Inclusion for LGBTQ talent: a practice theory approach

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Abstract

Purpose – There is an emerging interest in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) inclusion among researchers and practitioners. However, the interplay of macro-, meso- and micro-level factors that influence the behavior of various agencies, systems, structures and practices in different national, cultural and social contexts still needs to be researched. This paper aims to examine how organizations meaningfully engage with the marginalized and underrepresented workforce, especially the LGBTQ community, to promote diversity and inclusion through comprehensive policies and practices, thereby developing a sustainable inclusivity culture.

Design/methodology/approach – Adopting a practice theory lens and using a case study design, including multilevel interviews with 28 different stakeholders, this study examines how organizations institutionalize LGBTQ inclusion practices in an emerging market context with a historically low acceptance of the LGBTQ community.

Findings – Findings indicate that macro influences, such as regulatory, societal and market pressures and adopting international standards and norms, impact meso-level structures and practices. At the organizational level, leadership evangelism and workforce allyship serve as relational mechanisms for institutionalizing LGBTQ-inclusive practices. Furthermore, collaboration, partnerships and enabling systems and processes provide the structural frameworks within which organizations build an LGBTQ-inclusive culture. Lastly, at the micro level, cisgender allyship and the LGBTQ micro work environments provide the necessary psychological safety to build trust for authentic LGBTQ self-expressions. This study also indicates that organizations evolve their LGBTQ inclusion practices along a trajectory, with multiple external and internal forces that work simultaneously and recursively to shape HRM policies and practices for building an inclusive culture.

Originality/value – This study addresses the significant gaps in diversity and inclusivity research on LGBTQ employees and contributes to the literature in three significant ways. First, this study examines the diversity management mechanisms at the organizational level and explicates their interplay at the micro, meso and macro levels to create congruence, both internally and externally, for engaging with LGBTQ talent. Second, this study adopts a practice theory lens to examine the behavior of various actors, their agencies, the “flow” of underlying and emerging structures and processes, the continuous interplay between structure and action and how they enable inclusive culture for the LGBTQ community as a whole. Last, it addresses the call by diversity researchers for context-specific multilevel research design, including qualitative research, focusing on national, cultural and institutional contexts, where socio-organizational and historical factors and interactions among them shape diversity practices. Much of the literature on LGBTQ inclusion has, thus far, been within the Western context. By examining the emergence of inclusion practices in emerging markets like India, this study contributes to diversity and inclusion research.

Keywords LGBTQ, Inclusion, Practice theory, Case study method

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Globally, businesses are now more accepting of the various sexual orientations and gender identities of their workforce. Workforce legislation has also started to specifically shield minority gender identities from prejudice and exclusionary behaviors (Hennekam and Köllen, 2023). Progressive policies, practices and structures that improve opportunities for authentic expression of self are precursors to creating a conducive inclusive organizational climate (Beauregard et al., 2018; Hennekam and Ladge, 2022) for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ). The changing laws about LGBTQ people are also altering taboos, causing political contention and influencing the social dynamics of
organizations (Byington et al., 2021). While diversity policies are being adopted and implemented worldwide, effective management of policies is imperative for better talent utilization and increased creativity and performance (Hennekam et al., 2019). The challenge in diversity and inclusion research is contextualizing and relating practice implications through country studies to explain results (Farndale et al., 2015).

The business case for diversity emerges in the “war for talent” rhetoric (Beauregard et al., 2018). Talent shortage becomes critical in knowledge-intensive contexts, where technological advancements, global competition and changing employment patterns (Casper et al., 2013) make the ability to attract and retain “talent” (i.e. employees) with superior knowledge and skills a competitive advantage for organizations. Organizations often portray diversity management as a morally commendable and beneficial in their internal and external communication (Köllen et al., 2018). The ethical obligation of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) is rooted in the principle of ensuring fair representation, social responsibility and the elimination of discrimination. This is achieved through Human Resource Management (HRM) practices that aim to reduce or mitigate the disparities that minority groups may face to promote anti-discrimination and equal treatment (Köllen et al., 2018). HRM research has demonstrated that businesses with high LGBTQ DEI practices can attract higher-quality human capital and have a recruiting advantage over other businesses (Everly and Schwarz, 2014). However, organizations struggle to build inclusive culture and practices for the LGBTQ community, as successful policy implementation is contingent on consensus among policymakers, employee perception of policies being consistent and distinctive, alignment with HRM professionals and line managers, vis-à-vis their commitment to the changed HRM practices (Mierlo et al., 2018). Research has demonstrated that individuals who clearly deviate from traditional gender norms face a higher degree of prejudice compared to transgender individuals who are perceived as adhering to the gender identity assigned at birth (Hennekam and Köllen, 2023), which underscores the importance of appropriate HRM practices and policies to enable inclusion.

This paper examines how organizations meaningfully engage with the marginalized and underrepresented workforce, especially the LGBTQ community, to promote diversity and inclusion through comprehensive policies and practices, thereby developing a sustainable inclusivity culture. However, the critical question is: “What and how do the micro, meso, and macro diversity management practices contribute towards LGBTQ inclusion in organizations?”

We address the significant gaps in diversity and inclusivity research on LGBTQ employees and contribute to the literature in three significant ways. First, we examine the diversity management mechanisms at the organizational level and explicate their interplay at the micro, meso and macro levels to create congruence, both internally and externally, for engaging with LGBTQ talent. Second, we adopt a practice theory lens to examine the behavior of various actors, their agencies, the “flow” of underlying and emerging structures and processes, the continuous interplay between structure and action (Mierlo et al., 2018), and how they enable inclusive culture for the LGBTQ community as a whole. Last, diversity researchers have called for context-specific multilevel research design, including qualitative research, focusing on national, cultural and institutional contexts, where diversity practices are shaped by socio-organizational and historical factors and interactions among them (Hennekam et al., 2019). Notably, much of the literature on LGBTQ inclusion has, thus far, been within the Western context. Nevertheless, in emerging markets like India, a quiet wave of change has occurred, where grassroots lobbying and aggressive litigation have converged, especially in recent years, to shape an effective movement (Schultz and Naqvi, 2023).
The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: first, we present a review of the literature on LGBTQ and diversity practices and argue for a practice lens to study the phenomenon in India. Then, we describe the methodology and the research context; and finally, we present the analysis, findings and discussion, which theorize the structures and practices for building and sustaining LGBTQ talent in organizations.

**Literature review**

*Cisnormativity, gender binarism, initialism and LGBTQ+ individuals at work*

The target demographic for diversity efforts is sometimes referred to as LGBT(I), which includes lesbian, gay male, bisexual and transsexual personnel, and, if including an I, intersex employees (Köllen, 2016). A hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility known as the heterosexual matrix is characterized by the assumption that, for bodies to make sense and cohere, there needs to be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender. Stable sex and gender are defined oppositionally and hierarchically through the mandatory practice of heterosexuality (Hennekam and Köllen, 2023). Transsexuality and intersexuality are not inherently connected to sexuality or sexual preferences. In organizational diversity practices, heterosexuality is typically not included, while rules that safeguard employees based on sexual orientation also provide protection to heterosexual employees. Regardless of the specific terminology and meanings employed within this realm of diversity, it is evident that the focus of diversity study and practice predominantly revolves around gay and lesbian personnel.

The phrase “systems of cissexism” refers to the bundle of cisnormative experiences of non-cis normative individuals in their everyday lives, including non-affirmation, such as misgendering, as well as vicarious stress when learning about oppressive experiences impacting others (Hennekam and Köllen, 2023). Since the two binaries establish cisnormativity, those who do not fit into either category may find the binarist requirement to be an added burden. For them, it may be much more difficult to maintain or regain their comprehensibility as a gender and, in the workplace context, continue to be employable and promotable. The prevailing ideology of cissexism continues to shape the discourse inside many workplaces, resulting in detrimental consequences for those who do not conform to cisgender norms. This includes limited access to career prospects and a generally unfavorable working environment.

Diversity categories are loaded with contextually varying cultural meanings. Inclusion pertains to the organization of diverse manifestations concerning social, national or organizational hierarchies. It can also involve the process of (de)hierarchizing these various manifestations (Köllen et al., 2018). In many countries, with increasing support from public and political figures, legislation through gender recognition and equality acts and non-discrimination in employment are being implemented (Beauregard et al., 2018). Several dimensions of diversity, sexual identity and orientation were often neglected by organizations in the implementation of diversity programs in comparison to other key elements. However, there is a significant increase in the number of organizations, both from the commercial and governmental sectors, that are incorporating this aspect into their diversity management strategies (Köllen, 2016). Employees are now being able to accept their “sexual orientation” and gender identities without inhibition because of these acts. Very few population-based data sources assess LGBT identity, with an estimated 1.6% of UK adults, 2.3% of Americans and 3% of Canadians aged between 18 and 59 identifying as LGB (Beauregard et al., 2018). However, despite these growing numbers, Cisnormativity (the assumption that all people are cisgender) prevails across most, if not all, societal institutions (Beauregard et al., 2018). Besides, stigma, prejudice and discrimination are still common, especially among LGBTQ employees. Disclosing individual identity/sexuality at work still depends on supportive contextual factors, perceived disclosure consequences and individual differences (Beauregard et al., 2018).
Studies on LGBTQ inclusivity have addressed authenticity in transgender identity (Hennekam and Ladge, 2022), antecedents and outcomes of allyship for trans workers (Fletcher and Marvell, 2022), the workplace experience of transgender employees (Ozturk and Tatli, 2016), predictors for the adoption of LGBTQ-inclusive policies (Everly and Schwarz, 2014), reactions of HR team members toward transgender employees (Hennekam and Köllen, 2023), meaningful support for gay and lesbian employees (Huffman et al., 2008), the impact of a broader climate of support within organizations (Webster et al., 2018) and impact of supportive policies on firm performance (Pichler et al., 2017). Other studies on employee selection have examined the presence of LGBTQ employees in high-task-independent occupations (Lim et al., 2018) and argued that this might be due to discrimination during the hiring process rather than self-selection by LGBTQ individuals (Triana et al., 2021).

Extant management research on LGBTQ inclusion has concentrated on the function of HRM and HRM policies, or more broadly, on the influence of perceived diversity climates and the expected allyship behavior of cis coworkers (Hennekam and Köllen, 2023). HRM research shows that businesses with high LGBTQ DEI practices can attract higher-quality human capital and have a recruiting advantage over others (Everly and Schwarz, 2014; Ozturk and Tatli, 2016). Additionally, policies result in better employee recruitment and lower employee turnover, leading to a less stressful work environment that encourages employees to be open about their sexual identities and orientations (Beauregard et al., 2018; Fletcher and Marvell, 2022; Pichler et al., 2017). Many Fortune 500 companies today have implemented domestic partner benefits and anti-discrimination policies to demonstrate their public support for the community (Byington et al., 2021). Supportive work relationships and climate enable more psychological safety (Byington et al., 2021) and better predict positive work outcomes for LGBTQ employees. These include higher job and life satisfaction (Huffman et al., 2008); enabling policies, on the other hand, seem more influential but less impactful. Studies have also argued that policy-practice gaps may develop due to different approaches used by diversity professionals, managerial reluctance and lack of resources (Fletcher and Marvell, 2022) and require consistent implementation to be embedded in an organization’s culture (Webster et al., 2018). However, more research is needed on the workplace experiences of marginalized communities, along with HRM practices, policies and structures; this would help further develop “inclusive workplaces” (Beauregard et al., 2018; Ozturk and Tatli, 2016).

Interestingly, extant research has also raised the question of whether becoming an LGBTQ-inclusive brand presents the challenge of alienating cisgender talent, as the social dominance orientation of the cisgender group may impact inclusive climate development (Fletcher and Marvell, 2022). Prior studies in advertising, for instance, have shown that heterosexual consumers react with higher levels of disgust to advertising featuring same-sex couples (Hazzouri et al., 2018). Therefore, an organization must balance its inclusive practices for LGBTQ without negating the impact on the larger cisgender talent pool within the workforce. This requires straddling a delicate balance of practices, policies and norms, along with both internal and external communication, which research has yet to explore. By addressing the question: “What and how do diversity management practice at the micro, meso, and macro level contribute towards LGBTQ inclusion in organizations?” we examine some of the processual dimensions of how practices and policies are created, implemented and altered in organizations while drawing upon the “practice theory” to understand the phenomenon.

Practice lens
The practice lens begins with the premise that contemporary academic research largely ignores praxis, the “situated socially accomplished flows of activity” in organizations that matter for their survival (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007, p. 11) and that individual agencies acting
through and within social structures produce the social world. Social systems do exist due to the interaction between structures and agents’ actions. When the agents’ behavior aligns with structural rules, they reinforce the structures. However, repeated movements outside the existing structural rules do modify structures (Mierlo et al., 2018).

Drawing on “strategy-as-practice” literature, some scholars proposed a framework to study HRM-as-practice consisting of praxis, practitioners and practices (Björkman et al., 2014). Practitioner refers to the actions, skills, knowledge and agency of an individual and groups that deliberately or idiosyncratically adapt, utilize, participate or combine resources within the boundaries defined by micro-, meso- or macro-level practices inter/intra organizational collectives (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). Practices refer to the situated micro-, meso- and macro-level resources, such as routines, analytical frameworks, tools, concepts and technologies adapted and combined in specific collective contexts. It brings a micro-level focus within organizations to the people doing the work, vis-à-vis how and where. It also examines what skills, tools and resources (technical, psychological, or cognitive) they draw upon (Jarzabkowski and Paul Spee, 2009; Whittington, 2003). While practices, as generative structures, produce distinct patterns of actions and operate as a stabilizing influence, the recursive dynamic interplay between structure and actions provides the freedom to adapt to the surroundings, inevitably creating tensions, while helping to understand how the changes in the interaction between multilevels come about (Mierlo et al., 2018). Policies and practices do tend to shape reality but do not necessarily define it; they are insufficient without supportive climates and work relationships. Praxis refers to situated collective social activities of individuals and groups that include talking, presenting, influencing and meeting, shaping in the process, how management practices actually evolve (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Whittington, 2003). The practice lens remains underresearched, as the main theoretical lenses adopted in LGBTQ research include social categorization theories (i.e. social identity, role congruity, inter-sectionality, social role theory, etc.); normative theories include social justice or macro business ethics, CSR and stakeholder theories, institutional theories (i.e. isomorphism, structuration theory), macro-HR theories (i.e. inclusive organizational culture, talent management, signaling theory, etc.); and work attitude theories (i.e. job satisfaction, perceived organizational support, affective theories, self-determination theory, person-environment fit, etc.) (Byington et al., 2021; Pichler et al., 2017).

Thus far, few research studies have examined coherent collections of practices or complete diversity programs focusing on sexual orientation (Köllen, 2016). Most studies of HRM practices and systems present “implementation” as being distinctive and consistent, where there is consensus between policymakers. Furthermore, while HRM implementation is acknowledged as a process, the translation of the intended and actual practices and the granularity of tasks to be included in the involvement of numerous executives in a multi-stage process is not explicitly clear (Mierlo et al., 2018). For instance, when firms adopt LGBTQ-supportive policies, they must be embraced at multiple levels of the organization and manifested in formal policies, supportive climates and interpersonal relationships in the workplace (Triana et al., 2021).

Diversity management practices within an organization are defined and shaped by external contextual factors and varying cultural meanings. Therefore, understanding the inclusion practices adopted by an organization does require multilevel theorizing. Inclusion pertains to the organization of diverse manifestations concerning social, national or organizational hierarchies. It can also involve the process of (de)hierarchizing these various manifestations (Köllen et al., 2018).

Prior research in the organizational context preferred adopting a relational perspective to understand the micro-, meso- and macro-level diversity factors (Syed and Özbilgin, 2009), especially in terms of institutionalizing HRM practices. Macro-level factors (e.g. national structures, social organization, values and stratification, religious structures, gender-race
relations, laws and family and work institutions) impact diversity practices (Hennekam et al., 2019). As organizational practices are embedded in broader social relations, there is a need to examine the inter-relatedness of macro factors while driving diversity efforts (Hennekam and Ladge, 2022). Meso-level factors include organizational processes, routines and rituals at work, while micro-level factors include individual resilience, agency, capabilities and opportunities that intersect to impact diversity management. LGBTQ community members at a micro-level are especially vulnerable, as their sexuality affects their daily lives and career possibilities (Hennekam et al., 2019). Our literature review clearly shows that there is a paucity of research that describes the processual aspects of how and what organizations do at the micro, meso and macro levels, as inclusion practices for LGBTQ members, especially in an underresearched non-western context. Therefore, through this lens, we look to explain how social systems are effectively created and reframed over time and the recursive process through which LGBTQ-inclusive cultures are shaped in organizations.

Research context
The LGBTQ movement that began in the 1990s has evolved as a struggle for community rights, bringing about a change in the Indian Penal Code (Krishnan, 2018). The discriminatory legislation of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was legally contested for over two decades before India’s “Supreme Court,” before its landmark judgment that decriminalized homosexuality in September 2018 (Ghosh, 2015). This immediately removed the criminal conviction risk for an estimated 135 million people (Byington et al., 2021), allowing more community members a safe option to come out. Notably, earlier in 2014, the same court created the “third gender” status for transgenders and directed the erstwhile government to treat transgenders as a socio-economically backward class, thereby giving them equality of opportunity both in education and employment. In fact, currently, the Indian Supreme Court is engaged in legalizing same-sex marriages. However, notwithstanding these legislative changes, Indian LGBTQ individuals still face cultural marginalization.

A few educated members migrated to Western countries but felt racial marginalization in the white LGBTQ communities (Ghosh, 2015). The changing social and legislative stance toward stated sexuality and gender identification has resulted in a slow but increasing number of Indian workers coming out. This changing context certainly allows organizations to increase their access to a talent pool by building and communicating an inclusive culture.

Methodology
We conducted the study in two parts; the first uses a qualitative research design involving a single case study (Yin, 1994). It captures how HRM processes are effectively conceptualized and deployed within an organization. The second stage of the study involves validating our findings with other industry experts and recent publications by industry bodies. This helped in theorizing the stages of LGBTQ inclusion.

Study 1
Scholars have advocated using qualitative methods to study the implementation process (Fleetwood and Hesketh, 2006). The case study methodology is especially useful in diversity management studies, as it brings out the complexities in interactions and relationships in understudied contexts and subjects between various organizational actors involved in the process while providing in-depth contextual information that helps the field move forward (Hennekam and Ladge, 2022; Hennekam et al., 2019; Ozturk and Tatli, 2016). One method of enhancing the generalizability of case study-based research is strategically selecting cases
Following its objectives, we predicated the context for this research on firms espousing LGBTQ inclusion and being recognized for the same by independent bodies. The chosen firm was from a knowledge-intensive industry, where talent acquisition and retention are challenging. Furthermore, it was a “best-practice” organization, and a frontrunner in its sector on LGBTQ workforce inclusion, with multiple industry recognitions and awards for its inclusivity.

We conducted a 16-month comprehensive review of all policies, practices, systems and communication activities undertaken by the firm’s Bangalore office, anonymized as TWI. Notably, this study involved a three-stage process: first, we collected data through multilevel in-depth interviews with 28 different stakeholders, including 16 employees, 8 potential job applicants from the community and 4 who worked with recruitment partners to TWI and groups that enabled LGBTQ inclusion within organizations. The participants’ age ranged from 24 years to 53 years, with a mean of 34.7 years. Inviting the participants, both authors conducted in-depth interviews after explaining the study’s aim. By interviewing these different stakeholders, through the respondents’ shared personal and professional narratives, we were able to get a holistic picture of all salient practices, systems, enablers and experiences of the firm and the LGBTQ members. We also gained insights into how inclusive culture building actually evolves in a best-in-class LGBTQ-inclusive organization.

The 28 semi-structured questions and interviews lasted 30–45 min, with a median of 37 min (see Table 1). Notably, they were conducted both face-to-face and virtually, depending on the participants’ geographical location. We asked the employee and manager participants about their experiences with LGBTQ inclusion practices and policies, the support systems provided, the firm’s messaging and outreach programs to the community and managerial behaviors. We asked the community respondents about their interests and motivations for joining the firm. They also shared their perceived credibility of the initiatives and communication, as displayed by the firm. After this round of interviews, we encouraged them to reconnect with us if they wanted to share any additional information. We collected data until we reached theoretical saturation, and no additional categories related to the research question were found (Yin, 1994).

The authors, who identify as cisgender, have had significant experience with gender inclusion initiatives and research and have spent time exploring resources on LGBTQ inclusion practices across the Indian industry. During the research process, we met experts engaged in Diversity and Inclusion consulting to understand how organizations within the industry were embarking on LGBTQ inclusion. Interestingly, one of us had an opportunity to attend a conclave where LGBTQ inclusion was on the agenda. We also gained insights into the journey of LGBTQ inclusion at an industry level, which helped in framing the findings.

TWI

TWI is an Information Technology (IT) company engaged in strategy, design and software engineering for its clients, with over 10,000 employees spread over 48 offices across 17 countries. The company had developed a strong culture of inclusion, grounded in the founders’ belief in an equitable tech future and advocating positive social change. A “social impact group” actively participated in humanitarian projects, where employees volunteered their time and services. Supportive policies, such as gender-neutral Equal Opportunity, Non-discrimination and Anti-Harassment at the Workplace policy, and extended paid maternity leave were also applicable to surrogacy and adoption cases, besides pay parity across grades for all, “bring your child to work” benefit to support working parents had significantly increased gender representation within the firm.

The commitment to build an LGBTQ-inclusive culture began with the firm’s managing directors publishing an open letter in 2014 expressing their support for LGBTQ rights and the
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<th>Respondent profile</th>
<th>Identity/orientation</th>
<th>Sample comments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Global Head, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at TWI, 22 years of corporate experience, 15 years in enabling diversity and inclusion</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>We believe in the pragmatic approach of simplifying DEI. This is done by amplifying the voices and lived experiences of marginalized and underrepresented groups, learning as a community, establishing accountability at all levels and contributing to collective change.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Independent community management professional with 6 years experience, enabling organizations to hire: Women, persons with disability, LGBTQ, Women Returnship programs and Veterans</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>Our careers are not our identity. We are all so much more than the sum of our professions. Unfortunately, organizations that look at individuals through the narrow lens of skills they bring are never fully able to engage their talent. I work with recruitment teams to expand and modify the job descriptions, the interviewing techniques and processes and sensitising managers and leaders. I also help provide the funnel of applicants.</td>
</tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Business Leader at TWI, 24 years of IT consulting and delivery experience</td>
<td>He/Him</td>
<td>The majority of people are closed when it comes to things that they perceive as a threat to their sense of “order” or “normal.” At TWI, the “unconscious bias” workshops facilitated by the leadership team, understanding individual perspectives while having a conversation are the keys to challenging these points of view. These conversations will require careful structuring because you will most likely be dealing with a person who is deeply rooted in social conditioning that can take years to undo. All of this takes serious leadership time, resources and commitment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Program Manager, DEI at TWI</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>A journey of learning and unlearning, a willingness to challenge biases, engaging as a community with empathy and building authentic allyship are all necessary for creating workplaces that are equitable and inclusive.</td>
</tr>
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<td>5</td>
<td>IT Testing Manager at TWI</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>I work in IT (testing) role and had left my last organization to join TWI, after an insensitive manager flipped off my lesbian orientation as a “phase”. I now work with sensitizing the CIS-gender and larger community through workshops, role-plays, etc. on what is offensive and non-inclusive behavior and volunteer with the DEI team in arranging all these events. I am glad TWI has zero-tolerance for this. Dry-combing the messages constantly has now helped the inclusive culture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Head of Business Development for a For-Profit agency Recruitment agency</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>As a society, we need to make sure that everyone is treated fairly and equally and has the chance to use their skills and talents to become financially independent and create value for themselves and others. This should extend beyond gender, caste, religion, class, or any other criteria, besides merit factors. We provide capable talent to organizations that find value in hiring these individuals.</td>
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Table 1. Respondent profiles and sample quotes (continued)
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Principal Consultant, 16 years of work experience</td>
<td>He/Him</td>
<td>Should my sexual orientation matter to anyone at work, bias my performance reviews or growth? Why should I have to hide that I am gay? It is immaterial to the kind of work I do, and I would like to be judged for my work and not my orientation. I only had the courage to come out after joining TWI, when I was confident that this aspect of my life was immaterial to my career and performance evaluation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Business Head TWI, 27 years of work experience</td>
<td>He/Him</td>
<td>Culture is not shaped in one day. I see some organizations take short-term decisions, like rapping a homophobic manager on the knuckles, instead of exiting such rotten apples. That short-term decision has pretty long-term consequences. Before you know it, the whole barrel is rotten!</td>
</tr>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Project Manager, TWI, 15 years of work experience</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>Investing in a strong inclusive culture, It’s like watering and fertilizing the ground, nurturing the seed. If we believe in it, and we do, then all these efforts pay off. We have a happier and more engaged workforce.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Talent Development Program Leader at TWI, 16 years of work experience</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>My (lesbian) partner and I wanted to adopt a baby. TWI’s DEI team gave us legal counsel on the steps, connected us with agencies that would help us, and handheld us through the process. I also got full maternity leave when the baby arrived. My manager, today, gives me a lot of flexibility, to work from home. There is no judgment, only empathy! Our lives are fuller today, and it’s thanks to all the systems and culture at TWI. I speak about this at the NGOs and community meets. I have also referred a large number of applicants to TWI and got referral bonus for the effort (laughs).</td>
</tr>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Software Developer, 4 years of work experience</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>I saw this (TWI Trans-women’s) TED talk. I immediately reached out to her to understand how I could transition. I applied through the “Interning with Pride” program and now working full-time here. In the past, I was saving up for my transition costs. Now, this is all covered, and more importantly, I don’t have to hide this from anyone, citing “family emergency”, while applying for long leave. It’s a huge relief- on multiple fronts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Talent Acquisition, TWI, 9 years of experience</td>
<td>He/Him</td>
<td>I have not come out about my gay orientation to my family, but am out at work. The support groups here regularly share their stories about how they had these conversations. I know the challenges I face are not something new. The other’s stories give me hope that when I do come out (with the family), I will be accepted.</td>
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<td>S.No.</td>
<td>Respondent profile</td>
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<td>Sample comments</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Business Operations Analyst, TWI, 5 years of work experience</td>
<td>They/Them/Theirs</td>
<td>I was never comfortable wearing my preferred colors of pink, bright yellows, mauve before (TWI). I was always told that these are “girls” colors. When I am not sure where I stand (on my sexual preferences), I can wear these colors (at TWI), without hearing any ridiculous comments on what a CIS-male should/should not wear.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Human Resource Business Partner, TWI, 11 years of work experience</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>The preferred gender pronoun feature in the HRIS system and emails means that I do not, constantly, need to explain my identity. It is such a small thing, but it reduces the emotional burden on me(as a TWI Trans-woman employee).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Founder, Not for Profit Organization, 35 years experience working with the community</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>We need more organizations to be supportive to the community. TWI absolutely walks the talk on every front. Many times, they have reached out to me for my opinion on some of their policies. They are absolutely sincere and committed to being inclusive and work to ensure all the scaffolding is in place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Partner, Not for Profit Organization, 18 years experience working with the community</td>
<td>He/Him</td>
<td>Today, so many organizations celebrate “Pride Month” with flash-in-the-pan activities. It’s not consistent. It’s like saying, OK- be gay for a month, we’ll tolerate it, after that let’s wrap this up and not make others uncomfortable talking about it. That is nonsense and they don’t fool anyone. Nobody wants to join these firms for their purported inclusivity. TWI is pretty exemplary in how they have knitted the whole framework together.</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Software Developer, 2 years of work experience</td>
<td>He/Him</td>
<td>Who is to say what is or what is not “normal”. I had actually not thought about this before I joined TWI. Now, I am much better informed of the challenges of the community and therefore, more sensitive in my engagement. (CIS-male)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Compensation and Benefits Head, TWI, 16 years of experience</td>
<td>He/Him</td>
<td>We are extremely mindful while reviewing the merit increase recommendations. We check for patterns to see if any community members are being discriminated (in the recommended increase). We have also provided a little extra cushion in our budgets to correct any past inequities, especially for high-performing members. We want to and regularly signal that only performance matters here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Corporate Communications and Marketing Director, TWI, 18 years of experience</td>
<td>He/Him</td>
<td>We have so many great stories to share, it makes my job really easy. There is honesty behind every lived experience that we put out – it resonates with the larger workforce. After every post, we see an uptick in the number of applications on our career page.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No.</th>
<th>Respondent profile</th>
<th>Identity/ orientation</th>
<th>Sample comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>IT Developer in a Leading Indian IT Services firm, job applicant through an NGO, 6 years experience</td>
<td>He/Him</td>
<td>During an onsite visit, my (Indian CIS-male) manager insisted that I join him to visit a couple of strip clubs. Frankly, I would not have minded, if there were some gay clubs I could have visited. That whole evening, I sat, uncomfortable, laughing at his jokes. I hated every minute of it. That’s when I decided to either join are more inclusive organization in India, or look for jobs abroad, where this is more “normal”. Thankfully, I heard about TWI from my partner, who does not want to leave India. I have applied there- let’s see!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Lawyer with physical disability, 14 years of experience</td>
<td>They/Them/Theirs</td>
<td>Before applying to TWI, I carefully checked out the feedback on Glassdoor. Even the posts on LinkedIn by individual community members. All of these re-affirmed that TWI was extremely open and non-judgemental about our identities and orientations. I don’t know if I get through (a job), but I will keep looking out for postings for my skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Assistant Manager, DEI in a not-for-profit Foundation</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>I keep hearing about TWI, when I arrange industry symposiums and community meets. The best practice sharing by TWI always comes out and is replicated by other organizations trying to increase their LGBTQ representation in their workforce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Computer Engineer, training on Python, 4 years of work experience</td>
<td>He/Him</td>
<td>I first heard about TWI, when I was running from pillar to post to prevent my (policeman) father from taking me home and marrying me off to a boy. I had run away from home to undergo the transition. The NGO and community helped me deal with the police and provided shelter. However, they suggested that financial independence was critical. That was where the training program from TWI helped. I will finish this (training) in another 2 months and will definitely apply to them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Engineering student at a leading Engineering College</td>
<td>He/Him</td>
<td>I have been following the posts of a couple of TWI gay men. The images of the events, their ability to talk so openly about it, within TWI and on social media - it give me the confidence that it would be OK to come out. I would like to work there, once I finish my engineering degree. I do hope they come to campus, else I will apply to them through these employees that I follow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>IT Project Lead, 8 years experience in a Platform E-Commerce firm</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>I am not from the community, but as a female, I feel TWI would be a nice place to work. Their policies are really inclusive and supportive. Tomorrow, I feel when I have a child, they would not demonstrate the &quot;sticky floor and glass ceilings&quot; that I hear about and see in other firms, including mine</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No.</th>
<th>Respondent profile</th>
<th>Identity/orientation</th>
<th>Sample comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Software Developer at a leading Global IT Services Firm, 6 years of experience</td>
<td>He/Him</td>
<td>When I was transitioning, I was taking a lot of hormone supplements. I regularly needed to use the washroom and was not comfortable using either the male or female ones. I hear TWI has gender-neutral washrooms, in addition to the male/female ones. It’s a small thing - but it shows the sensitivity required to accommodate our needs. (Trans-male)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Talent acquisition head, Leading IT Consulting firm - 20 years of experience</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>How does one become an employer of choice? Is it only money and perks? That might attract, but people mostly leave because of the culture. We see this regularly with the talent we hire. We are now working with the TWI team and trying to replicate their best practices, so that we have an inclusive culture - for women, for LGBTQ, etc. It is a Herculean task and we have miles to go to get there. Till then, we will continue to lose good talent to TWI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Theater artist and freelance musician, 8 years of experience</td>
<td>He/Him</td>
<td>My brother is gay, he has come out to me, but not to our family. I have asked him to apply for the “intern with pride” program at TWI, that I heard about from one of my drama workshop groups, that regularly does programs there. I think that place will be good for him</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Study 2 respondents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>28 years experience in DEI, 12 years as a DEI head for a global MNE and 16 years as consultant. Works with about 26 clients both Indian and MNE firms. Has been voted among top 50 DEI specialists in the world</th>
<th>She/Her</th>
<th>It takes significant leadership courage to continue to invest in LGBTQ against pressures of financial performance, internal opposition, short-term goals and opting for the easier (gender) inclusion agendas. This tokenism commitment towards LGBTQ is instantly visible. We do not see community members coming out in these firms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>24 years in DEI implementing programs across multiple Indian and MNE firms. Has been associated with successful and unsuccessful initiatives in DEI. She is also part of an non profit organisation that supports DEI inclusion</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>The flywheel of resistance within individuals and organizations requires a push from multiple fronts. The leadership thrust may kick-start this, but building an inclusive culture requires support internally through other managers, opinion leaders, policies and systems. External support through talent incubator groups, industry forums that disseminate best practices, social pressure - all of these need to act together. Building an inclusive culture is not one person’s baby. In organizations, where I did not get this support, as a DEI head, there was very little that I could achieve. I left, when I realized that I was just a figurehead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>India DEI Head and Director, HR for a global Energy and Automation MNE firm, with revenues (2022) at $37.5 Billion</td>
<td>He/Him</td>
<td>We have won global awards for our gender inclusion efforts. There is significant affirmative action across the board. However, apart from the Pride Month celebrations, our gender neutral and medical insurance policies, we have not been able to do much. I find function leaders hesitating to send out communication from their desks supporting the (LGBTQ) cause. So no, with over 35,000 employees in India, we do not have anyone who has come out</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.
right to expression of individual identity, citing India’s rich cultural diversity and the spirit of openness demonstrated through the ages. This letter was significant since the Indian Supreme Court repealed Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, decriminalizing homosexuality only in 2018. After the historical judgment of 2018, the directors publicly celebrated the event as a “true equality day.” Notably, TWI’s “Social Impact Group” supported non-Government organizations (NGOs) that stood beside LGBTQ members, catering to their physical and financial safety, along with transition and employment with the help of pro-bono technology support. TWI also collaborated with the community NGOs to develop an up-skilling program called “Intern with Pride.” This six-month paid internship was to enhance the technical programming skills of applicants from the community through live industry experience. In fact, many of the interns were subsequently hired by TWI.

Feedback from the community and employees helped TWI develop strong HR policies to support inclusion. The Human Resource Information System (HRIS) was configured to allow employees to provide their preferred name and pronoun, which was also used in email IDs and digital signatures. Trained counselors and professionals supported employees needing help in gender affirmation and dealing with psychological issues emerging from stigmatization. Medical insurance and supportive leave policies helped during the gender transition. TWI also provided legal support to help change names in identity records and gender-neutral washrooms to support LGBTQ employees. TWI also collaborated with an art agency to create inclusive-themed artwork in the offices.

The HR team regularly conducted awareness and sensitization sessions, reinforcing the inclusivity message. An affinity group within TWI comprised employees across the organization enhanced inclusive conversations and practices through education and LGBTQ community-based events, celebrations and stories. The recruitment process was strengthened to include a separate assessment of applicants’ unconscious biases and attitudes toward inclusion and social change, and recruiters were provided additional training on revised recruitment norms. All job postings were made more gender-neutral in their language and tone. Strong inclusivity training was part of the employee onboarding and induction process. The leadership team regularly conducted “Being Inclusive” awareness training for the employees, encompassing the permanent and contingent workforce. The company also created a cross-functional task force that regularly engaged with all stakeholders, advised HR on policy formation, coordinated communication within and outside the organization and conducted regular events themed on inclusion.

Partner collaboration efforts included skill-building workshops and job fairs for NGOs supporting the LGBTQ community. Moreover, theater groups were invited and employees participated in workshops on LGBTQ inclusion.

TWI’s marketing team posted periodic updates on their website and all social media platforms. With over 530,000 followers on LinkedIn, 22,000 followers on Instagram, and 181,000 followers on Twitter, the posts saw high levels of engagement.

Analysis
In the second stage, the data set included 170 pages of detailed field notes and 78,260 words of transcribed interviews. Due to the inductive nature of the study, each author independently coded the data manually, using the methodology proposed by Gioia and colleagues (Gioia et al., 2012). This methodology is useful because it “applies the systematic conceptual and analytical discipline that leads to credible interpretations of data and aids in convincing readers that the conclusions are plausible and defensible” (Gioia et al., 2012, p. 15). The data analysis process was iterative, wherein various terms, codes and categories used by participants emerged within the first few interviews. Through data reduction and presentation, portions of interviews that referred to LGBTQ practices, communication and
credibility were identified. Then, the authors met to discuss, compare and debate common and different emerging themes. By the end of this stage, we retrieved 32 first-order categories.

As we progressed, we generated meaningful clusters of concepts and phrases labeled those categories using the participants’ language and began to notice both parallels and contrasts within the categories. Second-order themes are primarily theoretical; they assist researchers in defining and comprehending the phenomenon studied. We identified and categorized the common themes using the contextual macro, meso and micro-framework, which helps in understanding diversity practices (Syed and Özbilgin, 2009), and thereby develops the second-order coding. The number of categories was reduced to ten by this second-order analysis. We did a member check of the synthesized and analyzed data with the earlier respondents to obtain their perspectives on these additional emergent themes. Through this method, we were confident of having captured the respondents’ experiences holistically. In conclusion, it helped develop the inductive model by distilling the themes down to three aggregate dimensions for the data structure (Figure 1), which conveys the progression from raw data to aggregate themes by acting as both a visual aid and a graphical representation.

In the third stage, we validated the LGBTQ inclusion practices at the implementation level. New categories emerged (sources and credibility of inclusive culture, communication of leaders and brand ambassadors, formalization of systems and processes, conscious change, synergistic role of partners). This last stage of analysis involved checking with the participants and validating our interpretation and findings, which included tracking all employer branding-related communication (job postings on the website and job sites such as Naukri.com and Indeed.com), organization-initiated posts on social media platforms (including LinkedIn, Instagram and Twitter), semi-participant observations, unstructured and semi-structured interviews with various internal employees, their life histories and publicly available documented data of a few employees, recruitment partner firms and potential job seekers from the LGBTQ community.

Study 2
Study 1 helped us understand the comprehensive and interwoven nature of the relational context, the practices and the praxis that helped TWI become a best-in-class organization on LGBTQ inclusion. Using these findings, we also spoke to three DEI experts from leading Indian organizations to ascertain their experiences with organizations on LGBTQ inclusion in different sectors (see Table 1 for the respondent profiles).

Expert validations helped characterize the overall pattern of the primary LGBTQ inclusion practices and structures across multiple organizations, including the tensions experienced at various stages of LGBTQ inclusion structure and practice evolution. We found multiple ways, practices, praxis, practitioners and the intersection of social, legislative and labor market pressures interacted and influenced each other. Using all these inputs, we developed the model of the evolution of LGBTQ inclusion practices across organizations (see Figure 2).

Findings
Using the relational perspective (Syed and Özbilgin, 2009), the macro-, meso- and micro-level themes that emerged for enabling LGBTQ inclusion are summarized below. The identified representative quotes and examples supporting the various categories are presented in Table 2.
Inclusion for LGBTQ talent

Data structure

1st Order Concepts
- Decriminalisation of homosexuality
- Repeal of Section 377 of Indian Penal Code
- Increased media coverage of the LGBTQ community and activities
  - Civil Society Organisations to support the community
  - LGBTQ Support Groups
- Enhanced global recognition of the LGBTQ agenda
  - MNC subsidiary replication of international frameworks on rights
  - United Nations' engagement on LGBTQ rights
  - Industry-wide adoption of pride walk/week/month
  - Special conclave on LGBTQ inclusion
- Young consumer groups
  - Gen Y and Gen Z talent availability

2nd Order Themes
- Regulatory
- Societal pressure
- Adoption of International Norms and Standards
- Market pressures

Aggregate Dimensions
- Macro
  - Leadership
    - Evangelism
    - Relational Mechanism
    - Workforce Ambassadors
  - Meso
    - Collaboration and Partnership
    - Structural Mechanism
    - Enabling Systems and Processes
  - Micro
    - Cisgender Allyship
    - LGBTQ Micro work environment

Leaders' visible sponsorship and support for the cause
- Leaders' commitment of resources to embed cause
- Open access to employees for feedback and suggestions
- Strict punitive action for any norm breaches

Strong LGBTQ Activists as DEI head
- Community group activities
- Evangelist across levels

Strong external partner network and affinity groups to complement
- Inclusivity efforts
- Best practice sharing at the industry level
- Support through talent pipelines

HRIS system changes
- Strong inclusive policies
- Infrastructure support such as gender-neutral washrooms, etc.
- Continuous sensitisation and awareness training for all employees

Empathetic individual managers and leaders as allies
- Supportive peers as champions of LGBTQ inclusion

Increased trust with managers
- Perceived organisational support
- Enhanced comfort with peers
- Bringing authentic self to work
Figure 2.
Evolution of LGBTQ inclusion practices
Undoubtedly, the Supreme Court judgement made things easier for DEI teams to openly adopt the LGBTQ agenda into their charters. Before that, one was always wary of legal action or prosecution. (R2)

There is so much of coverage of the community rights and events, rights. We see huge social support and outrage when any member is ridiculed, ostracized or diminished in any capacity, because of their identity or orientation. Both internally within organizations and externally, the sensitization towards the community has increased. (R3)

The LGBTQ practices, events and acceptance is significantly higher in our Brazil and our Nordic country offices. We started the “Pride March” after seeing the success of the same event in their offices. We are trying to replicate some of these practices. (R1)

I remember watching an advertisement with my friends, and also a movie where a homosexual and a transgender provided the comic humour. I vowed never to use that company’s product or watch that director’s movies in future. (R20)

I remember this business head who kept making homophobic jokes. After a couple of instances, overnight he exited the organization, without any notice. I know that this would have been a leadership call, as this head was leading a very critical client engagement. Just shows that the leaders back the values they espouse. (R17)

We had to consciously invest time and money on multiple fronts - creating the team to run the DEI initiatives, for us to conduct the periodic “Unconscious Bias” workshop, for HR team to examine all our policies - all of this takes time, effort and money. For us, this investment is absolutely worth it. (R8)

I’ve regularly shared our inclusivity events on LinkedIn. In all instances, I have received resumes in my in-box. I think, we have hired quite a few of them also. The team laughts about my side gig of “recruitment” that I get done through my posts! (R11)

I remember a TWI employee mailing me permission to post their TED-Talk on YouTube. Why not - I said! But this helped us draft our social media policies. We encourage employees to be their full selves, at work, and at the same time, be mindful that they are representing not just the community but also TWI. The boundaries between a role holder, individual beliefs, organization values, organization’s policies, organization’s public stand on specific issues, and stakeholder interests have to be clear. (R1)

We reached out to TWI after we saw their MD’s open letter on their website. We had a large community of LGBTQ members. We needed their help to develop an app with appropriate features. TWI did this for us pro-bono. After that, the conversations continued, and now we help each other. They support with people and sponsorship for our event, we supply them with a great pool of talent. It’s a win-win all around. May their tribe increase! (R15)

You may think a gender-neutral washroom is a small thing. It is not. I had stopped drinking water, when I was transitioning, as I was not comfortable using the male or female washrooms. It had a huge impact on my health at that time. (R14)

We estimated the cost for the gender-neutral policies we were proposing. It was certainly an investment, but the leadership team was convinced that this was what we needed to do. I haven’t checked the return on investment, but I am sure this has paid back multi-fold. (R18)

I have volunteered to train “Intern with Pride” programs when I am between projects. I have gained a lot more, than I gave. I think my exposure to the community, their challenges - it has made me a better managers. (R9)

My previous organization had a few LGBTQ supportive policies, but no one, including myself, felt confident to come out. It’s the whole deal here (At TWI). You sense it quickly - that lack of judgement, the support to be who you want - I’ve been able to come out now. It’s a huge relief! (R12)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample quotes</th>
<th>Second order themes</th>
<th>Aggregate dimension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Undoubtedly, the Supreme Court judgement made things easier for DEI teams to openly adopt the LGBTQ agenda into their charters. Before that, one was always wary of legal action or prosecution. (R2)</td>
<td>Regulatory</td>
<td>MACRO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is so much of coverage of the community rights and events, rights. We see huge social support and outrage when any member is ridiculed, ostracized or diminished in any capacity, because of their identity or orientation. Both internally within organizations and externally, the sensitization towards the community has increased. (R3)</td>
<td>Societal pressure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The LGBTQ practices, events and acceptance is significantly higher in our Brazil and our Nordic country offices. We started the “Pride March” after seeing the success of the same event in their offices. We are trying to replicate some of these practices. (R1)</td>
<td>Adoption of International Norms and Standards</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I remember watching an advertisement with my friends, and also a movie where a homosexual and a transgender provided the comic humour. I vowed never to use that company’s product or watch that director’s movies in future. (R20)</td>
<td>Market Pressures</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I remember this business head who kept making homophobic jokes. After a couple of instances, overnight he exited the organization, without any notice. I know that this would have been a leadership call, as this head was leading a very critical client engagement. Just shows that the leaders back the values they espouse. (R17)</td>
<td>Leadership Evangelism</td>
<td>MESO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We had to consciously invest time and money on multiple fronts - creating the team to run the DEI initiatives, for us to conduct the periodic “Unconscious Bias” workshop, for HR team to examine all our policies - all of this takes time, effort and money. For us, this investment is absolutely worth it. (R8)</td>
<td>Workforce Ambassadors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ve regularly shared our inclusivity events on LinkedIn. In all instances, I have received resumes in my in-box. I think, we have hired quite a few of them also. The team laughs about my side gig of “recruitment” that I get done through my posts! (R11)</td>
<td>Collaboration and Partnership</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I remember a TWI employee mailing me permission to post their TED-Talk on YouTube. Why not - I said! But this helped us draft our social media policies. We encourage employees to be their full selves, at work, and at the same time, be mindful that they are representing not just the community but also TWI. The boundaries between a role holder, individual beliefs, organization values, organization’s policies, organization’s public stand on specific issues, and stakeholder interests have to be clear. (R1)</td>
<td>Enabling Systems and Processes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We reached out to TWI after we saw their MD’s open letter on their website. We had a large community of LGBTQ members. We needed their help to develop an app with appropriate features. TWI did this for us pro-bono. After that, the conversations continued, and now we help each other. They support with people and sponsorship for our event, we supply them with a great pool of talent. It’s a win-win all around. May their tribe increase! (R15)</td>
<td>Cisgender Allyship</td>
<td>MICRO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You may think a gender-neutral washroom is a small thing. It is not. I had stopped drinking water, when I was transitioning, as I was not comfortable using the male or female washrooms. It had a huge impact on my health at that time. (R14)</td>
<td>LGBTQ Micro-Work Environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Representative quotes and emerging themes
(1) Macro-Level Influences

- Regulatory: Studies have indicated that government policies influence inclusive workplace strategies and policies while boosting minority members' self-esteem and self-respect (Fletcher and Marvell, 2022). Regulatory support regarding repealing Section 377 and decriminalizing homosexuality was seen as a tipping point for LGBTQ acceptance. It allowed D&I functions within the organization to safely embrace LGBTQ as an additional diversity theme.

I don’t think we would have been permitted, even by our supportive leadership team, to include LGBTQ as a dimension of our DEI initiatives if Section 377 was still in force. Nobody wants the additional headache of inviting prosecution! (R1)

- Societal Pressure: Increased activism, social media and press coverage of community events, discrimination, same-sex marriages and the increase in the number of not-for-profit and civil society organizations working for LGBTQ rights did much to ameliorate the stigma against the community.

You cannot but see the amount of vocal assertion of LGBTQ rights on social media and popular press. The narrative on LGBTQ is slowly, but surely changing. (R2)

- Adoption of International Norms and Standards: The increased presence of multinational enterprises, as well as the UN engagement on LGBTQ rights.

When the number of nations ratifying LGBTQ rights increases at the United Nations, the equality and non-discrimination of the community may significantly reduce. Organizations will invest more resources to ensure that inclusive environments are developed. It is easier for the MNEs where, in some countries, the movement is far ahead of what is happening in India. However, we are slowly catching up!

- Market Pressures: Brands increasingly realize the benefits of inclusive advertising to tap into the LGBTQ community (Hazzouri et al., 2018). Additionally, research in the field of HRM has shown that firms with high LGBTQ DEI practices can attract higher-quality human capital and have a recruiting advantage over other firms (Everly and Schwarz, 2014; Ozturk and Tatli, 2016).

Organizations are now trying to capture unique talent pools to win the war for talent. Apart from disability, veteran, and cultural diversity, I think there is a lot of talent in the LGBTQ community. Attracting them would give us an edge (on the war for talent). (R18)

(2) Meso-Level Influences

From a praxis and practices perspective, the four dimensions for LGBTQ-inclusive organizations emerged: Leadership Evangelism, Collaboration and partnerships, Workforce Ambassadors and Enabling Systems and Processes.
• Leadership Evangelism: helps direct appropriate focus and channel resources, setting norms and institutionalizing practices. Leaders, as Allies, recognize their privilege, define unacceptable normative behaviors, help turn words into action and challenge micro-aggressions to avoid adverse effects for minority groups thereby maintaining genuine relationships with community members (Fletcher and Marvell, 2022). Talking about their inclusive culture, a senior business leader said:

We allow and accept all our employees as there are- no judgment! It is very relieving for many. Instead of investing energy in wearing a mask and trying to fit in, they present themselves wholly and focus on the job. Everyone wins this way! (R4)

• Collaboration and Partnerships: partners and NGOs had a symbiotic relationship with TWI, helping shape policies and practices and providing access to a talent pool. TWI also provided volunteer technology support and employee volunteering for community activities. Collaboration and partnerships help connect with the community, which may not come out in large numbers in a socially restrictive and discriminatory environment. With the public having less favorable attitudes toward stigmatized individuals, these individuals often experience difficulties finding employment (Milfeld et al., 2021). Partners help establish confidence and trust in organizational messaging and help amplify word-of-mouth referrals. The head of an NGO that supported and helped rehabilitate the community members said:

Our members have many challenges to grapple with, but having financial independence, with dignity, gives them the confidence to embrace, acknowledge and deal with who they are and how they wish to engage with society. R16.

• Workforce Ambassadors: Supportive peers in work relationships and an inclusive climate enabled more psychological safety (Byington et al., 2021) and better predicted positive work outcomes for LGBTQ employees. The role of cisgender colleagues constituted a vital part of enabling psychological safety.

My manager never assumes that I will stay late at work, even though I am a (gay)male. I have seen that he always seeks my consent (for late work). He respects that my partner and I are parents and face the same pressures of a cis-gender mother when it comes to family responsibilities. R7

• Enabling Systems and Processes: HRM practices consistent with deeply embedded cultural values create supportive conditions through training and development and enable allyship, all of which enhance the acceptability and effectiveness of HRM practices (Fletcher and Marvell, 2022). Infrastructural and policy support strengthened the inclusion of community members within the organization, making it possible for them to present their authentic selves at work. Policies on healthcare benefits, leave, work flexibility and support through an inclusive HRIS system, gender-neutral washrooms, internal support groups, strong continuous employee training and robust whistleblower mechanisms enabled psychological support.

(3) Micro-level Influences

• Cisgender Allyship: Allyship is a behavior that is typically associated with people who hold one or more non-minority positions and denotes active support for and advocacy
on behalf of a marginalized minority (Fletcher and Marvell, 2022). Organizations with a high inclusivity orientation often have individual champions who are not from the community as empathetic, supportive managers and leaders. They form a strong mechanism for converting the naysayers and on-the-fence employees’ perceptions and help overcome unconscious bias. A senior business leader opined:

All things considered, they (LGBTQ employees) are human beings. They have bright-thinking minds and truly diverse perspectives. Engaging them has developed my managerial acumen. Supporting them has helped me be successful. So yes, I champion their cause, especially with a few team members who may not be comfortable. R9_

- LGBTQ Micro Work Environment: Psychological safety at the workplace develops when there is high trust between employees and management, thereby enabling employee voice (Beauregard et al., 2018). Talking about his experience in another firm claiming to be LGBTQ inclusive, as a gay senior developer at TWI said:

I feel some organizations adopt affirmative action to meet internal targets but are not inclusive in their internal culture and communication. It’s the small things – addressing a group as “guys,” not having gender-neutral policies, insensitive jokes being considered acceptable – after a while, you realize that you were a token hire. I left because of that. I did not have to play the LGBTQ card to join (at TWI). Here, the DEI team takes serious note of our feedback. Somehow, the tone of communication, the vocabulary, and sensitivity toward all – it’s all-pervasive and institutionalized through the multiple internal processes. (R7)

From the second part of our study, we realized that while an increasing number of Indian organizations are trying to embrace the LGBTQ diversity agenda, none are as successful as TWI. The inclusion efforts can be conceptualized along a trajectory, represented in Figure 2, where internal and external pressures help propel the organization forward or regress on the inclusion journey. Therefore, the challenges that dilute the efforts stem from three broad pressures:

1. **Leadership Emphasis Discontinuity**: while individual leaders may initiate the inclusion efforts, any change or challenge to leadership authority will likely dilute or completely stop the inclusion efforts.

2. **Financial Pressures**: The sustained commitment of resources for building an inclusive culture may be challenged in environments where organizations feel pressured to increase shareholder value, adopt short-term measures for profitability or get listed, thereby increasing the shareholders’ “say” in framing organization policies and strategies.

3. **Institutional Change**: Organizations in flux, such as during a merger and acquisition, downsizing or organizational re-structuring, may slow down or stop their inclusion efforts.

**Discussion**

At the macro level, regulatory compliance pressures often lead to affirmative action policies. However, in contexts where regulations are evolving, compliance is a non-issue for organizations. While societal pressures are emerging, and demographic changes may advance the LGBTQ agenda in the future, there is no compelling reason for organizations to engage with the issue. Adopting international codes and rights perspectives puts pressure on MNE subsidiaries to conform to the headquarters’ agenda on LGBTQ. In the present context, the dominant macro pressures stem from both labor and consumer markets. Competitive labor markets do necessitate building powerful employer brands to build and engage potential external applicants and internal
incumbent employees (Casper et al., 2013). Strong employer branding, in turn, affects organizational profitability through increased employee identification, performance and satisfaction; it also helps attract and retain talent (Casper et al., 2013; Tumasjan et al., 2020).

At the meso level, we find practices and practitioners influencing the inclusion agenda. This is done through a combination of structural and relational mechanisms that alter existing practices to underscore the effective implementation of diversity management practices. The structural practices of norms, policies, HRIS systems changes, strong external partner networks, affinity groups and best practice sharing efforts catalyze the inclusion efforts. Leadership evangelists have potent resources to change the status quo of social structures within an organization (Fletcher and Marvell, 2022), and, therefore, help make the practices coherent, consistent and credible. Leadership evangelism and workforce ambassadors thereby build a compelling LGBTQ inclusion agenda through internal and external allyship for organizations.

At the micro level, the LGBTQ microenvironment comprising managerial trust, psychological safety and enhanced peer support allows employees to bring their authentic selves to work, strengthening the LGBTQ members’ personal and work identities. Strong cisgender leaders create a supportive work environment and play a crucial role as Allies and peer champions to help amplify support.

The practice theory widely accepts practices as generative structures yielding different patterns of actions and efforts to develop and enhance action stability (Yi et al., 2016). While practices offer a stabilizing force, they also provide the flexibility to evolve with the changing environment, creating inherent tensions. This theory takes a fairly extreme yet intellectually provocative stance, creating alternative ways to think about the complex interconnected ways people function and resources are utilized. HRM implementations have been recognized as a socially constructed recursive process shaped by the dynamics among various agents (Mierlo et al., 2018). For instance, when firms adopt LGBTQ-supportive policies, they must be embraced at multiple levels manifesting in formal policies, supportive climates and interpersonal relationships (Triana et al., 2021). Notably, while the top-down approach to implementing diversity management through policies, climates, systems and processes enables the creation, support and maintenance of the practices, the bottom-up approach of agentic behaviors of individuals and groups alters the dominant structural characteristics and mechanisms. Our study provides evidence for two kinds of allyship as agentic behavior for LGBTQ that positively enhance inclusion. Allyship could be enabled at individual or institutional levels (Fletcher and Marvell, 2022). Our findings indicate that while cisgender allyship at the individual level offers support to community members and influences the attitudes and behaviors of peers, leadership evangelism challenges existing organizational norms and structures, strengthens the voice of LGBTQ employees and promotes a broader social justice agenda. Leadership evangelism occurs as institutional activism that legitimates the social justice agenda signals acceptance of the new inclusive behaviors and allows employees to role model the behaviors their leader exhibits. Structural characteristics of enabling systems and processes and collaboration and partnership reinforce the relational aspects of leadership evangelism and workforce ambassadorship and embed the relational dimensions in the emerging structures. Therefore, the practice and praxis morph into LGBTQ-inclusive environments. The agentic behaviors at the micro and meso levels are also amplified, allowing inclusivity actions within the organization to be embedded. The institutionalization of practices is thereby reinforced through recursive micro-level interactions. Institutionalized practices signal strong, inclusive cultures in the labor and consumer markets, strengthening employer and consumer brands (Casper et al., 2013).

The dearth of research on inclusive structures, practices and norms for discriminated groups, especially the LGBTQ community, was our study’s departure point. Through this endeavor, we demonstrated that inclusive practices do follow a trajectory. Often, organizational LGBTQ initiatives begin with a cisgender champion at the leadership level who espouses the
cause. The champion is often a respected, credible member of the organization and hence can influence resource allocation and sponsorship for ad hoc events to create awareness of the cause. Moreover, such leadership actions often attract a small group of Allies from within the employees and can be strengthened by community members who are willing to speak up. These ad hoc events and awareness creation result in tinkering with HRM policies, including extending policies to same-sex partners or creating new medical policies pertaining to gender transition. Since the inclusion practice is leader-initiated and not embedded into the organization, sponsorship and support for the LGBTQ agenda acquire an instrumentality motive. Importantly, the organization cannot drop the agenda since the Allies would perceive it as non-inclusive. Managers filter changes in HRM practices through their interpretive schemes, which influence the shape and delivery of the practice to the employees (Mierlo et al., 2018). However, without adequate resources, support and sponsorship, HRM practices do remain as policies without the spirit of inclusion. Often, at this stage, if leadership changes do occur, the momentum is likely to be lost and the inclusion agenda takes a back seat.

In the next phase of the inclusion trajectory, we find that in organizations where leadership support and evangelism are visible through resource allocation, the isomorphic policy-led adoption support groups for the LGBTQ community and Allies are strong. Therefore, organizational leaders experience greater pressure to move the agenda forward. Policies and practices deepen, strengthen and are embedded within the system at this stage. Further, as these policies get institutionalized, leaders enforce strict actions on breaches and violations. Inclusivity sensitization and awareness efforts get into the training calendar. It is also likely that employee Allies, community-led action and leadership support together contribute to policy formation and implementation, making inclusion a deliberate and mindful agenda for the organization. HRM’s allocative facilities (resources to support new HRM practices) and authoritative facilities (reporting and hierarchy), formal norms (tasks, expected behaviors, responsibilities) and informal norms (acceptable/unacceptable behaviors) help formalize and institutionalize the structures and practices (Mierlo et al., 2018).

Moreover, often, at this stage of institutionalization, organizational changes, such as listing pressures, increased emphasis on shareholder value, profitability-related issues resulting in a short-term focus or mergers and acquisitions, can stall the agenda. Studies have argued that the dynamic interplay between organizational actors, the context and HRM, which mutually influence each other, results in the evolution of HRM system characteristics that gradually reach a stable phase (Mierlo et al., 2018).

The last phase of inclusivity is when policies and practices are institutionalized, and leaders, Allies and community members govern norms and behaviors. Organizations track qualitative and quantitative metrics. Given the confidentiality desired by community members, they may or may not disclose the metrics in the public domain. At this stage, organizations begin to share their best practices and receive industry awards and recognition. These organizations find an alignment between their desired image and their actual identity, which helps consolidate their employer brand internally and externally.

Implications for practice
We contribute to LGBTQ diversity management research in three ways; first, we provide evidence and support for the relational perspective of macro-, meso- and micro-level factors (Syed and Özbilgin, 2009) within the Indian context. Second, by adopting the practice lens, we demonstrated that inclusivity behaviors and actions emerge in the interplay of practices, practitioners and praxis within and across the levels. A robust equal opportunity approach for DEI advocates establishing enabling practices, and policies for diversity and inclusion initiatives that specifically support certain groups, as these individuals may face barriers that hinder their ability to acquire certain characteristics (Köllen et al., 2018). The interplay is a dynamic and recursive top-down and bottom-up process that enables organizational change.
Studies on the impact of sexual orientation diversity management and associated organizational practices have analyzed the relationship between their aggregated value and the perceived treatment discrimination but do not consider that a potential outcome of organizational practices could also be a proactive and supportive work environment (Köllen, 2016). Finally, we conceptualize inclusion as a trajectory of practices within an organization. Organizations begin their inclusion journey with often idiosyncratic and leader-driven practices. However, strong enabling systems and leadership commitment are important to institutionalize and embed the practices and transform the culture. Our study indicates that the inclusion journey is an evolutionary process sustained by a long-term leadership commitment.

Our study has implications for organizational leaders, HR practitioners and DEI specialists. While leadership evangelism is crucial in the inclusion journey, workforce ambassadors, cisgender Allies, collaborations and partnerships with the community must collectively coalesce to create impact. However, strong leadership commitment may not suffice without enabling systems, processes and a supportive LGBTQ micro-environment to embed the inclusivity culture. The trajectory of LGBTQ inclusion can act as a blueprint for practitioners in their diversity and inclusion agenda. The majority cisgender and the minority non-cisgender members may make the entire set of gender equality measures more inclusive, beginning with language inclusive of all genders (Hennekam and Köllen, 2023). Organizations ought to endeavor to refrain from categorizing all people under the LGBTQ “community”—a term that is frequently broadened by adding more or more nuanced initials for various minority sexes, sexualities and gender-related expressions and identities—or, at the very least, exercise caution when doing so, keeping in mind their particular difficulties in the workplace. A possible more successful beginning point for being more inclusive toward all employees may fundamentally be by extending the organization’s DEI focus as such and refraining from tackling issues through initialism.

HRM practitioners must adopt an inclusive policy mindset to seed practices that enable the DEI journey. HRM practitioners will also hold the socio-ethical compass for leaders, who may face dilemmas in decision-making between organizational outcomes and DEI priorities to keep them aligned with the cause. The role of DEI practitioners will not only be to serve as inclusion specialists to the organization but also play a crucial role in external networks and partnerships. They will be catalysts, collaborating with industry peers in moving the LGBTQ agenda at a societal level.

Conclusion

While we focused on how an Indian multinational organization built its inclusive culture, we generated insights into sustainable, inclusive approaches that transcend the country’s context. We did explore LGBTQ inclusion practices in a context where human rights are constitutionally guaranteed. Practitioners and HRM researchers across cultures should identify other distinctive factors and variables that could enrich the model. This case study approach allowed us to present one model for enabling LGBTQ inclusion. We believe that different contexts may evoke managing in different ways. Therefore, future research may focus on unraveling these models. Future studies could examine practices across multiple organizations to develop our theorizing and empirical studies to investigate the satisfaction of employees and other affective behavioral constructs with DEI inclusion practices.

More research on how organizations engage with the LGBTQ communities, using multiple cases and/or ethnographic studies in contexts where the legal framework is either non-existent or evolving, requires attention. Future researchers may explore the phenomena in non-supportive regulatory or religious sanctions contexts. Further, longitudinal studies across different contexts and possibly even cultures could help identify more macro-, meso- and micro-level factors.
References


Further reading


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