

Exploring Gender Dynamics and Diversity in the Technology Industry: A Qualitative Examination of Women's Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Technology is a rapidly growing industry, attracting highly skilled individuals from various walks of life. Historically, this field was represented by a predominantly white male staff. Individuals from minority groups often find themselves at the center of token diversity. More specifically, women in technology rarely find genuine respect in the workplace. The systemic barriers that lend to the lack of representation of women in the technology industry include gender dynamics that lean to the favor of men. The concept of gender dynamics brings unfortunate influences like stereotypes, imbalances in power, and general inequalities. Using a qualitative narrative inquiry, nine women were interviewed about their experiences working in the technology field. Within the interview transcripts, certain themes were identified: 1) token diversity, 2) gender dynamics, and 3) relationships. It was also shown that mentorship, sponsorship, and networking are important factors in fostering a sense of belonging in the workplace. These elements create opportunities for women that are essential to overcoming barriers and advancing in their technological careers.

KEYWORDS: Gender Dynamics, Relationships, Technology, Token Diversity, and Women.

The technology industry is a rapidly growing driver of global innovation and economic growth, historically, represented by a predominantly white male staff (Davidson, 2017). The industry consistently attracts highly skilled individuals from various walks of life, yet disparities exist related to the advancement and participation of women in the field. Currently, diversity in technology spans from gender and race to age and geographical roots. Despite evidence of prevalent diversity and inclusion initiatives, the presence of women in technology is sparse, specifically in leadership roles (Boyle et al., 2023; Muragishi et al., 2024). Makola and Tabane (2023) and Silva et al. (2023) identify a structural imbalance that highlights a deeply embedded imbalance, supporting a new and widely diverse interest in exploring career opportunities in the technology industry. It is important to identify the varying themes in the dynamics that impact women's sense of belonging and are key to enhancing innovation, protecting and increasing retention, and improving gender equity in the technology industry.

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Global and national initiatives exist to support a focus on corporate diversity initiatives via programs like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 and various initiatives throughout Silicon Valley. These programs focus on improving retention policies and practices while emphasizing inclusivity in hiring processes (AnitaB.org, 2025; TechWomen, 2025). Avolio et al. (2020) posits that the opportunities and progress are limited, surface-level, and absent of structural inclusion. Despite progress in supporting women in technology, persistent barriers such as limited mentorship, gender bias, and exclusion continue to create roadblocks to advancement (Makarem & Wang, 2020; Singh & Vanka, 2021). This problem emphasizes the need for a qualitative review of the lived experiences of women who are navigating the technology industry.

Two theories align with the present study and serve as guiding frameworks: Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987) and Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989). First, Social Role Theory suggests that gender roles and perceptions are often influenced by societal pressures and expectations, which tend to depict women as submissive, subordinate, or nurturing by nature (Eagly, 1987). As a complement, Intersectionality Theory highlights the varied paths women take in technology-based careers, recognizing characteristics such as age, socioeconomic background, and race as layered and overlapping identities (Crenshaw, 1989). Both frameworks lay a foundation for understanding gender inequalities in the technology industry by examining how the intersection of organizational structure and external social expectations shapes women's organizational belonging.

This study qualitatively examines women's experiences of token diversity, gender dynamics, and relationships within a professional environment in the technology industry through an in-depth exploration of gender diversity and inclusion. Previous studies center on quantitative representation, while this research honors the diverse voices of women as they share their experiences of identity, a sense of belonging, and opportunities in a male-dominated industry. The results aim to inform future engagement and belonging organizational practices to support authenticity and empowerment for professional women in technology.

This study aims to address the following three research questions:

1. How do women in the technology industry experience and interpret gender dynamics and token diversity in their professional environments?
2. In what ways do workplace relationships, mentorship, and advocacy shape women's sense of belonging and career development in technology?
3. How can organizational policies and practices be informed by women's lived experiences to promote equity, inclusion, and authentic representation in the technology sector?

Literature Review

A deeper understanding of the following three themes: token diversity, gender dynamics, and relationships are deeply connected to the experience of women in the technology industry. Token diversity refers to the experience of being the only person of a particular gender or race in the workplace (Guldiken et al., 2024). This theme highlights feelings of being tokenized or singled out solely because of an individual's minority status. Gender dynamics encompasses instances of gender bias, sexism, and unequal pay as significant challenges faced by women in the technology industry. This theme identifies instances of being underestimated or patronized solely because of gender. The relationship theme recognizes the importance of mentorship, advocacy, and networking in creating a sense of belonging and equity in the workplace. The experiences for individuals within this theme are supportive, creating environments where women feel valued and included (Banton et al., 2024).

Research shows that inclusion efforts in technology need more attention (Boyle et al., 2023; Muragishi et al., 2024). The technological economy reinforces segregation based on occupation and the stereotypes of sex and gender, specifically in technical and leadership roles (Makola & Tabane, 2023; Silva et al., 2023). These patterns reveal that inclusion cannot be achieved solely through numerical representation but requires a sustained cultural shift in organizational practices and power structures (Avolio et al., 2020; Kraugusteeliana, 2023).

All three themes underline the need for more equitable spaces in the technology industry. Each of the themes are relevant to the idea of belonging and diversity in the technology industry. This review aims to synthesize existing research after thorough collection and evaluation.

Token Diversity

Historically, the technology industry lacked diversity in the areas of gender and race (Davidson, 2017). Eventually, the pressure to open the doors to include individuals from underrepresented groups overpowered the desire to maintain a diversity-free environment (Kurtz et al., 2003). While this was a positive change, many technological leaders failed to ensure that these individuals were fully accepted as integral additions to the organization. Kurtz et al. (2003) discuss the superficial presence of inclusion following the addition of women to the technology industry. The authors highlighted an important increase of women in areas like engineering, health technology, and information technology by “44,000 between 2001 and 2002” (para. 7). Specifically, the number of female engineers increased by 2,000 or from 10% to 11%. As a result of the low increase of women in the technological workplace, there exists a sense of token diversity (Kurtz et al., 2003).

Individuals from minority groups often find themselves at the center of token diversity. Specifically, women in technology seek genuine respect in the workplace but rarely find it (Muragishi et al., 2024). Oftentimes, token diversity leaves minority staff without adequate support and a sense of inclusion (Muragishi et al., 2024). Avolio et al. (2020) discuss the manifestation of this theme in technology as superficial inclusion. This study also uncovers the underrepresentation of women in less influential roles and numbers, leading to few opportunities for career advancement in the technology industry. Boyle et al. (2023) suggest a deeper, more meaningful focus in this area to foster genuine support. As women are underrepresented and struggle to move into more influential roles, it is important to obtain support and opportunities from individuals who genuinely want to make a difference (Avolio et al., 2020).

Recent research highlights how tokenism contradicts belonging and intentional retention in the technology industry. Williams et al. (2022) discuss forms of bias, such as the “tightrope” or “prove-it-again” biases, within these experiences that drive a constant need for validation of belonging and competence, reinforcing tokenism. According to Cohen (2021) the WerkLabs and Mom Project study revealed that women who gain access to technology roles still end up reporting instances of exclusion from critical decision-making opportunities and assignments that leave them feeling overlooked and only symbolically included. Similarly, Guldiken et al. (2024) posits that tokenism undermines team stability and engagement because marginalized team members focus more on overperformance than on true outcomes. This research shows that token diversity must be combined with structural and cultural approaches to support workplace inclusion.

Gender Dynamics

The tone for gender norms and expectations has historically been set by society as the social impact of gender dynamics has impacted careers, economic and domestic growth, and political

realms. This dynamic also shapes interpersonal interactions, work environments, and product marketing with unfortunate influences like stereotypes, imbalances in power, and general inequalities. Makola and Tabane (2023) examined how young girls in South Africa continue to fight against societal and cultural stereotypes that portray technology as a male-dominated industry. To push back, various South African leaders are creating a movement of empowerment, confidence, and skills designed to promote gender equality in the technology industry (Makola & Tabane, 2023). Boyle et al. (2023) offered the solution of empowerment for women in STEM roles to navigate in this environment, fostering a more inclusive and supportive culture where underrepresented women feel like they belong.

The systemic barriers that contribute to the lack of representation for women in the technology industry include gender dynamics that favor men. These predispositions include stereotypes about the skill set and potential of women in technology, barriers to promotion or project funding, and hiring biases (Avolio et al., 2020). Tao et al. (2020) conducted a study to uncover the implications of gender stereotypes on the technological engagement of African American youth. The result was a clear correlation between the confidence of male and female members of the group, which clearly showed the negative impact on self-perception and engagement for the female members. Avolio et al. (2020) and Tao et al. (2020) agree that there is an opportunity to improve support for gender diversity through strategies that encourage equal contributions and the identification of female role models.

Recent research has continued the conversation on gender dynamics by examining the ways organizational and cultural forces work together to reinforce ideas that leadership and communication should fall under masculine norms (Silva et al., 2023). Many technology organizations highlight competencies such as assertiveness and technical expertise as masculine characteristics. This automatically disadvantages women who display leadership styles such as empathy and collaboration (Makarem & Wang, 2020). In addition, research shows that hard skills are often given more visibility than skills that demonstrate collaboration (Boyle et al., 2023; Singh & Vanka, 2021). Each of these gender biases and expectations align with Social Role Theory by explaining the natural, deeply ingrained cultural roles that shape many perceptions of success in the professional realm (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

Relationships

Mentorship, sponsorship, and networking are essential to fostering a sense of belonging in the workplace (Makarem & Wang, 2020). These elements create opportunities for women that are essential to overcoming barriers and advancing in their technological careers. Makarem and Wang (2020) found that the presence of such support guides women to more resources, helps women develop connections, and creates a space for long-lasting networks to grow. These networks provide visibility that enhances career prospects for women in technology (Singh & Vanka, 2021). Singh and Vanka (2021) conducted a study that uncovered the profound impact of the level of support and relationships with colleagues in technology on women's re-entry experience in India. Where the relationships were strong and the culture inclusive, women felt more valued and welcomed during the experience.

It is important to consider the quality and intentionality of mentorship to enhance availability. Most women benefit from having a mentor or sponsor who consistently advocates for career advancement, initiates and facilitates intentional introductions, and supports visibility across the organization (Banton et al., 2024; Makarem & Wang, 2020; Singh & Vanka, 2021). There is a growing community of digital mentorship platforms across the globe that allow women to connect and share various strategies for growth in a male-dominated space, which support scalable models

for inclusion (AnitaB.org, 2025; WomenTech, 2025). The nature of these relationship-based examples connect to Intersectionality Theory, which identifies intersecting identities, such as age, race, and class on equal footing as gender when considering women's experiences in technology (Crenshaw, 1989).

Silva et al. (2023) identified the importance of sponsorship, support, and mentorship from senior leaders and peers in helping women engineers build professional relationships and career advancement opportunities. The existence of such environments contributes to the desired sense of belonging, inclusion, and equity required for employee satisfaction and retention in this area. There are several examples of successful programs that demonstrate professional support, a focus on diversity, and an emphasis on the relationship between mentorship, advocacy, and a sense of belonging to create equitable spaces:

- TechWomen Program (2025): A United States - State Department program that partners leaders in Silicon Valley with women in STEM on a global level.
- WomenTech Networking Mentoring Program (2025): A mentorship path aiming to support the career advancement of women in technology.
- AnitaB.org's Mentorship Program (2025): Provides broad advocacy support for women in technology across the top companies in technology.
- TechLX by Technology Partners (2023): A mentorship program with a focus on professionals, in a mid-career status, seeking to grow their careers.

Each of these programs demonstrates the support recommended by Silva et al. (2023) to further enhance the employee experience for women in technology.

Gaps in Literature

Existing research on token diversity, gender dynamics, and relationships examines the various experiences of women in technology and the programs that support efforts to create more equitable environments. There are several gaps in the literature worth noting which are opportunities to further improve the support in this area. The research on token diversity is predictably general, as this is a newer term. As a result, researchers are working to gain more understanding of tokenism and its impact on underrepresented groups, specifically women of color (Hammonds et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2022). There remains a gap in gender dynamics research due to limited longitudinal studies exploring how these challenges affect women's representation over their careers in technology (Tang et al., 2017; Women's Transportation Seminar Advancing Women, 2021). Finally, there is a lack of research demonstrating the overall impact of mentorship and relationship-building programs for women across the broader technology industry (Kraugusteeliana, 2023).

Few qualitative studies have utilized narrative inquiry to explore how women in technological organizations narrate and make meaning of their experiences. Quantitative and survey-based designs dominate this field of research, often failing to capture the complexity of lived experience (Creswell & Poth, 2025). Offering a deeper understanding of how belonging and identity in the technology industry are shaped by the convergence of token diversity, gender dynamics, and relationships, this study addresses an existing gap by foregrounding women's voices through a narrative lens.

Conceptual frameworks are needed to explain the social and structural mechanisms that perpetuate gendered and racial inequities in technology, as highlighted by a review of the literature. Few studies, despite prior research examining tokenism, workplace culture, and mentorship, have linked these experiences to broader theoretical perspectives that incorporate both societal role

expectations and intersecting identities. This study employs Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2012) and Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989) to address this missing link. Together, these frameworks offer a comprehensive theoretical lens for interpreting the lived experiences of women in technology workplaces.

Theoretical Framework

Recent qualitative work, by Banton et al. (2024), on women in the technology industry highlights key barriers to retention: lack of belonging, trust, and support. This study underscores how women may be present in the workplace yet remain excluded from full participation, thereby reinforcing token status. From a Social Role Theory perspective, the devaluation of women's contributions and the mistrust of their expertise reflect deep-rooted role expectations that code technical competence as masculine (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2012). Intersectionality Theory further highlights that women's sense of belonging and access to support are mediated by intersecting identities, such that women who belong to other marginalized groups may face layered exclusion (Crenshaw, 1989). The empirical findings of Banton et al. (2024) exemplify how both framework lenses converge to explain the persistence of gendered disadvantages in technological workplaces.

Methodology

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for research involving human participants. The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB Approval No. 2031190-1). All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. Participation was voluntary and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by securely storing data and removing identifying information from all analyses and reports.

Method and Design

Qualitative methods were used in this research to gather the lived stories of the individuals under investigation. There is an overarching assumption that qualitative designs can capture these rich, detailed stories, whereas other methods miss their richness. According to Creswell and Poth (2025), "Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world" (p. 4). This also means that there is a search for participants' multiple meanings around their lived experiences. In addition, qualitative research requires a higher standard of justification for the research design. In this case, both narrative and phenomenology are used to capture the data needed to draw conclusions "...when assessing quality, the focus needs to be directed towards the depth, richness, and appropriateness of the data..." (Stenfors et al., 2020, p. 597). Qualitative methods were the most appropriate to capture the data needed to answer the research questions under consideration.

A narrative inquiry is often used in research to account for the oral history or experiences associated with events in participants' lives (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). In this research, we use a narrative inquiry to give voice to these life experiences and to understand the themes and circumstances around that narrative. According to Breakwell et al. (2003), "Typically narrative accounts aim to reproduce behavioral events in written form in much the same way, and in the

same sequence, as they originally occur, often aiming for little or no interpretive content” (p. 232). In this research, we aim to identify the themes and what those themes mean in the life of the participant, as opposed to interpreting our own meaning to the data. In narrative analysis, each participant makes sense of their world, and attempts are made to interpret and preserve the integrity of the personal narrative (Chambliss & Schutt, 2019). Narrative inquiry allows for a natural flow and lessens the need for control that other research designs mandate; it leads to depth and breadth of understanding and interpretation of meaning within the participant’s life (Bruce et al., 2016; Channa, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2025; Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022).

In this research, a narrative inquiry was completed using an interpretive paradigm (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022). According to Pino et al. (2022), this paradigm assumes that there is an “individual perspective on how people see the world (ontology). Knowledge is obtained by participating subjectively in meaning-making...” (p. 1). Over time, this interpretation can be applied to life experiences, and that subjective experience is often found within a social context (Gichuru, 2017). In this research, the social context can be defined as the workspace.

According to Channa (2016), “...we humans are inevitably surrounded by various narratives of our societies...we are guided by them directly and indirectly to cognitively think and function...” (p. 3). Interview questions were created to specifically target the phenomenon of investigation. In addition, open-ended questions were created to allow for further extrapolation of the experience (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007). The questions were created by the research team to be able to provide space for the telling and the experience; in this way, robust data could be obtained from the story.

However, this research is also connected to the idea of phenomenology, as it examines how the specific phenomenon manifests in the lived experience of the participants under study (Patton, 2002). According to Husserl (2012), “...the sole task and service of phenomenology is to clarify the meaning of this world” (p.21). In this case, the meaning of the experience is conveyed through the narrative. Phenomenological methods allow us to take the narrative story, look at the themes, and construct from them the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2025). This interplay of narrative inquiry and phenomenology allows us to take a deeper dive into how the participants experience being a female working in a primarily male-dominated workspace. Guided by Social Role Theory and Intersectionality Theory, the methodological design sought to capture participants lived experiences in ways that illuminate how gendered and intersectional factors shape workplace realities (Crenshaw, 1989; Eagly, 1987).

Participants

There were nine female participants, who were recruited via email correspondence using snowball sampling. It was assumed that most females who work in this field would know others who could also contribute to the body of knowledge as participants. This was done because a snowball sample was needed to gain enough participants to reach saturation. Saturation is understood to be that point where “It is commonly taken to indicate that, on the basis of the data that have been collected or analyzed... further data collection and/or analysis are unnecessary” (Saunders et al., 2018, p. 1893). In addition, participants were required to meet the following criteria for selection: 21 years of age or older, employed in a technology-related position for one year or more, earned a bachelor’s degree or higher in a technology-focused program between January 2017 - December 2021, were willing to be interviewed, and provide demographic information.

Nine individuals who identified as female were all working in the following career fields: Technology Support, Information Technology Consultant, Health Administration/Information

Technology, Information Technology, Data, and Sales, also shown in Table 1. According to the demographic information, participants worked in the technology field for a considerable amount of time, 1-10 years (55%), 11-20 years (11%), and 21-30 years (33%), which indicated that all participants were well-experienced in this field. The size of the organizations in which the participants worked varied from 1-2000 employees (11%), 2001-5000 employees (22%), 5001-15,000 employees (22%), 15,001+ (11%), and unknown (33%). The specific technology-related work positions included: unemployed, Salesforce Analyst, Cardiology PAC-Healthcare, Senior Management Data Analytics, Client Operations Manager, Leader of Engineers in technology, and Senior Information Technology GRG Analyst (See Table 1) (Banton et al., 2024, pp. 137-138).

Table 1.
Demographics of Participants

Current Work Positions	
Unemployed	
Salesforce Analyst	
Cardiology PAC (Healthcare)	
Sr. Mgt. Data Analytics	
Client Operations Manager	
Leader of Engineer in Technology	
Dr. IT GRG Analyst	
Age	Percentage
20-30	22%
31-40	33%
41-50	11%
51-60	22%
60+	11%
Ethnicity	Percentage
Caucasian	33.33%
African American	33.33%
Multi-Racial	33.33%
Highest Degree	Percentage
Bachelors	66%
Master	11%
Doctorate	11%
Unknown	11%
Year of Graduation	Percentage
2018	11%
2019	33%
2020	22%
2021	22%
2022	11%
Type of Work	Percentage
Technology Support	11%
IT Consultant 2020	11%
Health Administration/IT	22%
IT	33%
Data	11%
Sales	11%

Years in Technology Field	Percentage
1-10 yrs	55%
11-20 yrs	11%
21-30 yrs	33%
Size of Work Organization	Percentage
1-2000 employees	11%
2001-5000 employees	22%
5001-15000 employees	22%
15000+ employees	11%
Unknown	33%

Data Collection

Prior to data collection, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted approval to protect participants' interests and address any ethical concerns. Emails were sent to a university list of graduates who earned a technology-related degree between January 2017 and December 2021. Finally, due to the very specific nature of the research questions, a snowball sampling method was used; participants were asked to recommend another person who could participate who met the same criteria. In doing this, all individuals met the research design criteria.

Using this process, nine female participants self-identified and volunteered to participate in the research. Eligibility was determined through email contacts, and video interviews were scheduled for each of the nine participants. Before the interview's, written consent was received from each participant; these were placed in an encrypted electronic file to ensure the confidentiality and integrity of the research. Each participant was then interviewed using Zoom video conferencing software in 30–45-minute interviews by one of the researchers. The interviews followed a semi-structured list of open-ended questions, followed by the ability for participants to elaborate on any areas they felt needed further explanation. The interviews began with a brief explanation of the research as well as a collection of demographic information.

After the interviews were recorded, they were transcribed using the same Zoom video conferencing software. Each transcript was then given a random numerical code to ensure confidentiality. The researchers then reviewed each transcript for accuracy and alignment with the interview audio. Each participant was given an email copy of the transcript to approve for accuracy of their thoughts, ideas, and answers to the questions. The participant could approve, clarify, or choose not to respond to the email transcript. If the participant fully approved the written transcript, no further corrections were needed. If a participant wanted a correction or to provide further information about their interview answers, they provided this in email format for inclusion within the transcript notes. If the participant did not respond, passive approval was assumed after a 7-day period. Finally, each transcript was individually reviewed to identify narratives, expressions, and experiences, which were further classified into foundational themes.

Interview Questions (Banton et al., 2024, p. 139).

- As a woman, what has been your experience in your most recent workplace? What are some examples?

- As a woman, how have you experienced the technology industry as a whole? What are some examples?
- A sense of belonging for employees has recently emerged as a key factor in the areas of employee retention and job satisfaction. As a woman in a technology-focused position, how do you feel you do (did) or do not (did not) belong within your organization? What about within the technology industry?
- Thinking of the experiences you have discussed, how do/did you navigate those experiences?
- Did you experience support from others to assist you in navigating those types of experiences? If so, how?
- Were you in a technology-related position before your most recent position? If so, why did you leave?
- (If currently employed) Have you ever considered leaving your current position? Why or why not? If so, are you still considering leaving? Why? (If not employed) Why did you leave your last position?
- Have you ever thought about leaving the entire technology industry and doing something else? Why or why not?
- If you could make recommendations related to women, to those leading within the technology industry, what would they be? What advice would you give women in the technology field?

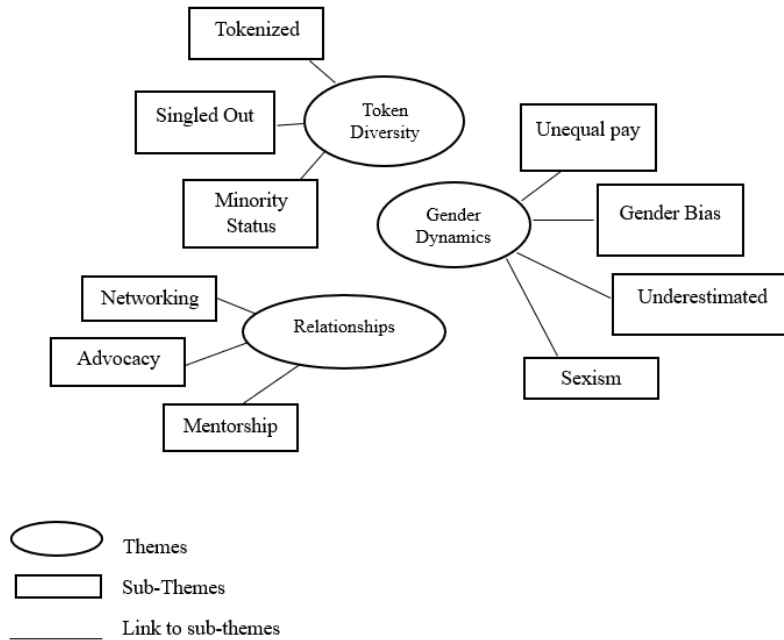
Data Analysis

The first step in the data analysis involved creating a code book, which was done using an Excel spreadsheet to identify themes and quotes that highlighted areas of interest. Data was manually coded through the transcriptions, which assisted in the development of concept mappings to derive themes and analyze the results. The researchers each reviewed the transcripts for possible themes or ideas that were outstanding in the comments that participants made during the interview. For each finalized transcript, specific quotes were extracted and recorded in the codebook. After pulling out these quotes, the researchers met to review all transcripts to identify themes that were overarching through all transcripts. In the research, saturation was achieved with the nine identified participants as themes started to emerge that mirrored statements and quotes found in most of the transcripts. The identified themes in the dataset were (1) token diversity, (2) gender dynamics, and (3) relationships.

Results

The focus of this study was on the unique experiences of women in a technology workspace who earned at least a bachelor's degree in a technology-focused field between January 2017 and December 2021. Using a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, certain themes were identified within the data, and saturation was achieved with nine female participants.

The three major themes that were identified are (1) token diversity, (2) gender dynamics, and (3) relationships, see Figure 1.

Figure 1. Themes and Sub-themes (replaced figure with a clear version)

Note: Designed by the authors.

Token Diversity

Token diversity in this research is defined as when someone had experiences of being within the minority group of a particular gender or race in the workplace (Weekes et al., 2024). Additionally, there were feelings of being tokenized or singled out due to their minority status. Several participants noted that they were treated like they were solely hired to add to the diversity of the organization and not included as a true team member. There were ways in which this idea was relayed to them by their male peers through micro aggressive behaviors, terms, phrases, and assumptions made within the workspace. These microaggressions were often used to disparage or to maintain the status quo (Jackson & Tewfik, 2025). In experiencing token diversity within the workplace, many of the participants did not feel invested in the company or the technology industry.

“January 6th, while I was at my previous role, and I was told something to the effect that my people would be shot down in the streets if we came to their house. I've been called the N-word. I've been in rooms where people forgot I was in the room and start saying the N word. I've walked up on people, oh no, there's this other experience where I was the only person on the zoom call. Everyone else was in the room or the conference room. I, because I was working on something, couldn't be there, so I had to do double duty. And in the conference room where I was not, there was some type of, I guess, a roach or some type of something. And one of the people

in the room said, ..., I know you've had roaches in your house before. They try to find a way in which to discount you" (Participant 9).

"I'm usually the only black person on the team, which presents a lot of challenges within itself...I felt as though I would speak on different topics and I wouldn't be heard" (Participant 9).

"I felt like the token diversity person...Because we need to be aware of what we're not aware of when in positions of leadership" (Participant 6).

"There were only three/four women that worked in the department and the only reason they hired me was because they had to. They sort of have requirements to make the team more diverse" (Participant 4).

Gender Dynamics

Gender dynamics is defined as gender bias, sexism, and unequal pay being significant challenges faced by women in the technology industry (Avolio et al., 2020; Tao et al., 2020). In addition, experiences of being underestimated or patronized based on their gender within the workspace were also prevalent. This contributed to a lack of belonging and true integration within the workspace. It was difficult for participants to gain a true sense of belonging when they felt like their opinions, education, and experience were constantly under review or criticism, not for the content of the information, but because of who it came from. Many of the participants recalled times when they would make a comment and others would not agree, yet when the same idea was said by a male colleague, it was accepted. They also recalled times when female new hires were given on-the-job tests to verify their ability and knowledge, but the same tests were not given to male new hires.

"He would try to test me, and I would show him I knew what I was doing, I think that kind of irritated him. I think he wanted to set me up for failure somehow. I don't know" (Participant 1).

"I don't get the respect that I think I should get if I was a man, like, for example, I'm on the phone and I'm, talking to them troubleshooting an issue" (Participant 5).

*"I feel really bad because I'll look and I'm like you've got to be a little tougher and there, they're so grateful that they work with me because, like, these guys are such jerks sometimes. It's tough because. You know and excuse me for saying so. Some of them are ***** ... as a woman of color. You literally must take a lot of deep breaths because you're like, you know, I am way smarter than you, right? ... They wouldn't even they wouldn't do that to a man, but this woman, they want to give her tests and make sure she knew all this stuff, and she could do this, and she could do all this programming" (Participant 2).*

"But there definitely were some people. Just would, just, prefer not to work with me, they just didn't think I knew anything because I was a female" (Participant 4).

Relationships

The theme of relationships is defined as the importance of mentorship, advocacy, and networking in creating a sense of belonging and equity in the workplace. In addition, supportive environments where workers feel valued, included, and more equitable spaces contributed to a

more positive workspace (Banton et al., 2024). Many participants noted that mentoring by a senior female staff member or female peer greatly enhanced their integration into the workspace. In addition, some of the participants in management positions suggested that there was a need to stay competitive, know their worth and value, and speak up in a way that could be heard by others. Additionally, some participants noted that it just took some time for people to trust them, but once relationships were established, they were accepted into the workspace.

"I feel like it's important to build a network of people who understand you, who relate to you. Even at my current company, when I didn't just have a project, I was able to network with the other woman in my office and she's high in leadership. I don't know her ethnicity, but you know, she was able to just help me. She pulled me into women in cloud, you know? And network with other women, so I feel like it's some kind of unity that we all have together like we understand each other" (Participant 2).

"Ok I'm lucky to be a part of a really great organization and they embody diversity and inclusion, and that's very much in our company's culture. It's a great place to work and we have the support that we need. Like I said, it really doesn't matter if you're male or female ...I think because I've been in the industry for quite some time, I've built a lot of contacts, not only in my organization but outside of my organization with the customers and with the manufacturers. I use LinkedIn a lot and have multiple contacts. It's great to just take the opportunities as they come and move forward" (Participant 7).

"Feel that the connections that I've had with other individuals have been my saving grace" (Participant 8).

Discussion

This study explored the lived experiences of women in the technology industry, focusing on token diversity, gender dynamics, and relationships. Using qualitative narrative inquiry, three major themes emerged, revealing nuanced ways in which women navigate male-dominated professional environments and offering insights that extend previous research. These findings align with Social Role Theory, as participants' experiences reflected persistent gendered expectations of competence and authority (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2012). Similarly, Intersectionality Theory helps explain how overlapping identities intensified experiences of exclusion and belonging (Crenshaw, 1989).

Token Diversity

Participants frequently described experiences of token diversity, defined as being singled out due to minority status in the workplace (Weekes et al., 2024). Many reported feeling hired to fulfill diversity requirements rather than as valued team members. Microaggressions, exclusion, and assumptions based on gender or race contributed to a lack of investment in the organization and, in some cases, disengagement from the industry itself. These findings align with previous research highlighting the superficial nature of diversity initiatives and the persistent structural barriers women face (Avolio et al., 2020; Boyle et al., 2023). However, this study provides a more nuanced view by capturing the emotional and interpersonal impact of tokenism, demonstrating how it erodes a sense of belonging and professional identity.

Gender Dynamics

Gender dynamics, encompassing sexism, bias, and unequal treatment, were pervasive in participants' experiences. Women described being underestimated, patronized, and subject to double standards, such as being repeatedly asked to verify their skills or having their ideas dismissed until male colleagues echoed them. These findings reinforce prior studies documenting gender-based obstacles in technology but extend the literature by highlighting the interpersonal and identity-based dimensions of bias (Avolio et al., 2020; Boyle et al., 2023; Makarem & Wang, 2020; Singh & Vanka, 2021). Participants' narratives illustrate how everyday interactions perpetuate systemic inequities, impacting both career advancement and belonging. These experiences are consistent with Social Role Theory, which explains how cultural expectations of women shape workplace perceptions, and with Intersectionality Theory, highlighting how overlapping identities, particularly gender and race, compound disadvantage (Eagly, 1987).

Relationships

Mentorship, advocacy, and networking emerged as crucial mechanisms for navigating workplace challenges. Participants noted that supportive relationships with female peers and leaders enhanced their integration, confidence, and sense of belonging. This aligns with prior research emphasizing the importance of social support in STEM fields (Makarem & Wang, 2020; Muragishi et al., 2024; Singh & Vanka, 2021). Importantly, this study highlights how women actively create informal networks when formal mentorship is limited, illustrating resilience and agency in response to structural barriers. Relationships serve not only as a buffer against exclusion but also as a vehicle for empowerment and sustained participation in technology careers.

Theoretical Implications

The findings are deeply informed by Social Role Theory and Intersectionality Theory. Social Role Theory explains how workplace behavior reflects societal gender norms, leading to biased evaluations of competence, exclusion, and microaggressions (Eagly, 1987). Intersectional Theory demonstrates that women's experiences are shaped by the convergence of multiple identities, including race and professional status, which can intensify workplace challenges (Crenshaw, 1989). Together, these frameworks show that women's professional experiences are shaped by both structural inequities and interpersonal dynamics, emphasizing the need for policies and practices that address both systemic and social dimensions of inclusion.

Implications

The findings of this study have significant implications for academic research and industry practices within the technology sector. Understanding the themes of token diversity, gender dynamics, and relationships can inform more effective diversity and inclusion initiatives aimed at improving the workplace experience for women in technology. Organizations can use these insights to design policies that address women's unique challenges, such as creating mentorship programs, promoting equitable opportunities for career advancement, and fostering an environment where diverse perspectives are genuinely valued.

This study has several implications for practice and research. First, it reinforces that diversity initiatives must go beyond representation to foster truly inclusive cultures where women are valued for expertise rather than token status. Policies addressing bias in pay, promotion, and

recognition, alongside accountability measures, can help dismantle systemic barriers. Second, mentorship, advocacy, and networking are critical for enhancing belonging and retention. Organizations should implement formal mentorship programs and encourage peer support networks to empower women in technology. Finally, an intersectional approach is essential, recognizing that overlapping identities influence women's experiences and require tailored strategies.

For academic researchers, this study underscores the need for further exploration into the lived experiences of underrepresented groups in technology. As demonstrated in this research, narrative inquiry provides valuable qualitative insights that could lead to a more nuanced understanding of workplace dynamics and their impact on diversity. Finally, the findings encourage women entering or currently working in technology to share their stories and advocate for an inclusive environment where gender and other forms of diversity are celebrated, not just tolerated. Empowering women through the sharing of experiences can help break down barriers and build stronger, more inclusive communities within the tech industry.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to get to the heart of women's experiences in the technology industry. Important information was revealed that answered the research questions in a way for full understanding of how these experiences are interpreted and how they impact the lives of women in this industry. Concepts such as token diversity, gender dynamics, and the value of relationship color the everyday working lives of these women. In addition, the connection to Social Role Theory and Intersectionality Theory highlighted the complex nature of gender and role dynamics observed in the findings (Crenshaw, 1989; Eagly, 1987). If we consider the implications of this research, we will need to use the results in such a way to change the environmental dynamics of these work environments. It is not enough to know if something is not working, or to define what is not working, if we do nothing about it or if no change comes from the findings. This research is a call to action; if we do not engage, support, uplift, or find ways to retain educated, intelligent, and hardworking women in the technology field, we will lose them. We will lose the knowledge, the time, the efforts, and the brilliant impact of women.

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