RESEARCH ARTICLE

College Belonging among University Students during COVID-19: An Online Interpretative Phenomenological (OIPA) Perspective

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify the factors that either facilitated or complicated students' sense of school belonging and to determine the levels within the Ecological Systems Theory (EST) framework to which participants attributed these influential factors, using the Online Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (OIPA) method. The OIPA approach is a qualitative research method and was used by the researcher for data collection and analysis in this study. Data were collected online using the OIPA form. The study cohort consisted of 82 university students (65% female, 35% male) from three different state universities in different cities in Türkiye. The results of the analysis revealed 20 facilitating factors, including elements such as friendships (33%), participation in activities and events (22%), and interactions with professors (20%). The study also identified 21 barriers, including economic challenges (39%), anxiety (32%), and experiences of exclusion and being ignored (29%). Participants attributed these facilitators and barriers to different levels of Ecological Systems Theory (EST). Specifically, they associated 63% of facilitating factors and 55% of complicating factors with the individual/intrapsychic level, 20% of facilitating factors and 51% of complicating factors with the microsystem level, 8% of facilitating factors and 26% of complicating factors with the exosystem level, and 15% of facilitating factors and 55% of complicating factors with the macrosystem level. Overall, participants linked 39% of facilitating factors and 52% of complicating factors to all levels combined.

Keywords: School belonging, COVID-19, online interpretative phenomenological analysis (OIPA), university students

Humans are inherently social beings, necessitating communication and interaction with others right from birth (Doğan, 2015). From a sociological perspective, the trajectory of this lifelong connection with the society into which one is born is shaped by various factors. In the context of social interpretations of belonging, one of these factors, it becomes evident that belonging is intertwined with one's state of consciousness during the identity construction process (Alptekin, 2011). Belonging is regarded as a vital necessity and an emotion that evolves within an individual's self (Alptekin, 2011). It embodies the constructive influence of feeling connected to a specific culture and geographic environment on the human existence (Gür, 2007). Belonging serves as a fundamental human motivation and a functional aspiration in the establishment, growth, and sustenance of interpersonal relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The need for belonging represents a fundamental psychological requirement and a foundational wellspring of human motivation, given that all humans are inherently inclined to seek and preserve a sense of belonging (Arslan, 2021). Within the process of human socialization, the sense of belonging to a family, team, or nation is regarded as a cornerstone value. This sentiment plays a significant role in defining one's societal role and achieving a particular status (Yetim, 2000). The individual's sense of approval, acceptance, and their perception of being a valuable member within a group, along with the enduring feeling of belonging to that group, are substantially contingent on the quality of communication they establish within that group (Alaca, 2011).

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Belonging plays a crucial role in an individual's functionality and psychological well-being, as it serves as a catalyst for their motivation to seek knowledge (Arslan & Coşkun, 2022). In addition to meeting the physiological needs of individuals, meeting their psychological and higher needs contributes significantly to their productivity, happiness, and overall peace (Deveci, 2007). Satisfying the need to belong and establishing emotional and social connections with others or external elements has a profound impact on cognitive processes. This includes perceiving others as individuals, understanding their thoughts, needs, emotional states, emotional patterns, behaviors, and individual psychology and well-being (Yüksel, 2020). Satisfying the need for belonging, which emphasizes an individual's alignment with the world and life satisfaction as a fundamental requirement, empowers individuals to shape and evaluate their expectations for the future. It also supports the cultivation of a harmonious personality and effective problem-solving skills in their interactions with the environment (Trommsdorff, 1983). There is broad consensus that belongingness is an innate, fundamental human need that virtually all individuals seek to fulfill (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Leary & Kelly, 2009; Maslow, 1954).

School Belonging

The role of education in fostering students' sense of belonging or social integration is fundamental (Hwang, 2013). Educational settings should be places where students feel safe, valued, and connected, and where they can enjoy their time and share experiences beyond the usual academic responsibilities such as exams, grades, rules, and homework. Hamm & Faircloth (2005) found that when individuals perceive that they belong to a group, they feel valued and are more likely to trust others within that group. Both Dewey and Vygotsky view education as a social process, not just an individualistic one. They recognize the interpersonal needs of children and the importance of cooperative learning in experiential education. Dewey, in particular, believed that children can function as a cohesive social group and argued that optimal education is achieved when individuals come together as a community. Research in psychology has shown that a sense of community and the experience of belonging are critical to understanding student behavior and achievement (Osterman, 2000).

Successful student learning depends on several emotional variables, one of which is a sense of belonging to school. This sense of belonging is critical to numerous educational processes and outcomes (Combs, 1982). Maunder (2018) emphasized its importance for positive educational experiences and linked it to children's well-being, motivation, and overall success in school. Belonging in a school setting is defined as a student's personal sense of the extent to which they are recognized, respected, included, and supported by their peers and educators (Arslan & Duru, 2017; Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Studies have shown that these feelings significantly influence students' future aspirations (Uwah et al., 2008). Adelabu (2007) found a strong correlation between students' sense of school belonging and their future expectations, asserting that students who are highly engaged in school have a brighter view of their future. Furthermore, this sense of belonging, which is widely considered to be central in the academic literature, has a profound impact on students. Their feelings toward school and their sense of connectedness play a significant role in shaping their self-perception and understanding of their environment (Balak, 2017). There are positive correlations between a strong sense of school belonging and factors such as high achievement, academic motivation, and academic self-efficacy. Conversely, there is a negative correlation between school belonging and dropout rates (Sarı, 2013). Arslan & Tanhan (2019) emphasize that school belonging is a fundamental need for the optimal psychological development of young people. Such a sense of belonging enhances positive educational experiences and supports mental health (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013). It creates an environment in which students feel safe and valued and fosters a conducive learning environment (Yıldız & Kutlu, 2015).

School affiliation is important at all stages of education, including university. Young adulthood, a stage characterized by significant career and social changes (Arslan, 2021), underscores the importance of university belonging. It encompasses a student's subjective perception of being accepted, supported, and integrated into the social fabric of the university. As a result, fostering university belonging is critical to improving young people's psychological adjustment and overall well-being. Individuals with a strong sense of belonging tend to experience fewer psychological adjustment challenges, such as depression and anxiety (Arslan et al., 2020; Arslan & Tanhan, 2019). Research suggests that a sense of belonging to the university positively affects students' mental health, motivation, and academic performance (Anderman, 2003; Arslan, 2021; Freeman et al., 2007; Sánchez et al., 2005).

Conversely, the absence of such a sense negatively affects well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Shochet et al., 2006), academic performance (Anderman, 2003; Sánchez et al., 2005), and college attendance (Stout & Wright, 2016). As a result, universities often prioritize strategic goals aimed at increasing students' sense of belonging (Van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020).

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated an abrupt shift to online educational platforms for universities. During this transition, institutions focused primarily on adapting quickly and efficiently to this new paradigm, rather than questioning whether online education could deliver on the promise of quality higher education. This situation underscores the need to not only evaluate the effectiveness of pandemic-era educational practices, but also to consider their impact on students (Liguori & Winkler, 2020). Research has highlighted the myriad challenges faced by university students during the pandemic (Fruehwirth et al., 2021; Giuntella et al., 2021; Haliwa et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2021; Mooney & Becker, 2021; Wang et al., 2020). These challenges have cast a shadow over students' sense of school belonging (Demir et al., 2022; Morán-Soto et al., 2022; Son et al., 2020). Therefore, amidst the paradigm shift induced by COVID-19, there is an urgent need to understand the impact of online, hybrid, and face-to-face education and training activities on students' sense of school belonging.

Theoretical Framework

There is a dearth of literature on school belonging among university students in Türkiye (Arslan et al., 2022; Esen & Aktağ, 2022; Özdemir, 2023; Yokuş et al., 2017). The lack of comprehensive studies, both internationally and in the Turkish context, that address school affiliation among university students, especially in the context of COVID-19, is noteworthy. Therefore, it is imperative to conduct in-depth research on university students' perceptions and feelings regarding their sense of school belonging. Furthermore, it is of utmost importance to understand the factors that either facilitate or hinder this sense of belonging during the COVID-19 period. Tanhan (2020) advocated the use of Online Photovoice (OPV) and Online Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (OIPA) to explore educational domains. In collaboration with Strack (2020), Tanhan developed OPV as a research method that offers increased effectiveness and richness by engaging a broader range of participants and producing meaningful and impactful results with reduced time and resources for both researchers and participants. OPV has proven to be highly adaptable, especially in extraordinary circumstances such as pandemics, security concerns, and natural disasters, where face-to-face interactions are either impossible or extremely challenging.

OIPA, which is often used to analyze data collected through OPV, is inspired by traditional interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Tanhan, 2020; Tanhan & Strack, 2020). In traditional IPA, researchers typically begin by listening to participants and then proceed to identify overarching themes within participants' experiences, emotions, thoughts, feelings, and meanings (Brunsden & Goatcher, 2007; Smith & Osborn, 2003; Tanhan & Strack, 2020). In essence, researchers create the themes in IPA. In contrast, OIPA allows participants to generate the themes, with researchers using only the themes that participants contribute. Consequently, OIPA serves to preserve the voices and themes of participants. Researchers then categorize similar themes under overarching themes. OIPA offers advantages over other methods such as IPA and content analysis in terms of optimizing resources such as time, materials, and communication channels. In addition, it allows for the examination of a broader range of factors by easily engaging a diverse range of participants, thereby facilitating more effective and comprehensive research efforts. For all of these reasons, OIPA is more advantageous than traditional IPA (Tanhan, 2020; Tanhan & Strack, 2020). Developers (Tanhan, 2020; Tanhan & Strack, 2020) and users of OIPA usually use it in conjunction with Online Photovoice (OPV) (Doyumğaç et al., 2021; Subasi, 2023; Subasi et al., 2023; Tanhan et al., 2021; Tanhan & Erin, 2023; Ünsal Seydooğulları, 2023). However, the developers of OIPA have stated that OIPA can also be used independently (Tanhan, 2020; Tanhan & Strack, 2020). Kızılay (2022) and Koç Koca (2023) used OIPA alone in their studies. In this study, OIPA was chosen because it allows the identification of factors that facilitate and hinder school belonging without intruding on students' topics.

The theoretical framework of this study includes Ecological Systems Theory (EST), Online Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (OIPA), Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), and active social advocacy. Based on this theoretical framework, the Online Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (OIPA) approach was used to analyze the data. Active advocacy was another crucial concept that complemented all of the above approaches, enhanced the significance of the study's data, and most importantly, formed the basis of OIPA, OPV, CBPR, and the study as a whole. When the OIPA method is applied in collaboration with willing participants and relevant individuals, institutions, and organizations-in other words, in the context of CBPR, EST, and active

social advocacy-it produces more effective contextual results. As a result, this approach has been found to empower participants and their communities, increase participants' resources, and lead to more functional solutions to the problems encountered (see Doyumğaç et al., 2021; Tanhan, 2020, for more information on these frameworks).

Purpose of the Study

Over the past half century, the global landscape of educational provision at all levels has evolved significantly. However, the emergence of COVID-19 has posed the greatest challenge to these expanded national education systems (Daniel, 2020). The pandemic has unleashed numerous negative consequences affecting students and all key stakeholders in the education sector. One notable area where these challenges have manifested is in the realm of students' sense of school belonging, as mentioned earlier. Consequently, this study aims to identify the factors that either facilitate or hinder the school belonging of undergraduate social studies students. The study was conducted within this framework that guided every aspect of the research, with particular emphasis on the methodology section. The primary objective of this study is to uncover the factors that facilitate or impede the school belonging of undergraduate students majoring in social studies. To delve deeply into the students' perspectives on this matter, the study employed online interpretative phenomenological analysis, a qualitative method approach designed to effectively address contemporary issues.

Method

Participants

The study included 82 participants enrolled in the Department of Social Studies Teaching in three different state universities located in different cities in Türkiye. Among these participants, 52 were female and 30 were male. The distribution of the students according to their academic year was as follows: 23 in the 2nd year, 27 in the 3rd year, and 32 in the 4th year. Notably, first-year students were excluded from the study because it was their first day at the university. Regarding the age of the participants, the distribution was as follows: 19 years (10 students), 20 years (13 students), 21 years (15 students), 22 years (17 students), 23 years (14 students), 24 years (eight students), and 25 years and older (five students; $M = 21.68$, $SD = 1.72$). In terms of economic status, 61 participants described their status as medium, while 11 reported low economic status and 10 reported good economic status. In addition, 79 of the participants were single, while three were married.

Procedure

A comprehensive literature review was conducted to examine existing research on school belonging, university students' school belonging, school belonging during the COVID-19 pandemic, online interpretative phenomenological analysis (OIPA), and online photovoice (OPV). The review revealed that students at all levels, including university students, encountered challenges related to school belonging both before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Arslan, 2021; Avcı, 2023). Based on these findings, the researcher, who holds a professorship in the Department of Social Science Education, turned her attention to studying the school affiliation of social science students, recognizing the lack of studies that examined the school affiliation of this particular group of students. Subsequently, after defining the sample of the study, the researcher sought and obtained ethical approval from the relevant committee, which duly granted permission. A research team was formed through collaboration with interested students from the universities involved in the study who expressed a desire to participate. This team consisted of five people, including one student from each of the participating universities (three in total), the author of the study, and an academic expert familiar with the OIPA method. The research process was effectively managed by this team throughout the study. Ethical approval was also received from the Adıyaman University Ethics Board (number: 22.09.2020-9).

Data Collection Tools

An online questionnaire was carefully designed for this study, which included demographic questions, ethics committee approval, and a structured approach based on Online Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (OIPA) to explore college belonging. The elements within this online questionnaire were carefully designed, taking into account both the OIPA and Online Photovoice (OPV) techniques developed by Tanhan and Strack (2020) and adapted into Turkish by Tanhan (2020). In the questionnaire, participants were provided with comprehensive instructions on how to participate in the study. The data collection process was divided into two distinct parts: the

first part focused on collecting demographic information, while the second part included questions related to the factors influencing students' school affiliation.

Consent and Demographic Information Form

The initial segment of the questionnaire was dedicated to collecting demographic data. Participants were prompted to disclose their gender, age, academic year, socioeconomic status, and marital status.

Online Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Procedures

The second section of the questionnaire, developed for the study, comprised two stages, each consisting of three distinct steps. Identical steps were applied in both stages to explore facilitating and complicating factors. These steps are elucidated below, respectively:

- In Step 1, participants were invited to compose a concise, coherent, and comprehensive narrative or commentary elucidating the aspects that bolstered their sense of belonging within the academic institution (university).

- In Step 2, participants were requested to delineate at least five and at most ten summary words or themes that encapsulated the essence of the narrative or commentary they crafted in Step 1. Following the completion of their narratives concerning the facilitating factors for college belonging, students subsequently followed the same two steps to expound upon the complicating factors impeding their sense of belonging within the academic institution.

- In Step 3, participants were encouraged to attribute the most significant factor to the Ecological Systems Theory (ETS). They had the flexibility to attribute this factor to a single system or multiple systems as they deemed appropriate.

Data Analysis

Online Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (OIPA) was employed to conduct data analysis, with the study team collaborating to analyze the data collectively. The data analysis process in OIPA comprises five distinct stages, as outlined by Tanhan (2020):

- *Examination of Stories and Themes for Missing Data and Consent:* In this initial stage, the focus is on scrutinizing the narratives and themes to identify any missing data and ensure that consent procedures have been adhered to.
- *Examination of Stories and Themes for Personal Information:* The second stage involves a thorough review of the narratives and themes to identify and handle any personal information that may be present.
- *Grouping of Facilitating Themes under Main Themes:* In stage 3, the facilitating themes are systematically categorized under overarching main themes, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the data.
- *Grouping of Challenging Themes under Main Themes:* Similarly, stage 4 entails organizing the challenging themes under main themes, allowing for a structured analysis of the impediments encountered.
- *Examination of Attribution to Ecological Systems Theory (EST) Systems:* The final stage, stage 5, entails an evaluation of which of the EST systems the facilitating and challenging themes are attributed to, shedding light on the broader contextual factors influencing school belonging.

These five stages collectively contribute to a rigorous and insightful analysis of the data.

Results

In this section, we present the findings pertaining to the factors that either enhance or hinder the sense of school belonging among undergraduate students majoring in social studies teaching during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. We begin by discussing the facilitating factors followed by the complicating ones.

Main Themes Associated with Factors Facilitating School Belonging

Table 1 below illustrates the principal themes that contribute to fostering a sense of school belonging among these students. To provide a more profound understanding of the facilitating factors, we share the personal narratives of three students who participated in the study.

Table 1. Facilitating factors for school belonging

	Themes	%	N
1.	Friendship	40	33
2.	Activities	27	22
3.	Professors (Teachers)	24	20
4.	Resources/opportunities	24	20
5.	Personal growth	24	20
6.	Goals and dreams	23	19
7.	Being valued and respected	21	17
8.	Socialization	20	16
9.	Freedom	18	15
10.	Peace	15	12
11.	Academic success	15	12
12.	My department	12	10
13.	Trust	10	8
14.	Responsibilities	10	8
15.	City	10	8
16.	Sincerity	9	7
17.	Opportunities	7	6
18.	Communication	6	5
19.	Self-confidence	6	5
20.	Family	6	5

Below, we present the narratives and summary words or themes regarding college belonging shared by three social sciences teaching students. These narratives have been selected from the most frequently reported main themes, which include *friendship, engagement in activities, and interactions with professors.*

Story 1 shared by the participant 23rd

> The biggest factor that makes me feel like I belong at university is my friends, because at university we see our friends more than our family and our friends become our family. We share our problems and happiness with them, we spend most of our day together. We build a new life for ourselves away from our family and the real people we bring into our lives give you the confidence that "I can stand on my feet and bring new people into my life and solve problems. I think that is what makes you feel like you belong somewhere. Most of us have had worries about "will I be alone where I am going, how will I continue my life there, how and with whom will I solve a problem" and these worries have affected many things from our school life to our daily life. When these worries are resolved, the sense of belonging increases with the strength to exist there and your life there starts to be meaningful. So your life with your friends begins to make sense.

Themes: "Friendship, new life, self-confidence, family, responsibility, longing, standing on your own two feet, choice"

The second narrative is more closely associated with the second most frequently reported facilitating theme: activities

Story 2 by the participant 54th

> It was the clubs and activities that helped me adjust to the university. Thanks to the new friends I met there, it helped me to integrate into the university in a stronger way. Staying in the dormitory also had a great impact, thanks to the upperclassmen friends there, our relationship with the faculty became stronger. The fact that they showed us around the university and explained everything in detail was of great benefit. And the follow-up was great, lots of activities. I'm not just limited to my class, there's an event I can go to almost every day of the week. Without these activities, there would be a big void inside me. I don't think I would

have felt like I belonged at the school. University is not just about education in the classroom. It is a socializing environment. And the mobility there provides that.

Themes: "Clubs, events, friends, dormitory, professors, campus, personal development"

The third predominant facilitating theme pertained to professors (teachers). The following is a student's narrative from this perspective.

Story 3 from the participant 72nd

> *The most important reason why I feel that I belong to my school is because of my teachers. If I have a problem in any subject, they give me the opportunity to talk easily. Talking with my friends who study in other departments of the university, I find that they agree with me; the fact that the teacher appreciates you, opens all his knowledge to you and communicates with you during the lessons is the biggest factor that increases your interest in the school and the lessons. I understand that I cannot get efficiency from the lectures of the lecturers who lecture and leave the class without any communication, and I think this is contrary to their profession. Teachers should be in contact with students because the basis of their profession is communication and knowledge transfer. If you want to feel that you belong to a place, look at the foundation of the place you are in, the foundation of universities is the professors.*

Themes: "professors, knowledge, communication, sincerity, value, respect, trust"

Main Themes Hindering College Belonging

Table 2 below illustrates the principal themes that pose challenges to students' sense of school belonging. Subsequent to the table, we include a narrative to exemplify the three most prominently emphasized themes.

Table 2. Key themes pertaining to factors that impede university students' school belonging

	Themes	%	N
1.	Economic problems	39	32
2.	Concerns/anxiety	32	26
3.	Exclusion and disregarded	29	24
4.	Housing issues	26	21
5.	City	22	18
6.	Inadequacy of activity	22	18
7.	Pandemic and earthquake	22	18
8.	Lack of socialization	21	17
9.	Longing	18	15
10.	Courses and exams	18	15
11.	Transportation	17	14
12.	Friends	13	11
13.	Professors (teachers)	12	10
14.	Department	11	9
15.	Psychological issues	9	7
16.	Adaptation problems	9	7
17.	Online/distance education	9	7
18.	Family	9	7
19.	Inequality	7	6
20.	Responsibility	7	6
21.	Loneliness	6	5
22.	Lack of self-confidence	6	5

As you can see below, we share narratives and themes that illuminate the difficulties students encounter while trying to develop a sense of school belonging. These valuable perspectives are derived from three exceptional students in the Social Studies Teaching Department who artfully captured their experiences using the OIPA framework.

To exemplify, we present a sample narrative below that centers on the theme of economic challenges, a factor underscored by these students as the most profound obstacle to feeling a sense of belonging within the school community.

Story 4 by the participant sixth

> One of the factors that make it difficult for me to belong to the university is the financial means. I have always been in the background because I have always supported my brother financially, and I do not get enough financial support from my family, so I face many difficulties during my university education. I pay for everything I buy myself, even the bills in our house in our hometown. As a student who was affected by the recent Kahramanmaraş earthquake on February 6, I feel like the whole burden is on me after this sad event. The earthquake, which came right after the pandemic, made my burden very heavy. It makes me live in difficult conditions at the university. At the same time, it makes it difficult for me to adapt to the school, to feel that I belong and to continue my studies.

Themes: "economy, pandemic, earthquake, living standards, cost of living, hardship, bills, family"

We offer a sample narrative below, focusing on the theme of concerns and anxiety. Undergraduate social studies students have identified this as the second most significant factor hindering their sense of school belonging.

Story 5 by the participant 37th

> Among these beautiful dreams I have established, the fear of the future, which is the painful reality of the department I am studying, and the painful reality of my department, which is very rarely employed, sometimes make it difficult for me to connect with life, school, and my department. Although I chose this department willingly and lovingly and still love it, being unemployed after graduation is a very difficult situation to express. Let the department stay there, you do not belong to life. I always tell myself "Don't think about it now, focus on your education, have a good time with your friends, participate in activities at the university, etc." but it doesn't work like that. There is a process waiting for me and my family and loved ones have expectations from me. There is also a certain social pressure. Actually, the feeling of belonging to the school is not only a situation caused by the school or the teachers of the school. In my opinion, the things that come from the realities outside the school and from the person himself are more effective.

Themes: "future anxiety, not being appointed, unemployment, department, economy, social pressure, pessimism"

The following narrative illustrates the third theme: exclusion and feeling disregarded, as shared by a student.

Story 6 by the participant 13th

> First of all, negative interactions with my peers would be a reason for me to stay away from school. I value my friends and expect the same from them. Experiencing unpleasant incidents with the teachers and other staff of our school and not being able to find a solution weakens my sense of belonging to the school. The fact that the relevant official body is not interested in the problems I have with the school and gives evasive answers to the problem weakens my sense of belonging to the school. Failure to provide necessary opportunities for the needs of students at school and failure to provide social services will weaken my attachment to the school and reduce my feeling of belonging to the school. Not being able to express my ideas comfortably and having my project ideas ignored weakens my sense of belonging to the school. Especially the fact that my ideas were not taken into consideration by the professors affected me a lot. After a certain point, I am reluctant to express my ideas. I feel that no one takes me seriously. Problems arising from tensions that may arise between students, as well as problems arising from possible situations that may arise from cheating on exams and assignments, and many other factors that do not ensure the control of behaviors that do not comply with the rules of the school, will weaken my belonging to the school.

Themes: "Being ignored, teachers, friends, not appreciated, services, miscommunication, confidence, behaviors"

Facilitators and Complicators through the Lens of Ecological Systems Approach

In this section, we present the way university students attribute facilitating and complicating themes to the framework of ecological systems approach. During the study, participants were given the flexibility to attribute these factors to more than one system.

Table 3. Attribution of facilitating and complicating themes to ecological systems approach

Factors	EST Levels				
	Individual	Microsystem	Exosystem	Macrosystem	All together
Facilitator	63% (n = 52)	20% (n = 16)	8% (*n* = 7)	15% (*n* = 12)	39% (*n* = 32)
Barrier	49% (*n* = 40)	51% (*n* = 42)	26% (*n* = 21)	60% (*n* = 49)	52% (*n* = 43)

Upon reviewing Table 3, it becomes apparent that participants attributed college belonging facilitator themes to the following levels in descending order of significance: individual (intrapsychic), all levels collectively, microsystem, macrosystem, and exosystem. Conversely, for the complicating themes related to college belonging, participants assigned importance in the following order of EST levels: macrosystem, all levels collectively, microsystem, individual (intrapsychic), and exosystem.

Discussion

Key Facilitating Themes

A comprehensive examination of the data revealed twenty primary themes that contribute significantly to fostering a sense of belonging among college students. These themes, ranked by frequency of emphasis, encompass a wide range of factors. At the top of the list is friendship, emphasized by 33% of respondents, followed closely by involvement in activities at 22%. Interaction with professors, access to resources and opportunities, and personal development are equally important factors, each cited by 20% of respondents. In addition, themes such as pursuing goals and dreams (19%), feeling valued and respected (17%), socialization (16%), and the concept of freedom (15%) are integral to students' sense of belonging. Further down the list, issues such as peace (12%), academic success (12%), belonging to one's department (10%), trust (8%), responsibility (8%), connection to the city (8%), and sincerity (7%) all play a significant role. Opportunity (6%), effective communication (5%), confidence (5%), and family (5%) round out the list. Taken together, these themes provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted factors that contribute to the sense of belonging experienced by college students.

The most emphasized facilitating theme in the study was "friendship," with a significant endorsement rate of 33% (n = 40). In essence, friendship emerged as the central factor contributing to students' sense of belonging to their academic institutions. A comprehensive analysis of the data set revealed that elements such as "(1) friends filling the void left by family at university, (2) enjoying quality time and shared experiences with friends, and (3) overcoming challenges together with friends" were of paramount importance to students. The acceptance of students by their peers and the cultivation of positive relationships with friends are crucial factors in fostering their sense of belonging in the school environment (Booker, 2004).

A review of the existing literature reveals that peer support plays a pivotal role in enhancing school belonging (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999; Özgök & Sarı, 2016). Confirming the findings of this study, Van Gijn-Grosvenor and Huisman (2020), in their investigation of university students' sense of belonging, emphasized the pivotal role of friends as the primary factor that helps students feel a strong sense of belonging to their university. Wilson et al. (2018) conducted a study that yielded similar results, further supporting the findings of the current study. It is reasonable to expect that students who derive enjoyment and camaraderie from their friendships at school, engage in shared experiences, and feel valued by their peers will exhibit a greater sense of openness and security within the educational environment. This, in turn, will allow students to form a more favorable evaluation of their sense of belonging at school (Özgök & Sarı, 2016).

The importance of strong friendships among students goes beyond fostering school belonging; it also plays a critical role in their academic success. Research by Demir Şad (2007) found that students who were socially accepted by their peers tended to perform better academically than those who experienced rejection. Similarly, Maunder (2018) highlighted that students who reported strong emotional connections with their friends also demonstrated an increased sense of belonging to university life and the institution itself. Conversely, students who experienced challenges in their friendships reported lower levels of belonging to the university. Further underscoring the importance of peer relationships, Bowers (1997) found that students who experienced peer rejection were at higher risk for psychological and social difficulties, including school dropout, alcohol abuse, underemployment, and marital problems. In addition to its role in academic success, friendship serves as a protective

buffer against psychological problems while enhancing students' overall well-being (Rodriguez et al., 2003). Findings from numerous other studies are consistent with the notion that friendships contribute significantly to school belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Pittman & Richmond, 2007; Thomas, 2012; Wilcox et al., 2005). These collective findings from the literature confirm that college students' assertion that their friends are the most important factor in facilitating their sense of college belonging is not only valid, but also has significant meaning in the context of school belonging.

The second central theme that promotes school belonging for college students is engagement in activities, with a substantial 22% endorsement rate (n = 27). An examination of the dataset reveals that factors such as "(1) deriving enjoyment and socialization through active participation in school-related activities, (2) making social connections through these activities, and (3) experiencing lessons embedded in extracurricular activities" are of great importance to students. Clubs, societies, and participation in a wide range of activities contribute significantly to university students' sense of belonging to their academic institution (Van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020). In particular, sociocultural activities conducted in the school environment serve to strengthen students' ties with their educational institutions (Akıncı et al., 2020). In a comprehensive review of the literature focusing on the topic of activities, which was highlighted by students in this study as the second most influential factor facilitating their school belonging, it is evident that various research studies consistently confirm the positive impact of activities on university students' sense of belonging. Consistent with the findings of this study, Wilson et al. (2018) identified extracurricular activities as one of the five most important factors facilitating university students' school belonging. Furthermore, in a study that examined the influence of activities and social connections on university students' sense of belonging, Araújo et al. (2014) organized a series of activities, including exhibitions, games, off-campus trips, class discussions, among others, with first-year students over the course of a year. At the end of the study, it was found that these activities played a pivotal role in facilitating students' development of a strong sense of belonging to the school.

Fernandes et al. (2017) examined the impact of participation in the Non-Residential Colleges (NRC) program, which included various social and competitive activities, on university students' sense of belonging to the institution. The results indicated that students who participated in the activity program reported an increased sense of belonging compared to their non-participating peers. Similarly, Özdemir et al. (2010) observed a relationship between increased participation in school activities and students' academic performance, which correlated with increased satisfaction and an improved sense of belonging. These findings are consistent with the results of the present study. Numerous other studies have also demonstrated that students who participate in extracurricular activities tend to have more positive perceptions of social interactions, emotional well-being, safety, adult and peer support, and school engagement (Martinez et al., 2016).

The third most emphasized facilitative theme identified in this study was the role of professors (teachers), which received a substantial 20% endorsement rate (n = 24). A detailed analysis of the data set revealed that factors such as "(1) maintaining open lines of communication with teachers, (2) feeling valued and appreciated by teachers, and (3) perceiving teachers as well prepared" were emphasized by students as central facilitators. Indeed, the relationships students form with their teachers have a significant impact on their sense of belonging to the academic institution (Goodenow, 1993). Furrer and Skinner (2003) further supported this notion by demonstrating that students experience happiness and comfort in the classroom when they receive recognition and appreciation from their teachers, which makes academic participation engaging and enjoyable. Conversely, students who feel disregarded or undervalued by their teachers tend to experience frustration, dissatisfaction, and increased stress during learning activities. The emphasis in this study on teachers as key facilitators of students' school belonging is consistent with findings documented in the existing literature.

Avcı (2023), whose research carries particular weight in supporting the findings of the present study and who deals with the area of university students' school belonging after COVID-19, emphasizes the central role of professors in this context. Avcı asserts that professors hold a crucial position in shaping students' sense of school belonging, and emphasizes the importance of establishing close and meaningful relationships with professors as a means of fostering high levels of school belonging. This assertion is closely aligned with the findings that highlight the importance of "being valued by professors" within the data set. Further supporting this facet of the data, Yokuş

et al. (2017) found in their study that the most important determinant of students' educational quality is the degree to which academic staff show care and interest in their students' progress. Moreover, additional research, such as that conducted by Wilson et al. (2018), supports this notion by affirming that feeling respected and valued by faculty, particularly in recognition of their contributions to the learning process, is a paramount factor contributing to students' sense of belonging at the university. Similarly, Booker's (2004) study found that students' interactions with their professors were among the most important factors in shaping their overall sense of school belonging. These collective findings underscore the central role of professors in fostering students' sense of belonging to the educational institution.

Key Complicating Themes

A total of twenty-two major themes emerged, highlighting the barriers students face that hinder their sense of belonging at school. In order of prevalence, the themes are: Economic problems at 39% (n=32), worries and fears at 32% (n=26), feelings of exclusion and being ignored at 29% (n=24), housing problems at 26% (n=21), problems related to the city at 22% (n=18), inadequacy of activities also at 22% (n=18), the effects of the pandemic and the earthquake at 22% (n=18), a lack of socialization at 21% (n=17), a sense of longing at 18% (n=15), challenges with courses and exams also at 18% (n=15), transportation difficulties at 17% (n=14), problems with friends at 13% (n=11), problems with professors or teachers at 12% (n=10), departmental concerns at 11% (n=9), psychological challenges, adjustment difficulties, problems with online or distance learning, and family-related challenges all at 9% (n=7 each), experiences of inequality and overwhelming responsibilities both at 7% (n=6), and finally feelings of loneliness and lack of self-confidence each at 6% (n=5).

The most prominent challenge reported by students participating in the study was "economic problems" (39%, n=32). A close examination of the data set reveals that factors such as "(1) the high cost of living, (2) inadequate financial support from their families, and (3) difficulties in meeting basic needs" were identified by students as significant complicating factors. Unfortunately, there is a lack of studies in the Turkish context that directly address the factors that hinder school belonging. However, in studies that focus on the challenges faced by university students, it is consistently observed that financial problems rank among the challenges experienced by this population (Aydın & Egemberdiyeva, 2018; Bilgin, 2000; Cevher, 2015; Erkan et al., 2012; Karagüven, 2000; Türküm et al., 2004).

In a study by Karagüven (2000), the challenges faced by university students were categorized under five main headings: economic problems, transportation difficulties, worries about the future, communication problems with peers, and other miscellaneous problems. Türküm et al. (2004) found that young people face challenges such as economic constraints, longing for family, worries about the future, difficulties in studying, and poor eating habits. Bilgin (2000), in a separate study focusing on university students, found that their most pressing challenges were family problems (65%), economic problems (49.4%), difficulties in expressing their thoughts (46.6%), worries about their professional future (40%), pursuing undesirable educational paths (32.5%), academic underachievement (25.8%), and conflicts with peers (24.9%). Erkan et al. (2012) found that university students primarily faced emotional problems, followed by academic challenges and then economic difficulties. In a further study with university students, Cevher (2015) found that economic issues were their main complaint. As evidenced by these studies, economic challenges consistently rank among the top concerns of university students. Furthermore, the literature shows that economic difficulties are often highlighted in studies that examine factors that challenge university students' sense of school belonging. In line with this, Ahn and Davis (2020) in their research on college students' sense of school belonging concluded that after psychological issues such as isolation, stress, and unhappiness, economic challenges were the most significant obstacle for students.

The study identified "worry/anxiety" as the second most significant barrier to students' sense of school belonging, with 32% (n=26) of participants expressing this sentiment. Further analysis of the data revealed specific concerns, including (1) anxiety about future prospects, (2) fear of not being able to secure a job after graduation, and (3) anxiety related to exams. Shochet et al. (2011) found that anxiety and school attachment are inversely related; as anxiety levels increase, school attachment decreases. Previous research has shown that students with weaker school connectedness tend to have higher levels of anxiety (Arslan et al., 2021; Bond et al., 2007; McGraw et al., 2008; Shochet et al., 2006). In support of these findings, Arslan et al. (2021) examined the anxiety and psychological adjustment of university students during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that students with pronounced coronavirus-related anxiety felt a reduced sense of belonging to the university. Conversely, those

without such anxiety felt more connected to their schools. In addition, Arslan et al. concluded that individuals who experience anxiety often face challenges in psychological adjustment. In a related study focusing on education during the pandemic, Daniel (2020) highlighted students' fears. Esen and Aktağ (2022) provided further context, noting that given the economic conditions in Türkiye, uncertainties after graduation fostered anxiety among university students. Supporting the findings of this study, McGraw et al. (2008) found that students with elevated levels of depression, anxiety, and stress had weakened attachments to family, friends, and school. In addition, Bond et al. (2007) found that adolescents with decreased school attachment reported increased symptoms of depression and anxiety.

In the study, "exclusion and being ignored" emerged as the third most important barrier to students' sense of belonging, with 29% (n=24) of participants identifying this issue. A closer examination of the data revealed the following critical factors that students perceived as complicating: (1) feelings of loneliness due to a lack of acceptance by peers or professors, (2) not being taken into account when addressing problems, and (3) the inability to freely express their opinions and feelings. Social exclusion can manifest itself both physically, through outright rejection, and emotionally, through being overlooked or ignored. This sense of exclusion is often associated with subjective feelings or perceptions of rejection and neglect, especially by peers and educators. Students who feel socially excluded often do not perceive themselves as integral members of a social group, nor do they feel valued within the school environment (Arslan, 2018a; Arslan, 2018b; Arslan & Duru, 2017). This type of exclusion directly threatens an individual's innate need to belong, as it undermines the social ties that are crucial for well-being and security (Aydın et al., 2013). In order for individuals to maintain their mental health and feel secure, it's essential to develop healthy social relationships and foster a genuine sense of belonging. After all, social acceptance and a sense of belonging are fundamental human motivations (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

In addition to social exclusion, social acceptance also plays a central role in shaping students' sense of belonging to their schools (Booker, 2004). It correlates with feelings of inclusion, respect, and a warm welcome from peers. Individuals who are socially accepted often experience positive emotions such as happiness, contentment, satisfaction, and calmness. Conversely, individuals who face social exclusion tend to struggle with negative emotions such as anxiety, depression, and loneliness (Arslan, 2018a). Research has shown that students who face social exclusion have significantly higher levels of depression, loneliness, and feelings of inadequacy than their peers with robust social connections (Witvliet et al., 2010). In addition, social exclusion has been linked to negative emotional states such as anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation (Williams et al., 2000). In this study, the emphasis placed by university students on feelings of exclusion and neglect as primary barriers to school belonging is of particular concern, especially in light of the existing literature. Exclusion, defined as the act of excluding an individual from a group or avoiding forming relationships with them (MacDonald & Leary, 2005), may have been exacerbated by recent events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent earthquake in Türkiye. Given that a significant consequence of exclusion is the deprivation of social support (MacDonald & Leary, 2005), it is plausible that these events exacerbated the student participants' feelings of isolation. In support of the findings of this study, Ahn and Davis (2020) identified exclusion as a critical factor in reducing college students' sense of school belonging. Echoing the sentiments expressed in this study about students feeling unaccepted by peers and professors and experiencing loneliness, Osterman (2000) and Anderman (2002) highlighted loneliness as a significant barrier to fostering a sense of belonging.

Facilitating and Challenging Factors Based on the Ecological Systems Approach

This section of the study explores the levels of Ecological Systems Theory (EST) that were most commonly agreed upon by participants. Because system levels are considered holistically when identifying facilitators or barriers, participants were allowed to select multiple levels or systems within EST (Tanhan, 2020). According to the results of the study, the distribution of factors that facilitate or hinder college students' sense of belonging, consistent with the EST, is as follows: individual/intrapsychic (63%, n=52; 49%, n=40), collective (39%, n=32; 52%, n=43), macrosystem (15%, n=12; 60%, n=49), microsystem (20%, n=16; 51%, n=42), and exosystem (8%, n=7; 26%, n=21). When examining the rates and distributions of students' assignment of facilitating factors to EST levels, it's evident that the majority identified factors at the "individual/intrapsychic" level. In addition, a significant proportion of participants identified factors in the "collective" category. Fewer participants identified broader systems, such as

the macrosystem and exosystem. These findings suggest that students primarily view themselves and their immediate environment as the primary facilitators of their connection to the university. The influence of broader systems, such as government policy, the economy, the media, social services, and local government, appears to be minimal in facilitating this sense of belonging. In contrast, when assessing the rates and distributions of students' association of complicating factors with EST levels, it appears that participants view all systems as similarly challenging. However, they tend to view broader systems as more challenging. Interestingly, the distribution of complicating factors does not mirror that of facilitating factors. That is, students don't exclusively attribute facilitating factors to themselves and challenging factors to external systems. While they see themselves as the primary facilitators, they also acknowledge their role in the challenges they face.

Limitations and Conclusions

This study has several limitations. First, participants were drawn from only three universities and only from the social studies department. As a result, the perspectives of a broader student population were not captured. The 82 social studies students who participated represent a relatively small fraction of the total number of social studies students in Türkiye. In order to prioritize the safety of participants and mitigate potential bias, participation was voluntary and questions asking for personal information were intentionally omitted. However, given the diverse regional and academic backgrounds of the participants, the potential for institutional bias should be acknowledged.

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in global research on school belonging. Most of these studies have primarily focused on challenges to school belonging or predicted school belonging based on specific variables, and have predominantly employed quantitative research methods (Arslan, 2018; Arslan, 2021; Avcı, 2023; Potts, 2021). A notable strength of this study was the use of the OIPA method, which allowed for the simultaneous exploration of both facilitating and complicating factors related to school belonging. In light of these findings, the use of OIPA and/or Online Photovoice (OPV) is recommended for studies of school belonging as well as other diverse topics. The recent successful implementation of OIPA and OVP in various fields and subjects further supports the findings of this study (e.g., Doyumğaç et al., 2021; Genç et al., 2022).

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical Standards

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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