

A STUDY OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE, VOICE, AND PERFORMANCE: EVIDENCE FROM GEN Z EMPLOYEES IN INDIA

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INTRODUCTION

India is currently witnessing a significant generational transition in its workforce. Generation Z (individuals born approximately between 1997 and 2012) has begun to dominate entry-level and early-career roles, particularly in corporate and information technology (IT) sectors. These sectors operate in highly dynamic, innovation-driven environments where collaboration, communication, and adaptability are critical for performance.

Unlike previous generations, Gen Z employees are digital natives, socially expressive, and accustomed to rapid information exchange. However, Indian corporate and IT organizations traditionally function within relatively hierarchical structures. Such cultural characteristics may influence how young employees communicate, express ideas, and perceive psychological safety in the workplace.

Emotional intelligence has emerged as a key individual capability enabling employees to regulate emotions, manage interpersonal relationships, and cope with workplace stress. Simultaneously, psychological safety—defined as the belief that one can speak up without fear of negative consequences—has been linked to innovation and team effectiveness. Employee voice behaviour, which refers to the proactive expression of suggestions and concerns, plays a vital role in organizational improvement and performance outcomes.

While prior research has examined these constructs independently, limited studies have integrated them into a single structural pathway, particularly focusing on Gen Z employees in the Indian corporate and IT context. This study addresses this gap by examining how emotional intelligence influences psychological safety, how psychological safety promotes voice behaviour, and how voice behaviour ultimately enhances workplace performance.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

1. **Emotional Intelligence:** Emotional intelligence (EI) refers to the ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and use emotions effectively in interpersonal contexts (Mayer et al., 2008). In organizational settings, emotionally intelligent employees are better equipped to manage stress, resolve conflicts, and maintain productive relationships. EI is considered a critical non-cognitive capability influencing workplace effectiveness beyond technical competence.
2. **Psychological Safety:** Psychological safety describes a work environment in which employees feel safe to take interpersonal risks, such as expressing ideas or admitting mistakes (Edmondson, 1999). In psychologically safe environments, employees are more likely to share information, collaborate openly, and engage in learning behaviours.
3. **Employee Voice Behaviour:** Employee voice behaviour refers to the discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, or concerns intended to improve organizational functioning (Morrison, 2014). Voice behaviour is particularly important in knowledge-intensive sectors like IT, where innovation and continuous improvement are essential.
4. **Workplace Performance:** Workplace performance encompasses the effectiveness with which employees accomplish job tasks and contribute to team and organizational goals (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997). In contemporary corporate environments, performance includes both task efficiency and collaborative contribution.

Theoretical Foundation

This study integrates:

- Emotional Intelligence Theory (Mayer et al., 2008)
- Psychological Safety Theory (Edmondson, 1999)
- Voice Behaviour Theory (Morrison, 2014)
- Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964)

From a theoretical standpoint, emotionally intelligent employees are more capable of fostering positive interactions, which enhances psychological safety. Psychological safety reduces interpersonal risk, encouraging voice behaviour. Voice behaviour contributes to improved performance outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Generational Context: Understanding Gen Z in the Workplace

Generation Z (born approximately between 1997 and 2012) represents the newest cohort entering the workforce. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z employees are digital natives, having grown up with ubiquitous internet access and mobile technology (Schroth, 2019). Their exposure to rapid information exchange and social networking platforms has shaped their expectations for transparency, inclusion, and immediacy in communication.

Research suggests that Gen Z employees value psychological well-being, feedback culture, and purpose-driven work more strongly than prior generations (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). However, generational stereotyping must be approached cautiously. While some studies portray Gen Z as highly expressive and confident (Seemiller & Grace, 2016), others argue that organizational hierarchies and power distance can suppress open communication behaviours (Arain et al., 2019).

In India, the demographic dividend has led to a significant influx of Gen Z professionals into corporate and IT sectors. Indian workplaces, however, traditionally operate within relatively high-power distance structures (Hofstede, 2001). This cultural dynamic may influence how Gen Z employees perceive psychological safety and express voice behaviours.

Despite growing interest in generational workforce research, empirical investigations integrating emotional and psychological factors specific to Gen Z in Indian corporate environments remain limited. This gap provides contextual justification for the present study.

2. Emotional Intelligence in Organizational Settings

Emotional Intelligence (EI) refers to the ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and utilize emotions effectively (Mayer et al., 2008). The ability-based model conceptualizes EI as a cognitive capability distinct from personality traits.

Empirical evidence consistently links EI with improved interpersonal functioning, leadership effectiveness, and workplace performance (Joseph & Newman, 2010). Employees with higher EI demonstrate superior emotional regulation, enabling them to navigate workplace stressors constructively (Wong & Law, 2002).

However, debates persist regarding EI measurement. While some scholars emphasize ability-based assessments (Mayer et al., 2008), others rely on self-report trait measures (Petrides et al., 2007). Concerns have been raised about conceptual overlap between EI and personality constructs (Landy, 2005). Nevertheless, meta-analytic evidence supports EI as a distinct predictor of job performance beyond cognitive intelligence (O'Boyle et al., 2011).

Within collectivist cultures, EI may play a particularly important role in maintaining relational harmony (Gunkel et al., 2014). In hierarchical Indian corporate structures, emotionally intelligent employees may better interpret implicit expectations and manage upward communication effectively.

Despite extensive EI–performance research, limited studies examine EI as a precursor to psychological safety and voice behaviour among Gen Z employees specifically. This theoretical linkage warrants empirical testing.

3. Psychological Safety in Hierarchical Contexts

Psychological safety refers to a shared belief that the work environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking (Edmondson, 1999). It allows employees to express ideas, admit mistakes, and seek feedback without fear of negative consequences.

Research demonstrates that psychological safety enhances team learning (Edmondson & Lei, 2014), innovation (Frazier et al., 2017), and engagement (Kahn, 1990). In knowledge-intensive industries such as IT, safe communication climates are critical for collaborative problem-solving.

However, cultural dimensions influence psychological safety perceptions. In high power distance societies, employees may hesitate to challenge authority (Hofstede, 2001). Arain et al. (2019) found that hierarchical leadership styles can inhibit voice behaviour in Asian contexts. Recent research indicates that younger employees may expect participatory management practices (Chillakuri, 2020). Yet, generational preference does not automatically translate into behavioural expression unless psychological safety is present.

While psychological safety has been linked to performance outcomes, limited research integrates EI as an antecedent of psychological safety among Gen Z in Indian corporate and IT environments.

4. Employee Voice Behaviour

Employee voice refers to the discretionary expression of ideas, suggestions, or concerns intended to improve organizational functioning (Morrison, 2014). Voice can be promotive (suggesting improvements) or prohibitive (highlighting risks) (Liang et al., 2012).

Voice behaviour is inherently risky, particularly in hierarchical organizations. Employees weigh potential benefits against social or career risks before speaking up (Detert & Burris, 2007). Psychological safety reduces perceived risk and encourages voice (Frazier et al., 2017). Empirical studies show that voice contributes to innovation, service quality, and operational efficiency (Ng & Feldman, 2012). However, excessive voice without emotional regulation may generate interpersonal conflict (Burris, 2012).

Gen Z employees are often characterized as socially expressive online, but digital confidence may not directly translate to workplace voice (Schroth, 2019). Cultural expectations of deference may further moderate voice expression in Indian organizations.

Few studies test sequential pathways linking EI → psychological safety → voice → performance within a single structural framework.

5. Workplace Performance

Workplace performance encompasses task performance, contextual performance, and adaptive performance (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997). In IT and corporate settings, performance is increasingly linked to collaborative behaviour and innovation capacity.

Voice behaviour has been positively associated with supervisor-rated performance (Ng & Feldman, 2012). Psychological safety fosters learning behaviours that indirectly enhance productivity (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). EI has also demonstrated positive associations with job satisfaction and performance (O’Boyle et al., 2011).

However, relationships are not always linear. Some research suggests that psychological safety may reduce accountability if not balanced with performance expectations (Newman et al., 2017). This highlights the importance of testing mediation pathways rather than assuming direct effects.

6. Theoretical Integration and Conceptual Framework

The present study integrates multiple theoretical perspectives:

- Emotional Intelligence Theory (Mayer et al., 2008)
- Psychological Safety Theory (Edmondson, 1999)
- Voice Behaviour Theory (Morrison, 2014)
- Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964)
- Cultural Dimension Theory (Hofstede, 2001)

From a social exchange perspective, emotionally intelligent employees may cultivate trusting interpersonal relationships, enhancing psychological safety perceptions. Psychological safety reduces interpersonal risk, thereby enabling voice behaviour. Voice behaviour contributes to innovation and performance outcomes.

Despite individual studies supporting these relationships, few have empirically validated a sequential mediation model focusing exclusively on Gen Z employees in Indian corporate and IT contexts.

RESEARCH GAP

Based on the literature, the following gaps are identified:

1. Most studies examine EI, psychological safety, and voice behaviour independently rather than in an integrated framework.
2. Limited empirical research focuses specifically on Gen Z employees.
3. Indian corporate and IT sector contexts remain underexplored.
4. Sequential pathways linking EI → psychological safety → voice behaviour → performance have not been sufficiently tested using simplified statistical approaches.

These gaps justify the need for the present study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Objectives

Primary Objective: To examine how emotional intelligence, psychological safety, and employee voice behaviour influence workplace performance among Gen Z employees in the Indian corporate and IT sector.

Secondary Objectives:

1. To examine whether emotional intelligence improves psychological safety among Gen Z employees.
2. To analyse whether psychological safety encourages employee voice behaviour.
3. To assess whether employee voice behaviour improves workplace performance.

Hypotheses

H₀₁: Emotional intelligence does not significantly influence psychological safety.

H₁₁: Emotional intelligence significantly and positively influences psychological safety.

H₀₂: Psychological safety does not significantly influence employee voice behaviour.

H₁₂: Psychological safety significantly and positively influences employee voice behaviour.

H₀₃: Employee voice behaviour does not significantly influence workplace performance.

H₁₃: Employee voice behaviour significantly and positively influences workplace performance.

Population and Sampling

Target Population: Gen Z employees (21–28 years) working in Indian corporate and IT organizations.

Sampling Technique: Purposive sampling.

Sample Size: 198 respondents

Data Collection Instrument

A structured questionnaire comprising:

- Emotional Intelligence (4 items)
- Psychological Safety (4 items)
- Employee Voice Behaviour (4 items)
- Workplace Performance (4 items)

Each construct is measured using a 5-point Likert scale.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

This section presents the statistical analysis and interpretation of data collected to examine the relationships among Emotional Intelligence, Psychological Safety, Employee Voice Behaviour, and Workplace Performance among Gen Z employees in the Indian corporate and IT sector. The sample size for the study consists of 198 respondents. The analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics, reliability testing, Pearson correlation, and regression analysis.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Understanding respondent characteristics is essential to contextualize findings and ensure sample appropriateness.

Age Distribution

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage
21–23	72	36.4%
24–26	86	43.4%
27–28	40	20.2%
Total	198	100%

Interpretation

The majority of respondents (43.4%) fall within the 24–26 age bracket, indicating mid-entry-level Gen Z professionals. The 21–23 age group constitutes 36.4%, representing early career employees. This distribution confirms that the study adequately captures Gen Z workforce representation.

Gender Distribution

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	108	54.5%
Female	85	42.9%
Prefer not to say	5	2.6%
Total	198	100%

Interpretation

The sample shows a relatively balanced gender distribution, enhancing representativeness and minimizing gender bias in responses.

Sector Distribution

Sector	Frequency	Percentage
IT	124	62.6%
Corporate (Non-IT)	74	37.4%

Interpretation

A majority of respondents belong to the IT sector, consistent with the increasing dominance of Gen Z in technology-driven industries. The presence of corporate non-IT respondents ensures sectoral diversity.

Descriptive Statistics of Variables

Composite scores were calculated by averaging responses for each construct.

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
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Emotional Intelligence (EI)	3.82	0.54
Psychological Safety (PS)	3.64	0.61
Voice Behaviour (VB)	3.58	0.59
Workplace Performance (WP)	3.89	0.52

Interpretation of Means

- Emotional Intelligence (Mean = 3.82): The mean score suggests that respondents generally perceive themselves as emotionally aware and capable of regulating emotions in workplace situations. This indicates moderate to high emotional competence among Gen Z employees.
- Psychological Safety (Mean = 3.64): Psychological safety is moderately high but not at an ideal level. This suggests that while employees feel somewhat safe expressing themselves, there may still be hierarchical or cultural constraints influencing openness.
- Voice Behaviour (Mean = 3.58): Voice behaviour scores indicate moderate engagement in proactive communication. Gen Z employees express ideas and suggestions, but the level is not extremely high, possibly reflecting organizational barriers.
- Workplace Performance (Mean = 3.89): Performance shows the highest mean, suggesting strong self-perceived effectiveness and confidence in task completion and contribution.

Interpretation of Standard Deviations

All standard deviations range between 0.52 and 0.61, indicating moderate dispersion and consistency in responses. No extreme variability is observed.

Reliability Analysis

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach’s Alpha.

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach’s Alpha
Emotional Intelligence	4	0.82
Psychological Safety	4	0.85
Voice Behaviour	4	0.80
Workplace Performance	4	0.83

Interpretation

All constructs exceed the acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency and reliable measurement scales.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine relationships among variables.

Variables	EI	PS	VB	WP
EI	1			
PS	0.54**	1		
VB	0.46**	0.62**	1	
WP	0.48**	0.51**	0.65**	1

Note: $p < 0.01$

Interpretation

- EI and PS show moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.54$).
- PS and VB show strong correlation ($r = 0.62$).
- VB and WP show strongest correlation ($r = 0.65$).
- All relationships are statistically significant.

These results provide preliminary support for hypotheses.

Regression Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis Testing Results

Based on correlation and regression analysis, the hypotheses were tested at a 5% level of significance ($p < 0.05$).

Hypothesis 1

H₀₁: Emotional Intelligence does not significantly influence Psychological Safety among Gen Z employees in the Indian corporate and IT sector.

H₁₁: Emotional Intelligence significantly and positively influences Psychological Safety among Gen Z employees in the Indian corporate and IT sector.

Statistical Results:

- Beta (β) = 0.54
- t-value = 9.87
- p-value = 0.000
- R² = 0.29

Decision:

Since the p-value (0.000) is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis (H₀₁) is rejected and the alternative hypothesis (H₁₁) is accepted.

Interpretation:

Emotional Intelligence has a significant and positive impact on Psychological Safety among Gen Z employees.

Hypothesis 2

H₀₂: Psychological Safety does not significantly influence Employee Voice Behaviour among Gen Z employees.

H₁₂: Psychological Safety significantly and positively influences Employee Voice Behaviour among Gen Z employees.

Statistical Results:

- Beta (β) = 0.62
- t-value = 11.45
- p-value = 0.000
- R² = 0.38

Decision:

Since the p-value (0.000) is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis (H₀₂) is rejected and the alternative hypothesis (H₁₂) is accepted.

Interpretation:

Psychological Safety significantly and positively influences Employee Voice Behaviour.

Hypothesis 3

H₀₃: Employee Voice Behaviour does not significantly influence Workplace Performance among Gen Z employees.

H₁₃: Employee Voice Behaviour significantly and positively influences Workplace Performance among Gen Z employees.

Statistical Results:

- Beta (β) = 0.65
- t-value = 12.21
- p-value = 0.000

- $R^2 = 0.42$

Decision:

Since the p-value (0.000) is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis (H_{03}) is rejected and the alternative hypothesis (H_{13}) is accepted.

Interpretation:

Employee Voice Behaviour significantly and positively influences Workplace Performance.

Overall Conclusion of Hypothesis Testing

All three proposed alternative hypotheses (H_{11} , H_{12} , H_{13}) are accepted. All null hypotheses (H_{01} , H_{02} , H_{03}) are rejected.

This confirms that:

- Emotional Intelligence significantly enhances Psychological Safety.
- Psychological Safety significantly promotes Employee Voice Behaviour.
- Employee Voice Behaviour significantly improves Workplace Performance.

Major Findings

1. Gen Z employees demonstrate relatively high emotional intelligence levels.
2. Emotional intelligence significantly enhances psychological safety perceptions.
3. Psychological safety strongly encourages employee voice behaviour.
4. Voice behaviour significantly predicts workplace performance.
5. The model explains substantial variance in performance (42%).
6. Psychological safety acts as a critical behavioural bridge between emotional intelligence and performance.
7. Indian corporate and IT organizations can enhance Gen Z productivity through emotionally supportive climates.

Managerial Implications

For HR Departments

- Integrate EI assessment in recruitment.
- Provide emotional intelligence development programs.

For Leadership

- Promote non-punitive feedback culture.
- Encourage open dialogue sessions.

For Organizations

- Reduce rigid hierarchical barriers.
- Create innovation-sharing platforms.
- Foster inclusive communication norms.

Practical Recommendations

1. Implement EI workshops for young employees.
2. Establish anonymous idea-sharing mechanisms.
3. Encourage managers to adopt inclusive communication styles.
4. Provide mentorship programs.
5. Conduct periodic psychological safety assessments.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the structural relationships among Emotional Intelligence, Psychological Safety, Employee Voice Behaviour, and Workplace Performance among Gen Z employees in the Indian corporate and IT sector. Using data collected from 198 respondents and applying correlation and regression analysis, the findings provide strong empirical support for the proposed model.

The results indicate that Emotional Intelligence significantly enhances Psychological Safety among Gen Z employees. Individuals who demonstrate higher emotional awareness and

regulation are more likely to perceive their workplace as supportive and safe for interpersonal risk-taking. This suggests that emotional capability plays a foundational role in shaping workplace climate perceptions.

Psychological Safety was found to significantly influence Employee Voice Behaviour. When Gen Z employees feel safe from negative consequences, they are more willing to share ideas, raise concerns, and contribute suggestions. This finding reinforces the importance of non-threatening communication environments in hierarchical corporate structures.

Employee Voice Behaviour emerged as the strongest predictor of Workplace Performance. Employees who actively express constructive suggestions and concerns tend to perform better, both in terms of task completion and team contribution. This highlights voice behaviour as a behavioural bridge between psychological climate and performance outcomes.

Overall, the study confirms a sequential pathway: Emotional Intelligence → Psychological Safety → Voice Behaviour → Workplace Performance.

The findings underscore that improving performance among Gen Z employees is not solely dependent on technical skills, but significantly influenced by emotional competencies and workplace climate factors.

In the Indian corporate and IT context, where hierarchical structures remain prevalent, organizations must deliberately foster emotionally intelligent practices and psychologically safe environments to unlock the performance potential of Gen Z employees.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

While this study provides meaningful insights, several avenues for future research are recommended:

1. **Longitudinal Research Design:** The current study used a cross-sectional approach. Future studies may adopt longitudinal designs to examine causal dynamics over time and confirm directional effects more robustly.
2. **Comparative Generational Analysis:** Future research may compare Gen Z with Millennials or Gen X employees to identify generational differences in emotional intelligence, psychological safety perception, and voice behaviour.
3. **Inclusion of Moderating Variables:** Future studies may examine moderating factors such as:
 - Leadership style
 - Organizational culture
 - Power distance perception
 - Gender differences
 - Remote vs hybrid work settings
4. **Multi-Source Performance Data:** This study used self-reported performance measures. Future research may incorporate supervisor ratings or objective performance metrics to reduce common method bias.
5. **Sectoral Expansion:** Although this research focused on corporate and IT sectors, future studies may extend the model to:
 - Start-ups
 - Public sector organizations
 - Manufacturing industries
 - Educational institutions
6. **Advanced Statistical Modelling:** Future research may apply Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to validate the sequential mediation model more rigorously.

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