Research Article

The Impact of Reflective Leadership on Workplace Belongingness: A Gender-Inclusive Analysis Using a Convergent Mixed Methods Approach

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of reflective leadership on workplace belongingness, with a particular focus on gender differences. Through a combined approach of thematic and quantitative analyses, the study explores the factors that contribute to workplace belongingness and investigates potential variations in these factors based on gender. The findings reveal that reflective leadership positively influences workplace belongingness, with employees perceiving higher levels of reflective leadership in their leaders reporting higher levels of belongingness. The study identifies a safe environment, open communication, and challenging beliefs and assumptions as significant components of reflective leadership that impact workplace belongingness. The thematic analysis highlights the importance of psychological safety, effective communication, the value of work and purpose, and openness to change in fostering workplace belongingness. The quantitative analysis further reveals that the relationship between reflective leadership and workplace belongingness is stronger for female employees compared to male employees. The study emphasizes the need to consider gender-specific factors when promoting workplace belongingness, and it suggests strategies for organizations and leaders to create a positive work environment that enhances belongingness. These strategies include fostering a safe and supportive environment, promoting open communication, encouraging critical thinking, and implementing gender-specific initiatives and policies. The findings contribute to the existing literature by shedding light on the complex relationship between reflective leadership, workplace belongingness, and gender. Overall, promoting workplace belongingness contributes to improved employee well-being, satisfaction, engagement, and organizational performance.

Introduction

In today's dynamic and diverse organizational landscape, fostering workplace belongingness has become a critical objective for leaders seeking to enhance employee well-being, satisfaction, and productivity (Waller, 2020; Pathak and Srivastava, 2020). Workplace belongingness, characterized by employees' perception of being valued, accepted, and included within the organizational community, has been recognized as a key contributor to organizational success (Byrd, 2022). However, achieving and maintaining a sense of belonging can be challenging, particularly in complex work environments.

Reflective leadership, an approach that emphasizes self-awareness, critical thinking, and responsiveness to the needs and experiences of employees, has emerged as a potential strategy for enhancing workplace belongingness (Alvesson et al., 2016). Reflective leaders engage in introspection and actively seek feedback from employees, leading to a deeper understanding of individual and collective experiences and the creation of inclusive work environments. By promoting open communication, respecting diversity, and challenging beliefs and assumptions, reflective leaders foster psychological safety and a sense of belonging among employees (Edmondson & Roloff, 2008).

While the theoretical foundations suggest that reflective leadership can positively influence workplace belongingness, empirical evidence supporting this relationship remains limited. Moreover, the potential moderating role of gender in this relationship has received little attention in previous studies. Gender differences in leadership styles and the experience of workplace belongingness may shape how reflective leadership impacts employees' sense of belonging (Eagly & Johnson, 1990). Therefore, it is essential to explore how gender may interact with reflective leadership to influence workplace belongingness.

To address these research gaps, the present study employs a convergent mixed methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches, to comprehensively examine the relationship between reflective leadership, workplace belongingness, and the moderating role of gender. By considering gender as a moderator, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how the relationship between reflective leadership and workplace belongingness may vary based on gender differences.

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the association between reflective leadership, workplace belongingness, and the moderating role of gender. To achieve this objective, the study aims to address the following research questions:
1. What is the relationship between reflective leadership and workplace belongingness?
2. How do different components of reflective leadership (safe environment, open communication, aligning organizational mission, building confidence and self-esteem, respecting diversity, and challenging beliefs and assumptions) individually contribute to workplace belongingness?
3. Are there gender differences in the predictors of workplace belongingness within the framework of reflective leadership?

Research suggests that reflective leadership positively influences various outcomes, including employee satisfaction, engagement, and performance (Devecchi & Potter, 2020; Titus, 2022). However, the specific relationship between reflective leadership and workplace belongingness requires further examination. By exploring the mechanisms through which reflective leadership enhances workplace belongingness, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of leadership practices that foster a sense of belonging among employees.

Gender plays a significant role in leadership styles and the experience of workplace belongingness. Research has consistently found gender differences in leadership behaviors, with

women often displaying more transformational and inclusive leadership styles compared to men (Maida & Weber, 2022; Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2020). These gender differences may influence how reflective leadership practices are perceived and experienced by employees.

Moreover, gender-related factors, such as gender stereotypes and bias, can shape employees' experiences of workplace belongingness (Lawson et a., 2023, van Zyl, 2022). Women, for instance, may face unique challenges in male-dominated workplaces, which can impact their sense of belonging. Understanding how gender interacts with reflective leadership to influence workplace belongingness is crucial for developing gender-sensitive leadership approaches that foster inclusivity and belonging.

The Social Identity Theory, proposed by Tajfel et al. (1979), emphasizes the significance of social identification and group membership in shaping individuals' attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions. According to SIT, individuals strive to maintain a positive social identity by aligning themselves with groups that they perceive as favorable or beneficial. Workplace belongingness can be understood within the framework of SIT, as it involves individuals' identification and connection with their work organization and colleagues.

The core tenets of SIT can provide a foundation for examining the relationship between reflective leadership and workplace belongingness. Reflective leadership practices can influence employees' social identity within the organization by fostering a positive work environment, promoting inclusion, and enhancing interpersonal relationships.

By employing SIT as the base framework, this study can explore how reflective leadership practices influence employees' social identification with the organization and how this, in turn, affects their sense of belongingness. Additionally, SIT can also help to understand the potential role of gender in shaping individuals' social identities and experiences of workplace belongingness.

By incorporating the Social Identity Theory as the base framework, this study can provide valuable insights into the underlying psychological processes that contribute to workplace belongingness and how reflective leadership practices can be leveraged to enhance employees' sense of connection and belonging within the organization.
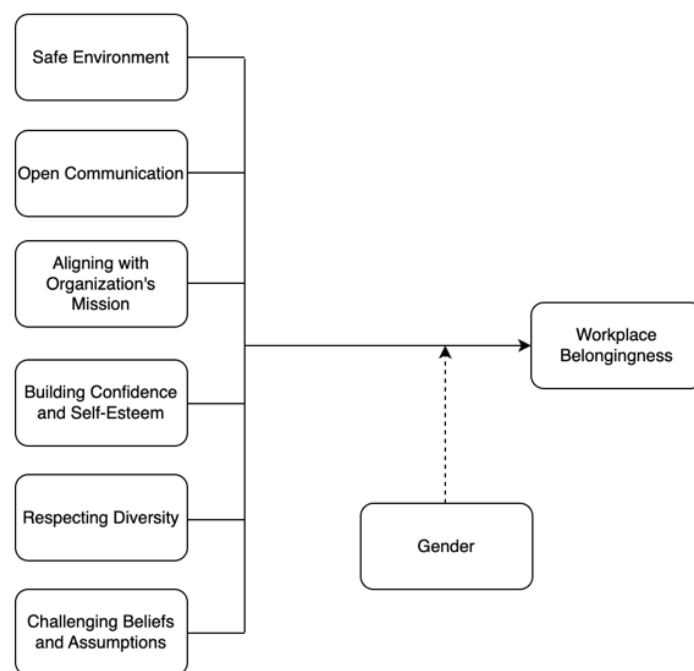
Conceptual Framework

Figure 1.

In this study, the conceptual framework posits that reflective leadership practices, including the creation of a safe environment, open communication, aligning organizational mission, building confidence and self-esteem, respecting diversity, and challenging beliefs and assumptions, contribute to fostering workplace belongingness.

The framework suggests that when leaders engage in reflective practices and create a supportive environment, employees are more likely to feel valued, accepted, and connected to the organization. This, in turn, enhances their sense of belongingness, leading to increased job satisfaction, engagement, and overall wellbeing.

The conceptual framework guides the selection of variables and hypotheses in this study, providing a theoretical lens to examine the relationship between reflective leadership and workplace belongingness. It also serves as a foundation for the data collection and analysis, enabling the investigation of the predictors of workplace belongingness and the potential gender differences in this relationship:

Hypothesis 1: Reflective leadership positively influences workplace belongingness, indicating that employees perceiving higher levels of reflective leadership in their leaders will report higher levels of workplace belongingness.

Hypothesis 2: Gender moderates the relationship between reflective leadership and workplace belongingness, suggesting that the strength and direction of the relationship will differ for male and female employees. Specifically, it is hypothesized that the relationship between reflective leadership and workplace belongingness will be stronger for female employees compared to male employees.

Hypothesis 3: The components of reflective leadership (i.e., safe environment, open communication, realizing the organization's mission, building confidence and self-esteem, respecting diversity, and challenging beliefs and assumptions) impact workplace belongingness. Specifically, it is hypothesized that these components will explain the underlying mechanisms through which reflective leadership promotes workplace belongingness.

Methods

The study adopts a convergent mixed methods research design, integrating quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, to comprehensively explore the relationship between reflective leadership, workplace belongingness, and the moderating role of gender. This design enables the integration of both quantitative and qualitative data, facilitating a comprehensive and robust analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

In this study, the measurement of workplace belongingness and reflective leadership was adapted from established scales in the literature. The Workplace Belongingness Scale used in this research was adapted from the work of Pradhan and Jena (2017). Pradhan and Jena (2017) developed a conceptual model and empirically validated a scale to measure employee performance in the workplace. The scale was modified and tailored to specifically assess the construct of workplace belongingness, considering its components such as safe environment, open communication, realizing the mission of the organization, building confidence and self-esteem, respecting diversity, and challenging beliefs and assumptions.

The Reflective Leadership Scale employed in this study was adapted from the research conducted by Egleston, Castelli, and Marx (2017). Egleston et al. developed, validated, and tested a model of reflective leadership. Their scale captures the various dimensions of reflective leadership, encompassing traits such as self-awareness, critical reflection, open-mindedness, and adaptability. To ensure its applicability to the current study's context of workplace belongingness, the reflective leadership scale was modified and customized accordingly.

The use of established scales adapted from previous research allows for the measurement of workplace belongingness and reflective leadership in a valid and reliable manner. By drawing upon the work of Pradhan & Jena (2017) and Egleston, Castelli, & Marx (2017), this study benefits from the theoretical foundations and empirical evidence supporting the measurement of these constructs. A pilot with 100 respondents coming from the target popu-

lation of workers was used to establish the reliability of the questionnaire. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were reported at 0.88 for the Reflective Leadership Scale and 0.81 for the Workplace Belongingness Scale, deeming the questionnaire reliable with an overall alpha value of 0.845 surpassing the 0.7 threshold for instruments with acceptable internal consistency (George & Mallery, 2016).

A total of 255 respondents are included in the survey, allowing for quantitative data analysis using appropriate statistical techniques. The qualitative portion of the study involves in-depth interviews with 32 individuals, aiming to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and insights related to workplace belongingness, reflective leadership, and gender. Thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative analysis technique, is employed to identify and to interpret recurring themes and patterns within the interview data.

The thematic analysis in this study followed the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data by thoroughly reading and immersing themselves in the transcribed interviews. Initial codes were then generated, where interesting features, patterns, and themes within the data were identified and labeled. In the subsequent phase, the researchers searched for themes by reviewing the codes and looking for connections and patterns across the data. This process involved identifying potential themes that captured important aspects of workplace belongingness and reflective leadership. The identified themes were then reviewed and defined, with relevant data extracts collated under each theme to refine their definitions and boundaries. The themes were carefully developed and refined through an iterative process, ensuring their coherence and distinctiveness from one another. Finally, the researchers wrote up the thematic analysis by integrating the identified themes into a cohesive narrative, supported by excerpts from the interview data and contextualized within the broader research context. By following this rigorous framework, the thematic analysis provided a robust and systematic exploration of the qualitative data.

Results and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of reflective leadership on workplace belongingness, with a focus on gender differences. A convergent mixed methods research design was employed, combining quantitative survey data and qualitative interviews. The quantitative analysis utilized multiple linear regression to explore the relationship between reflective leadership components (Safe Environment, Open Communication, Aligning Organizational Mission, Building Confidence and Self-esteem, Respecting Diversity, and Challenging Beliefs and Assumptions) and Workplace Belongingness. The sample consisted of 255 respondents, including both males and females. Additionally, separate regression analyses were conducted for males and females to examine any gender-specific effects.

Overall Model:

The results of the linear regression model for the overall sample were significant, $F(6,253) = 58.60$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .58$, indicating that approximately 58.15% of the variance in Workplace Belongingness can be explained by the six predictor variables. The individual contributions of the predictors were as follows:

➢ Safe Environment significantly predicted Workplace Belongingness, $B = 0.23$, $t(253) = 3.39$, $p < .001$. A one-unit increase in Safe Environment was associated with a 0.23 unit increase in Workplace Belongingness, highlighting the importance of providing a secure and supportive work environment for fostering belongingness.

➢ Open Communication significantly predicted Workplace Belongingness, $B = 0.31$, $t(253) = 3.66$, $p < .001$. A one-unit increase in Open Communication was associated with a 0.31 unit increase in Workplace Belongingness, underscoring the significance of transparent and effective communication in promoting a sense of belonging among employees.

➢ Aligning Organizational Mission did not significantly predict Workplace Belongingness, $B = 0.11$, $t(253) = 1.46$, $p = .146$. The results suggested that, based on this

sample, a one-unit increase in Aligning Organizational Mission did not have a significant effect on Workplace Belongingness. However, further investigation or considering additional factors may reveal different results.

➢ Building Confidence and Self-esteem did not significantly predict Workplace Belongingness, B = -0.08, t(253) = -1.11, p = .267. The findings indicated that a one-unit increase in Building Confidence and Self-esteem did not have a significant effect on Workplace Belongingness. It is essential to explore additional factors or conduct further research to gain a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between these variables.

➢ Respecting Diversity did not significantly predict Workplace Belongingness, B = -0.07, t(253) = -1.10, p = .272. Based on this sample, a one-unit increase in Respecting Diversity did not have a significant effect on Workplace Belongingness. However, fostering a culture of diversity and inclusion remains important for multiple reasons, beyond the scope of this study.

Challenging Beliefs and Assumptions significantly predicted Workplace Belongingness, B = 0.29, t(253) = 4.08, p < .001. A one-unit increase in Challenging Beliefs and Assumptions was associated with a 0.29 unit increase in Workplace Belongingness, highlighting the significance of encouraging critical thinking and promoting an environment that challenges assumptions and fosters growth.

Table 1. Summary of Regression Results Overall

Variable	*B*	*SE*	95.00% CI	β	*t*	*p*
(Intercept)	0.75	0.19	[0.38, 1.11]	0.00	3.99	< .001
Safe_Environment	0.23	0.07	[0.10, 0.37]	0.26	3.39	< .001
Open_Communication	0.31	0.08	[0.14, 0.48]	0.31	3.66	< .001
Aligning_Organizational_Mission	0.11	0.08	[-0.04, 0.27]	0.11	1.46	.146
Building_Confidence_and_Self_esteem	-0.08	0.07	[-0.22, 0.06]	-0.09	-1.11	.267
Respecting_Diversity	-0.07	0.07	[-0.21, 0.06]	-0.11	-1.10	.272
Challenging_Beliefs_and_Assumptions	0.29	0.07	[0.15, 0.43]	0.39	4.08	< .001

Note. Results: $F(6,253) = 58.60$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .58$

Unstandardized Regression Equation: Workplace_Belongingness = 0.75 + 0.23*Safe_Environment + 0.31*Open_Communication + 0.11*Aligning_Organizational_Mission - 0.08*Building_Confidence_and_Self_esteem - 0.07*Respecting_Diversity + 0.29*Challenging_Beliefs_and_Assumptions

Gender-Specific Results:

To further explore potential gender differences, separate regression analyses were conducted for males and females.

For females, the regression model was significant, F(6,142) = 49.19, p < .001, R2 = .68, indicating that approximately 67.52% of the variance in Workplace Belongingness could be explained by the predictors. The results indicated the following:

➢ Safe Environment significantly predicted Workplace Belongingness, B = 0.25, t(142) = 2.43, p = .016. A one-unit increase in Safe Environment was associated with a 0.25

unit increase in Workplace Belongingness among females.

➢ Open Communication significantly predicted Workplace Belongingness, B = 0.34, t(142) = 2.99, p = .003. A one-unit increase in Open Communication corresponded to a 0.34 unit increase in Workplace Belongingness for females.

➢ Aligning Organizational Mission, Building Confidence and Self-esteem, and Respecting Diversity did not significantly predict Workplace Belongingness for females.

➢ Challenging Beliefs and Assumptions significantly predicted Workplace Belongingness, B = 0.19, t(142) = 2.18, p = .031. A

one-unit increase in Challenging Beliefs and Assumptions was associated with a

0.19 unit increase in Workplace Belongingness for females.

Table 2. Summary of Regression Results for Females

Variable	B	SE	95.00% CI	β	t	p
(Intercept)	0.37	0.23	[-0.08, 0.82]	0.00	1.61	.109
Safe_Environment	0.25	0.10	[0.05, 0.45]	0.25	2.43	.016
Open_Communication	0.34	0.11	[0.12, 0.56]	0.34	2.99	.003
Aligning_Organizational_Mission	0.10	0.10	[-0.09, 0.30]	0.11	1.04	.299
Building_Confidence_and_Self_esteem	-0.02	0.09	[-0.19, 0.16]	-0.02	-0.17	.864
Respecting_Diversity	0.02	0.09	[-0.15, 0.18]	0.02	0.19	.847
Challenging_Beliefs_and_Assumptions	0.19	0.09	[0.02, 0.36]	0.25	2.18	.031

Note. Results: $F(6,142) = 49.19$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .68$

Unstandardized Regression Equation: Workplace_Belongingness = 0.37 + 0.25*Safe_Environment + 0.34*Open_Communication + 0.10*Aligning_Organizational_Mission - 0.02*Building_Confidence_and_Self_esteem + 0.02*Respecting_Diversity + 0.19*Challenging_Beliefs_and_Assumptions

For males, the regression model was significant, F(6,104) = 17.39, p < .001, R2 = .50, indicating that approximately 50.09% of the variance in Workplace Belongingness could be explained by the predictors. The results indicated:

➤ Safe Environment significantly predicted Workplace Belongingness, B = 0.25, t(104) = 2.47, p = .015. A one-unit increase in Safe Environment was associated with a 0.25

unit increase in Workplace Belongingness among male employees.
➤ Open Communication did not significantly predict Workplace Belongingness for males.
➤ Aligning Organizational Mission, Building Confidence and Self-esteem, Respecting Diversity, and Challenging Beliefs and Assumptions did not significantly predict Workplace Belongingness for males.

Table 3. Summary of Regression Results for Males

Variable	B	SE	95.00% CI	β	t	p
(Intercept)	1.27	0.32	[0.64, 1.90]	0.00	3.99	< .001
Safe_Environment	0.25	0.10	[0.05, 0.46]	0.31	2.47	.015
Open_Communication	0.24	0.13	[-0.02, 0.50]	0.24	1.81	.073
Aligning_Organizational_Mission	0.06	0.12	[-0.19, 0.31]	0.06	0.49	.624
Building_Confidence_and_Self_esteem	-0.10	0.12	[-0.34, 0.13]	-0.12	-0.88	.380
Respecting_Diversity	-0.21	0.11	[-0.43, 0.01]	-0.31	-1.89	.061
Challenging_Beliefs_and_Assumptions	0.42	0.12	[0.18, 0.65]	0.57	3.52	< .001

Note. Results: $F(6,104) = 17.39$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .50$

Unstandardized Regression Equation: Workplace_Belongingness = 1.27 + 0.25*Safe_Environment + 0.24*Open_Communication + 0.06*Aligning_Organizational_Mission - 0.10*Building_Confidence_and_Self_esteem - 0.21*Respecting_Diversity + 0.42*Challenging_Beliefs_and_Assumptions

In summary, the overall regression analysis revealed that Safe Environment, Open Communication, and Challenging Beliefs and Assumptions were significant predictors of Workplace Belongingness. However, the importance of these predictors varied when examining gender-specific effects. For females, Safe Environment, Open Communication, and Challenging Beliefs and Assumptions were significant predictors, while for males, only Safe Environment was a significant predictor. These findings highlight the need for organizations to consider gender-specific factors when designing and implementing strategies to enhance workplace belongingness.

For the qualitative component of the study, in-depth interviews were conducted with purposefully selected informants who did not participate in the survey portion. The selection of informants aimed to ensure a diverse and balanced representation. Special attention was given to achieving a good distribution of informants based on gender and industry affiliation. A total of 32 informants participated in the interviews, with an equal split between male and female participants. Each industry category, including education, food and beverage, manufacturing, banking and finance, real estate, and retail, was represented by four informants, while the remaining eight informants came from various other industries.

To ensure a comprehensive understanding of workplace belongingness, informants were selected with a range of tenure in their respective organizations. The minimum tenure requirement for informants was set at 2 years, while the maximum was 30 years. On average, the informants had been employed by their organizations for 12.27 years, with a standard deviation of 10.24, indicating a diverse range of experiences and perspectives.

Following the interviews, a rigorous thematic analysis was conducted to identify common patterns and themes related to workplace belongingness. The analysis involved a systematic and iterative process of coding and categorizing the qualitative data obtained from the interviews. Through this process, the themes were identified:

Theme #1: The Significance of a Safe Environment for Workplace Belongingness

During the thematic analysis, a prominent theme that emerged from the qualitative interviews was the critical role of a safe environment in fostering a sense of belongingness among employees. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of feeling safe and secure within the workplace as a fundamental factor for developing a strong sense of belongingness.

The safe environment theme encompassed several sub-themes, including physical safety, psychological safety, and emotional well-being. Participants highlighted the need for physical safety measures such as adequate infrastructure, ergonomic workspaces, and proper safety protocols to ensure a secure working environment. The physical aspect of safety was mentioned by female informants but not by males, indicating a gendered perspective on this dimension. As one respondent expressed, "The first level of belongingness would probably be secured when there's physical safety. How will I feel that I belong when I feel that I am physically molested or harassed at work? I can never feel that I belong when I don't feel safe in the first place."

Psychological safety emerged as another crucial component of a safe environment for workplace belongingness. Participants emphasized the need for an inclusive and supportive organizational culture that fosters psychological safety, enabling individuals to freely express ideas, voice concerns, and engage in open communication without fear of judgment or retribution. Both male and female informants expressed the significance of having a voice and feeling that their opinions matter in the decision-making processes of the organization. A male employee articulated this sentiment, stating, "It's important that even if we are just lower-ranked employees, somehow we have a voice if not in policymaking, at least in expressing how we feel about the policies implemented, especially the new ones. Otherwise, how else will we feel that we actually belong to the company?"

Furthermore, the theme of emotional well-being emerged as a vital element within the safe environment category. Participants shared

experiences where their organizations provided emotional support during challenging times, fostering a sense of belongingness and loyalty. The presence of supportive relationships, empathy, and respect within the workplace was highly valued. Participants believed that an emotionally supportive environment enhances belongingness by creating a sense of care, trust, and camaraderie among team members. One informant, who had been with their company for 22 years, expressed the significance of emotional support, stating, "I felt that I belong more with the company when my bosses and co-workers went to the wake of my husband during work hours. That's when I felt that I really belong to my company."

The emergence of the safe environment theme underscores the crucial role it plays in cultivating workplace belongingness. Organizations that prioritize and promote physical safety, psychological safety, and emotional well-being are more likely to create an environment where employees feel secure, valued, and connected. Recognizing the importance of a safe environment can guide organizations in implementing policies, practices, and interventions that enhance workplace belongingness and create a positive work environment conducive to employee well-being and productivity.

Theme #2: The Value of Communication in Fostering Workplace Belongingness

A second prominent theme that emerged from the thematic analysis is the significance of communication in cultivating a sense of belongingness within the workplace. The findings revealed that effective communication practices contribute to a greater sense of belonging for employees, regardless of their gender.

Both male and female participants expressed the importance of clear and well-communicated policies and directions. However, a subtle divergence emerged in the preferred communication styles between the genders. While males indicated satisfaction with verbal communication, females expressed a preference for more detailed and written forms of communication. This could involve printed and posted notices or email communication. Adapting communication strategies to cater to these preferences can enhance engagement and inclusivity within the organization.

Furthermore, participants emphasized the value of being able to approach their superiors with questions or concerns related to projects. While the physical accessibility of the boss's office door may hold symbolic importance, what truly matters is the willingness of superiors to actively listen and address employee feedback. Participants highlighted that having superiors who are open to receiving and addressing concerns fosters a sense of trust, validation, and belongingness.

Effective communication practices create an environment where employees feel heard, respected, and valued. When employees are kept well-informed, have their questions answered, and feel that their opinions matter, they are more likely to develop a sense of belonging to the organization. This sense of belongingness contributes to increased job satisfaction, motivation, and overall well-being. It creates a supportive work environment where individuals feel connected to their colleagues and the organization's mission.

By recognizing the importance of tailored communication approaches and encouraging open dialogue, organizations can strengthen workplace belongingness. Investing in effective communication strategies that accommodate diverse communication preferences and foster a culture of active listening can significantly enhance employees' sense of belonging and ultimately contribute to a more engaged and cohesive workforce.

Theme #3: The Value of Work and Purpose in Fostering Workplace Belongingness through Communication

A third significant theme that emerged from the thematic analysis is the importance of individuals perceiving their work as valuable and having a sense of purpose within the organization. The findings indicated that while the desirability of an easy task was acknowledged, a substantial proportion of participants, including 56% of males and 75% of females, felt a sense of belonging when they believed their work was valued, contributed to the organization, and provided them with a clear sense of purpose.

The participants highlighted that feeling valued within the organization played a crucial role in fostering workplace belongingness. When employees perceive that their efforts are recognized and appreciated, it reinforces their sense of worth and connection to the organization. Notably, for male participants, receiving applause and appreciation for their work had a particularly profound impact on their sense of belonging. These acts of recognition and affirmation affirmed their competence and affirmed their alignment with the organization's goals and values.

Moreover, participants expressed that having work that contributes to the overall objectives and success of the organization enhances their sense of purpose. When individuals understand how their specific roles and responsibilities fit into the larger picture, they experience a deeper connection to their work and a stronger sense of belongingness. This sense of purpose provides them with a meaningful context for their contributions, fostering a greater commitment and dedication to their work.

Effective communication plays a vital role in cultivating an environment where individuals perceive the value of their work and understand their purpose within the organization. Through clear and transparent communication channels, employees can gain insight into how their contributions impact the organization's goals and objectives. Communication can also serve as a platform for recognizing and appreciating employees' efforts, reinforcing their sense of value and bolstering their belongingness.

When individuals feel that their work is valued, recognized, and aligned with the organization's purpose, they are more likely to experience a sense of belonging within the workplace. This sense of belongingness leads to increased job satisfaction, engagement, and overall well-being. It fosters a supportive and cohesive work environment where individuals feel motivated, fulfilled, and connected to their colleagues and the organization.

To promote workplace belongingness, organizations should prioritize effective communication that emphasizes the value of employees' work and provides a clear sense of purpose. By creating a culture that celebrates and appreciates individual contributions, organizations can foster a stronger sense of belonging and fulfillment among their workforces.

Theme #4: Openness to Change of team members.

The fourth and final theme that emerged from the thematic analysis is the openness of individuals to change, which significantly contributes to workplace belongingness. According to the participants, a sense of belongingness within the organization is influenced by the relationships among employees, guided by the leadership of supervisors, and the flexibility of organizational policies. Participants highlighted the importance of open communication, collaboration, and adaptability in fostering a sense of belongingness.

Participants emphasized the significance of working well with their peers and having a positive relationship with their colleagues. Despite differences in beliefs, strategies, and approaches to their work, participants described the ability to work as a team and establish a collective strategy as a key aspect of fostering workplace belongingness. They attributed this sense of belongingness to the openness of team members to alternative perspectives, active listening, and the willingness to engage in constructive dialogue. As one informant expressed, "I believe it's not easy to achieve this work dynamics, and this is why I feel I belong to the organization."

The importance of openness to change and collaboration was particularly emphasized by female participants, although it was valued by individuals of both sexes. Female participants highlighted the value of flexibility among team members and leaders. They expressed appreciation for the ability to challenge plans and strategies as a team, including providing feedback to superiors and engaging in open discussions. This collaborative and inclusive approach, where differing viewpoints are acknowledged and respected, fostered a sense of belongingness. As one female informant stated, "I think that's really important; otherwise, we will always be in a quandary, and there won't be a sense of belongingness."

Effective communication plays a vital role in promoting openness to change and

collaboration, thereby contributing to workplace belongingness. When communication channels are open, transparent, and supportive, employees feel comfortable expressing their opinions, challenging ideas, and engaging in constructive dialogue. This open communication fosters trust, mutual respect, and a sense of psychological safety, creating an environment where individuals feel valued and connected.

Organizations should strive to create a culture that encourages openness to change and collaboration through effective communication practices. This includes fostering an environment where employees feel comfortable sharing their perspectives, ideas, and concerns. Leaders should promote a culture of active listening, where diverse viewpoints are considered, and constructive feedback is welcomed.

By embracing and valuing open communication and collaboration, organizations can cultivate a sense of belongingness and create a positive work environment where individuals thrive.

Therefore, the openness of individuals to change, facilitated by effective communication and collaboration, plays a pivotal role in fostering workplace belongingness. When employees feel that their voices are heard, their opinions are valued, and they are part of a supportive and inclusive team, they develop a strong sense of belongingness. By prioritizing open communication and promoting collaboration, organizations can create an environment that enhances workplace belongingness, leading to increased engagement, satisfaction, and overall organizational success.

Summary of Decisions Made:

Hypothesis	Quantitative Analysis	Qualitative Analysis	Decision
Hypothesis 1: Reflective leadership positively influences workplace belongingness, indicating that employees perceiving higher levels of reflective leadership in their leaders will report higher levels of workplace belongingness.	The analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between reflective leadership and workplace belongingness. This suggests that when leaders engage in reflective practices such as self-awareness, introspection, and learning from experiences, it has a positive impact on employees' sense of belongingness in the workplace.	Based on the attributes of reflective leadership, it was revealed in the informants' interview that at least four contribute to workplace belongingness. These are safe environment, communication, alignment to mission and openness to change of members.	Supported
Hypothesis 2: Gender moderates the relationship between reflective leadership and workplace belongingness, suggesting that the strength and direction of the	The gender-specific analyses revealed that the relationship between reflective leadership and workplace belongingness is stronger for female employees compared to male employees.	The females feel more strongly about certain aspects of reflective leadership than males. This is especially true for openness to change, which is also challenging beliefs and	Supported

relationship will differ for male and female employees.		assumptions, and valuing communication.	
Hypothesis 3: The components of reflective leadership (i.e., safe environment, open communication, realizing the organization's mission, building confidence and self-esteem, respecting diversity, and challenging beliefs and assumptions) impact workplace belongingness.	Among the components of reflective leadership, the analysis revealed that safe environment, open communication, and challenging beliefs and assumptions significantly impact workplace belongingness.	Among the components of reflective leadership, the analysis revealed that safe environment, open communication, aligning to company's mission, and challenging beliefs and assumptions impact workplace belongingness.	Partially Supported; Only safe environment, open communication, and challenging beliefs and assumptions significantly impact workplace belongingness according to both analyses.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to examine the effects of reflective leadership on workplace belongingness, with a particular focus on gender differences. Through a combination of thematic and quantitative analyses, the study provided valuable insights into the factors that contribute to workplace belongingness and shed light on the potential variations in these factors based on gender.

The thematic analysis identified several key themes that emerged from the participants' narratives. The first theme highlighted the importance of a Safe Environment in fostering workplace belongingness. The findings aligned with previous literature, emphasizing the significance of psychological safety and supportive organizational climates in promoting employee well-being and engagement (Geisler, Berthelsen, & Muhonen, 2019; Hau, 2023). A safe and supportive work environment instills confidence and security in employees, creating a sense of belongingness.

The second theme that emerged from the thematic analysis was Open Communication. The participants emphasized the role of effective communication in fostering a sense of belonging in the workplace. Open communication channels enable employees to express their ideas, concerns, and perspectives, creating an inclusive and connected environment. This finding resonated with previous research highlighting the importance of communication in promoting workplace belongingness (Enwereuzor, 2021).

The third theme that emerged from the thematic analysis was the Value of Work and Purpose. Participants expressed that feeling that their work had value and purpose within the organization contributed to their sense of belongingness. They found fulfillment and belongingness when their work contributed to the organization's goals and when they felt that they had a meaningful role to play. This theme underscored the significance of aligning individual values and purpose with organizational objectives to enhance workplace belongingness. The same has been revealed in literature from the works of Byrd (2022) and Qin et al. (2022).

The fourth and final theme identified in the thematic analysis was the Openness to Change. Participants expressed that workplace belongingness was also a product of the relationships among employees, guided by leadership and organizational policies. The willingness to embrace change, challenge assumptions, and maintain open minds played a crucial role in creating a sense of belongingness. This theme highlighted the importance of fostering a culture that values diverse perspectives, encourages dialogue, and promotes continuous

improvement; thus, concurring with current literature (Katsaros, 2022).

Building upon the insights gained from the thematic analysis, the quantitative analysis further examined the predictors of workplace belongingness and explored potential gender differences. The results revealed that Safe Environment, Open Communication, and Challenging Beliefs and Assumptions significantly contributed to workplace belongingness. These findings were consistent with the thematic analysis, validating the importance of these factors in fostering belongingness.

The gender-specific analyses provided additional insights into the relationship between reflective leadership and workplace belongingness. The results indicated that the predictors of workplace belongingness varied for males and females. While Safe Environment, Open Communication, and Challenging Beliefs and Assumptions significantly predicted workplace belongingness for females, only Safe Environment had a significant effect for males. These gender-specific findings highlighted the need to consider gender-specific factors when promoting workplace belongingness.

The gender-specific findings contribute to the existing literature by emphasizing the potential influence of societal and cultural factors on individuals' experiences and perceptions of belongingness in the workplace. The variations in the significance of specific leadership behaviors based on gender underscore the complexity of the relationship between reflective leadership and workplace belongingness.

Contrary to initial hypotheses, the predictors of Aligning Organizational Mission, Building Confidence and Self-esteem, and Respecting Diversity did not significantly predict workplace belongingness. These findings differed from some previous studies, suggessting the need for further exploration of sample characteristics, measurement instruments, and contextual factors.

The findings of this study have several implications for organizations and leaders seeking to enhance workplace belongingness. Creating a safe and supportive environment, fostering open communication, and encouraging critical thinking are essential in promoting employees' sense of belongingness. Leaders should prioritize building psychological safety, establishing clear communication channels, and creating opportunities for employees to contribute meaningfully to the organization's goals.

The gender-specific findings call for a more nuanced understanding of how gender influences the relationship between reflective leadership and workplace belongingness. Organizations should consider gender-specific factors when designing and implementing strategies to promote workplace belongingness. This includes recognizing and addressing the unique experiences, needs, and expectations of male and female employees.

To create a safe and supportive environment, organizations can implement policies and practices that prioritize employee well-being, respect, and fairness. This can involve fostering a culture of inclusivity and diversity, where employees feel valued and respected regardless of their gender, background, or beliefs. Leaders should actively promote open communication by encouraging feedback, active listening, and providing platforms for employees to express their thoughts and ideas. Regular team meetings, town halls, and feedback sessions can facilitate open dialogue and ensure that employees feel heard and included in decision-making processes.

Furthermore, leaders should emphasize the importance of challenging beliefs and assumptions within the organization. By encouraging critical thinking and a growth mindset, employees can explore alternative perspectives, question existing practices, and contribute to the continuous improvement of the organization. Creating a culture that values intellectual curiosity and learning promotes a sense of empowerment and ownership among employees, enhancing their sense of belongingness.

The gender-specific findings highlight the need to consider the unique experiences and needs of male and female employees. Organizations can implement gender-specific initiatives and policies that address the specific challenges and opportunities faced by each gender. For example, mentorship and sponsorship programs can provide support and guidance for female employees, helping them navigate potential barriers and advance in their careers. On

the other hand, initiatives that promote work-life balance and flexible work arrangements can benefit both male and female employees, ensuring that they feel supported in managing their personal and professional responsibilities.

Leaders and managers play a crucial role in creating a sense of belongingness in the workplace. They should lead by example, demonstrating empathy, respect, and fairness in their interactions with employees. By fostering an inclusive and collaborative work culture, leaders can empower employees to contribute their unique skills and perspectives, further enhancing their sense of belongingness.

However, it is important to recognize that promoting workplace belongingness is an ongoing process. Organizations should regularly assess and evaluate the effectiveness of their initiatives and strategies in fostering belongingness. This can be done through employee surveys, focus groups, and performance evaluations that specifically measure employees' sense of belongingness. Feedback from employees should be actively sought and used to make necessary adjustments and improvements to the organizational culture and practices.

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the factors that influence workplace belongingness and the role of reflective leadership in fostering a sense of belongingness among employees. Creating a safe and supportive environment, fostering open communication, challenging beliefs and assumptions, and considering gender-specific factors are crucial in promoting workplace belongingness. By prioritizing these aspects, organizations can cultivate a positive work environment where employees feel valued, included, and connected to the organization's mission. Ultimately, fostering workplace belongingness contributes to improved employee well-being, satisfaction, engagement, and organizational performance.

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