

Workplace Friendship and Engagement: Mediating Role of Psychological Safety Climate

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In today's fast-paced world, materialism and competition negatively impact individuals' social lives, and organizations often prioritize productivity over employees. While workplace friendships could lead to better work environment and organizational success, it could also be counterproductive to organisational goals due to distraction and decreasing professionalism. The present study investigates the intersection of workplace friendship, work engagement, and psychological safety climate (PSC). The sample comprised 200 participants (103 males; 97 females) aged 22 years or above, working in a private organisation in Delhi-NCR. Using Workplace Friendship Scale (WFS), Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9), and Psychological Safety Climate-12 (PSC-12), data was analyzed using correlation and multiple regression to predict the influence of workplace friendship and PSC on the work engagement of employees. Further, mediation analysis revealed that workplace friendship and PSC exhibit a positive impact on the work engagement of employees, as PSC also acts as a mediating factor between the other two variables.

Keywords: Workplace friendship, work engagement, psychological safety climate

Friends play an important role in an individual's life and are necessary for social and psychological support. Friendship is frequently cited as the primary source of enjoyment and meaning in life (Rawlins, 1992; Dickie, 2009). Friends in all cultures are considered a source of joy, a helping hand, and a support network. A Gallup survey (2006) revealed that over 30% of American workers said they had a best friend at work (Rath, 2006).

Workplace Friendship

Workplace friendship is defined by Berman et al. (2002) as "*a non-exclusive interpersonal relationship in an organisation that involves trust, commitment, mutual affection, and shared interests or values*". Nielsen et al. (2000) explained that workplace

friendship has two aspects: friendship quality (psychological benefits of the friendship and the degree to which it is maintained between the two members); and friendship opportunity (informal relationships among employees). According to Pillemer and Rothbard (2018), workplace friendships differ from other positive work relationships in that they possess four fundamental features:

- a) Friendships at work are voluntary relationships formed by employees on their own initiative rather than under compulsion.
- b) Friendships at work are casual connections. It is relatively deficient in "standard rituals or terminology" of limiting expectations of roles.

- c) Rather than being only focused on reciprocity, workplace friendships are defined by societal conventions or hope, offering need-based support.
- d) Workplace friendships were created to satisfy the affective requirements of workers and are motivated by affective objectives.

Work Engagement

When he coined the phrase “work engagement” in 1990, Kahn defined it as “*the harnessing of organisational members’ selves to their work roles.*” Stated differently, it refers to the favorable perception that arises from employees’ interactions with their work. (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006). Research on employee engagement is extremely thin (Saks, 2006).

Levinson (2007) found that about 85% of the highest-performing employees have lengthy tenure and are very engaged. Involved workers display tenacity, initiative, commitment, and self-efficacy (Seijts & Crim, 2006) and such workers affect the performance of businesses (Harter et al., 2002), customer happiness, sales, and productivity (Hewitt Associates, 2004), promote the company and its goods and services, gain a deeper understanding of the demands of customers, and cultivate a devoted clientele (Levinson, 2007). A valuable employee demonstrates a progressive attitude, takes pride in the organisation, and advocates high praises about it (Ologbo and Saudah, 2011); forms a rapport with the organisation & has a notion of empowerment (Reissner and Pagan, 2013); behaves generously, improves human bonding, and builds strong teams (Viljevac, Cooper-Thomas, and Saks, 2012); is dedicated 24x7, understands overall requirements; and is ready to volunteer to help the organisation (Freeney and Fellenz, 2013).

Psychological Safety Climate

Organisations are social systems comprising various individuals engaged in patterned activities together. Social interaction patterns are founded on common understandings of contextual elements that communicate norms and beliefs about the behaviour expected of employees to meet organisational objectives. These contextual factors probably support pro-organisational motivational outcomes by establishing a behaviour-outcome expectancy frame with organisational identity. To accomplish organisational goals, these people must collaborate due to a lack of experience, difficult work, specialisation, and diversity. Understanding how people will collaborate to achieve shared goals requires an understanding of psychological safety (Edmondson, 2004). Friends believe they are safe from personal risk when they feel psychologically comfortable in the workplace (Kostopoulos & Bozionelos, 2011), which is of top concern (Leroy et al., 2012; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2011). It is the degree to which a person feels capable of expressing and employing themselves without worrying about repercussions to their status, career, or self-image. In addition, it is a mental state in which people are certain that their personal environment does not threaten them and that they will not face consequences or embarrassment for expressing who they are.

Developing relationships at work is essential to creating a psychologically healthy environment. They impact how individuals see each other and how they see themselves, including the interactions between employees and supervisors. Colleague relationships are secondary in the workplace, with the employee’s relationship with his or her line manager being the primary one. Therefore, leaders and managers must provide a healthy workplace to encourage friendships and relationships and set up a psychologically secure environment

(Wellbeing Works, 2021). Maqsood et al. (2023) research indicates a significant association between job-related expectancies and self-efficacy and the psychological safety climate. A high correlation was noticed between the two variables - self-efficacy and job expectations.

A review of 93 research articles was done by Amoadu et al. (2023). It was shown that “work-family conflict, effort-reward imbalance, job expectations, insecure job resources, job control, and quality leadership” are all proven to be directly impacted by PSC. Furthermore, PSC has a direct impact on workplace relationships, encompassing harassment, discrimination, aggression, and abuse. Once again, because PSC mitigates the negative effects of high job demands on workers’ health and safety, it directly affects performance and health and safety. Lastly, PSC increases the impact of job resources on enhancing employees’ performance, safety, and well-being. Akila and Priyadarshini (2018) identified the most common kinds of friendships that occur at work and ascertained how they affect employees’ commitment to their jobs and their desire to quit. It was inferred from the study that information peers and special friends are the two most common kinds of friendships seen in the workplace. Work-spouse friendships are the least favored kind, despite providing a great deal of emotional and developmental support.

Based on the review of literature, it is noticed that the existing research has examined various factors influencing interpersonal relationships in organizations. However, evolving environments introduce new elements like Psychological Safety Climate (PSC) that need further study, particularly conciliation between workplace friendships and work engagement. Moreover, most studies have focused on the outcomes of workplace friendships from a Western

perspective, thus not examining the emotional processes of the Indian population. Further, the policy development for managing workplace friendships has been neglected, thus necessitating a comprehensive policy framework.

The current study examines how psychological safety and workplace friendships affect employee engagement. It also sought to evaluate the psychological safety climate’s mediation function between the other two factors.

Objectives

1. To study how employees’ work engagement is impacted by the psychological safety climate and friendships at work.
2. To study the relationship between work engagement and friendship at work and the mediating effect of psychological safety climate.

Hypotheses

- H₁ Workplace friendships and psychological safety climate influence employees’ work engagement.
- H₂ Psychological safety climate mediates the relationship between workplace friendship and work engagement.

Method

Sample

The sample comprised 200 participants (103 males and 97 females). The population studied comprised young to middle-aged adults. Respondents were selected through the process of purposive and snowball sampling. The demographic details of the participants are given in Table 1. The inclusion criteria included employees aged 22 years or above, working full-time in a private organisation in Delhi NCR. Only the employees currently working from the office and with at least 1 year of work experience

in the current organisation were included. Individuals who are primarily working from home were excluded from the sample.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

Category	Sub-Category	Sample Split (n=200)	Percentage(%)
Gender	Male	103	51.5
	Female	97	48.5
Age (in years)	22-29	131	65.5
	30-39	60	30
	40 and above	9	4.5
Experience in Present Organization (in years)	1-3	83	41.5
	3-4	32	16
	Above 4	85	42.5

Measures

The research employed the following three standardised instruments for examining the variables:

(i) *Workplace Friendship Scale* (WFS) having twelve items is a five-point Likert scale developed by Nielsen et al. (2000) to measure extent of friendships and social relationships within the workplace. It focuses on assessing the quality and depth of relationships between coworkers rather than merely their existence. It has 2 components: friendship prevalence and friendship opportunity, which have an estimated internal consistency reliability of .89 and .84, respectively.

(ii) *Utrecht Work Engagement Scale* (UWES) is a nine-item rating scale developed by Schaufeli et al. (2006). It includes three dimensions of Work engagement: (a) Vigor, (b) dedication, (c) absorption. Their cronbach alpha value ranges from .75 to .91, .83 to .93 and .75 to .94 respectively.

(iii) *Psychological Safety Climate* (PSC) is a twelve-item scale developed by Hall et al. (2010) that assesses how organisational working fosters and supports the psychological health and safety of its workers on a 5-point Likert scale. It has four subscales: (a) Management Commitment; (b) Management Priority; (c) Organizational Communication, and (d) Organizational Participation, having internal consistency of .88, .90, .77 and .80 respectively.

Procedure

The study used Google Forms to present inventories. The first page explained the study's purpose and participants' rights. The form had 33 items in three sections: workplace friendships, work engagement, and psychological safety climate. It was distributed to those meeting the inclusion criteria via crowdsourcing and social media. Participants completed the questionnaire individually, with clear instructions. Personal details were documented and preserved. Data was exported to Excel for inclusion scrutiny, and descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and demographic pie charts) were calculated. The data was then analyzed using SPSS version 21, employing multi-linear regression and mediation to examine the influence of workplace friendships, psychological safety climate, and work engagement.

Ethical considerations

Researchers adhered to all ethical guidelines while conducting the research. Informed consent was obtained from the participants, who were provided with sufficient information about the research. It was clarified that their responses would not be used to identify individuals; instead, they would be compiled solely for research purposes while maintaining confidentiality. Participants were allowed voluntary participation and the freedom to withdraw from the research at any stage.

Results

After scoring the data collected through online mode, it was analysed using correlation and regression and mediation with the help of SPSS v21.0.

Table 2. Mean And Standard Deviation and correlation between Workplace Friendship, Work Engagement, and Psychological Safety Climate (N=200)

	Workplace Friendship (WF)	Work Engagement (WE)	Psychological Safety Climate (PSC)
Mean	47.87	4.53	46.11
SD	8.40	1.19	10.28
Workplace Friendship (WF)	1	.59**	.76**
Work Engagement (WE)	.59**	1	.58**
Psychological Safety Climate (PSC)	.76**	.58**	1

Note: **. Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 represents the mean and standard deviation and correlation scores for workplace friendship (WF), Work Engagement (WE) and Psychological Safety Climate (PSC). Workplace friendship had a mean score of 47.8 (SD=8.4), Work Engagement of 4.53 (SD=1.19) and Psychological Safety Climate (PSC) of 46.11 (SD=10.2). Table 2 also indicates Pearson's correlation coefficient between the variables. The workplace friendship and work engagement had a significant positive relationship ($r=.59$, $p<.001$). Thus, research suggests that a rise in workplace friendships results in a rise in employees' work involvement. Further, the correlation between psychological safety climate and work engagement also shows a positive

association ($r=.58$, $p<.001$). Pearson's correlation coefficient shown also evaluates the connection between psychological safety climate and workplace friendship. The two variables had a substantial positive relationship ($r=.76$, $p<.001$). This suggests that a greater sense of camaraderie among coworkers results in a safer work environment.

Table 3. Summary of Regression Analysis for Workplace Friendship and Psychological Safety Climate Predicting Work Engagement of the Employees

Predictors	Adjusted R ²	β	F	p
Workplace Friendship (WF)		0.48		<0.001
Psychological Safety Climate (PSC)	0.390***	0.38	62.85	<0.001

Note: ***significant at $p<0.001$

A linear regression analysis was performed to examine the influence of workplace friendship and psychological safety climate on the variable work engagement. The regression model showed that the variable workplace friendship and psychological safety climate explained 39% of the variance from the variable work engagement. The present sample found that the effect was significantly different from zero, $F = 62.96$, $p<0.001$, $R^2 = 0.39$. Workplace friendship and psychological safety climate emerged as highly significant predictors of work engagement among the employees, indicating that higher levels of workplace friendship and psychological safety climate are associated with increased work engagement. Thus, Hypothesis 1 stating that "Workplace friendships and psychological safety climate influence work engagement of employees." is accepted.

Table 4. Total, Direct, and Indirect Effects of X on Y

	Coefficient	SE	p	95%CI
Total effect (c path)	0.083	0.008	<0.001	[.676; .100]
Direct effect (c' path)	0.048	0.012	<0.001	[.024; .072]
Indirect effect (ab path)	0.248	0.072	<0.001	[.242; .072]

Note: N=200. Unstandardised effects are reported

Table 4 and 5 shows the mediation analysis of the variables. Path *a* describing the effect of workplace friendship on psychological safety climate is significant ($b = 0.93$ $p < .001$). This indicates that for every one-unit increase in workplace friendship,

psychological safety increases by 93 per cent on average. Path *b* describing the impact of psychological safety climate on work engagement is significant ($b=0.03$, $p < 0.001$). This means that for every one-unit increase in psychological safety climate, there is a 3 per cent increase in work engagement on average. Path *c* which describes the total effect of workplace friendship on work engagement is significant ($b = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that for every one-unit increase in PSC, there is 4 per cent increase in work engagement on average. The main mediation model results are indicated by the direct and the indirect effects that is *c'* path and *ab* path respectively. The direct effect of PSC on work engagement in the presence of a mediator (*c'* path) is significant ($b = 0.08$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 5. Model Coefficients of path *a*, *b* and *c'*

Antecedents	M (PSC)				Y (WE)			
		Coefficient	SE	p		Coefficient	SE	p
X (WF)	<i>a</i>	0.935	0.056	<.001	<i>c'</i>	0.048	0.012	<.001
M (PSC)		-	-	-	<i>b</i>	0.037	0.01	<.001
Constant		1.33	2.72	0.625		0.47	0.386	0.224
			R ² = .58				R ² = .38	
			F=277.3				F=62.85	
			p<.001				p<.001	

Note: N=200. Unstandardised effects are reported

a: WF→PSC. b: PSC→WE. c': WF→WE

Discussion

The first hypothesis which states that workplace friendships and psychological safety climate influence work engagement of employees is accepted. Work engagement is heavily influenced by workplace friendships and psychological safety climate. The favourable impact of these elements on work engagement is widely acknowledged. In today's globalized society, office working

hours of individuals have increased and they often spend a lot of time in office cubicles where they collaborate, eat, and learn together. Even at home, they stay connected through emails, social media, and phones, strengthening their bonds. Levesque (1992), in *The Human Resource Problem-Solver's Handbook*, noted that coworker interactions during work tasks help them learn about each other's views, feelings, habits, and interests,

fostering unity and attraction. Therefore, the organizations must understand how friendships manifest in the workplace. The study shows that work engagement brings cohesiveness and leads to attraction among employees, thus fostering friendship. The results of present study are in consonance with this study showing relation between work engagement and workplace friendship.

Recognizing the need for strong human connections at work is a strategic necessity for long-term success. Thus, McClelland's needs theory (1988) highlights achievement, power, and affiliation as primary drivers, with the affiliation motive reflecting the desire to build good relationships. Similarly, Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) identifies friendship as fulfilling the need for love and belonging. Similarly, strong social connections at work boost job satisfaction and emotional contentment, creating a supportive environment where employees feel comfortable expressing concerns, seeking advice, and collaborating productively. This sense of belonging and camaraderie improves morale and engagement, leading to higher motivation and productivity. Rzepka and Leœniewski (2019) and Fernandes et al. (2015) highlight the importance of interpersonal interactions for personal and organizational development, especially in multi-professional teams. Supporting positive interactions among diverse employees can enhance workplace diversity and reduce stress and depressive symptoms (Lahti, 2013; Wang et al., 2020). Workplace friendship is positive interaction, which enhances psychological safety climate by reducing stress and depression, thereby confirming the result of the present study i.e., positive relation between workplace friendship and psychological safety climate among employees.

Individual and situational factors influence workplace friendships (Sanchez-Burks, 2002; Sias & Cahill, 1998). Organizational factors

such as close physical workspace and a supportive culture also foster friendships (Gryphon & Sparks, 1990; Ibrahim & Dickie, 2010), which also confirms results of the present study. Friendships are more likely to form when employees perceive their organization as supportive and when they collaborate on tasks. Mutual self-disclosure and perceived similarity are key processes in forming and maintaining friendships. Sharing personal information and validating shared values and beliefs strengthen these bonds (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979; Byrne, 1961). Wu et al. (2023) revealed that psychological safety reduces job-related stress and anxiety, which helps in increased work engagement, thus corroborating the results of the present research.

Hypotheses 2 which states that the association between workplace friendship and work engagement is mediated by psychological safety climate is also accepted. As in the current study, where work engagement is only a different variable rather than innovative behaviour, Cao & Zhang (2020) established a model and theorised that psychological safety partially mediates the association of workplace friendship and employees' innovative behaviour. In addition, Ge (2020) found that the full mediation existed for employee voice in the relationship between psychological safety and work engagement, like in the present study, except that the mediation existed for psychological safety. Rathert & Ishqaidef (2020) found the role of psychological safety as a mediating factor between the caring work environment and emotional exhaustion. Similarly, Saleem et al. (2022) found the mediating role of work engagement between self-efficacy and hope (2 dimensions of psychological capital) with safety compliance behavior among construction employees in the Pakistan construction industry. Khan & Gul (2021) examined work engagement as a mediator between psychological ownership and the

subjective happiness of employees. As a result, from the review of literature, it is clear that psychological safety is playing a statistically significant mediator between workplace friendship and work engagement.

Managers should cultivate pleasant relationships in order to improve interpersonal helping and reduce harmful behaviours (Venkataramani and Dalal, 2007). Healthy workplaces with excellent interpersonal interactions, respect for employees, and involvement in decision-making processes can contribute to better mental health and lower turnover intentions (Zou et al., 2012). The extensive deployment of working units and group cooperation in modern workplaces necessitates interpersonal connections (Chen et al., 2022). Durrah (2023) discovered that the association between employees' creative behaviour and workplace friendship is mediated by the psychological safety atmosphere. Results of the present study also have the same mediating variable i.e., psychological safety climate and workplace friendship is another common variable. Research studies indicate that psychological safety climate, as a mediating variable, is by and large beneficial. As this aspect has not been ventured much, there is dire need to examine this issue in depth.

Limitations

Despite the benefits of a psychological safety climate, it may not always guarantee increased work engagement among employees. Some individuals may still feel hesitant to speak up or share their ideas, even in a safe environment, which may be due to personal insecurities or external factors like workload, leadership etc. Further, high intensity of work engagement may lead to early burnout. Additionally, it may adversely affect the well-being of the employee. At times, families of employees engrossed in

high level of work engagement get neglected and thus suffer.

Implications

It is noticed that the psychological safety climate mediates the relationship between workplace friendship and work engagement. Therefore, it may be worthwhile for the organisations to provide a psychological safety climate, so that employees' work engagement increases, thus leading to better outcomes/ achievement of organisational goals. There has not been much research in this area and it requires further investigation. Additionally, organisations' training schedule should also emphasise this area's importance.

Conclusion

Work engagement is influenced by workplace friendships and a psychological safety climate. Workplace friendships and a psychological safety climate are significant factors that influence employees' work engagement. A psychological safety climate fosters a friendly, communicative, and trustworthy environment that mediates the relationship between friendships at work and work engagement. This environment lowers tension and anxiety, improves teamwork and trust, and cultivates a culture that values learning. Friendships at work are essential for creating psychological safety, which raises levels of involvement at work. With the help of these findings, organisations can improve overall employee engagement and performance by implementing initiatives to foster strong interpersonal relationships and a psychologically safe work environment.

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