

Psychological Safety and Career Success among Employees of Indian Start-ups: Mediating Role of Passion

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Abstract

India is one of the leading countries that have a favorable start-up ecosystem and is home to hundreds of start-ups and unicorns. From fintech and e-commerce to healthcare and agritech, these startups are disrupting traditional industries, leveraging technology to address unique challenges and tap into vast market opportunities. The start-ups' human resources policies are different, and they do not have complex human resources rules and policies to promote new ideas. The start-ups' future is unpredictable, and they have a lot of uncertainty. Human assets work in start-ups to get a sense of career success despite the psychological fear about the future as they have a strong passion to succeed. This research seeks to explore the impact of psychological safety on the professional achievement of human resources within Indian startups, with a particular focus on the intermediary role of passion. This study adopts a descriptive approach and utilizes a survey-based research methodology to gather first-hand data from employees working within the realm of Indian startups. The study results convey that psychological safety impacts the overall career success of start-up employees, and it also significantly impacts the objective career success of the employees. Objective career success pertains to tangible accomplishments or results in a person's professional journey, which are usually quantifiable and evident to external observers. Further, it is found that passion mediates psychological safety and objective career success of the start-up employees significantly.

Keywords: Career Success, India, Passion, Psychological Safety, Start-ups.

Introduction

India has been one of the leading economies that have a favorable start-up ecosystem next to the United States of America and China. India has been home to hundreds of start-ups. The government of India has come up with a lot of strategies to promote the entrepreneurship environment in India. One of the landmark initiatives towards "pro-entrepreneurship" is the "Start-up India" program (1). India holds the position of the third-largest startup ecosystem globally. Till 2022, 57000 start-ups have started and mobilized \$131 billion in funds between 2014 and 2022 (2). 105 Indian start-ups are in the league of unicorns (2). Indian start-ups generated around 5.2 lakh jobs (1). Many start-ups in India are technology driven and these technology-based start-ups want to change the world with their innovative products and services. The start-ups embrace a modern, progressive, and dynamic culture that makes them different from traditional enterprises (3). Start-ups do not have more complex human resource

rules and policies because they may impede innovation and ideas (4). The start-up human resource policies are not like the human resources policies of traditional enterprises and the start-ups tend to move towards "People Team" (4). The entrepreneurs and employees in start-ups have a different mindset than the businessmen and employees in traditional business enterprises. The entrepreneurs who establish the start-ups want to disrupt the world of business and the start-up employees give their time, expertise, and ideas to realize the dream of the entrepreneurs. Risk-taking is not only a characteristic of entrepreneurs, but risk-taking is also a quality of the employees who made up their minds to work in the start-ups because there is no assurance or guarantee that all the start-ups will succeed. In India, 90% of start-ups fail within five years of their inception due to a lack of funds, weaker business models, faulty customer insights, poor planning, inappropriate teams, and leadership gaps (5). Among these causes of failure of start-ups, the focus of this

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article is "inappropriate team". The success of a start-up is not only attributed to the entrepreneur, but it is to be attributed to the employees as well. The employees choose to work in the start-up because they can get name, fame, and money when the start-up is successful. The employees will get a sense of career success while working for the success of the start-ups. Career success is a sense of accomplishment of desirable work-related outcomes by an employee (6). Psychological safety is a crucial one for start-up employees. Psychological safety means the "perceptions of the employees on taking the interpersonal risk in a workplace"(7). However, start-up employees have a psychological fear of losing jobs, income, and time as there is uncertainty about the success of the start-up. Despite the psychological fear about the future, the employees want to work or continue to work in start-ups. There may be many reasons for this such as no alternative opportunity, interest, passion, and so on. This study aims to investigate the relationship between psychological safety and career success among employees in Indian startups, with a focus on how passion mediates this relationship among employees in Indian startups.

Review of the existing research works

This section focuses on reviewing the research works done on psychological safety, career success, and passion to identify the research gap. Psychological safety is a pre-requirement for learning and success in knowledge-driven business enterprises (8). Psychological safety represents a crucial cognitive and interpersonal construct within organizational dynamics (8). Psychological safety refers to the collective belief among employees that their team environment is conducive to taking interpersonal risks without fear of negative consequences (9). Psychological safety is the mutual perception among employees that the workplace provides a secure environment where they can freely take interpersonal risks, share knowledge, and express opinions without fear of reprisal or judgment (10). Psychological safety is a psychological climate where the employees are safe (11). Psychological safety brings out workplace effectiveness (9) and it increases employee or team performance (8). Psychological safety explains reasons for sharing information and knowledge, providing suggestions for the organization's improvement, and making

efforts to develop new products and services by the employees (12). A positive team climate is the critical driver of psychological safety (13). Psychological safety instills a tendency to think from an individual's as well as a team's perspectives (14). The presence of psychological safety within a workplace environment has been shown to have a beneficial effect on both employee performance and overall organizational performance (11). Psychological safety contributes to the psychological well-being of employees and enhances their job performance (15).

A career is a sequence of a person's work experience (6). Career success is the experience of achieving personal and meaningful goals by an individual (16). Objective career success and subjective career success are distinct components within the broader construct of career success (17). Career success refers to reactions to both previous and future career-related attainments rather than one's immediate job satisfaction (18). Objective career success typically pertains to external, measurable achievements such as promotions, salary increases, or job titles, while subjective career success is more intrinsic and relates to personal satisfaction, fulfillment, and feelings of accomplishment in one's career (17). Objective career success refers to observable, measurable, and identifiable factors such as salary, promotions, occupational status, and other tangible achievements within one's career trajectory (19). Subjective career success is an individual's reactions to career experience and it includes career satisfaction, work-life balance, and so on (19). Extrinsic career success alone cannot define overall career success (20). Many factors are employed to measure career success. Job security, promotional opportunities, rewards, training, career commitment, and self-efficacy are determinants of the career success of employees working in the insurance sector (21). Internal success is a critical determinant of an individual's career success (20). Achievement, formal learning, and the capacity to support a family are often regarded as determinants of objective career success, focusing on tangible outcomes and financial stability. On the other hand, individual perceptions of career success are shaped by elements like job satisfaction, the achievement of personal objectives, maintaining equilibrium

between work and personal life, and participating in informal learning opportunities (22). The correlation between objective and subjective career success typically exhibits a closer connection within the private sector in comparison to the public sector. Private organizations often tie career progression and monetary incentives more directly to individual performance and accomplishments, resulting in a tighter alignment between objective indicators of success (like promotions and salary increments) and personal perceptions of career contentment and achievement. Conversely, the public sector may emphasize criteria beyond individual performance, such as tenure or adherence to bureaucratic procedures, potentially diminishing the relationship between objective career success and subjective feelings of fulfillment (23). There is often a positive association between organizational commitment and subjective career success. When employees possess a strong dedication to their organization, they tend to experience heightened job satisfaction, engagement, and overall career fulfillment. Consequently, this can lead to subjective feelings of career success, as individuals who are deeply committed to their organization are likely to feel more connected to their work and derive a greater sense of accomplishment and fulfillment from their careers (24). Subjective career success differs from person to person (25). Psychological safety indirectly contributes to career success as job performance is a product of psychological well-being and abilities. "Passion is at the heart of entrepreneurship" (26). Passion motivates an individual, and enhances cognitive abilities and interests in work (27). Passion helps to overcome the constraints posed by the goals of an individual (28). Passion can serve as a mediating variable between psychological safety and career success by enhancing engagement, intrinsic motivation, resilience, and alignment with personal values and goals. Organizations that prioritize creating psychologically safe environments and fostering employees' passions are likely to see positive

outcomes in terms of employee satisfaction, performance, and overall organizational success. Self-determination Theory proposes that individuals have innate psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Psychological safety in the workplace can support these needs by providing employees with the freedom to express themselves, opportunities to develop their skills, and a sense of belonging within their teams. When these needs are met, employees are more likely to experience greater engagement, satisfaction, and ultimately, career success (29). Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) emphasizes the role of self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and contextual factors in shaping individuals' career-related behaviors and outcomes. Psychological safety in the workplace can influence employees' self-efficacy beliefs regarding their ability to succeed in their careers and their expectations of positive outcomes, such as promotions or recognition. These beliefs, in turn, can affect their career success (30). Existing research indicates that psychological safety significantly impacts both individual job performance and overall organizational performance. Job performance is recognized as a key indicator of employees' career success. However, there is a scarcity of studies investigating the connection between psychological safety and the career success of employees in India, particularly within the context of startups. Therefore, this study seeks to address this research gap. Additionally, passion is often a motivating force for individuals to engage in work, especially in environments with uncertain futures. Thus, this study aims to examine the relationship between psychological safety and career success among employees in Indian startups, with a focus on passion as a potential mediator. By exploring these dynamics, the study intends to provide valuable insights into how psychological safety and passion influence career outcomes in the context of the burgeoning startup ecosystem in India. The research model is exhibited in Figure 1.

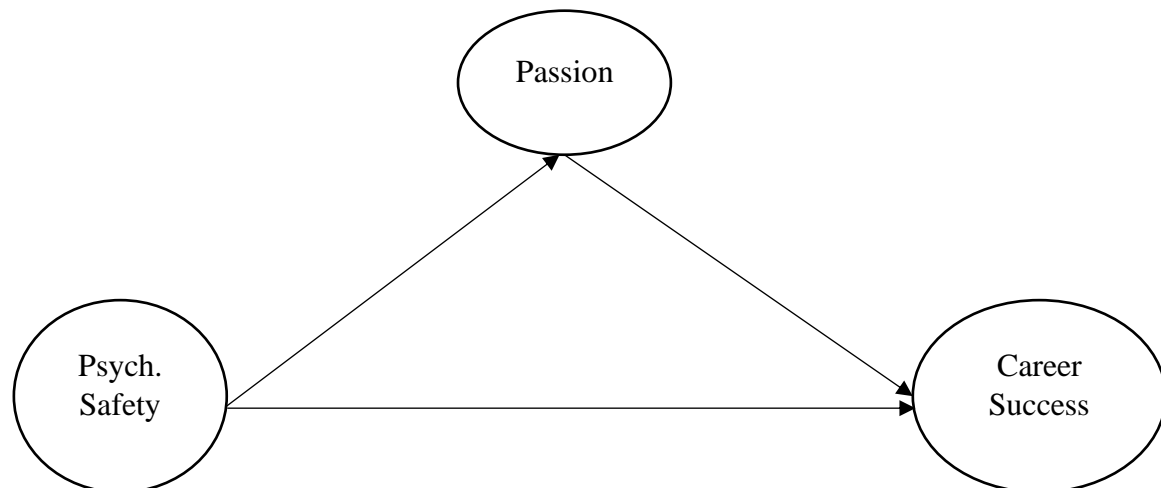


Figure -1: Proposed Research Model

Research Methods and Materials

Research Framework

This study has applied a descriptive research design. Psychological safety, passion, and career success are the variables of the study. A survey method is employed to collect primary data from the unit of analysis. The unit of analysis is the employees working in start-ups in Bangalore, India. A structured questionnaire is a research instrument. The questionnaire has 2 parts to measure the core variables such as psychological safety, passion, career success, and personal information. This study is conducted at a stretch.

Sample design

The employees working in start-ups in India constitute the population of the study. On account of practicality, the employees working in start-ups in Bangalore, India are the target population of the study. Bangalore is chosen as the locale of the study because Bangalore is home to more than 4k start-ups with \$62 billion in funding (2). When the population of the study is above 75 thousand, the sample size will be 382 at a 95% level of significance (31). So, the sample size is 382. The purposive sampling technique is employed. The possible drawback of this sampling technique is not a possible generalization of the results.

Measurement of the variables

Psychological safety and passion are measured using appropriate scales available in the works of literature, measurement scales are finalized and shown in the following Table 1.

Table 1: Scales

Variable	Name of the Scale	Author (s) and Year	Total items
Psychological safety	Psychological Safety scale	(10)	7
Passion	Passion scale	(26)	13

To assess the career success of employees, both objective and subjective dimensions are taken into account. Objective career success is evaluated through factors like salary, financial stability, and progression within the organizational hierarchy. Subjective career success is gauged by interpersonal relationships at work, job satisfaction, sense of accomplishment, work-life balance, and overall career contentment. A set of thirty-six statements, rated on a five-point scale, is utilized to measure the various facets of career success experienced by the employees.

Pilot study

A pilot study is carried out after deciding on the questionnaire. Sixty-three responses are taken for the pilot study. Reliability alpha scores are computed for the variables of the study. α scores for the constructs such as psychological safety, passion, and career success are 0.853, 0.827, and 0.856 respectively. Then, the main study was conducted and the collected data was analyzed using appropriate statistical tools such as Independent Sample t-test, One-way ANOVA, Pearson's correlation, and Process Macro Analysis.

Results and Analysis

The collected data is tested for normality. Normality tests convey that psychological safety, passion, and career success are approximately normally distributed. Personal characteristics of the sample units are presented here. 63.4% of the employees are male. 59.2% of the respondents are Gen -Y employees, 29.3% of the employees are Gen-X, and 5.5% of the employees are millennials. 62% of the employees earn an annual income of Rs 2,00,001 to 5,00,000. 66% of the employees have completed an undergraduate degree. Differences in perceptions of the sample employees are analyzed and presented below.

Table 2: Psychological Safety

Particulars	Significance value	Outcome
Gender	0.367	No Difference
Age	0.328	No Difference
Annual income	0.489	No Difference
Education	0.364	No Difference

Psychological safety perceptions of the employees working in start-ups do not vary based on their characteristics such as gender, age, annual income, and education (Table - 2). Psychological safety perceptions are not the product of personal characteristics.

Table 3: Passion

Particulars	Significance value	Outcome
Gender	0.178	No Difference
Age	0.429	No Difference
Annual income	0.023	Difference exists
Education	0.588	No Difference

The passion of the employees does not vary based on gender, age, and education. But it differs significantly based on their annual income (Table - 3). Mean scores indicate that the employees who earn an annual income of Rs 2,00,001 to 5,00,000 have a higher level of passion (3.7673) followed by the employees who earn up to Rs 2,00,000 annually. Interestingly, the employee who earns more has a lesser amount of passion.

Table 4: Career Success

Particulars	Significance value	Outcome
Gender	0.879	No Difference
Age	0.010	Variance exists
Annual income	0.553	No Difference
Education	0.158	No Difference

The career success of the employees does not vary based on gender, annual income, and education. But it differs significantly based on their age (Table 4). Mean scores indicate that the lesser the age, the higher the perceptions of career success. The employees aged between 19 to 24 years have a higher amount of career success (Mean Score: 4.1230) followed by the employees aged between 25 years to 40 years (Mean score: 3.9743).

Table 5: Relationship Analysis

Particulars	Psychological safety	Passion	Career Success
Psychological safety	1		
Passion	0.734	1	
Career Success	0.294	0.269	1

Table 5 outlines the relationships among the core variables. Psychological safety and passion exhibit a strong positive correlation, as do psychological safety and career success. Similarly, passion and career success are also positively correlated. These findings indicate positive relationships among the core variables. To further understand the impact of psychological safety on the career success of startup employees and the mediating role of passion in this relationship, a mediation analysis is conducted. Career success is measured through both objective and subjective components. Therefore, mediation analysis is performed separately for each component of career success, as well as for overall career success. The PROCESS model - 4 (32) is employed to test the impact of psychological safety on career success and the mediating role of passion. The results of the analysis are presented in Tables 6 to 11.

Table 6: Model Summary

r	r ²	MSE	F	P
0.7344	0.5394	0.1715	445.0407	0.000

Table 7: Model

Particulars	Coefficients	SE	t	P
Constant	1.6235	0.1011	16.0573	0.000
Psychological safety	0.5731	0.0272	21.0960	0.000

In Tables 6 and 7, the impact of psychological safety on passion (mediator) and model fit are presented. The proposed model demonstrates significance (Table 6), indicating that psychological safety significantly influences passion (Table 7) with a p-value of 0.000. Specifically, psychological safety accounts for 53.94% of the variance in passion. These results suggest a substantial impact of psychological safety on fostering passion among employees within startup environments.

In Table 8, the mediating effect of passion is depicted, demonstrating the significance of the model. Specifically, Table 8 indicates that the model is significant. Furthermore, Table 9 highlights that 9.2% of the variance in career success can be attributed to both passion and psychological safety. This suggests that passion plays a significant mediating role in the relationship between psychological safety and career success among employees in startup settings.

Table 8: Model Summary

r	r ²	MSE	F	P
0.3045	0.0927	0.1878	19.3599	0.000

Table 9: Model

Particulars	Coefficients	SE	t	P
Constant	3.1760	0.1371	23.1700	0.000
Psychological safety	0.1224	0.0419	2.9231	0.003
Passion	0.0849	0.0537	1.5812	0.114

Table 9 displays the coefficients of the model. It reveals that psychological safety significantly impacts the career success of the sample employees. However, contrary to expectations, passion does not exhibit a significant effect on the career success of the employees (Table 9). Despite the lack of significance for passion, the results indicate that psychological safety remains a crucial factor influencing career success within startup environments.

Table 10 presents the direct relationship between psychological safety and career success, revealing its significance. Specifically, career success is explained by 12.24% through this direct relationship. However, the total indirect effect of passion (Table 11) on the relationship between psychological safety and career success is calculated at 4.19%, which suggests that the indirect relationship is not statistically significant. Despite the lack of significance in the indirect relationship, the direct impact of psychological safety on career success remains noteworthy within the context of this study.

Table 10: Direct Effect

Effect	SE	t	P
0.1224	0.0419	2.9231	0.003

Table 11: Indirect Effect

Mediator	Effect	SE	BootLL CI	BootUL CI
Passion	0.0486	0.0266	-0.0027	0.1012

The results of the mediation analysis indicate that the relationship between psychological safety and career success is indeed significant, and passion does not serve as a mediator in this primary relationship. Furthermore, this study conducted a mediation analysis involving psychological safety, passion, objective career success, and subjective career success. The mediation effect of passion on the relationship between psychological safety and objective career success is illustrated in Table 12 and Table 13. Both tables demonstrate that the proposed model is statistically significant, reinforcing the importance of psychological safety in influencing objective career success.

In Table 12, it is shown that the direct relationship between psychological safety and objective career success is significant, with objective career success being explained by 19.81%. Additionally, the total indirect effect of passion on the relationship between psychological safety and objective career success is calculated at 16.98%. Notably, the indirect relationship is statistically significant, highlighting the role of passion as a significant mediator in influencing objective career success within the context of this study.

Table 12: Direct Effect

Effect	SE	t	P
0.1981	0.0357	5.5529	0.000

Table 13: Indirect Effect

Mediator	Effect	SE	P
Passion	0.1698	0.0282	0.001

The mediation analysis results indicate that the relationship between psychological safety and objective career success is significant, and passion significantly mediates this primary relationship. However, when considering the mediation effect of passion on the relationship between psychological safety and subjective career success, the results are presented in Table 14 and Table 15, revealing that the proposed model is insignificant. This suggests that passion does not serve as a significant mediator in influencing subjective career success within the context of this study.

Table 14: Direct Effect

Effect	SE	t	P
0.0619	0.0584	1.10607	0.289

Table 15: Indirect Effect

Mediator	Effect	SE	P
Passion	-0.0483	0.0382	0.258

In Table 14, it is observed that the direct relationship between psychological safety and subjective career success is not significant, with subjective career success being explained by 6.19%. Furthermore, the total indirect effect of passion on the relationship between psychological safety and subjective career success is negative, amounting to -4.8%. However, the indirect relationship is found to be insignificant. This suggests that while there is no direct significant relationship between psychological safety and subjective career success, passion does not appear to play a significant mediating role in this particular relationship within the context of this study.

Mediation analysis results show that psychological safety does not affect subjective career success significantly and passion does not mediate this prime relationship.

Discussion and Conclusion

The success rate of start-ups is very low across the globe because of a lack of funding, weak business models, poor planning, no innovation, and so on. The life of a start-up is always uncertain and unpredictable. Working in start-ups requires a lot of commitment and passion as the future is not clear and complex. However, start-up employees

should feel safe mentally to achieve their individual goals such as good pay, promotion, respect in the workplace, career satisfaction, work-life balance, and career development. Psychological safety, characterized by employees feeling secure to take interpersonal risks and share knowledge, is crucial for fostering both individual and organizational performance. Career success, encompassing intrinsic and extrinsic achievements, is a key goal for individuals. This study investigates the impact of psychological safety on the career success of employees in Bangalore's startup ecosystem, with passion as a mediator. The analysis finds that perceptions of psychological safety among startup employees remain consistent across demographic characteristics, while passion varies with annual income. This suggests that regardless of factors such as gender, age, or educational background, employees in Bangalore's startup ecosystem generally feel psychologically safe in their work environment. This result confirms the findings of the study conducted by Janssen E and et al. (33).

This consistency implies that efforts to promote psychological safety may benefit all employees equally. While psychological safety remains consistent, passion varies with annual income among startup employees. This finding suggests that individuals with higher incomes may be more passionate about their work, possibly due to factors such as greater autonomy, job satisfaction, or alignment with personal values. Understanding this variation in passion can help organizations tailor strategies to enhance employee engagement and commitment.

Career success, however, correlates positively with age, indicating higher perceptions among younger employees. This finding implies that younger employees may perceive themselves as more successful in their careers, possibly due to factors such as ambition, career progression opportunities, or technological proficiency. The study reveals a strong positive correlation between psychological safety and passion, suggesting that a sense of safety fosters passion for one's work. This suggests that promoting psychological safety and fostering passion can contribute to employees' overall career success. Moreover, passion positively influences career success, underscoring its significance in employees' professional trajectories.

Psychological safety significantly impacts employees' overall career success, particularly in terms of objective measures, but not subjective evaluations. Mediation analysis indicates that while passion plays a significant mediating role in the relationship between psychological safety and objective career success, its mediation of subjective career success is insignificant. This suggests that while passion influences objective measures of career success, such as performance and promotions, its impact on subjective evaluations, such as job satisfaction or work-life balance, maybe less prominent. Thus, psychological safety significantly affects the career success of startup employees, with passion mediating the relationship, particularly in terms of objective measures. Thus, the study emphasizes the importance of psychological safety and passion in driving employees' career success within the startup ecosystem. By promoting a culture of psychological safety and supporting employees' passion for their work, organizations can enhance employee engagement, performance, and overall organizational success. Further, understanding how psychological safety and passion influence career success can inform targeted interventions and strategies to support employees' professional development and well-being.

Entrepreneurship is gaining momentum in this technology-driven era. India has been home to around 5000 start-ups and India is placed third in terms of start-up numbers and funding across the globe. The start-ups in India have generated more than 5 lakh jobs. Not only the entrepreneurs require a risk-taking attitude to start new businesses, but a risk-taking attitude is also required for individuals who want to work in start-ups, in addition to commitment, and passion, because the lives of start-ups are uncertain. Psychological safety is a driving force for individuals to work in start-ups. This study investigated the impact of psychological safety on the career success of the employees working in start-ups in India keeping their passion as a mediator. The study found that psychological safety impacts the overall career success of start-up employees, and it also significantly impacts the objective career success of the employees. However psychological safety insignificantly impacts the subjective career success of the employees. Passion mediates psychological safety

and objective career success of the start-up employees significantly.

Abbreviation

Nil

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Author Contributions

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Ethics Approval

The authors received the consent of the start-up employees to administer the questionnaires from the concerned employees.

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