

The Psychology of Belonging: How Inclusive Cultures Drive Retention in Diverse Workforces in Africa, A Case Study of MTN

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how inclusive organizational cultures influence employee retention through the psychology of belonging, using MTN Nigeria as a case study. Drawing on industrial/organizational psychology, the research applies theories such as Social Identity Theory, Self-Determination Theory, Organizational Commitment, Leader–Member Exchange, and Job Embeddedness. A descriptive survey design was used with 120 staff across MTN departments in Lagos and Abuja. Data collection included structured questionnaires measuring perceived inclusion, belonging, organizational commitment, and turnover intention. Findings show that inclusivity strengthens psychological belonging, which in turn predicts retention through higher job embeddedness and affective commitment. However, barriers such as implicit bias, weak psychological safety, and inconsistent policy application were identified. The study recommends institutionalizing inclusive leadership training, developing a diversity climate index, and embedding belonging measures into HR dashboards to sustain workforce stability.

Keywords: Psychological Belonging, Inclusive Culture, Employee Retention, Organizational Commitment, Diversity Climate, MTN Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Workforce diversity has become a concept for organizations in Africa across different industries. Companies including MTN Nigeria operate across different regions and employ thousands of people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Nigeria has over 250 ethnic groups and more than 500 languages which makes the workforce highly competitive and diverse. Diversity gives companies access to a wide range of skills and ideas, but it also brings challenges in building inclusion and keeping employees over time (Horwitz, 2005; Nyambegera, 2002). Retention remains a major concern for organizations in Africa. Even with significant investments in training, career development, and diversity initiatives, many firms still face high turnover. Nkomo and Kriek (2011) observed that while many African companies adopt diversity policies, these still fails to show up in everyday practice. This issue reduces employees' sense of belonging to their organizations and increases the chance of employee leaving. For large firms like MTN, the loss of skilled workers leads to higher recruitment costs and difficulties in maintaining service quality in a competitive market.

Employee retention is not only about salaries or benefits because it is strongly influenced by psychological factors. Motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment all shape why people choose to stay or leave (Mitchell et al., 2001; Meyer & Allen, 1997). A key factor is belonging which is the sense of being accepted and valued in the workplace. Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory explains that employees are more engaged and more likely to remain when their needs for competence and relatedness are met.

Research also shows that organizational commitment is closely tied to belonging. Meyer and Allen's (1997) model highlights three forms: affective commitment (emotional attachment to the organization), continuance commitment (staying because of the cost of leaving), and normative commitment (a sense of obligation to stay). Inclusive cultures are most strongly linked to affective commitment because when employees feel they belong, they form stronger emotional ties to their organization (Eisenberger et al., 2001).

This research is guided using the following research questions:

1. To what extent does an inclusive organizational culture improve employee retention at MTN?
2. How does psychological belonging mediate the inclusion and retention relationship?
3. What barriers affects inclusive culture at MTN?
4. Which I/O psychology-driven interventions can strengthen belonging and retention?

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks

Social Identity Theory explains that individuals derive part of their self-concept from the groups they belong to (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In the workplace, people identify with managers, languages, culture, teams, departments, and the organization itself. When a workplace promotes inclusion, employees are less likely to feel excluded as outsiders and more likely to develop strong identification with the organization (Nkomo, 2014; Shore et al., 2011). This identification builds loyalty and lowers employee turnover.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) argues that people are motivated when their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied. In organizational life, inclusion speaks directly to relatedness. When employees feel accepted and valued, they are more motivated and less likely to consider leaving. However, environments that fail to provide belonging create a culture where people do not feel valued, acknowledged, respected and this affects overall retention strategies (Eisenberger et al., 2001).

Job Embeddedness Theory (Mitchell et al., 2001) suggests that retention is not explained by job satisfaction alone. People stay when they perceive strong connection with colleagues, a good fit between their values and the organization, and high costs of leaving. Inclusive cultures strengthen each of these elements (Adusei, 2017; Horwitz, 2005). They create opportunities for strong workplace bond, increase perceptions of fit by respecting diverse identities, and raise the sacrifice of leaving by building meaningful connections.

Organizational Commitment Theory (Meyer & Allen, 1997) highlights affective, continuance, and normative commitment. Belonging is most closely tied to affective commitment, the emotional bond between an employee and the organization. When employees feel they belong, they are more willing to go beyond formal job requirements and are less likely to leave voluntarily (Mor Barak et al., 1998; Nishii, 2013).

Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) explains the role of supervisors. Leaders who practice inclusion through fair treatment, respect, open communication, and trust-building create higher-quality relationships with employees. These relationships improve belonging and strengthen the decision to stay and matters more than policies on paper. As the saying goes, *culture eats strategy for breakfast* so even the best HR strategies fail if the daily culture does not make employees feel seen, respected, and included (Nkomo & Kriek, 2011; Nyambegera, 2002).

2.2 Belonging and Inclusion in Organizations

Belonging is more than being present in the workplace; it is the experience of acceptance and recognition (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). It is closely associated to psychological safety, which allows employees to contribute ideas without fear of embarrassment or punishment (Edmondson, 1999). Studies show that employees who feel they belong are more engaged, more committed, and more likely to stay with their organizations (Shore et al., 2011).

Inclusion involves creating structures, policies, and everyday practices that support fairness and respect. A positive diversity environment whereby employees perceive genuine commitment to inclusivity reduces turnover intentions and improves satisfaction (Mor Barak et al., 1998). Research also shows that organizational support and the idea that the employer values employee contributions enable stronger attachment and higher retention (Eisenberger et al., 2001).

2.3 Empirical Studies

Global studies consistently show that inclusion promotes retention. Shore et al. study (2011) found that inclusive practices increase job satisfaction and reduce turnover intentions across multiple sectors. Nishii (2013) research concluded that diversity predicts commitment and engagement especially among minority employees.

In Africa, research highlights unique challenges. Horwitz (2005) found that while South African companies have diversity policies, many employees feel a sense of discrimination and exclusion that affects the retention of competitive employees. Nyambegera (2002) reported similar findings in Kenya, whereby ethnic divisions reduced the idea that fairness existed. Nkomo and Kriek (2011) argued that African firms adopt global diversity frameworks without adapting them to local cultures which limits the effectiveness of these frameworks.

Telecommunication companies provide useful examples. Studies in Ghana and Nigeria have shown that cultural diversity can improve innovation but also lead to conflict if not managed inclusively (Adusei, 2017). For MTN Nigeria, managing a multicultural workforce requires balancing corporate policies with local realities. When inclusion is applied consistently, employees report higher engagement and stronger loyalty. When inclusion is inconsistent, turnover increases.

2.4 Challenges in Building Inclusive Cultures

Several challenges affect inclusive culture in African workplaces:

Social categorization: Employees form groups along their ethnic, religious, or regional lines that reinforces divisions (Nkomo, 2014).

Bias in promotions and rewards: Perceived unfairness affects trust in management.

Hierarchical leadership: Strong power distance limits employee voice and also affects employee sense of belonging.

Policy and practice gaps: Organizations may have written diversity policies; however, the daily operations of employees are not equally aligned to these practices with line managers and team lead not properly implementing these policies. (Nyambegera, 2002). These challenges highlight the need to move from symbolic diversity management to practices that genuinely foster belonging.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive survey design. This design was selected because it allows systematic collection of data on perceptions and behaviour from a large group of employees at a single point in time. A survey is appropriate for understanding how inclusive culture, belonging, and retention are connected given that these are constructs that are best measured through employee self-reports using validated psychological scales (Creswell, 2014). The design also enabled the study to capture both quantitative data for statistical analysis.

3.2 Population and Sampling

The population comprised of employees of MTN Nigeria across different offices. Departments included Human Resources, IT and Digital Services, Operations, Customer Service, and Sales and Marketing.

A random sampling technique was used. Stratification was based on two criteria:

Department: To understand and analyze functional diversity.

Employee level: To balance perspectives from entry level employees, mid-level employees to senior managers.

From an estimated workforce of 800 in these offices, 120 employees were selected as the sample. This size was considered adequate to represent departmental diversity while remaining manageable for in-depth analysis.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments

Data was collected using a structured questionnaire divided into five sections with each measuring a construct linked to inclusion, belonging, and retention. All scales were drawn from established measures with proven reliability in organizational research. Responses were captured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*).

3.4 Instrument Validation

To establish content validity, the draft questionnaire was reviewed by three experts in human resource management and organizational psychology. Their feedback led to revisions in item wording for cultural appropriateness.

A pilot test was conducted with 15 employees from a regional MTN office not included in the main sample. Results confirmed item clarity and relevance. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated to assess internal consistency reliability:

- Inclusion = 0.87
- Belonging = 0.89
- Commitment = 0.85
- POS = 0.83
- Turnover Intention = 0.81

All exceeded the 0.70 threshold recommended by Nunnally (1978), indicating strong reliability.

3.5 Data Collection Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed physically and electronically. To improve response rates, the research study was considered confidential and voluntary, and employees were assured of anonymity. Out of 120 questionnaires distributed, 112 were returned, representing a 93% response rate.

3.6 Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis combined descriptive and inferential statistics:

Descriptive statistics (SPSS): Frequencies, means, and percentages were calculated to summarize employee perceptions.

Chi-square (χ^2) tests: Used to test associations between categorical variables such as inclusion and retention perceptions.

Correlation analysis: To examine relationships between belonging, commitment, and turnover intention.

Regression analysis: Conducted to test the mediating role of belonging in the inclusion–retention relationship.

A significance level of $p < 0.05$ was used for hypothesis testing.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

- Informed consent was obtained from all participants.
- Confidentiality was maintained, with no identifying data collected.
- Voluntary participation was emphasized, and employees could withdraw at any time.
- Data security: All completed questionnaires were stored securely and only used for research purposes.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Descriptive Results

Research Question One: Does inclusive culture improve organizational development and retention at MTN?

Table 1: Employees' Perceptions of Inclusion and Retention

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	48	42.9
Agree	36	32.1
Neutral	12	10.7
Disagree	10	8.9
Strongly Disagree	6	5.4
Total	112	100

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Interpretation: Nearly 75% of respondents (Agree + Strongly Agree) reported that inclusion improves retention, while only 14% disagreed. This supports the claim that inclusive culture strengthens retention at MTN.

4.2 Belonging and Organizational Commitment

Research Question Two: Does belonging influence organizational commitment at MTN?

Table 2: Belonging and Commitment

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	52	46.4
Agree	40	35.7
Neutral	8	7.1
Disagree	7	6.3
Strongly Disagree	5	4.5
Total	112	100

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Interpretation: A combined 82% agreed that belonging strengthens commitment. This shows that belonging plays a strong role in employee commitment at MTN.

4.3 Research Question Three: Is there a significant relationship between inclusive culture and turnover intention at MTN?

Table 3: Reported Barriers to Inclusion

Barrier	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Perceived favoritism in promotions	34	30.4

Lack of transparent communication	28	25.0
Limited cross-cultural understanding	22	19.6
Weak accountability for non-inclusive behaviour	18	16.1
Inconsistent HR practices	10	8.9
Total	112	100

Interpretation: The main barriers identified were favoritism in promotions and poor communication, followed by limited cultural awareness. These areas weaken employee confidence in inclusion and show where MTN needs to focus its efforts.

4.4 Research Question Four: Which interventions can strengthen belonging and retention?

Table 4: Suggested Psychology-Driven Interventions

Intervention	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Inclusive leadership training	40	35.7
Transparent recruitment and promotion	30	26.8
Employee resource groups (ERGs)	22	19.6
Regular employee voice forums	12	10.7
Mentoring across teams	8	7.1
Total	112	100

Interpretation: Employees highlighted leadership training, fair HR practices, and support networks as the most effective ways to build belonging and improve retention. These align closely with organizational psychology principles that stress fairness and supportive leadership as key drivers of commitment.

4.5 Data Analysis

RQ1: To what extent does an inclusive organizational culture improve employee retention at MTN?

Statistical Technique Used: Pearson’s Product–Moment Correlation.

Formula:

$$r = \frac{\sum (X - \bar{X})(Y - \bar{Y})}{\sqrt{\sum (X - \bar{X})^2 \sum (Y - \bar{Y})^2}}$$

Where:

- XXX = Inclusion scores
- YYY = Retention scores
- X, Y = Means

Data Processing Steps:

1. Likert-scale responses for inclusion and retention were aggregated into composite scores.
2. Descriptive statistics were generated:

- Inclusion (M = 3.87, SD = 0.62)
- Retention (M = 3.75, SD = 0.71)

3. Correlation was computed using SPSS.

Table 1: Pearson Correlation Between Inclusion and Retention

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2
1. Inclusive Culture	3.87	0.62	1	
2. Retention	3.75	0.71	0.63**	1

Note: $p < 0.001$, $N = 112$.

Interpretation:

The correlation coefficient ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.001$) shows a strong positive relationship between inclusive culture and retention. Employees who perceive higher inclusion report stronger intentions to remain at MTN.

RQ2: How does psychological belonging mediate the inclusion–retention relationship?

Statistical Technique Used: Regression-Based Mediation with Sobel Test.

Regression Formula:

$$\begin{aligned}
 Y &= \beta_0 + \beta_1 X + \varepsilon \\
 M &= \beta_0 + \beta_2 X + \varepsilon \\
 Y &= \beta_0 + \beta_3 X + \beta_4 M + \varepsilon
 \end{aligned}$$

Where:

- XXX = Inclusion
- MMM = Belonging
- YYY = Retention

Table 2: Mediation Regression Results

Path	β	t	p-value
Inclusion → Retention	0.29	4.1	<0.01
Inclusion → Belonging	0.72	11.8	<0.001
Belonging → Retention	0.61	9.3	<0.001
Inclusion (with Belonging) → Retention	0.12	2.3	<0.05

Sobel Test: $z = 4.21$, $p < 0.001$.

Interpretation:

Belonging partially mediates the inclusion–retention relationship. Inclusion improves retention, but the effect becomes stronger when employees feel a genuine sense of belonging.

RQ3: What barriers affect inclusive culture at MTN?

Statistical Technique Used: Chi-Square Test of Independence.

Formula:

$$\chi^2 = \sum \frac{(O - E)^2}{E}$$

Where:

- OOO = Observed frequency
- EEE = Expected frequency

Table 3: Barriers Reported by Employees

Barrier	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Favouritism in promotions	34	30.4
Lack of transparent communication	28	25.0
Limited cultural awareness	22	19.6
Weak accountability	18	16.1
Inconsistent HR practices	10	8.9
Total	112	100

Chi-square Result: $\chi^2 = 10.7$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.01$.

Interpretation:

Favouritism and poor communication are the most cited barriers, with significant variation across departments. These barriers weaken employee confidence in inclusion.

RQ4: Which psychology-driven interventions can strengthen belonging and retention?

Statistical Technique Used: Friedman Test (Ranked Preferences).

Formula:

$$\chi_F^2 = \frac{12}{Nk(k+1)} \sum R_j^2 - 3N(k+1)$$

Where:

- NNN = number of respondents
- kkk = number of conditions
- $R_j R_j R_j$ = rank sum for each intervention

Table 4: Preferred Interventions

Intervention	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Rank
Inclusive leadership training	40	35.7	1
Transparent HR practices	30	26.8	2
Employee resource groups	22	19.6	3
Employee voice forums	12	10.7	4
Mentoring across teams	8	7.1	5

Friedman Test Result: $\chi^2 = 38.4$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.001$.

Interpretation:

Employees ranked leadership training and fair HR practices as the most important interventions for strengthening belonging and retention. These reflect industrial-organizational psychology principles of leadership quality, fairness, and employee voice.

DISCUSSION

The results strongly support the idea that inclusive culture promotes retention by fostering belonging. Employees who feel included are more likely to experience belonging which in turn strengthens commitment and reduces intentions to leave.

These findings align with the Social Identity Theory earlier mentioned which suggests that employees identify more strongly with organizations that accept them (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). They also support Self-Determination Theory by showing that inclusion satisfies the need for relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The strong correlation between belonging and affective commitment is consistent with Meyer and Allen's model (1997).

While MTN has formal inclusion policies, the findings suggest the need to be more proactive in daily practice and leadership accountability. Leadership is central to employee belonging. Managers who treat staff fairly and recognize their contributions are able to create inclusive environments. Training in inclusive leadership is important but accountability matters too. Tools like 360-degree feedback and employee surveys can measure how well leaders practice inclusion, making it part of performance standards and appraisals.

HR and organizational policy set the framework for fairness. Recruitment and promotions should also be transparent and based on clear criteria to reduce any idea of bias. Diversity dashboards can track employee perceptions across departments and highlight gaps. Mentoring across teams and backgrounds helps break down divisions and builds stronger workplace connections which can further improve retention.

Employee voice and engagement complete the picture. Resource groups give employees safe spaces to connect, while anonymous feedback channels allow concerns to be raised without fear. Regular forums that encourage open discussions on workplace experiences also strengthen psychological safety. When employees feel heard and respected, their sense of belonging grows, and they are more likely to stay.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined how inclusive culture drives retention at MTN Nigeria by focusing on belonging as the connecting factor. The findings showed that employees who feel included are more likely to develop a sense of belonging, which strengthens commitment and lowers turnover intention. Inclusion therefore acts as the foundation of retention, because it satisfies employees' psychological need to feel accepted and valued at work.

The evidence also highlights that theory translates well into practice. Inclusion builds identification with the organization, supports relatedness, and deepens workplace connections. It fosters affective commitment and depends heavily on the quality of leader–employee relationships. At MTN, gaps still exist between policy and daily practice, but when inclusion is consistently applied, belonging grows, and employees choose to stay.

Based on these results, the organization should institutionalize inclusive leadership through training and accountability measures, while embedding fairness into recruitment and promotion systems. Belonging should be tracked as part of HR metrics, and employees should be given safe spaces to express concerns and engage through resource groups, mentoring, and open forums. Strengthening psychological safety and ensuring that leaders act on feedback will close the gap between written policy and lived experience. In this way, inclusion and belonging become not only values on paper but everyday practices that directly improve retention.

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