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# Belongingness, uniqueness, and balance: how inclusion shapes SME work–life outcomes

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## ABSTRACT

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) face unique challenges in supporting employee work–life balance (WLB) due to limited formal Human Resource (HR) structures. This study uses conservation of resources theory (COR) to examine how work group inclusion (WGI), as operationalized through belongingness and uniqueness, shapes WLB outcomes, including work-to-life and life-to-work enrichment and conflict. Drawing on COR theory, 925 SME employees from New Zealand and the United Kingdom completed surveys, with structural equation modelling applied to test hypothesized relationships. Results indicate that belongingness enhances work-to-life enrichment and reduces work-to-life conflict, while uniqueness promotes life-to-work enrichment and mitigates life-to-work conflict. These findings highlight that everyday inclusion practices act as resources for managing work–life boundaries. The study underscores implications for hybrid and remote work arrangements, leadership in team building, and cross-cultural application. Simply, supporting belongingness and uniqueness differentially provides SMEs with a low-cost strategy to enhance employee well-being and sustain performance.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Belongingness; Conservation of Resources Theory (COR); Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SME); Work Group Inclusion (WGI); Work–Life Balance (WLB); Uniqueness

## Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a critical role in national economies yet face unique challenges in supporting employee work–life balance (WLB) (Haar & Brougham, 2022; OECD, 2017). They tend to be independently owned and operated businesses that employ fewer than 250 people resulting in limited HR capacity, informal management practices, and resource constraints, meaning they often rely more heavily on the quality of workplace relationships than on formal policies (Johnston et al., 2022). In this context, work group inclusion (WGI), operationalized by employees' sense of belongingness and uniqueness within their teams, may be especially influential in shaping WLB outcomes. For SME leaders, who may lack the resources to implement formal WLB initiatives, understanding how everyday inclusion practices within teams affect enrichment and conflict across the domains of work and life is critical for sustaining both employee well-being and business performance.

Research on work–life balance (WLB) increasingly explores the factors that support or undermine employees' capacity to balance, integrate, and enrich work and personal life domains (Kossek & Ollier-Malaterre, 2020; Shockley et al., 2017). However, the specific role of WGI in shaping WLB outcomes remains insufficiently explored, and little is known about how key WGI components – belongingness and uniqueness – relate to WLB dimensions (Ashikali et al., 2021; Atiku et al., 2024).

In this study, belongingness is defined as employees' perception of being accepted and valued within their work group, while uniqueness refers to the ability to express distinctive perspectives that are recognized and respected by others (Chung et al., 2020). This research is motivated by the observation that although prior studies have acknowledged the broader work environment as instrumental to employee satisfaction and well-being (Bardoel, 2016, 2010; Syrek et al., 2022), the distinct effects of belongingness and

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uniqueness on WLB outcomes – specifically, work-to-life and life-to-work enrichment and conflict – have received limited empirical attention (Eshete & Birbirssa, 2024).

While WLB has been widely studied in larger organizations, little is known about how WGI affects WLB outcomes in SMEs, where employees often work in close-knit teams and policies around inclusion or flexibility are less formalized. This represents a significant gap in the literature, especially considering current organizational emphasis on diversity and inclusion, alongside the rise of remote and flexible work arrangements that reshape how employees experience connection and individuality at work (Chung et al., 2020; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). This gap is pressing in the post-pandemic context, where blurred boundaries and increasing diversity make the dynamics of belongingness and uniqueness especially salient for SME workforces (Adisa et al., 2022). The need to explore this further is underscored by the scarcity of empirical studies examining how belongingness and uniqueness affect work-to-life and life-to-work outcomes, particularly within the SME sector (Johnston et al., 2022). Given increasing challenges in managing blurred work-life boundaries, especially in post-pandemic contexts, this inquiry is particularly timely (Adisa et al., 2022).

Although work-life balance in SMEs has received less scholarly attention than in large organizations, a small but growing body of research has begun to examine how SME contexts shape work-life experiences. While the literature on work-life balance in SMEs is less developed than in large organizations, existing studies highlight that SME employees' work-life experiences are shaped primarily through informal, relational, and cultural mechanisms rather than formal HR policies. For instance, Cegarra-Navarro et al. (2016) show that organizational unlearning in SMEs can support work-life balance by reducing entrenched work practices that drain employee resources. Lamane-Harim et al. (2023) similarly demonstrate that a work-life balance supportive culture enhances employee retention in SMEs, underscoring the central role of shared norms and managerial behaviours. More recently, Hernández Martínez and Chunga-Liu (2024) identify work-life balance as a key mechanism linking flexible work arrangements to job happiness, with gender shaping these relationships.

Building on this emerging SME-focused WLB literature, the present study shifts attention from organizational-level structures to work-group inclusion as a relational resource. While prior research emphasizes flexibility, culture, and learning processes, little is known about how employees' day-to-day experiences of belongingness and uniqueness within work groups shape work-to-life and life-to-work enrichment and conflict. Given the centrality of close-knit teams in SMEs, examining work group inclusion offers a theoretically grounded and practically relevant extension to existing SME WLB research.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating the influence of WGI – conceptualized as a two-dimensional construct comprising belongingness and uniqueness – on four distinct WLB outcomes: work-to-life enrichment (WLE), work-to-life conflict (WLC), life-to-work enrichment (LWE), and life-to-work conflict (LWC) (Frone, 2003; Gragnano et al., 2020). WLC refers to the negative spillover of work demands into personal life, whereas WLE captures the positive transfer of experiences from work to personal domains. Conversely, LWC encompasses the disruptive impact of personal life responsibilities on work performance, while LWE describes how personal experiences can enhance performance or satisfaction at work.

By analysing data from SMEs in New Zealand and the United Kingdom, both countries with similar socio-political environments but distinct traditions in inclusion and flexible work practices, this study highlights how context shapes the role of WGI in supporting WLB. The sample comprises 925 valid responses from employees working in SMEs across both countries. Participants, drawn from diverse industries and demographic profiles through panel surveys, provide a robust dataset for comparative analysis (Bosco & Valeriani, 2024). Structural equation modelling (SEM) is used to evaluate the relationships between the two WGI components (belongingness and uniqueness) and the four identified WLB outcomes.

The study is guided by two research questions:

RQ1: What is the effect of belongingness on work-to-life enrichment and conflict (WLE and WLC)?

RQ2: What is the effect of uniqueness on life-to-work enrichment and conflict (LWE and LWC)?

This research makes three contributions. First, it generates context-specific insights into how WGI influences WLB in SMEs, providing evidence from over 900 employees across New Zealand and the UK. Second, it introduces a two-component operationalization of WGI into the WLB literature, responding to calls for deeper investigation of how inclusion and team dynamics shape employee well-being (Ashikali et al., 2021).

Third, it presents the first empirical analysis explicitly linking belongingness and uniqueness to enrichment and conflict across both work-to-life and life-to-work domains.

Overall, the findings provide meaningful implications for human resource management, particularly in helping SME leaders design inclusive environments that simultaneously enhance WGI and WLB. By doing so, this research extends theoretical and practical understanding of how individual-level inclusion experiences intersect with work-life outcomes, supporting efforts to foster sustainable and supportive workplace cultures.

## **Theoretical framework**

This study uses the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) to explore how WGI influences WLB outcomes. COR theory posits that individuals strive to obtain, retain, and protect their valuable resources, which include objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are central to their well-being (Hobfoll, 2001). Within COR theory, Principle 2 emphasizes that individuals actively invest their existing resources to prevent further loss, recover from depletion, and generate new gains, highlighting resource investment as a central mechanism through which employees manage work-life demands (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Based on this principle, this study hypothesizes that when employees perceive a high level of inclusion within their work groups, characterized by belongingness and uniqueness, they will experience a gain in these resources. This increased resource base is expected to enhance their ability to achieve WLE while minimizing WLC (Haar & Brougham, 2022). Thus, WGI is proposed to act as a vital resource, enabling employees to better manage work-life stressors, thereby enhancing overall well-being (Haar & Harris, 2023). Organizational readiness to foster such inclusive climates is an important contextual factor, as highlighted by prior work on change readiness and its impact on resource mobilization (Cinite et al., 2009).

## **Crossover model and hypotheses**

COR theory introduces the concept of resource exchange through the crossover model (Bolger et al., 1989), where job stress or well-being is shared and transferred between individuals within the same social environment. Westman (2001) identified three crossover processes: direct crossover (where emotions transfer through empathy), indirect crossover (where experiences transfer via intervening factors such as coping mechanisms), and spurious crossover (where shared external challenges cause similar feelings in individuals). While the initial focus of the crossover concept was on negative experiences, Westman (2001) extended it to positive experiences, suggesting that both negative and positive resources can spread between individuals. This framework provides a basis for understanding how the resources associated with WGI, such as belongingness and uniqueness, can crossover from the work domain to influence WLB outcomes.

## **Belongingness and WLE**

Belongingness within a work group is an essential component of WGI, characterized by the perception that one is valued and supported by fellow group members, a condition shown to enhance positive team identity and commitment (Ellemers et al., 2013; Shore et al., 2011). According to COR theory, the sense of belongingness serves as a critical psychological resource that employees can leverage to enhance their well-being (Hobfoll, 1989). The positive crossover effect occurs as the emotional and instrumental support gained through belongingness facilitates better management of work and life responsibilities, contributing to WLE (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). However, the strength of this relationship may depend on moderating factors such as organizational support and job autonomy. For instance, organizational support, in the form of flexible work policies or manager encouragement, can provide additional resources that amplify the positive effects of belongingness on WLE (Haar & Brougham, 2022). Similarly, job autonomy, which allows employees more control over their tasks and work environment, may enhance the positive effects by providing them with greater flexibility to explore new approaches (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). These conceptual associations lead us to posit our first hypothesis:

H1: Belongingness has a significant positive relationship with WLE.

## ***Belongingness and WLC***

Belongingness is also hypothesized to have a significant impact on reducing WLC. According to COR theory, the resources provided by a strong sense of belongingness can buffer against the stressors that often lead to WLC (Hobfoll, 2001). Employees who feel connected to their work group may focus more on work responsibilities due to emotional attachment, which can lead to conflict as work demands intrude on personal time (Chung et al., 2020). Despite this, research suggests that the emotional and social support gained through belongingness can also enhance coping mechanisms, thereby mitigating the negative effects of increased work demands on personal life (Brough et al., 2014; Hahn & Dormann, 2013).

The extent to which belongingness reduces WLC may be influenced by key moderators, such as organizational support and job flexibility (Johnston et al., 2022). For instance, employees who experience high levels of organizational support, such as flexible working arrangements or supportive supervisors, may find it easier to manage the potential conflicts that arise from their attachment to work groups, as the resources provided by the organization help buffer against these stressors (Haar & Brougham, 2022). Job autonomy also allows employees to adjust their schedules, which can help them manage conflicts arising from their attachment to the work group (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). These conceptual associations lead us to posit our second hypothesis:

H2: Belongingness has a significant negative relationship with WLC.

## ***Uniqueness and LWE***

The uniqueness component of WGI refers to the extent to which employees feel that their distinct perspectives and contributions are valued by their peers (Shore et al., 2011). From the perspective of COR theory, the ability to express one's uniqueness within a group serves as a valuable resource that can enhance an employee's sense of self-worth and job satisfaction, which may crossover positively into their personal life (Hobfoll et al., 2018). A supportive workplace culture that encourages individuals to bring their full, unique selves to work is expected to enhance the positive effects of uniqueness on LWE. In such environments, employees may experience greater fulfilment in their personal lives, which can then positively influence their work life (Chung et al., 2020). These conceptual associations lead us to posit our third hypothesis:

H3: Uniqueness has a significant positive relationship with LWE.

## ***Uniqueness and LWC***

Recognizing an employee's uniqueness within their work group can help reduce LWC. According to COR theory, when employees bring their full selves to work and feel appreciated for their individuality, they are less likely to experience internal conflict between their work and personal identities (Hobfoll, 1989). This alignment between personal and work identities reduces the likelihood of conflict arising from role incompatibility. The freedom to express uniqueness in the workplace may reduce the stress that contributes to LWC, as employees feel more comfortable and supported in their work environment (Chung et al., 2020). Managerial support plays a critical role in fostering an environment where employees feel safe to express their uniqueness, which can help buffer against stressors that often lead to conflict between work and personal life (Hobfoll et al., 2018). The crossover of positive experiences between work and life due to this uniqueness is expected to decrease LWC. These conceptual associations lead us to posit our fourth hypothesis:

H4: Uniqueness has a significant negative relationship with LWC.

## **Method**

### ***Sample and participants***

The study focused on NZ and UK SMEs, using employees across a range of industries and geographic locations. The timing of the data collection surveys was aligned with the autumn seasons in each domain, March and May 2023 in NZ, and September and October 2023 in the UK. This timing was chosen to avoid

any vagaries in working practices due to other forces such as school holidays, with autumn signifying the return to 'standard' working conditions in both countries.

Data was sourced from Qualtrics survey panels, as there are no open databases holding NZ or UK firm performance data. Qualtrics data collection is focused on representative data across NZ and the UK by location. The survey included a screening question ensuring respondents were working a minimum of 20 h per week for an SME in NZ or the UK at the time of the survey. Qualtrics responses are confidential, and the system removes respondents who complete the survey too slowly or fast, while ensuring multiple responses are not possible. Such panels have become more common (e.g. Haar et al., 2021a, 2021b) and a recent meta-analysis by Shockley et al. (2017) showed that this type of panel data was no different from data sourced through conventional means (e.g. mail survey).

NZ and the UK were chosen as the two contexts for this study as they met several criteria. First, SMEs are a critical component of the economy in both NZ and the UK, contributing significantly to employment and economic growth (Haar & Kelly, 2024; OECD, 2017). Additionally, in both constituencies, SMEs face numerous challenges implementing robust WLB policies due to limited resources and the pressures of maintaining competitiveness (Biron & van Veldhoven, 2016), and there are similar overarching legislative frameworks in both contexts. Finally, both countries have made significant strides in promoting flexible work arrangements and inclusive work environments, with NZ being recognized for its progressive WLB policies (Haar, Russo, et al., 2019). As such, when examining how WGI, characterized by belongingness and uniqueness, affects WLB outcomes in SMEs, we can assume some base contextual similarities (Brewer, 1991).

While there are several base similarities, NZ and the UK also offer distinctive contexts for studying the impact of WGI on WLB outcomes. The UK, for example, has focused more on advancing diversity and inclusion initiatives within the workplace, which are crucial for fostering a sense of belongingness and uniqueness among employees (Oswick & Noon, 2014). In addition, cultural differences between the two countries were deemed likely to influence how policies are experienced and implemented.

There is also evidence that NZ's work culture tends to emphasize a more relaxed and egalitarian approach, aligning with its values of WLB and fairness (Macky & Boxall, 2008), which can make flexible work arrangements more readily accepted. NZ's bicultural framework, shaped by its partnership between the Crown and Māori under Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi), also fosters greater attention to cultural inclusivity in workplace practices (Haar, Roche, et al., 2019). In contrast, the UK's work culture tends to be more hierarchical (Chung, 2020; Lewis, 1997, 2001), which can lead to varying experiences of flexible work, with employees in higher positions potentially having greater access to such benefits than those in lower ranks. Finally, cultural diversity in the UK is often viewed through a multicultural lens, emphasizing the inclusion of various ethnicities and nationalities (Kamenou, 2008), and resulting in different expectations around inclusivity compared to NZ's bicultural focus (Niha, 2021). These cultural nuances could influence how flexible work and inclusivity policies are adopted in both countries, affecting their overall efficacy.

In short, the selection of distinct samples from the UK ( $n = 335$ ) and NZ ( $n = 700$ ) was deemed appropriate as there are similarities that allow for extrapolation from one context to another, while cultural and historical differences allowed the researchers to test the veracity of the proposed model in different contexts and test the overall theoretical model in two populations (see Figure 1).

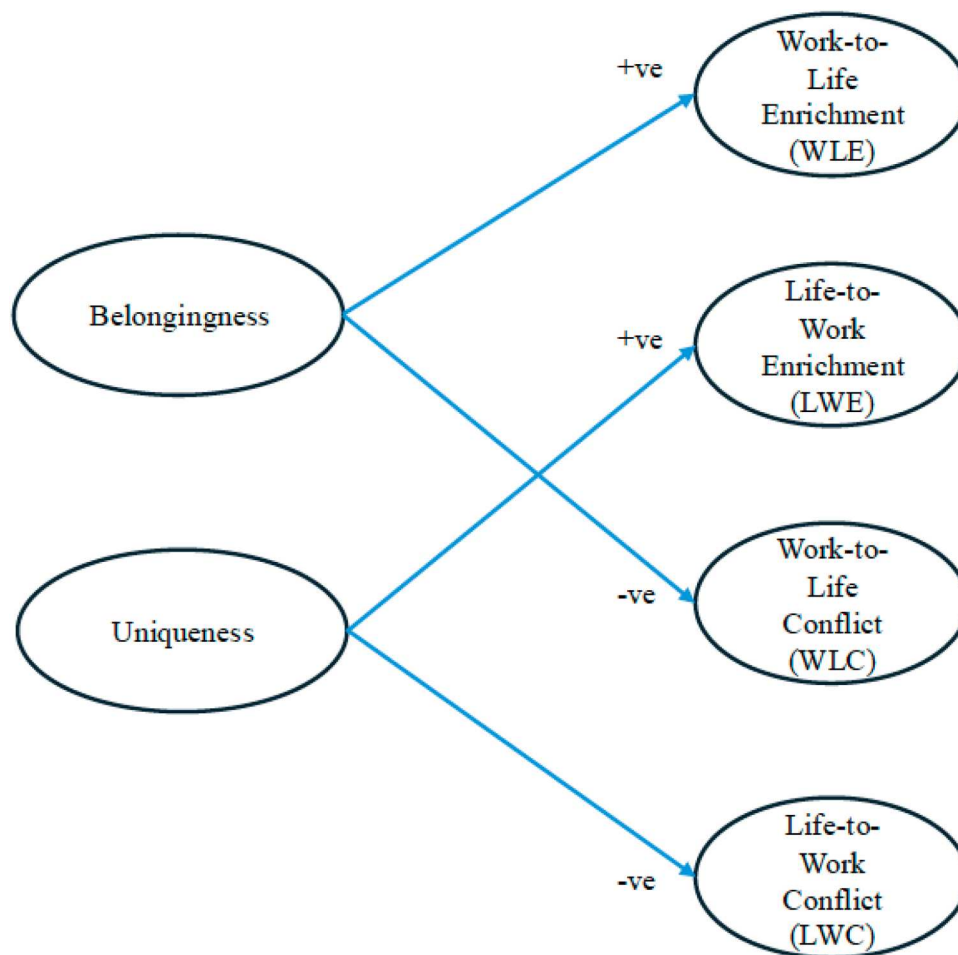
A final usable sample of  $n = 613$  NZ and  $n = 312$  UK was utilized after testing for multivariate normality using Mahalanobis distance, which indicated that 87 NZ cases and 23 UK cases were removed from the study. Demographics for the study are shown in Table 1.

## Measures

All constructs were found to be valid and reliable, with Cronbach's alphas provided in Table 2.

Belongingness and uniqueness were measured using five dimensions each, drawn from Likert scales developed by Chung et al. (2020), coded 1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree. The belongingness and uniqueness measures developed by Chung et al. represent the two components of WGI.

A sample item for belongingness is 'I am treated as a valued member of my work group.' A sample item for uniqueness is 'I can bring aspects of myself to my work group that others in the group don't have in common with me.'



**Figure 1.** Theoretical model of belongingness and uniqueness on work-to-life and life-to-work enrichment and conflict (figure is the property of the authors).

WLE and LWE were measured using three dimensions each, based on a work-nonwork enrichment scale applied by Kacmar et al. (2014), coded 1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree. The scale applied by Kacmar et al. was an abbreviated version of a multidimensional measure of work-to-family and family-to-work enrichment previously developed by Carlson et al. (2006).

A sample item for WLE is ‘My involvement in my work helps me to understand different viewpoints and this helps me be a better individual in my personal life.’ A sample item for LWE is ‘My involvement with my family and friends helps me acquire skills and this helps me be a better worker.’

WLC and LWC were measured using three dimensions each based on a work-nonwork conflict scale applied by Matthews et al. (2010), coded 1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree. Matthews et al.’s (2010) six-item scale represents a statistically validated, abbreviated version of Carlson et al.’s (2000) original 18-item, multidimensional measure of work-family conflict. This adaptation maintains the core directional conflict dimensions (time- and strain-based) while ensuring brevity suitable for SME employee surveys.

A sample item for WLC is ‘I have to miss activities with family and friends due to the amount of time I must spend on work responsibilities.’ A sample item for LWC is ‘I have to miss work activities due to the amount of time I must spend on non-work responsibilities.’

### **Measurement model**

Constructs for both the NZ and UK samples were confirmed using CFA with AMOS (version 29) following recommendations by Hu and Bentler (1998) and Williams et al. (2009), and conducted bootstrapping (5000 times). Table 3 details the fit indices for the NZ and UK samples respectively.

**Table 1.** Respondent demographics for NZ and UK data.

		Frequency NZ	Percent NZ	Frequency UK	Percent UK
Age group	Under 30	202	33.0	23	7.4
	30–39 years old	175	28.5	67	21.5
	40–49 years old	103	16.8	83	26.6
	50–59 years old	71	11.6	72	23.1
	60–69 years old	47	7.7	55	17.6
	70 years or older	15	2.4	12	3.8
Gender	Male	237	38.7	180	57.7
	Female	376	61.3	131	42
Industry	Agriculture, forestry, fishing	21	3.4	2	.6
	Construction	38	6.2	24	7.7
	Education and training	66	10.8	35	11.2
	Electricity, gas, water and waste services	10	1.6	3	7.4
	Mining	3	.5	0	0
	Manufacturing	46	7.5	23	7.4
	Wholesale trade	26	4.3	2	.6
	Retail trade	54	8.8	19	6.1
	Accommodation and food services	30	4.9	21	6.7
	Transport, postal, and warehousing	28	4.6	20	6.4
	Information, media, and telecommunications	30	4.9	16	5.1
	Financial and insurance services	24	3.9	17	5.4
	Rental, hiring, and real estate services	11	1.8	7	2.2
	Professional, scientific, and technical services	42	6.9	35	11.2
	Administrative and support services	32	5.2	21	21
	Public administration and safety	9	1.5	2	.6
	Healthcare and social assistance	50	8.2	27	8.7
	Arts and recreation services	13	2.1	3	1
	Other services	78	12.7	35	11.2

**Table 2.** Data internal consistency for NZ and UK data.

Cronbach's alphas	New Zealand	United Kingdom
Belongingness	.92	.87
Uniqueness	.89	.75
Work-to-Life Enrichment (WLE)	.84	.84
Life-to-Work Enrichment (LWE)	.83	.80
Work-to-Life Conflict (WLC)	.72	.68
Life-to-Work Conflict (LWC)	.75	.71

Overall, the hypothesized measurement models were a good fit for the data with the NZ model demonstrating  $\chi^2(df) = 472(196)$  providing a ratio of 2.4 and the UK model demonstrating  $\chi^2(df) = 425(199)$  providing a ratio of 2.1, meeting the requirement of being  $\leq 3$  (Kline, 1998). Alternative CFA models were also tested, and these were all a poorer fit to the data (Hair et al., 2010) for both populations.

Outputs indicated that the amount of construct variance explained as demonstrated by the squared multiple correlations for WLE was .49 (NZ) and .43 (UK), LWE .20 (NZ) and .20 (UK), WLC .12 (NZ) and .14 (UK), and LWC Conflict .03 (NZ) and .06 (UK).

Harman's single factor test using an unrotated principal component analysis was performed on all 22 measurement items to assess common methods bias given that data for all constructs were collected using a self-report survey from a single source (Podsakoff et al., 2003). In the UK study this analysis extracted 4 factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, with the first factor accounting for 34.4% of the total variance. In the NZ study this analysis also extracted 4 factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, with the first factor accounting for 37.2% of the total variance. These analyses suggest that common method bias is unlikely to be an issue in this study.

**Table 3.** Fit Indices for NZ and UK models.

Fit indices	New Zealand	United Kingdom
CFI	.97 (Good fit – Hu & Bentler, 1999)	.94 (Acceptable fit – Hu & Bentler, 1999)
RMSEA	.05 (Reasonable fit – MacCallum et al., 1996)	.06 (Reasonable fit – MacCallum et al., 1996)
RMR	.04 (Excellent fit – Diamantopoulos & Sigauw, 2000)	.08 (Acceptable fit – Hu & Bentler, 1999)
AGFI	.91 (Acceptable fit – Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1989)	.85 (Acceptable fit – Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1989)
TLI	.96 (Good fit – Hu & Bentler, 1999)	.93 (Acceptable fit – Hu & Bentler, 1999)

## Results

This study sought to establish whether WGI, characterized by belongingness and uniqueness, is associated with WLE, LWE, WLC, and LWC. Subsequently, the hypothetical model was applied to two populations – one from NZ and one from the UK.

Descriptive statistics for the NZ study variables are shown in Table 4 and the UK study variables in Table 5. Uniqueness and belongingness are significantly and positively correlated with WLE and LWE. Uniqueness and belongingness are also significantly but negatively correlated with WLC and LWC.

Tables 4 and 5 also indicate the means and standard deviations for each construct for the NZ and UK samples. It is noted that uniqueness and belongingness in both samples have means well below the midpoint, as do WLE and LWE. WLC and LWC are nearer the midpoint (noting that 1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree). Specifically, 92% (NZ) and 90% (UK) of respondents scored the Uniqueness construct at or below 3 and 54% (NZ) and 56% (UK) at or below 2, indicating that employees' perceptions of whether they can have distinct perspectives within their work group, and that these distinctions are valued and respected by fellow work group members, were largely positive or neutral. Similarly, 90% (NZ) and 87% (UK) of respondents scored the Belongingness construct at or below 3 and 58% (NZ) or 55% (UK) at or below 2, indicating that employees' perceptions of whether they have supportive and caring relationships with their work group members was largely positive or neutral.

Figure 2 shows the relationships between independent and dependent variables determined by the study's structural model and indicates  $\beta$  and  $p$  for each hypothesized pathway for the NZ and UK data.

Figure 2 addresses each of the hypotheses providing the following results:

H1 stated that 'Belongingness has a significant positive relationship with WLE.' This hypothesis is supported with a  $\beta$  of .70 (NZ) and .66 (UK) with  $p < .01$ .

H2 stated that 'Belongingness has a significant negative relationship with WLC.' This hypothesis is supported with a  $\beta$  of  $-.35$  (NZ) and  $-.38$  (UK) with  $p < .01$ .

H3 stated that 'Uniqueness has a significant positive relationship with LWE.' This hypothesis is supported with a  $\beta$  of .45 (NZ) and .45 (UK) with  $p < .01$ .

H4 stated that 'Uniqueness has a significant negative relationship with LWC' This hypothesis is supported with a  $\beta$  of  $-.18$  (NZ) and  $-.24$  (UK) with  $p < .01$ .

## Discussion

This study introduces a novel perspective on WLB by examining how WGI, operationalized through belongingness and uniqueness, shapes WLB outcomes within SMEs in New Zealand and the United

**Table 4.** Correlations and descriptive statistics of the NZ study variables.

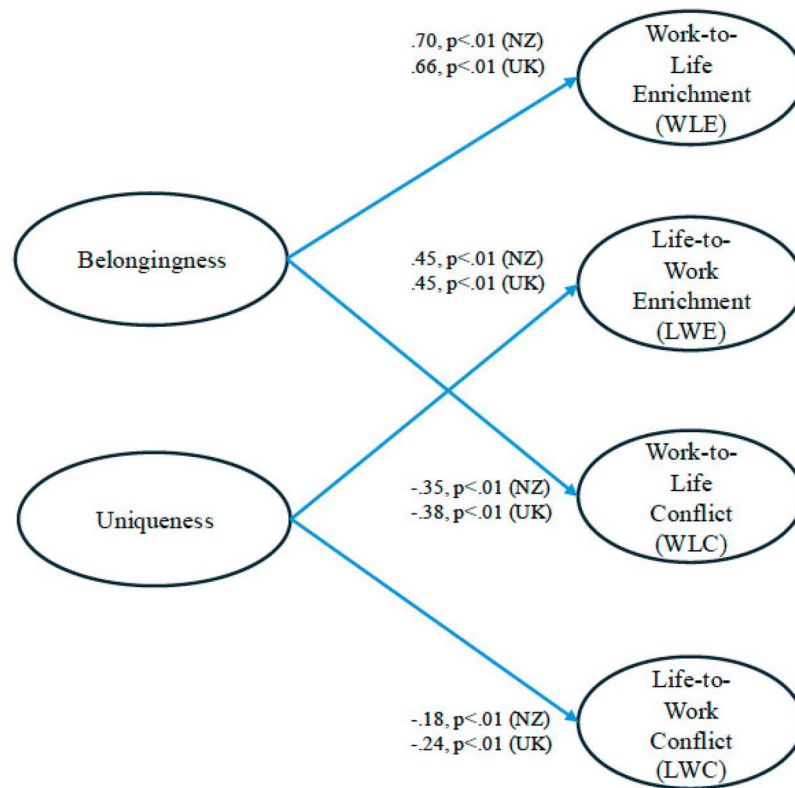
Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Work-to-Life Enrichment (WLE)	2.04	.75	–					
2. Life-to-Work Enrichment (LWE)	1.95	.72	.58†	–				
3. Work-to-Life Conflict (WLC)	3.06	.95	-.14†	-.01	–			
4. Life-to-Work Conflict (LWC)	3.46	.90	-.03	-.02	.59†	–		
5. Uniqueness	2.12	.72	.54†	.38†	-.17†	-.12†	–	
6. Belonging	2.04	.82	.60†	.36†	-.22†	-.08*	.75†	–

$n = 613$ , \* $p < .05$ , † $p < .01$ .

**Table 5.** Correlations and descriptive statistics of the UK study variables.

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Work-to-Life Enrichment (WLE)	2.22	.89	–					
2. Life-to-Work Enrichment (LWE)	2.16	.81	.59†	–				
3. Work-to-Life Conflict (WLC)	3.07	.96	-.11	-.03	–			
4. Life-to-Work Conflict (LWC)	3.67	.85	-.05	-.03	.56†	–		
5. Uniqueness	2.12	.74	.49†	.37†	-.11	-.17†	–	
6. Belonging	2.13	.87	.61†	.41†	-.17†	-.20†	.75†	–

$n = 335$ , \* $p < .05$ , † $p < .01$ .



**Figure 2.** Study results from NZ and the UK (figure is the property of the authors).

Kingdom. Grounded in Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018), which emphasizes the acquisition and preservation of valuable resources to manage stress and well-being, this research highlights the critical role of inclusion-based resources in SME contexts. Unlike larger organizations with formal HR systems and structured inclusion policies, SMEs rely heavily on everyday relational dynamics within work groups to sustain employees' resource reservoirs. These findings show that everyday experiences of belongingness and uniqueness within teams influence how employees navigate the boundary between work and personal life. This gap is notable given the increasing emphasis on inclusive practices within diverse work environments (Pless & Maak, 2004; Shore et al., 2011; Oswick & Noon, 2014).

Rather than exerting uniform effects across the work–life interface, the findings indicate that different dimensions of work group inclusion become salient depending on the direction of crossover between work and non-work domains. Belongingness appears to play a more prominent role when experiences originating in work spill over into personal life, whereas uniqueness becomes more influential when resources derived from personal life are drawn upon in the work domain. This pattern is consistent with prior research suggesting that relational support primarily buffers work-originating demands and strain, while identity affirmation and self-expression facilitate the mobilization of non-work resources in work contexts (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Shore et al., 2011). In SME environments, where employees work in close proximity and role boundaries are often less clearly delineated, these differentiated pathways may be particularly pronounced, shaping how inclusion-based resources are experienced and transferred across domains.

This study extends existing research by showing that belongingness and uniqueness are complementary rather than opposing resources that together enhance bidirectional work–life outcomes. Building on Shore et al. (2011), who advanced the theoretical integration of belongingness and uniqueness, this study is among the first to empirically examine how these dimensions differentially influence work-to-life and life-to-work enrichment and conflict. While traditional models focus on unidirectional effects (e.g. Greenhaus & Powell, 2006), this research highlights the importance of recognizing the full crossover process in SMEs, where employees' professional and personal spheres are often closely interwoven (Johnston et al., 2022).

Theoretically, this study extends COR theory by elucidating how inclusion-based resources – belongingness and uniqueness – function within SME contexts to shape resource conservation and gain processes. Belongingness acts as a vital emotional and relational resource that buffers the detrimental effects of work stress, supporting employees' capacity to preserve and replenish their resource reservoirs, as evidenced by its strong negative association with work-to-life conflict ( $\beta = -.35$  NZ;  $\beta = -.38$  UK) and positive link to work-to-life enrichment ( $\beta = .70$  NZ;  $\beta = .66$  UK). These results align with existing research connecting robust interpersonal bonds to reduced stress and enhanced self-esteem (Neff et al., 2012; Haar, Russo, et al., 2019). In the close-knit teams typical of SMEs, such relational resources may be especially critical for fostering employee resilience and well-being, effectively compensating for limited formal HR support systems.

Uniqueness contributes to resource acquisition by affirming identity and autonomy, helping individuals to draw strength from personal life and apply it at work. The study found positive associations between uniqueness and LWE ( $\beta = .45$  in both countries) and negative associations with LWC ( $\beta = -.18$  NZ;  $\beta = -.24$  UK). These results align with prior research suggesting that when employees feel their individuality is respected, they are more likely to exhibit engagement and creativity (Shore et al., 2011) and carry positive personal experiences into the workplace (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006).

This study further clarifies that belongingness and uniqueness differentially relate to the bidirectional flow of resources across work and non-work domains – a central tenet of COR theory's crossover model (Westman, 2001). Belongingness predominantly supports work-to-life resource transfer, acting as a buffer that mitigates resource loss from work stress spilling into personal life. Meanwhile, uniqueness facilitates the acquisition and deployment of life-derived resources into the work domain, enhancing life-to-work enrichment. This dual effect advances a more nuanced COR-informed understanding of how inclusion-based resources dynamically influence both directions of crossover, addressing a key limitation in prior work-life balance research that often focused on singular directions of enrichment or conflict.

These findings are particularly meaningful in SME settings, where employee experiences of work-life balance are shaped less by formalized HR policies and more by everyday interactions, shared norms, and team-level practices. In such contexts, inclusion within immediate work groups may function as a critical mechanism through which employees acquire and conserve resources needed to manage competing work and non-work demands. Research by Ashikali et al. (2021) highlights that inclusive leadership and supportive team climates foster a sense of belongingness and uniqueness, which serve as vital psychological resources for employees navigating work and life boundaries. The strong associations observed between belongingness and work-to-life outcomes, and between uniqueness and life-to-work outcomes, suggest that how employees are treated and recognized within their teams has implications that extend beyond the workplace. This interpretation aligns with emerging SME-focused research emphasizing the importance of informal practices, relational dynamics, and supportive cultures in shaping work-life experiences (e.g. Lamane-Harim et al., 2023), while also indicating that inclusion processes operate at a more proximal, work-group level.

While strong belongingness might be expected to intensify work centrality and potentially exacerbate work-life conflict by increasing emotional attachment to work, the present findings suggest that in SME contexts this risk may be offset by the emotional and instrumental support embedded in close-knit teams. Such support may enable employees to manage work demands more effectively, thereby reducing rather than amplifying conflict across domains. Similarly, although the expression of uniqueness could introduce role strain or interpersonal friction in some settings, its association with enhanced life-to-work enrichment here suggests that, when supported, individuality functions as a resource rather than a source of tension.

This study also contributes by demonstrating how WGI and WLB outcomes unfold within the two distinct yet comparable SME environments of NZ and the UK. The NZ context, with its more egalitarian work culture, progressive WLB orientation, and bicultural framework contrasts with the UK's more hierarchical structures, stronger emphasis on formal diversity and inclusion initiatives, and multicultural framing of workforce diversity. Showing that the WGI-WLB relationships hold across these differing institutional and cultural settings strengthens confidence in the robustness of the model, while also underscoring the importance of national context in shaping how inclusion practices are enacted and experienced in SMEs.

Finally, this study underscores that although organizations cannot directly control the resources available to employees in their personal lives, they can shape work environments that acknowledge and respond to the life-to-work interface. Flexibility, personalization, and mental health resources are key tools to support this crossover (Itam & Warriar, 2024). Recognizing this bidirectional relationship equips managers with a more sophisticated lens for supporting inclusion and work–life balance in ways that are both meaningful and measurable. In SMEs, this means recognizing that inclusion practices at the group level are not just ‘good culture’ but are also vital for balancing work and non-work demands. By embedding belongingness and uniqueness into daily operations, SMEs can create low-cost, high-impact mechanisms for supporting employee well-being in the post-pandemic era of blurred boundaries.

### Theoretical implications

These findings contribute to the theoretical understanding of how WGI influences WLB outcomes by offering potential explanations grounded in COR theory. As psychological resources cross over bidirectionally (Westman, 2001), the emotional and social support provided by belongingness may help reduce WLC, while the recognition of uniqueness might foster WLE by encouraging individuals to bring their full selves to work (e.g. Shore et al., 2011). Additionally, this study uniquely demonstrates that these two components of WGI (belongingness and uniqueness) enhance crossover effects in distinct ways. By highlighting the comparative influence of belongingness and uniqueness on both directions of resource crossover, this study extends COR theory by elaborating on the effects of bidirectional crossover (Westman, 2001) linked to WGI. This is consistent with recent findings that highlight the importance of structured resource recovery processes to enhance employee resilience and well-being.

### Practical implications

From a COR perspective, these findings suggest that SME managers should prioritize cultivating inclusion-based resource reservoirs at the immediate work group level to effectively support employees’ work–life balance. The significant relationships observed between WGI – encompassing both belongingness and uniqueness – and WLB outcomes indicate that investing in employees’ social and identity resources fosters resilience against resource loss and promotes resource gain. Practical activities such as regular team building, inclusive decision-making, open communication, individualized recognition, and targeted diversity training can help sustain these critical resource pools within work groups, thereby enhancing employees’ capacity to manage competing demands in flexible and autonomous work arrangements.

It is important to recognize that belongingness and uniqueness are not opposing or independent forces, but rather complementary aspects of inclusion (Canlas & Williams, 2022). From a COR perspective, belongingness and uniqueness represent complementary resource types that together form a robust inclusion resource caravan supporting employee well-being. While individuals seek to fit in, they also desire to maintain their unique identity within the group (Shore et al., 2011). This dual need, however, may lead to conflicts if not properly managed and both needs are linked with WLB outcomes. Managers should be proactive in creating opportunities for employees to express their unique strengths in ways that align with both organizational goals and individual work-life situations such as individualized goal setting, professional development opportunities, role flexibility, cross-functional collaboration and innovation encouragement (Bakker & Leiter, 2017). This approach not only supports work-life integration but also contributes to a more balanced and productive work environment. Understanding and addressing these dynamics within work groups may prevent potential negative effects, such as conflicts or disengagement, that might arise from simply allowing for autonomous work arrangements (Rastogi et al., 2018).

Consistent with COR’s emphasis on contextually embedded resource processes, the contrasting institutional environments of New Zealand and the United Kingdom highlight the need for SME leaders to tailor inclusion and work–life balance strategies to local resource realities. In NZ, managers can leverage existing egalitarian norms and bicultural commitments to normalize inclusive decision-making, relational leadership, and flexible work practices that support both belongingness and uniqueness. In the UK, where organizational hierarchies and formal D&I infrastructures are more established, SME leaders may need to focus

on ensuring that top-down policies translate into everyday team-level inclusion, particularly for lower-level employees who may have less access to flexibility and support.

## Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into the role of WGI on WLB outcomes in SMEs across NZ and the UK, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design of the study limits the ability to establish causal relationships between WGI and WLB outcomes. Future research would benefit from a longitudinal approach to explore how these relationships develop and change over time (Little, 2013).

Second, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of common method bias (Kock et al., 2021), as participants may have been influenced by social desirability when reporting their experiences of inclusion and WLB. Incorporating objective measures or multiple data sources could enhance the robustness of future studies.

Additionally, while the study draws from two distinct cultural contexts, the generalizability of the findings to other regions or industries may be limited. Further research across diverse geographical and industrial settings would provide a more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics.

Finally, the study did not distinguish between employees with and without access to hybrid or remote work arrangements, which may influence how work group inclusion affects work–life outcomes.

## Future research

Future research can build upon the findings of this study by exploring several key areas that were either beyond the scope of this research or revealed as promising avenues through the study's results. First, the bidirectional crossover effects observed in this study suggest the need for a deeper examination of the mechanisms through which personal and work domains influence each other, particularly in the context of remote and autonomous work environments (Woods et al., 2013). Future studies could investigate how different work arrangements, such as hybrid models or entirely remote settings, affect the impact of work group inclusion on WLB outcomes. Additionally, examining these effects across different industries and cultural contexts could provide valuable insights into the universality or variability of these relationships (Grzegorzczak et al., 2021).

Second, while this study highlighted the significance of both belongingness and uniqueness within work groups, future research should consider the potential conflicts that might arise from balancing these two elements, as well as their impacts on WLB outcomes, particularly in diverse work settings (Shore et al., 2011). Longitudinal studies could be beneficial in understanding how these dynamics evolve over time, especially as organizations increasingly adopt flexible work policies (Little, 2013). Moreover, exploring the role of leadership in managing and fostering a group work environment that supports both belongingness and uniqueness could provide practical insights for managers seeking to enhance WLB outcomes.

Finally, research could extend this work by testing the WGI–WLB model in SME contexts that differ more markedly from NZ and the UK in terms of labour regulation, welfare systems, and cultural values, such as coordinated market economies in continental Europe or emerging economies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Comparative designs that explicitly model national-level or cultural-level moderators – for example, power distance, collectivism, or policy regimes around flexible work – would help clarify which contextual features strengthen or weaken the effects of belongingness and uniqueness on enrichment and conflict. Longitudinal and multi-level studies could also examine how changes in policy or culture (e.g. post-pandemic shifts in remote work) alter the dynamics of WGI and WLB over time.

## Conclusion

This study advances the literature by empirically examining how WGI, conceptualized through the dual dimensions of belongingness and uniqueness, shapes WLB outcomes. It is the first empirical analysis to explicitly investigate the effects of these two inclusion components on both work-to-life and life-to-work enrichment and conflict, within the general workplace and specifically in the SME context. Grounded in COR theory, the findings highlight the significance of resource crossover in both directions: work

influencing life and life influencing work, as essential for achieving a balanced and enriching work-life interface. Importantly, the results challenge traditional assumptions that belongingness and uniqueness operate in tension. Instead, they demonstrate that when both are supported within work groups, they can function synergistically to enhance employees' overall work-life outcomes. These insights reinforce the notion that inclusive work groups serve as vital resource caravans that sustain employee well-being amid the blurred boundaries characteristic of contemporary work environments. This provides practical guidance for SME leaders seeking to foster inclusive environments that not only value group cohesion but also celebrate individual distinctiveness as a resource for well-being and sustainability. Moreover, the robustness of these findings across distinct cultural and institutional contexts highlights the universal relevance of COR's resource framework while also calling attention to the need for contextually attuned inclusion practices. By embedding COR theory as the continuous underpinning of this study, we contribute to both theoretical development and practical understanding of how resource-based inclusion strategies can foster resilience, reduce conflict, and promote enrichment across life domains in SMEs.

For SME leaders, the key message is clear: creating inclusive team environments is not a luxury but a strategic necessity. By fostering both belongingness (a strong sense of team connection) and uniqueness (valuing individual distinctiveness), SMEs can promote employee well-being, reduce conflict across work and personal domains, and enhance sustainable performance. Crucially, these practices need not involve extensive resources or formal HR infrastructure. Instead, SMEs can focus on everyday inclusion practices, such as open dialogue, recognition of individual contributions, flexibility in roles, and shared team rituals, that simultaneously build cohesion and celebrate individuality.

In doing so, SMEs can leverage inclusion as a low-cost but powerful mechanism for supporting work-life balance, strengthening employee retention, and sustaining competitiveness in increasingly dynamic labour markets.

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