

Belonging at Work: A Qualitative Meta-Synthesis of Workplace Inclusion, Social Identity, and Employee Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

Organizations today face increasing pressure not only to enhance productivity and performance but also to create work environments where employees feel genuinely accepted, valued, and integrated as meaningful members of the organizational community. This systematic literature review adopts a qualitative meta-synthesis approach to analyze, synthesize, and integrate findings from prior research examining how belonging at work is formed through the interplay of workplace inclusion, social identity recognition, and employee well-being. Workplace belonging represents a critical organizational concern because it directly influences employee engagement, psychological health, work motivation, retention, and the quality of social relationships within organizations. Through a rigorous examination of peer-reviewed articles published between 2014 and 2026 across multiple academic databases, this study identifies several interconnected themes: workplace inclusion as a foundational condition, social identity recognition as a psychological mechanism, psychological safety as a mediating factor, inclusive leadership as a facilitating influence, social support and organizational culture as contextual moderators, and employee well-being as the ultimate outcome. The findings reveal that belonging at work is a multidimensional social-psychological phenomenon shaped by structural organizational practices, interpersonal relationships, leadership behaviors, and cultural norms. This review contributes theoretically by integrating previously fragmented literature into a comprehensive conceptual framework explaining the formation and consequences of workplace belonging. Practically, the findings offer actionable insights for organizational leaders and human resource practitioners seeking to design inclusive workplaces that promote employee health, engagement, and sustainable organizational performance.

Keywords: Workplace Belonging, Workplace Inclusion, Social Identity, Employee Well-Being, Psychological Safety.

I. Introduction

Modern organizations operate in an increasingly complex environment shaped by demographic diversity, technological transformation, flexible work arrangements, and evolving employee expectations. Whereas traditional management discourse often emphasized productivity, efficiency, and financial performance as the primary indicators of organizational success, contemporary organizations are increasingly required to cultivate workplaces in which employees feel accepted, valued, heard, and recognized as integral members of the organizational community (Sabella, 2026). In this context, belonging at work has emerged as a critical concept in organizational behavior and human resource management. It refers to the psychological and social experience through which individuals perceive meaningful connection, identity recognition, and acceptance within their work environment (Szczygiel et al., 2026). Workplace belonging therefore extends



beyond formal employment status or contractual attachment. It is produced through everyday interactions, organizational practices, leadership behaviors, and cultural norms that signal whether employees are regarded merely as functional contributors or as authentic members of the organization.

The significance of workplace belonging has intensified as organizations become more diverse across multiple dimensions, including gender, age, culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, employment status, professional identity, and generational cohort. The expansion of hybrid and remote work arrangements has also created new challenges for sustaining social connection, organizational identification, and psychological attachment among employees (Marozva & Pelsler, 2025). Within such contexts, workplace inclusion cannot be understood simply as the numerical representation of diverse groups. Rather, inclusion constitutes a social and structural process through which employees are enabled to participate meaningfully, express their perspectives, access development opportunities, and receive recognition regardless of their social identities (Dhanani et al., 2024). Inclusive workplaces are characterized by fairness, respect, voice, psychological safety, and the ability to contribute without fear of marginalization. Thus, inclusion provides an essential organizational condition for the emergence of belonging.

Social identity theory offers a useful theoretical foundation for explaining how employees construct their sense of belonging through group membership, identity recognition, and perceived acceptance within organizational settings (Zhou & Huang, 2025). Employees do not enter the workplace as identity-neutral individuals; they bring personal, social, and professional identities that influence how they interpret organizational experiences. When employees perceive that their identities are respected, acknowledged, and valued, they are more likely to experience psychological safety, interpersonal trust, and stronger social connection (Mari & Ahmad, 2026). Conversely, when employees encounter exclusion, discrimination, stereotyping, tokenism, organizational bias, or low psychological safety, their sense of belonging may be weakened. Such experiences can produce adverse consequences, including stress, emotional exhaustion, burnout, disengagement, reduced commitment, and turnover intentions (Sultana et al., 2023). Therefore, belonging is not only an affective experience but also a mechanism through which inclusion and identity recognition influence employee well-being.

Although workplace inclusion, social identity, and employee well-being have received substantial scholarly attention, these concepts are often examined as separate domains. This fragmentation limits the development of a comprehensive understanding of how belonging at work is formed, sustained, or undermined in contemporary organizations. Existing studies have explored specific aspects of inclusion, identity, psychological safety, and well-being, yet the literature still lacks an integrative qualitative synthesis that explains the interplay among organizational inclusion practices, identity recognition processes, relational experiences, and well-being outcomes (J & Mahalakshmi, 2024). Such a synthesis is important because belonging is contextual and socially constructed. It cannot be fully understood through isolated variables alone, but requires attention to employees' lived experiences, organizational meanings, and the social conditions that shape acceptance or exclusion at work.

Accordingly, this article aims to conduct a systematic literature review using a qualitative meta-synthesis approach to integrate existing empirical and conceptual insights on belonging at work. The purpose of this study is to develop an integrated conceptual framework that explains how workplace inclusion and social identity shape employees' sense of belonging and how this sense of belonging contributes to employee well-being. Specifically, this review is guided by five research questions: how does workplace inclusion shape employees' experience of belonging at work; how does social identity influence employees' sense of belonging within organizations; what is the relationship between belonging at work and employee well-being; what organizational factors strengthen or weaken employees' sense of belonging; and how can a conceptual framework for belonging at work be constructed based on the synthesis of existing literature? By addressing these questions, this article contributes to organizational behavior and human resource management scholarship by positioning belonging at work as a central mechanism linking inclusion, identity, and well-being in organizational life.

II. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

3.1. Workplace Belonging

Workplace belonging constitutes a fundamental psychological experience characterized by feeling accepted, valued, and recognized as a meaningful member of the work community (Szczygiel et al., 2026). This concept encompasses emotional, social, and psychological dimensions that extend beyond mere organizational membership. Research has demonstrated that belonging does not automatically emerge from employment status but rather develops through the quality of social relationships, recognition of individual contributions, opportunities for meaningful participation, and experiences of genuine integration within work groups (Westover, 2024). Studies across multiple professional contexts have consistently shown that belonging is shaped by values congruence and engagement, recognition and trust, and community connection, with supportive relationships promoting belonging while social isolation erodes it.

The importance of workplace belonging has gained particular prominence in contemporary organizational research due to its documented associations with numerous positive outcomes including enhanced engagement, improved retention, stronger organizational commitment, and greater willingness to contribute beyond formal job requirements (Oluwalusi, 2025). Furthermore, belonging has been recognized as essential for sustainable workforce participation, particularly among diverse employee populations who may face additional barriers to full organizational integration. Research examining belonging among specific professional groups has revealed that faculty, healthcare workers, and employees in high-stress occupations particularly benefit from environments that foster genuine connection and recognition.

3.2. Workplace Inclusion

Workplace inclusion refers to the extent to which organizations create environments enabling all individuals to feel valued, involved, heard, and afforded equitable access to opportunities (Girgin, 2025). Critically, inclusion differs fundamentally from diversity; while diversity emphasizes demographic representation, inclusion emphasizes the lived experience of being accepted, empowered, and meaningfully engaged within organizational life. Inclusive workplaces are characterized by fair treatment, integration of differences, participatory decision-making, psychological safety, trust, and genuine celebration of diversity across multiple identity dimensions (Hassan, 2025).

Contemporary research has established that inclusive organizational behavior encompasses multiple dimensions including being accepted and treated equally regardless of social identities, being integrated into decision-making processes, and being able to express oneself authentically without fear of negative consequences (Dhanani et al., 2024). Importantly, the definition and importance of specific inclusive behaviors differ across employee subgroups, with minoritized employees often prioritizing different aspects of inclusion compared to majority group members. Recent studies have also highlighted that an inclusive psychological climate, leader inclusion behaviors, and workgroup inclusion are associated with stronger organizational trust and deeper organizational identification, demonstrating the cascading benefits of inclusion across multiple organizational levels (Sabella, 2026).

3.3. Social Identity

Social identity theory posits that individuals construct their self-understanding through membership in social groups, deriving meaning, value, and psychological resources from these affiliations (Zhou & Huang, 2025). Within organizational contexts, social identity can be formed through multiple channels including professional roles, job positions, work teams, organizational culture, gender, ethnicity, generational cohort, and professional communities. Research has demonstrated that employees develop complex identity

frameworks comprising comparison selves (reference groups and role models), relational selves (colleagues and workplace relationships), and reflexivity selves (life planning and social positioning) (Manzi et al., 2023).

When employees' social identities are recognized and valued within organizational settings, they experience enhanced belonging, psychological safety, and organizational identification (Alam et al., 2025). Studies have shown that identity recognition contributes to career fulfillment, work involvement, and psychological empowerment. Conversely, when social identities are ignored, devalued, or stigmatized, employees may experience alienation, diminished self-confidence, and reduced well-being (Veelen et al., 2020). Research on stigmatized identities has revealed that discrimination leads individuals to employ various coping strategies including self-group distancing, which while potentially providing short-term relief, ultimately maintains unequal social hierarchies and undermines collective belonging.

3.4. Employee Well-Being

Employee well-being represents a comprehensive construct encompassing physical, psychological, emotional, and social dimensions of health and functioning within work contexts (Syahir et al., 2025). Well-being is influenced by multiple organizational factors including relationship quality, organizational support, psychological safety, work-life balance, meaningful work, and experiences of inclusion or exclusion. Research has consistently demonstrated bidirectional relationships between well-being and various work outcomes, with enhanced well-being predicting improved job satisfaction, engagement, performance, and retention ("Exploring Professional Self Identity, Psychological Capital, and Work Well-Being in China's Pharmaceutical Sales Sector," 2024).

Contemporary scholarship has increasingly recognized the multifaceted nature of employee well-being, distinguishing among subjective well-being (life satisfaction and positive affect), psychological well-being (purpose, growth, and autonomy), and social well-being (positive relationships and social contribution) (Shekhar & Saurombe, 2025). Studies examining well-being in diverse organizational contexts have identified that while workplaces can foster structure, purpose, and social connection, they can simultaneously serve as sources of psychological distress through excessive demands, inadequate support, and exclusionary experiences. The intersection of well-being with demographic factors including age, generation, and income level has also received increasing attention, with research revealing differential patterns of stress and satisfaction across employee subgroups.

3.5. Linking Workplace Inclusion, Social Identity, and Employee Well-Being

The conceptual relationships among workplace inclusion, social identity, and employee well-being operate through interconnected mechanisms that collectively shape belonging at work (Westover, 2025). Workplace inclusion creates organizational conditions characterized by fairness, openness, and participatory opportunities that enable recognition of diverse social identities. When employees perceive that their personal, professional, cultural, and social identities are acknowledged and respected, they develop stronger psychological safety the belief that one can express ideas, raise concerns, and take interpersonal risks without fear of negative consequences (Handayani, 2025).

Psychological safety functions as a critical mediating mechanism linking inclusion practices to belonging outcomes (Fahrizal et al., 2025). Research has demonstrated that employees who experience psychological safety are more willing to voice opinions, express authentic identities, engage in collaborative behaviors, and develop healthy interpersonal relationships. Studies have shown that high levels of psychosocial safety climate correlate with reduced stress and burnout, enhanced employee engagement, and greater openness in communication. Furthermore, inclusive leadership styles and participatory organizational structures have been identified as key facilitators of psychological safety, while stigma, policy fragmentation, and hierarchical rigidity serve as persistent barriers.

The culmination of inclusion, identity recognition, and psychological safety produces belonging at work, which in turn generates positive employee well-being through multiple pathways including enhanced sense of security, meaningful work experiences, social connection, emotional support, and organizational commitment (Oluwalusi, 2025). Empirical studies have consistently found that inclusive organizational cultures influence employee outcomes through the psychology of belonging, with inclusivity strengthening psychological belonging and subsequently predicting retention through higher job embeddedness and affective commitment. This integrated perspective suggests that organizations seeking to enhance employee well-being must address not only individual-level interventions but also the structural, relational, and cultural conditions that enable authentic belonging.

III. Research Method

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology with a qualitative meta-synthesis approach (Morris et al., 2025). Qualitative meta-synthesis represents a rigorous method for identifying, evaluating, and integrating qualitative findings from multiple primary studies to generate higher-order interpretations and conceptual frameworks. Unlike quantitative meta-analysis that seeks to measure statistical relationships across studies, qualitative meta-synthesis aims to understand patterns, meanings, and mechanisms that explain complex social phenomena. This approach is particularly appropriate for examining belonging at work given the construct's inherently subjective, experiential, and contextually embedded nature.

3.2. Data Sources

Articles analyzed in this review were obtained from reputable academic databases ensuring comprehensive coverage of relevant scholarship. The databases searched included Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis, Wiley Online Library, SAGE Journals, and Google Scholar. These databases were selected to capture research published across organizational behavior, human resource management, psychology, and related disciplines that address workplace belonging and its constituent elements.

3.3. Search Keywords

The literature search employed combinations of the following keywords and Boolean operators:

- "workplace belonging" OR "belonging at work" OR "organizational belonging"
- AND "workplace inclusion" OR "inclusive workplace" OR "inclusive climate"
- AND "social identity" OR "identity at work" OR "identity recognition"
- AND "employee well-being" OR "psychological well-being" OR "workplace well-being"

Additional searches included related terms such as "psychological safety," "inclusive leadership," "organizational commitment," "employee engagement," and "workplace diversity"

3.4. Inclusion Criteria

Table 1. Inclusion Criteria

Criterion	Specification
Publication type	Peer-reviewed journal articles
Publication period	2014–2026



Relevance	Directly addresses workplace belonging, inclusion, social identity, or employee well-being
Methodology	Qualitative studies or mixed-methods studies with substantial qualitative findings
Language	English
Availability	Full-text accessible

3.5. Exclusion Criteria

Articles were excluded based on the following criteria:

- Not relevant to organizational or workplace contexts
- Not peer-reviewed academic publications (e.g., trade publications, opinion pieces)
- Full-text not accessible
- Did not address relationships among inclusion, identity, belonging, and well-being
- Focused exclusively on technical management aspects without social-psychological dimensions
- Purely quantitative studies without qualitative insight into mechanisms or experiences

3.6. Data Selection Procedure

Article selection followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines through four stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion.

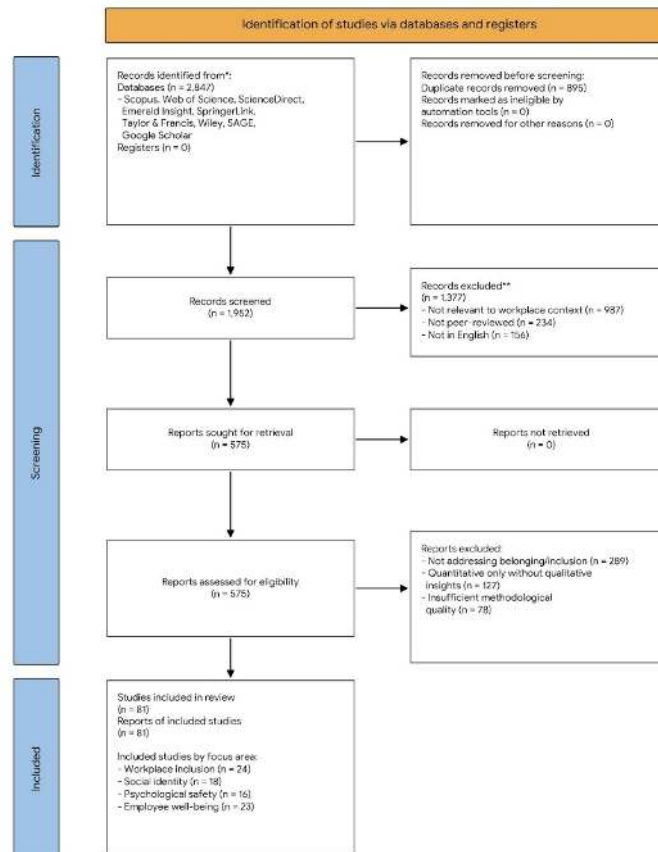


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020

3.7. Quality Appraisal

Article quality was assessed based on multiple criteria: topic relevance, clarity of research objectives, methodological rigor, appropriateness of research design, transparency of data collection procedures, quality of analysis, and contribution to understanding belonging at work. Articles failing to meet minimum quality standards were excluded from synthesis. Quality assessment was conducted independently by the research team with disagreements resolved through discussion and consensus.

3.8. Data Analysis

Analysis proceeded through thematic synthesis following established procedures for qualitative meta-synthesis (Ip et al., 2025). The process involved: (1) in-depth reading of all included articles; (2) coding of key findings related to inclusion, identity, belonging, psychological safety, leadership, culture, and well-being; (3) grouping codes into preliminary categories; (4) developing broader themes through iterative refinement; and (5) integrating themes into a coherent conceptual framework. Throughout analysis, attention was paid to convergent findings across studies as well as divergent perspectives that enriched understanding of the phenomena.

IV. Results and Discussion

4.1. Result of Research

a. Workplace Inclusion as the Foundation of Belonging

The synthesis revealed workplace inclusion as the foundational condition enabling belonging at work. Employees experience belonging when they receive fair treatment, meaningful opportunities to participate, equitable access to information and resources, recognition for their contributions, and organizational support (Sabella, 2026). Inclusion practices strengthen social relationships and reduce feelings of alienation within the workplace. Studies consistently demonstrated that employees who perceive their organizations as inclusive report stronger psychological connection to their work communities.

Research across diverse organizational contexts including healthcare, technology, hospitality, and public sector organizations revealed common inclusion dimensions: being accepted and treated equally regardless of identity characteristics, being integrated into important decisions, and being able to express authentic selves (Dhanani et al., 2024). Importantly, the specific inclusive behaviors most valued varied across employee subgroups, with minoritized employees often prioritizing protection from discrimination and authentic acceptance while majority group members emphasized participatory opportunities. Organizations with strong inclusive climates demonstrated higher levels of organizational trust, identification, and commitment across employee populations (Kalla et al., 2025).

The findings highlighted that workplace inclusion operates through both structural and interpersonal mechanisms (Hassan, 2025). Structural inclusion involves formal policies, equitable resource allocation, transparent procedures, and accessible opportunities. Interpersonal inclusion encompasses daily interactions, communication patterns, relationship quality, and felt acceptance within work groups. Both dimensions must be present for employees to experience genuine belonging, as formal policies without supportive interpersonal relationships produce hollow diversity initiatives, while positive relationships without structural equity create inconsistent and unsustainable inclusion.

b. Social Identity Recognition and Belonging at Work

Recognition of employees' social identities emerged as a critical psychological mechanism linking inclusion to belonging (Mari & Ahmad, 2026). When organizations acknowledge, respect, and value employees' personal, professional, cultural, and social identities, employees more readily experience

acceptance and integration. Studies demonstrated that identity recognition strengthens organizational identification, meaning employees come to see organizational membership as central to their self-concept, which enhances commitment and engagement.

Research examining identity dynamics revealed that employees bring multiple, intersecting identities to work including those related to profession, department, generation, gender, ethnicity, religion, and personal interests (Manzi et al., 2023). Organizations that create space for these diverse identities to be expressed and valued foster stronger belonging compared to those demanding identity suppression or assimilation. Studies of migrant workers, LGBTQIA+ employees, employees with disabilities, and other minoritized groups consistently demonstrated that identity threat undermines belonging while identity affirmation enhances it (Sibande & Gobind, 2024).

Conversely, when social identities are ignored, devalued, or stigmatized, belonging weakens substantially (Sultana et al., 2023). Employees experiencing identity-based discrimination reported heightened stress, reduced self-confidence, diminished job satisfaction, and increased turnover intentions. Research on workplace ostracism revealed that biased treatment, exclusion from interactions, interpersonal alienation, and withheld information constitute acts of ostracism that damage psychological well-being. The findings emphasized that authentic belonging requires organizations to actively recognize diverse identities rather than pursuing identity-blind approaches that inadvertently privilege dominant group norms.

c. Psychological Safety as a Mediating Mechanism

Psychological safety emerged as a crucial mediating mechanism connecting inclusion and identity recognition to belonging outcomes (Fahrizal et al., 2025). Employees who feel psychologically safe demonstrate greater willingness to express opinions, show authentic identities, take interpersonal risks, and build healthy working relationships without fear of punishment, rejection, or humiliation. Studies consistently found that psychological safety mediates relationships between inclusive leadership, diversity initiatives, and positive employee outcomes including engagement and commitment.

Research examining psychological safety antecedents identified three primary factors: inclusive and transformational leadership styles, hierarchical structures and power dynamics, and workplace climate and communication culture (Ip et al., 2025). Leaders who demonstrate inclusive behaviors openness, accessibility, availability, and respect for diversity significantly enhance team psychological safety. Conversely, authoritarian leadership, rigid hierarchies, and closed communication cultures suppress employee voice and innovation, undermining safety perceptions.

The findings revealed that psychological safety operates as both a precondition and a reinforcement mechanism for belonging (Hartley, 2024). Initially, psychological safety enables employees to engage authentically with organizational membership, allowing them to test whether genuine belonging is possible. As belonging develops, it reciprocally strengthens psychological safety by establishing patterns of safe interaction. This cyclical relationship suggests that organizations must simultaneously cultivate psychological safety while building belonging rather than treating them as sequential achievements. Practical strategies including mentorship programs, regular feedback, and inclusive onboarding processes were identified as effective approaches for establishing psychological safety foundations.

d. Inclusive Leadership and Social Belonging

Inclusive leadership emerged as a powerful facilitating factor for workplace belonging (Deepalakshmi et al., 2025). Leaders characterized by openness, accessibility, empathy, fair decision-making, and active appreciation of individual differences create psychologically safe environments where employees feel valued, heard, and empowered. The synthesis revealed that inclusive leadership directly influences belonging through multiple pathways including values congruence, recognition of contributions, and cultivation of trusting relationships. Studies across cultural contexts demonstrated consistent associations between inclusive leadership behaviors and belonging-related outcomes (Al-Balushi, 2025). Research in Asian IT organizations found strong correlations between perceived inclusive leadership and employee engagement,

with leadership openness, accessibility, and respect for diversity particularly influential. In hospitality contexts, inclusive leadership enhanced organizational pride, psychological ownership, and organizational identification, all of which strengthened service performance and workplace harmony (Mari & Ahmad, 2026). These findings suggest that inclusive leadership represents a transferable competency that produces consistent benefits across diverse organizational settings.

The synthesis also revealed that inclusive leadership interacts with other organizational factors to shape belonging (Purnama et al., 2025). When inclusive leadership is combined with psychological safety, trust, and engagement-supporting policies, retention outcomes improve substantially. However, inclusive leadership cannot compensate entirely for deficient organizational structures or toxic cultures. Studies emphasized that sustainable belonging requires alignment between leader behaviors and organizational systems, suggesting that leadership development must be accompanied by broader organizational culture transformation.

e. Organizational Culture and Social Support

Organizational culture and social support emerged as essential contextual factors strengthening workplace belonging (Khoiri et al., 2025). Cultures characterized by openness, collaboration, and genuine appreciation of diversity create social spaces enabling employees to feel integrated into organizational communities. Core cultural values of agility, inclusiveness, and empowerment play crucial roles in enhancing employees' emotional commitment and motivation, particularly during periods of organizational change and uncertainty.

Social support from supervisors, colleagues, and broader work communities proved particularly important for belonging (Teborg et al., 2025). Research examining disabled employees revealed that social support is essential for balancing individual needs with work demands, helping employees address challenges, create suitable work arrangements, and develop occupational skills. Critically, social support functions as both an expression and a driver of inclusion when experienced as regular lived practice reflecting genuine belonging rather than exceptional accommodation. The findings suggest that support must be integrated into routine organizational functioning rather than positioned as special provision for particular groups.

The synthesis revealed that organizational culture shapes belonging through both direct and indirect pathways (Dziedzic, 2024). Directly, culture establishes norms about who belongs, what behaviors are valued, and how differences are treated. Indirectly, culture influences leadership practices, interpersonal relationships, communication patterns, and resource allocation decisions that collectively shape belonging experiences. Studies identified that organizational cultures emphasizing autonomy, social support, and transparent communication demonstrate lower stress-related outcomes, while rigid, hierarchical cultures exhibit higher stress and weaker belonging.

f. Exclusion, Marginalization, and Threats to Belonging

The synthesis identified multiple factors that undermine workplace belonging including social exclusion, discrimination, organizational bias, closed communication, identity conflict, and hierarchical work cultures (Sharma et al., 2024). Employees experiencing marginalization demonstrated elevated stress, alienation, reduced motivation, diminished self-confidence, and deteriorated psychological well-being. Research consistently revealed that workplace ostracism significantly reduces psychological well-being, job satisfaction, and productivity while increasing absenteeism and turnover intentions.

Studies examining specific marginalized populations revealed distinct patterns of exclusion (Sibande & Gobind, 2024). LGBTQIA+ employees face ongoing challenges with diversity and inclusion measures often remaining unmet, leading to daily discrimination and harassment that prompt many to resign. Employees with disabilities encounter attitudinal barriers at organizational levels among the most commonly reported obstacles to inclusion. Racial and ethnic minorities experience microaggressions and discrimination that decrease organizational efficiency and prevent goal realization (Salari et al., 2024). These findings highlight

that belonging is not uniformly distributed within organizations; rather, particular groups face systematic barriers requiring targeted intervention.

The findings also revealed that exclusion operates through subtle mechanisms that may be invisible to organizational leaders (Zimmerman et al., 2016). Research on academic settings demonstrated that women and faculty of color experience more frequent exclusion than their counterparts, with department demographic composition failing to reduce these disparities. Involuntary forms of silence where employees remain quiet about important issues due to fear rather than choice were shown to decrease organizational identification and subsequently increase uncivil behaviors (Weiss & Zacher, 2025). These findings suggest that belonging assessment must attend to subtle interpersonal dynamics and hidden experiences rather than relying solely on formal diversity metrics.

g. Belonging at Work and Employee Well-Being

The synthesis confirmed strong positive relationships between belonging at work and employee well-being ("Exploring Professional Self Identity, Psychological Capital, and Work Well-Being in China's Pharmaceutical Sales Sector," 2024). Sense of belonging enhances emotional well-being, job satisfaction, resilience, work engagement, organizational commitment, and employee loyalty. Studies demonstrated that professional self-identity positively impacts work well-being both directly and through psychological capital, with psychological resources mediating the translation of identity benefits into concrete well-being improvements.

Research revealed that belonging influences well-being through multiple mechanisms (Boland et al., 2025). Belonging provides psychological security, reducing anxiety and uncertainty about organizational membership. It generates meaningful social connections that buffer stress and provide emotional resources. It creates opportunities for contribution recognition that enhances self-efficacy and professional identity. And it establishes foundations for growth and development that satisfy fundamental psychological needs. Healthcare-focused studies particularly emphasized how belonging fosters psychological safety and self-actualization, benefiting both employees and the populations they serve.

Conversely, low belonging generates negative well-being outcomes including burnout, workplace loneliness, anxiety, disengagement, and turnover intentions (Gui, 2025). Studies examining workplace loneliness in digitalized contexts revealed that while technology enhances efficiency and coordination, it may weaken interpersonal bonds and expand psychological distance, particularly for older workers facing additional digital barriers. Research on remote and hybrid work identified specific belonging challenges including social isolation, reduced informal interactions, and weakened team dynamics (Toscano et al., 2025). These findings suggest that organizational approaches to well-being must address belonging as a core mechanism rather than treating well-being interventions as separate from inclusion efforts.

4.2. Discussion

The meta-synthesis findings demonstrate that workplace belonging constitutes a complex social-psychological phenomenon formed through the interaction of organizational structures, inclusion practices, social identity recognition, psychological safety, leadership behaviors, organizational culture, and well-being experiences (Westover, 2025). Belonging emerges not as an individual attribute but as an outcome of organizational systems that create space for employees to be seen, heard, valued, and accepted. This systemic perspective challenges approaches that position belonging as employee responsibility and instead emphasizes organizational accountability for creating belonging-enabling conditions. The findings reveal that workplace inclusion functions as a structural prerequisite for belonging, establishing the organizational conditions necessary for identity recognition and psychological safety (Hassan, 2025). However, inclusion alone proves insufficient; employees must also perceive that their specific social identities are acknowledged and valued rather than merely tolerated or rendered invisible. Social identity recognition operates as the psychological dimension determining whether individuals experience the organization as hospitable to their

authentic selves or demanding of assimilation and identity suppression. This dual requirement suggests that organizations must pursue both structural equity and cultural authenticity simultaneously.

Psychological safety emerges as the critical mediating mechanism linking inclusion structures and identity recognition to belonging outcomes (Fahrizal et al., 2025). Employees who feel safe to express themselves, raise concerns, and take interpersonal risks can engage authentically with organizational membership, testing and confirming whether genuine belonging is possible. The bidirectional relationship between psychological safety and belonging creates reinforcing cycles safety enables belonging while belonging reinforces safety suggesting that early investments in psychological safety generate compounding returns as belonging develops over time. The findings highlight that inclusive leadership plays an essential role but cannot substitute for organizational systems (Purnama et al., 2025). Leaders who demonstrate openness, empathy, accessibility, and appreciation for diversity create microclimates of belonging within their teams. However, sustainable organization-wide belonging requires alignment between leader behaviors and organizational policies, culture, resource allocation, and communication systems. Organizations must therefore pursue leadership development alongside broader culture transformation, recognizing that neither alone produces lasting belonging.

The synthesis emphasizes that organizations seeking enhanced employee well-being cannot rely solely on individual-focused health programs, formal benefits, or diversity policies (Onwujei, 2025). Comprehensive wellbeing strategies must address the relational and structural conditions enabling belonging, including culture transformation, relationship quality enhancement, inclusive leadership development, safe communication systems, and equitable participation opportunities. Research on the oil and gas sector demonstrated that comprehensive wellbeing programs generate substantial improvements when they normalize mental health discourse, disrupt stigmatizing norms, and signal authentic organizational care effects achieved primarily through belonging mechanisms rather than programmatic offerings alone.

V. Conclusion

This systematic literature review with a qualitative meta-synthesis approach demonstrates that belonging at work constitutes a social-psychological phenomenon formed through the interaction of workplace inclusion, social identity recognition, psychological safety, inclusive leadership, social support, and organizational culture. Workplace belonging does not emerge automatically from formal organizational membership but develops through lived experiences demonstrating that employees are genuinely accepted, valued, heard, and recognized as meaningful members of the organizational community. The synthesis confirms that workplace inclusion serves as the foundational condition for belonging, while social identity recognition strengthens psychological safety and interpersonal connection. Belonging at work subsequently generates substantial positive effects on employee well-being, including enhanced engagement, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and sustainable employment relationships.

From a theoretical perspective, this review contributes by integrating previously fragmented literature on workplace inclusion, social identity, psychological safety, and employee well-being into a coherent conceptual framework explaining the formation of belonging at work. The proposed framework advances the understanding that belonging is not merely an individual psychological state but also an outcome of organizational systems, interpersonal relationships, and cultural contexts that collectively create belonging-enabling or belonging-inhibiting conditions. From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that organizations must develop inclusive cultures, strengthen inclusive leadership capabilities, create psychologically safe communication environments, address discrimination and bias, and ensure equitable participation opportunities for all employees. Human resource practitioners and organizational leaders can use these insights to design organizational policies and practices oriented not only toward productivity but also toward psychological well-being, social connection, and sustainable employment relationships.

This review acknowledges several limitations, including database coverage, publication timeframe, language restriction, and potential contextual variations across cultures, industries, and organizational types

represented in the analyzed studies. As a qualitative meta-synthesis, the findings are interpretive and do not establish causal relationships through statistical testing. Future research should empirically test the proposed conceptual framework through quantitative, mixed-method, or longitudinal designs. Particularly valuable directions include examining belonging at work within hybrid and remote work contexts, exploring belonging across generational cohorts with different workplace expectations, and investigating belonging experiences among employees who may be especially vulnerable to exclusion, including employees with disabilities, immigrants, and other marginalized groups. Such research will strengthen understanding of how organizations can create genuinely inclusive, healthy, and employee-centered work environments.

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