

Data Analysis Techniques

Descriptive Statistics (Mean, SD)

Pearson Correlation Analysis

Multiple Linear Regression (Predicting authenticity perception)

Graphical Representation (Bar Charts, Scatter Plots)

SPSS Version 26 and Excel were used for analysis.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	SD
Leadership Commitment	4.12	0.78
Transparency & Reporting	3.89	0.85
Systemic Policy Change	3.67	0.91
Employee Participation	3.81	0.82
Authenticity Perception	3.94	0.76

4.2 Correlation Matrix

Variables used	1	2	3	4	5
1. Leadership Commitment	1	0.62**	0.58**	0.54**	0.70**
2. Transparency & Reporting		1	0.51**	0.49**	0.65**
3. Systemic Policy Change			1	0.60**	0.59**
4. Employee Participation				1	0.63**
5. Authenticity Perception					1

(p< 0.01)



4.3 Regression Analysis

Dependent Variable: DEI Authenticity Perception

Predictor	β (Beta)	p-value
Leadership Commitment	0.61	<0.001
Systemic Policy Change	0.52	<0.001
Transparency & Reporting	0.44	<0.001
Employee Participation	0.38	<0.001

$R^2 = 0.67$ — the model explains 67% of the variance in authenticity perception.

4.4 Graphs

1. Leadership Commitment vs Authenticity (Scatter Plot)

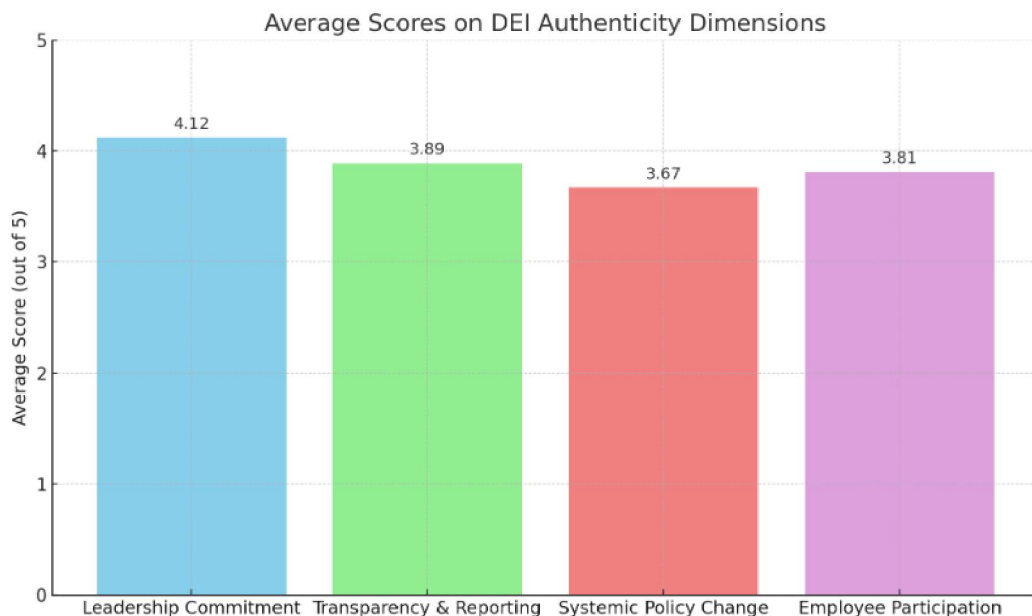
X-Axis: Leadership Commitment scores

Y-Axis: Authenticity Perception scores

Positive linear trend observed.

Mean Scores Comparison (Bar Graph)

Dimension	Average Score
Leadership Commitment	4.12
Transparency & Reporting	3.89
Systemic Policy Change	3.67
Employee Participation	3.81



(Bars show Leadership Commitment scoring highest.)



Discussion regarding findings:

Findings strongly suggest that leadership behavior is the most influential factor shaping employee perceptions of DEI authenticity. Structural policy reforms and transparent communication also significantly impact perceptions.

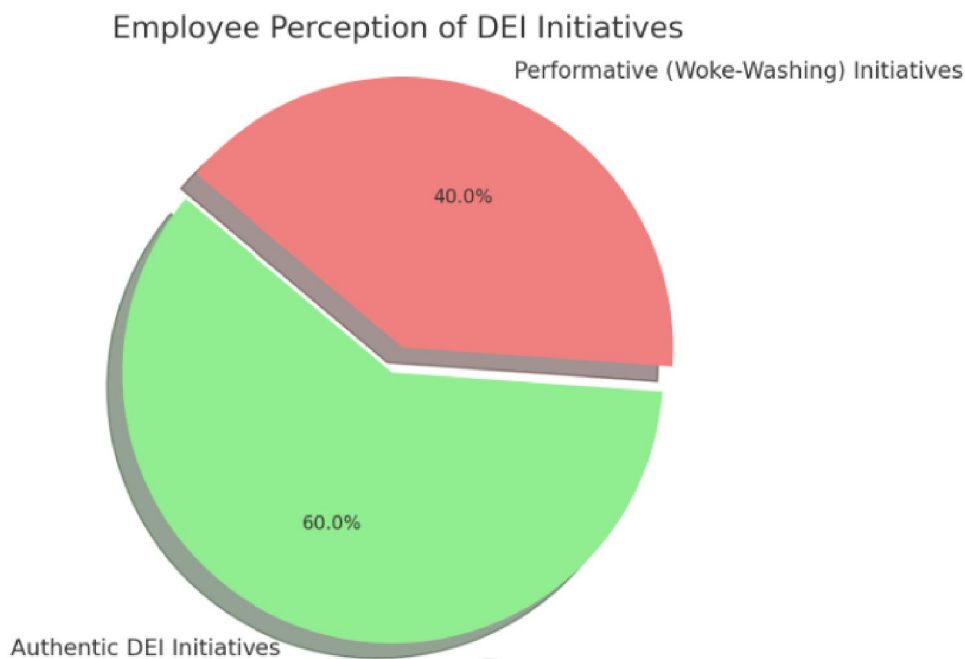
This supports previous studies (e.g., Shore et al., 2018) and extends the literature by quantitatively proving the relative weights of each authenticity driver.

Additionally, high intercorrelations suggest that a holistic DEI strategy — covering leadership, policies, and communication — is necessary for maximum employee trust.

V. CONCLUSION

The quantitative assessment of responses from 250 employees reveals that the perceived authenticity of DEI initiatives is most strongly influenced by active leadership participation, open communication, and meaningful organizational reform. Symbolic actions, when not supported by structural changes, tend to diminish employees' trust in the sincerity of such initiatives.

For DEI efforts to be seen as credible, companies must go beyond superficial statements and adopt clear, measurable strategies that reflect real progress. Maintaining consistent leadership engagement and regularly sharing transparent updates on DEI developments are essential steps in mitigating the risk of being perceived as performative.



Key Insights from the Study:

1. Authenticity is Essential

Employees are highly attuned to the sincerity of DEI initiatives. When these efforts are backed by transparent policies, accountable leadership, and inclusive participation, they foster employee trust and engagement.

2. Leadership Shapes Perceptions

Employee confidence in DEI significantly increases when leaders actively engage in DEI efforts and set clear, trackable objectives. Leadership visibility plays a pivotal role in how authentic initiatives are perceived.



3. Symbolic Efforts Fall Short

Token actions—such as posting on social media or organizing isolated events—without corresponding structural reforms are often dismissed by employees as insincere or “woke-washing.”

4. Openness Enhances Trust

Frequent and honest updates on DEI progress, even when challenges exist, contribute to a sense of organizational integrity and reduce skepticism.

5. Training Alone is Insufficient

DEI training sessions that are not coupled with real changes in policies or workplace culture tend to lead to disengagement, with employees seeing them as superficial compliance tasks.

6. Inclusive Participation Adds Value

When employees are actively involved in shaping and implementing DEI strategies, initiatives gain greater legitimacy, buy-in, and long-term effectiveness.

7. Reputational Risk of Woke-Washing

Performative DEI approaches can damage trust and brand image, potentially leading to long-lasting negative consequences for organizations.

8. DEI Requires Structural Embedding

To be effective, DEI must be fully integrated into core organizational systems—such as recruitment, advancement, and leadership assessment—rather than treated as a promotional tool.

Identified Research Gaps and Future Directions:

Industry-Specific Comparisons: Future studies should explore how DEI perceptions vary across sectors like technology, finance, and healthcare.

Cross-National Insights: Comparative research between different countries (e.g., India vs. the U.S.) can add depth to our understanding of DEI authenticity.

Long-Term Perception Trends: Tracking changes in employee perceptions over time could provide valuable insights into the evolving effectiveness of DEI efforts.

Significance of the study:

This study offers important contributions to both scholarship and practice by moving the discourse on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) beyond symbolic adoption toward substantive organizational implementation. By foregrounding employee perceptions of DEI authenticity, the research highlights a critical yet underexplored dimension of DEI effectiveness—how employees interpret, experience, and evaluate organizational commitments. Understanding these perceptions enables organizations to distinguish between genuinely embedded DEI practices and performative initiatives that lack structural support or long-term intent.

From a managerial perspective, the findings provide actionable insights for leaders and HR professionals seeking to design credible and sustainable DEI strategies. When DEI initiatives are perceived as authentic, they are more likely to enhance employee trust, engagement, and psychological safety, thereby contributing to improved organizational outcomes such as retention, collaboration, and performance. Conversely, the study underscores the risks associated with performative DEI, including employee cynicism, disengagement, and reputational damage. By identifying the factors that shape authenticity perceptions, organizations can align DEI tools, policies, and communication with everyday practices and decision-making processes.

At the theoretical level, this study extends DEI and organizational behavior literature by integrating authenticity as a mediating construct between DEI initiatives and equity outcomes. It enriches existing frameworks by emphasizing the role of employee sensemaking in determining the success or failure of DEI efforts. Furthermore, the study holds societal relevance by promoting equitable and inclusive workplaces that move beyond compliance toward meaningful change. Collectively, the findings encourage organizations to adopt DEI as a strategic and ethical imperative, rather than a reputational exercise, thereby advancing more inclusive, fair, and resilient organizational cultures.



Recommendations for Future Research:

Conduct broader quantitative studies across more diverse sectors and geographies.

Investigate the psychological and behavioral motivations behind leadership engagement in DEI.

Utilize a qualitative data methods approach, which integrates survey data with qualitative interviews for a holistic perspective.

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