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Recognizing the diversity in how students define belonging: evidence of differing conceptualizations, including as a function of students' gender and socioeconomic background

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Abstract

Sense of belonging is a fundamental human motivation and, in higher education settings, has been associated with students' motivation and academic outcomes. However, less is known about the nuances of how students define belonging within a university context, and how their gendered and socio-economic identity-based experiences inform these definitions. Using a qualitative approach, we interviewed 36 UK university students to better understand (1) students' definitions of belonging to university, and (2) how these conceptualizations are shaped by their experiences in terms of their gender, their socioeconomic status, and the intersection of these two identities. Interviews showed that students defined belonging in terms of social belonging. These definitions were shaped by their (a) cultural capital about university, (b) socioeconomic or gender identity experiences and (c) perceived similarity with other students. Indeed, despite the fact that students' definitions of belonging were associated with how they have experienced belonging to university, identity-based experiences were mostly mentioned when they perceived they did not belong, which was framed as a "sense of anti-belonging". Otherwise, students defined belonging as (a) being authentic, considering—for example—gender identity-based experiences of acceptance in university, or (b) sharing similar experiences with others, considering the importance of perceiving similarity with other students to feel they belong and, in some cases, being necessary to learn about university culture to perceive similarity with others. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed in terms of how belonging conceptualisations are bound up in identity and context, opening questions about the consequences of inclusion and diversity policies in higher education.

Keywords Authenticity · Intersectionality · Multiple social identities · Sense of belonging · Social identity

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1 Introduction

One of the main concerns in educational organisations is to promote a diverse and equal environment. In the past decades, following discussions about the benefits of attending higher education (HE), governments have created policies to increase participation of underrepresented groups under the name of 'Widening Access' policies (Evans et al., 2019). These policies have led to increased accessibility for historically marginalised students, such as women and students from socioeconomic disadvantaged backgrounds, among others.

With this increased access, universities and stakeholders have expressed their concerns about how well such students will fit in within the university context, how they will get along with the rest of the students, and how they develop a sense of belonging to university. Consequently, universities have focused an important amount of their work on ensuring that students, regardless their background, feel part of university community (Brady et al., 2020). For example, universities have provided individual scholarships for high-achieving students that want to study STEM but don't have the financial resources to access to university, and have developed outreach programmes to encourage female and male students to study STEM (Piper & Krehbiel, 2015). Universities have also introduced workshops to improve the study skills of students from less advantaged background (e.g. low-income households, first generation students), as well as providing them information about the university system (Independent Reviewer on Social Mobility & Child Poverty, 2012).

Despite these initiatives, difficulties remain for students from underrepresented groups in university. For example, in STEM disciplines, women report lower levels of sense of belonging compared to men (Lewis et al., 2017); and women of colour are less likely to report a sense of belonging, compared to white men (Rainey et al., 2018). Moreover, research has shown that family income and students' self-identification with social class groups (e.g. working class, middle class) predict students' sense of belonging (Ostrove & Long, 2007). Social class is positively related to students' sense of belonging, and working-class students are higher risk of being excluded from social activities at university due to their lack of financial resources and time (Nguyen & Herron, 2021; Rubin, 2012).

This lowered sense of belonging for members of underrepresented groups in HE is problematic because research has shown that a sense of social belonging in HE contributes to academic motivation and students' retention (Pedler et al., 2022). A sense of belonging in HE increases underrepresented students' ability to handle academic and social demands (Costello et al., 2018), and is strongly related to the future academic choices that students make, for example, pursuing a major (Murphy & Zirkel, 2015), as well as their wellbeing (Suhlmann et al., 2018). Hence, considering the relevance of a sense of belonging, the fact that some groups are uncertain about their belonging or do not feel they belong to university is critical for HE organisations, as they have declared commitment to equal access to opportunities for all students, regardless of their background (Connell-Smith & Hubble, 2018).

Thus, the interest in understanding students' sense of belonging is high. Most of the research about sense of belonging in HE has shown how students from diverse groups have distinct *levels* of a sense of belonging, and how these levels might be associated with particular outcomes (e.g., motivation, retention). However, because (a) a sense of belonging is a complex concept and (b) challenges in sense of belonging for students from disadvantages groups -such as women and students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds—persist, it is important to provide an in-depth view of sense of belonging. This includes showing the potential nuances in how students approach the idea of belonging to university, an understanding how students might *conceptualise* a sense of belonging, whilst considering how their multiple intersecting identities-based experiences might play a role in these conceptualisations.

This paper aims to address these lacunae. Using a qualitative approach, we examine students' experiences of belonging within the university context, and how their identity-based experiences—in terms of gender and subjective socioeconomic status (SES)—might shape their conceptualisations about belonging.

1.1 Sense of belonging conceptualizations

Despite the relevance of a sense of belonging for students' experiences, there is a lack of conceptual clarity and consistency in defining belonging in the research (Allen et al., 2021), likely because to define sense of belonging is complex, as it encapsulates a variety of constructs (Bettencourt, 2021; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Furthermore, while belongingness can be a stable experience over time and among different contexts, it can also change frequently among different situations and experiences (Allen et al., 2021). In this section, we aim to summarise three key approaches to belonging in psychological research: (a) sense of belonging and interpersonal relationships, (b) sense of belonging and fitting in, and (c) sense of belonging and authenticity. Across these three areas, we draw on a social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) to understand belonging, considering the role of multiple and intersectional identities (Shields, 2008).

1.1.1 Sense of belonging and interpersonal relationships

The notion of belonging as social belonging—focused on positive social relationships—is widespread in society. For instance, US students from sixth to eighth grade, defined belonging as "having good relationships with peers and teachers" (Nichols, 2006). Indeed, belonging has been conceptualised as feeling connected, accepted, and respected by groups or others (Strayhorn, 2020). Hence, sense of belonging emphasises individual's perception of the quality of their relationship with a valued group, organisation, or community context (e.g., university; Walton & Brady, 2020), as well as the sense of being valued by others and social acceptance (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Pedler et al., 2022).

According to optimal distinctiveness theory (Leonardelli et al., 2010), belonging has two components: (1) group membership, that is the perceived strength of the

bond between the individual and the groups, and (2) group affection, which refers to the perceived valence of the bond (Jansen et al., 2014). Hence, belonging implies to perceive that one belongs to particular groups considering the strength of the bond with the group, as well as the positive valence perceived from this bond. Indeed, belonging from interpersonal relationships involves feelings of intimacy, interdependence, and frequent interactions (Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2013).

The understanding of sense of belonging as interpersonal relationships with others is present within research in the context of HE. Connections with staff and peers promote students' sense of belonging (Pedler et al., 2022) and feeling that they are part of a community (Prodgers et al., 2022). Faculty members and peers in HE have a key role in students' sense of belonging, especially for underrepresented groups, as they can facilitate (or not) a sense of community and bond with others (Booker, 2016). Hence, positive relations with others promote individuals' perceived social support which in turn, can help to overcome distressful experiences of lack of belonging without affecting students sense of adequacy and authenticity (Wang et al., 2018).

1.1.2 Sense of belonging and fitting in

Sense of belonging has also been defined as a subjective feeling of fitting in and being included as a valued member of a group or organisation (Lewis et al., 2017). For example, individuals define belonging to their work as "being part of something" (e.g. organisation, groups, relationships with others). Likewise, research in the educational context has considered fitting in as an attribute of sense of belonging (Bean, 1985) in terms of feeling connected with a group (Hausmann et al., 2009); and fitting in socially with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

The idea of belonging as being part of a group has been highlighted by the social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This approach is based on the idea that one's social identity is built by a sense of membership and belonging with a social group, as individuals categorise themselves and others in different groups (e.g. gender, socioeconomic status). This classification process has a critical impact on individual attitudes and behaviour (Spears, 2011). For example, in the context of higher education, to feel part of university shapes students' willingness to persevere (Bornholt, 2001) and therefore improves students' academic performance (Reynolds et al., 2017) and their self-concept (Suhlmann et al., 2018).

A sense of belonging and a sense of fitting in can be considered as different yet interrelated concepts. Similar to the concept of sense of belonging, the definition of fitting in has also lacked of consistency, and has been subject to multiple conceptualizations (Kristof, 1996). Here, sense of fit has been defined as the compatibility between individuals and organizations (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005), associated with feelings of inclusion and compatibility with an institutional environment (Peters et al., 2012), or cultural match with the organisation (Stephens et al., 2012). For some authors, sense of fit emphasises organisational aspects rather than the interpersonal ones (Schmader & Sedikides, 2018). Furthermore, sense of fitting in is context dependent, and can change according to the context. For example, a low SES can

feel a lack of sense of fitting in a highly selective institution, but this might change in a different institution (Sommet et al., 2015).

A different perspective is that a sense of fitting in can influence social belonging, which in turn has been associated to different outcomes, such as academic success and wellbeing (Freeman et al., 2007). Following this model, students that perceive a cultural match with their university in terms of their values, norms, or cultural capital, will experience a greater sense of social fit. This in turn will promote greater sense of belonging, as to perceive sharing similar values and understanding the organisation norms will facilitate the development of interpersonal relationships with others perceived as alike (Phillips et al., 2020). The distance that students from underrepresented groups see between themselves and university norms and culture will increase the gap in participation at university and therefore lead to lower feelings of belonging. This in turn, can affect motivation, academic outcomes and wellbeing. Hence, as students feel closer to the prototype of the group who represents group norms and values, they will be more likely to feel they belong. The idea of prototype can be understood as a set of attributes that characterise a group, such as attitudes, feelings, and behaviours (Hogg, 2000). The prototypes will help to differentiate one group from another. Likewise, prototype attributes can be understood as norms that members from the group must follow to be considered part of the group.

Since individuals self-categorise with particular groups and wish those groups to be better and distinct, they evaluate the ingroup following two key individuals' motivations: self-enhancement and social comparison. For the former, belonging to particular groups will promote a sense of positive self, especially when individuals belong to high status groups and perceive their context as uncertain, as it makes it difficult to anticipate events (Hogg & Adelman, 2013). Hence, intergroup comparisons attempt to reach a positive ingroup distinctiveness and similarity within the group (Hogg, 2000). Through social comparison, individuals connect socially with others, as they emphasise similarities. Furthermore, when individuals compare to others they also make some of their social identities salient, especially the ones that maximise a sense of belonging with their group (Krizan, 2018).

1.1.3 Sense of belonging and authenticity

Sense of belonging has also been defined as feeling at home (Mulrooney & Kelly, 2020) and social cues from the environment, such as perceived similarity with the organization culture, may facilitate individuals' perceptions that they can express themselves. Hence, sense of belonging also has been associated with the acceptance of individual' authentic self (Magrath, 2021). Here, to feel that one belongs has been conceptually interrelated to feeling that one can be authentic (Jansen et al., 2014; Scully, 2015).

According to the State Authenticity as Fit to Environment (SAFE) Model (Schmader & Sedikides, 2018), the feeling of being accepted by others or feeling like home are definitions closer to an "state authenticity", rather than sense of belonging. The same model proposes that belonging is also considered as an element of authenticity rather than authenticity being considered as an element of belonging. Following this model, perceived fit with the environment is the process

that promotes in turn feelings about being authentic (Aday & Schmader, 2019; Dormanen et al., 2020). However, despite the consensus about the intra and interpersonal benefits of authenticity (Al-Khouja et al., 2022), to perceive that one can be authentic is associated with perceiving that one is aligned with the group norms and values (Schmader & Sedikides, 2018).

For instance, women in disciplines with a lack of female representation, where their gender identity does not fit with the identity prototype, or where environmental signals show them that they don't belong or fit to a particular domain, see their motivation to participate in this discipline negatively affected (Cheryan et al., 2009). These social cues can work as norms about what is expected for individuals of this group, and can facilitate or not that individuals feel they can be themselves, or that they need to change to fitting in the identity prototype of the group. Thus, if the environment signals materials elements (e.g. physical objects) that don't fit with individuals' identity, individuals might feel their 'true' self will not be accepted, affecting their sense of belonging. Hence, environments and physical spaces are important to individuals' sense of belonging, which has been conceptualized as "ambient belonging" (Cheryan et al., 2009). Thus, being authentic might only be possible when individuals perceive that their authentic self will be accepted by the group, and for the individuals that don't feel aligned with valued groups, being authentic could be more costly than beneficial.

To perceive that one belongs to a particular group promotes social identity processes such as individual mobility—to pursue belonging to higher status groups and improve their sense of identity, or intergroup discrimination in favour to the group where individuals perceive to belong (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Hence, as individuals categorise themselves into different groups, their sense of belonging to these groups develops their sense of self and defines their place in society (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Individuals look for a positive sense of self and social identity, and the perceived status of the groups to which they belong is important to understand both inter- and intragroup relations, as well as an individuals' behaviour. Research from a social identity perspective has shown that processes of self-categorization with a particular group, such as gender and socioeconomic status, affect HE students' sense of belonging (London et al., 2011). For example, in HE, working-class students must negotiate between the potential of reaching upward mobility (and abandon their previous identity) and maintaining a sense of authenticity (Reay, 2002).

1.2 A social identity approach to students' conceptualisations about sense of belonging and intersectional identities

Students' conceptualisations of belonging can differ as their experiences differ, especially for students from historically underrepresented groups in HE, such as women and students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. A sense of belonging is also an experience that might differ depending on individuals group memberships, as an individual's identification to a particular group will structure an individual's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours that are described and prescribed to their groups (Peters et al., 2015). A university student is not a homogenous identity

(Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018); it can coincide with many other identities, such as SES and gender. The intersection between gender and SES might promote particular experiences regarding to overlapped identities. For example, female students from a disadvantaged SES might experience less social support and sense of belonging than male students, but also than female middle-class students. Furthermore, psychology's recent interest in social class—a discipline where class has had less attention than other identities—demonstrates how the social class system is still present and influent on individuals' identity (Manstead, 2018). Despite this, the intersection of gender and social class inequalities has received less attention (Walby et al., 2012), highlighting the need for research into how gender and socioeconomic intersectional identities are experienced by individuals.

Social identities are situated in complex social structures, with multiple social realities and overlapping experiences of disadvantage and privilege (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Theories of intersectionality highlight the problems of considering identities as one-dimensional, without exploring how (a) identities are multiple (Block & Corona, 2014); (b) these multiples identities are interrelated and intersect, creating particular experiences at these intersections (Shields, 2008); and (c) identities are contextual and situated within multiple systems of inequality and oppression (Collins et al., 2021; Crenshaw, 1989). In other words, theories of intersectionality recognise that individuals' experiences need to be understood considering how their multiple identities (e.g. gender, social class) are situated in social systems, interrelated and create subjective intersectional experiences (e.g. being a woman from a high socioeconomic status is a different experience than being a woman from a low SES). Hence, social identities mutually create each other: one social identity (e.g. gender) makes sense in relation to another (e.g. SES Shields, 2008). Furthermore, social identities organise social relationships as they are context-dependent and situated within a social hierarchy (Fernández et al., 2022). Hence, social identities are not neutral categories—they are understood as embodied in power and prestige relationships (McCormick-Huhn et al., 2019).

Social identities are a common focus in both the social identity approach, and theories of intersectionality. This has led to efforts to integrate both theories as a way of having a more in-depth and complex approach to individuals' identity experiences. An intersectional approach to social identity considers that group memberships are not only characteristics, but also relationships of social inequality that can be examined as intersections of disadvantage (Hurtado, 2017). To consider that identities are intersectional, is to create nuances in terms of (dis)advantages and provides a different perspective in terms of how social identity processes are understood—especially in terms of collective action, as alliances with members of other members of disadvantaged groups create a shared identity that recognises power relationships among groups (Wiley & Bikmen, 2012). Thus, research has shown the need to integrate the role of power, a critical element discussed by theories of intersectionality, into inter- and intragroup dynamics, a key aspect analysed by the social identity approach (Hahn Tapper, 2013). However, most of the integrated psychological approaches have focused on the multiple/intersectional identity aspects, rather than the discussion of power and dominant systems of oppression (Buchanan & Wiklund, 2021). For example, the bicultural identity integration approach (Benet-Martinez

& Haritatos, 2005) focuses on the compatibility of two cultural identities (e.g. two nationalities), and how they are perceived as overlapping and congruent, or in conflict.

Although both the social identity approach (Doosje et al., 2002) and theories of intersectionality (Hurtado, 2017) have recognised that individuals are perceived and treated within their social environments following a hierarchically organised social structure, both approaches highlight different aspects of these experiences. On one hand, the social identity approach has traditionally focused on broad social identities, such as gender; and includes the idea of multiple identities. However, depending on the context, a particular identity might become salient (e.g., in elite/more selective universities, social class identity might have more relevance than other identities), rather than considering that individual's experiences may be shaped by their social class, but simultaneously by their gender. On the other hand, intersectionality has offered a more nuanced approach for considering individuals' positions within social hierarchies and how simultaneous identities experience these disadvantages. However, it has not offered the same level of detail in how individuals might navigate that social hierarchy. A social identity approach helps offer a depiction of such strategies, including the potential that individuals might attempt to boost a positive sense of self (Fernández et al., 2022).

1.3 The current research

HE has a critical role in society, aiming to promote social equality and empowering individuals from different groups to improve their quality of life. However, despite efforts to ensure a wider participation and increase diversity in organisations, students from historically underrepresented groups, such as women and students from disadvantaged SES groups, continue to face challenges in terms of how they perceive themselves in university. Following the complexity in theoretically defining belonging, research has not shown clarity in the understanding of how individuals from particular groups (e.g. university students) conceptualise what belonging means to them.

In view of these points, in our study we aim to understand (a) how students conceptualise belonging to university, and (b) how students associated these definitions with their gender and SES identity-experiences. To address this, we conducted online interviews with UK undergraduate students using an exploratory qualitative approach. This methodology will allow us to consider participant ideas about belonging from their own perspective and lived experiences, to focus on students' meanings of belonging, rather than focusing on whether they feel they belong or not.

Socioeconomic background has been conceptualised differently in the research, either using (a) objective measures such as parental education level (Bettencourt, 2021; Flanagan, 2017; Pascarella et al., 2004); (b) subjective measures, such as students self-identifying as part of a particular group, such as working class (Soria & Bultmann, 2014), or (c) indicating students perceived social status, also known as subjective social status (Rubin et al., 2014). We will focus our study on subjective conceptualisations of socioeconomic status, as this provides a (a) direct assessment

of students' perception of their status; (b) view on social identity elements of SES, (as its focus is on students sense of belonging to a particular group); and (c) context-dependent perception of SES—rather than focus on a fixed categorisation and understanding that SES can vary across contexts (Rubin et al., 2014. More details on the use of subjective SES in the Sect. 2).

We draw on a social identity theory approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) to consider the importance of how social contexts shape individuals' sense of belonging, the role of social identity in these processes, and treat social identities as multiple and intersectional (Hurtado, 2017). We present the main results of the interviews conducted, which provide information about the nuances of students' conceptualisations of belonging to university, and how students understood these definitions in terms of their gender and socioeconomic identity experiences, as well as the intersection of both. Finally, implications for theory and practice are discussed.

2 Method

In our study, we followed the online interview method developed by Opara et al. (2021), using real-time, semi-structured online written interviews via a document sharing website. This method provides benefits for research with university students, such as: (a) following a language that young adults are used to (typing), due to their use of social media and texting; (b) a sense of privacy that is important when sensitive topics are discussed, such as university experiences, and gender and socioeconomic experiences; and (c) reaching a wide range of participants from different universities and cities within the UK without travelling expenses for researcher or students, which facilitated an access to students from diverse social backgrounds.

Hence, although students required to sign into an email account before accessing the live document, which could affect their sense of perceived anonymity and therefore, affect their answers particularly in sensitive topics, to address this, the interview process was conducted behind a computer screen to provide participants a sense of privacy and facilitate a greater sense of anonymity (Opara et al., 2021). Furthermore, this method gave us the flexibility of interviewing students from different locations and with different schedules, which is important when we consider that students from different socioeconomic backgrounds are likely to have different schedules due to their activities outside university, such as part-time jobs or family responsibilities (Pascarella et al., 2004). Interviews were conducted through an online document, transcribed in real time and verbatim, providing more accuracy to their transcriptions. We also recognise some limitations of this method in terms of obtaining non-verbal information that could contribute to a better understanding of students' responses; and emotional information associated with students' responses, such as changes in their tone of voice (Opara et al., 2021). Hence, we did not focus our analysis on emotional and non-verbal responses from the participants.

This study received ethics approval from the first and third authors' institution (approval for participant consent obtained electronically).

2.1 Participants

This study is part of a wider research exploring students experiences in higher education. Hence, we followed the same process and analytic procedure described in Fernández et al., (2022), except for the coding process. We interviewed 36 undergraduate students enrolled in UK universities (19 women and 17 men, see Table 1 in "Appendix"). To address the following study objectives: (a) to describe the ways in which students define belonging to university, and (b) to analyse how students associated their gender and SES identity experiences with these conceptualisations; we selected participants through quota sampling (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995). We selected participants with a brief online screening questionnaire through the online participant recruitment site Prolific, Facebook student groups, and university contacts from Widening Participation programmes. We intentionally used multiple recruitment platforms to capture a greater extent of students.

The screening questionnaire included: (a) demographics questions (age, gender, ethnicity); (b) educational information questions (year of study, university, discipline of study, parent educational background); (c) their subjective social status, measured with the MacArthur Social Class Ladder (adapted from Adler et al., 2000), where students identified their place relative to people in the UK, with 1 meaning the lower place and 10 the highest place; and (d) whether they would agree to be contacted for a future interview in the next weeks. On the basis of the screening questionnaire we invited students to participate in the interviews in a way that ensured equal representation of (a) women and men, and (b) students from different socioeconomic backgrounds in the UK. We stopped recruiting more participants when we reach a similar distribution of participants in each group, the topics mentioned in the interviews started to repeat, and no further new information about our research questions was detected.

Participants' mean age was 21.97 ($SD = 3.44$), and, on average, they were enrolled on their 2.5 years of study ($SD = 0.74$). We grouped students' SES into 3 groups: 12 students in the lower SES group (values of 1–4), 10 students in the mean group (values of 5–6), and 14 students in the higher SES group (values of 7–10). Students were enrolled in a variety of disciplines, and were from a range of UK universities (for details, see Table 1 in "Appendix").

2.2 Process

Based on the screening questionnaire, we contacted students via Prolific or email (depending on where participants saw the first call for the study) and invited them to the interview, sharing the participant information form, and asking them to provide different options of days and times were students were available to participate in the interviews. We then shared the unique link to access the document via private message or email one day before the arranged interview time, with a reminder message about the interview.

The online written interviews were semi-structured and consisted of a thematic script that included: (a) students' academic routine; (b) students experiences arriving

university; (c) how students experienced belonging at university; and (d) their definitions of belonging (for the interview script, see Supplementary Material).

Following the methodology proposed by Opara et al. (2021), the first author typed the questions live into an online document that was unique to each participant. Participants typed their responses in reply. As the interviews were in real-time, we were able to ask follow-up questions for a better understanding of the participants' initial responses, replying to their answers on the same shared document during the interview. Each interview lasted approximately 2 h and could be conducted in two separate sessions within the same week, with the purpose of facilitating students' participation (for details, see Table 1 in "Appendix"). The interviews were part of a large project about students' experiences in HE, other topics were discussed but not included in this study. The section on sense of belonging (which this study focuses on) lasted between 30 and 45 min. For students that had the interview in two separate sessions, this section was conducted during the first session and was not disrupted, except in one case (P2) due to time constraints. In this case, the first session included introductory questions about their academic routine, and sense of social support, and the second session included the set of questions about sense of belonging.

After the interviews, we debriefed students via email and they received payment for their participation in line with the national minimum wage (approximately £15). Finally, we anonymised the transcription, using letters to refer to any name mentioned. The letters were not associated to any particular information, with the purpose of anonymising the transcriptions.

2.3 Analytical procedure

We followed a qualitative and interpretive approach to analyse participants' definitions of belonging, following a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). We approach the data from a social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), acknowledging how the social context shapes students' multiple and intersecting identities (Hurtado, 2017; Shields, 2008). Thus, we read and interpreted the interviews identifying (a) how students associated their definitions of belonging with their gender and SES based identity experiences, (b) if and how they associated these definitions with the intersection of both group identity experiences, and (c) if previously documented social identity processes (e.g. social comparison) were related to students' definitions of belonging. We included observations of potential differences, similarities and patterns in how identity groups (that is, women/men, low/high SES, and the intersections of them) conceptualised belonging, using the demographic information that students provide about their gender and SES.

To analyse the data, we followed the process described by Byrne (2022). First, after all interviews were conducted we again read through each participant's transcripts. The first author began analysing each interview at a time, considering what participants had explicitly said, and taking notes as required using NVivo memos. Then, the first author re-read the memos and each interview creating codes with interview's latent content. These latent codes included theoretical interpretations

about students' perceived role of gender and socioeconomic based-experiences in their definitions of belonging to university, as well as observations in terms of how different groups (women, high SES, etc.) might be more likely to endorse different conceptualisations of belonging. The first author reviewed the codes again, and grouped the codes in subthemes and themes following a deductive (or 'theory-driven') analysis, considering the data following the research questions: (a) how students defined belonging to university and (b) how gender and socioeconomic identity experiences were associated with their definitions of belonging. However, we noticed that the first round of coding was more focused on students' *experiences* of belonging rather than their *definitions* of belonging. Following this, the first author reviewed the material and analysed how students' definitions were based on their belonging experiences. Taking the relation between both elements (experiences and definitions) into consideration, the first author created new codes, themes and subthemes according to study's objectives.

Next, the new list of themes, sub-themes, and codes was shared with the second author as a hierarchically organised table for feedback. The first and second author reviewed again the themes and subthemes in light of the research questions and objectives, and analysis stopped when we could not identify new codes and subthemes, nor identified alternative patterns with the codes and subthemes.[1] All data was coded using NVivo software to facilitate systematic data processing.

3 Findings

Following our analyses, we created three main themes to summarise students' definitions of belonging to university: (a) belonging as sharing similar university experiences, (b) belonging as authenticity, and (c) barriers to belong and (disadvantaged) identity experiences. Student's definitions were especially focussed on belonging as relationships with their peers, and understanding belonging as relationships with others. Overall, students recognised belonging to university as a complex concept to explain and these definitions, rather than directly being associated with gender and socioeconomic experiences, were related to the extent to which students (a) perceive they are similar to others or (b) perceive to have the knowledge to navigate university, more than to belong to a particular or intersectional group.

When students did not perceive themselves as similar to other students other identities became relevant, helping them to feel they shared similar experiences. Thus, students actively looked to share experiences that endorse their feelings of belonging; or recognised barriers to feel a sense of belonging as part of their experiences, which made it difficult for them to define what belonging is. Particularly when it was difficult to define belonging, students highlighted the role of intergroup dynamics, especially in terms of socioeconomic experiences, an identity that became particularly salient in HE contexts (For details of the codes and subthemes for each theme, see Supplementary materials).

[1] We also reviewed the codes, subthemes and themes following reviewers' comments.

3.1 Belonging as being authentic

For a group of students, belonging was defined as being accepted for who they were, giving less importance to similarity to others and focusing more on being authentic. Hence, this group of students navigated university experiencing belonging as being themselves, mostly because the university provided them with the opportunity of showing their identity without critique. Students that conceptualised belonging as being authentic did not mention particular socioeconomic experiences associated to this definition. However, for some students, to perceive similarity in aspects of their gender identity, such as their gender or sexual orientation, prompted a sense of being able to be authentic at university, a sense they had not experienced before attending university.

Students who defined belonging as being authentic also perceived belonging as an individual responsibility, as individuals *just* needed to be themselves to belong, demonstrating a sense of ownership and power within the university context, as they felt able to be authentic without concerns of rejection. Mostly students with a high SES defined belonging as being "authentic". This changed when other identities (such as gender or sexual orientation) became salient in particular contexts where similarity was perceived, where low SES students felt they could be themselves.

3.1.1 Belonging as acceptance by who you are

For a group of students, belonging to university was being accepted by others for their authentic self: *"(…) when you belong you do not alter your behaviour, you become open and you fit in with your own behaviour"* (P3, man, high SES, Russell Group university). In this sense, belonging would be understood as a deeper or 'stronger' concept associated with authenticity: *"Belonging is far more powerful than fitting in, it can be relatively easy to fit in but feel like you don't belong. The ability to be accepted for the real you (…)"* (P21, man, high SES, non-Russell Group university).

For these students, belonging meant a total acceptance of their identity, either from other students and overall university community. Feeling accepted allowed students to show their "true" self, which boosted their sense of belonging and positive self: *"The university has provided many opportunities for me to self-reflect and develop myself. And that as a basis, has helped me explore who I am/ want to become"* (P27, man, high SES, Russell Group university). This feeling was compared to feeling at home: *"In my opinion belonging to university means you feel confident and happy being there and you feel at home there. Being comfortable to express who you are and not being worried about what other's think of you"* (P11, woman, high SES, Russell Group university).

Although the understanding of belonging as authenticity was referred mostly by high SES students, this sense of belonging as being at home was also shared by low SES students in contexts where other identities became salient, as their "home" was not a place to share certain aspect of their identity and be authentic. For example, LGBTI+ students mentioned the importance of sharing aspects of their identity that

are not accepted by their family or context, such as their sexual orientation: *"I feel like ive [sic] become myself more, ive [sic] embraced my sexuality and started to enjoy more things (e.g. having a boyfriend, going out with friends) that were hard when I was at home"* (P32, man, low SES, Russell Group university).

3.1.2 "Belonging comes natural"

In line with the idea of belonging as being authentic, students discussed how individual characteristics, such as personality traits, were important to belonging: *"Belonging would be facets of your own personality that fits in well with the place you're at"* (P13, man, high SES, Russell Group university). Hence, for students that perceive themselves as compatible with the university cultural context, belonging would be a "natural" experience, rather than socially constructed: *"Fitting in isn't always easy for everyone but can be done where as [sic] belonging can only happen naturally you can't force it (…) Belonging came natural at university yes but not in every scenario in life"* (P21, man, high SES, non-Russell Group university). Given that belonging can be seen as being related to your authentic self and, therefore, more "real"; here belonging was seen as not be forced and being dependent on individuals' traits, and individuals were responsible for their own sense of belonging. Thus, from this perspective, students have the "power" to belong, as an innate ability performed effortlessly in university settings without recognising the role of identity experiences, either in terms of gender, socioeconomic status, or the intersection of both.

3.1.3 Belonging as sharing similar experiences

Some students endorsed similarity with others as an important dimension of belonging within the university context. Here, particularly for students that recognised not having enough knowledge about how the university system worked when they entered university (e.g. first-generation students, low SES students), participating in social activities (e.g., Freshers' Week, societies) promoted feelings of being recognised as university students—either by other students, or by academics and staff. In these activities, students shared experiences with other members of the university, which led them to perceive that they were like others and share things that were positively valued by them.

3.1.4 Belonging as "being in the same boat"

For students, an important part of attending university was spending time on campus. A significant group of students moved from their home to another city to attend university and live in university accommodation: *"For example, on my first day in the University halls, I met my flatmates during what we call "Freshers week". We talked and had a good time, they were super nice to me and to other students (…)"* (P4, woman, mean SES, Russell Group university).

Although living on campus was recognised as a dimension of belonging, this was mostly noticed by students who did not live in university accommodation.

Particularly students living off campus or at home (a living option that can be more affordable depending on the university/location), perceived a lack of shared experiences with students that were living on campus, which affected their feelings of belonging: *"I started university in a house and not halls so I found it hard to make friends, I was kind of excluded from freshers events as I hadnt [sic] made any friends at the uni itself (…)"* (P29, man, low SES, non-Russell Group university). Hence, living on campus facilitated perceptions of having similar experiences and shared activities beyond academic endeavours. Given this, informal spaces and activities were particularly significant to students when they talked about belonging.

Consequently, spending time on campus interacting with others promoted a sense of sharing an important experience and the realisation that others were going through similar experiences whilst navigating higher education. When explaining what belonging to university looks like, students used the metaphor of being "in the same boat", where the boat would represent a place where students meet, in this case university, where they will reach a new place or situation, such as graduation and having a degree:

> *Most of the other students I met came from very different environments to me so that was very weird but because we were all going through the same things of having to be fully independent and get jobs and focus on our studies it felt like we were all in the same boat. It was a weird mix of feeling like we were all the same but different at the same time, I can't really describe it sorry* (P10, woman, mean SES, Russell Group university).

3.1.5 Belonging as feeling "less lost"

One of the main reasons why students valued participating in university activities and endorsed this dimension in their definitions of belonging, was learning more about university life. For some students, learning about university processes—how to approach academic staff, or how university works, enhanced their sense of belonging to university. Here, they were able to better understand what university was about, felt similar to others that had cultural capital about university and in turn, felt more confidence to navigate in university activities and connect with others.

Low SSS students recognised cultural capital to be a key dimension of feeling they belonged, or "less lost" within the university context: *"I also remember attending welcome talks and I felt that they also covered modules and credit options very well so I was less "lost", which definitely made me feel more comfortable"* (P2, woman, low SES, Russell Group university. Quoting marks from the participant). Students associated this definition of belonging with the importance given to know about the university system, rather to belong to a particular socioeconomic group.

Despite not being directly mentioned by students, SES was also important in how students approached these first encounters. For example, some lower SES students referred to feeling welcomed by the cleaning staff, being comfortable sharing time with them, as other students prioritised their contact with academic or students from higher years: *"But a staff member (who I later learned to be a cleaner) was there smoking with us and was really friendly and seemed to be sharing our excitement. It*

was a really nice experience (...) I still keep in touch with one of the security guards there who I used to chat to sometimes" (P14, man, low SES, non-Russell Group university).

In this way, student' sense of belonging was shaped by their identification to groups (Peters et al., 2015), and students felt different levels of belonging with staff at different organisational levels.

3.1.6 Belonging as sharing experiences

As students valued participating in formal and informal university activities, positive experiences in these activities facilitated a sense of sharing experiences with others:

> *Belonging to university: I would describe it as feeling part of the community—I want to be able to walk through campus or my school's building and see familiar faces, I want to feel like the staff and SU facilitate me feeling comfortable and 'at home' at university. I would say this has happened in the past; an example I would give would be having a piece of coursework due in 2 days and going to the library and seeing my coursemates [sic] also working there. It makes me feel like I'm in the same boat as my peers and this makes me feel like I belong* (P14, man, low SES, non-Russell Group university).

Indeed, these experiences facilitated the perception of being acknowledged as university students by themselves and others also known as academic social identity (Smyth et al., 2019). Hence for a group of students, to participate in these activities prompted a feeling of sharing experiences and belonging to a same group, the university student: *"Belonging to a University is spending 4 years with a huge community with whom you share the same identity"* (P4, woman, mean SES, Russell Group university). Self-identification as a university student was associated with belonging to a high-status group and a positive sense of self. Therefore, for some students, belonging to university could also be understood as moving to a higher status group, as an individual mobility strategy (Tajfel & Turner, 1979):

> *I suppose I'd describe belonging to university as prestigious if I was looking at it from the outside in, however personally I like to look at it as more of a personal challenge. So, belonging to a university to me is more like an opportunity to push myself to see what I am capable of, to increase my knowledge, and to then see what opportunities are created for me because of it* (P20, man, low SES, non-Russell Group university).

3.2 Barriers to belonging and (disadvantaged) identity experiences

For some students, belonging at university was difficult and something that they had not experienced. This lack of belonging was explained in terms of a lack of financial resources compared to others students, especially when students attended less inclusive universities. Low SES students did not recognise themselves as

belonging at university, described feeling like "outsiders", especially on social dimensions (e.g., participating in extra academic activities). Hence, for some students, rather than describing what belonging was to them, they described the barriers to belonging that they encountered, which were mostly associated with their socioeconomic background. Furthermore, some female students expressed that their gender experiences were associated with their lack of belonging, sharing experiences of harassment and sexual assault in the university context.

3.2.1 Exclusion and hostility experiences

Within the first and second themes, students explained what belonging meant to them using their own experiences, as examples. However, in some cases, students did not experience a sense of belonging, and rather referred the barriers they have faced to belong to university. Students described experiences of not being welcomed by other students: *"To be honest, not really. I felt like my housemates who I was randomly placed in, like the first-year accommodation didn't really welcome me. I wasn't even in the house group chat until like a month and a half later, and even then I just didn't feel like they were very welcoming or conversational with me"* (P9, woman, low SES, Russell Group university).

To not feel welcome or having problems making new friends were a real contrast to students' expectations of university as a place where they could meet new people and have a "fresh start":

> *I guess this is another thing that is spoken about a lot when considering university. I remember some people specifically telling me "university will be the best time of my life", in terms of friends and social life. Personally, Im not really sure that I agree with that. I definitely expected to make lots of new friends and peers, whether through my course or accommodation In [sic] first year. I think it seems like a "fresh start", and for a lot of people it is that* (P2, woman, low SES, Russell Group university).

Students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds were more prone to highlight these difficulties: *"Socially, I felt that maybe from the way I look people may be skeptical [sic] of interacting with myself [because of my] Skin colour or maybe the way I speak with others"* (P8, man, mean SSS, non-Russell Group university); or to follow a different schedule than the expected for undergraduate student *"I think because I have only been to uni for a couple of weeks, and I'm not a full term student I guess, I don't really feel a belonging to the uni"* (P18, woman, mean SES, non-Russell Group university).

Besides these insidious forms of hostility (e.g., being ignored by students), participants also mentioned explicit conflicts that affected their sense of belonging, especially in terms of interpersonal relationships:

> *That was more a case of signing onto a house with some girls we barely knew because you have to sign so early in the year. We ended up not being friends and we ended up just having drama with them (the two girls I am close with*

were also living there). Some of the problems were related to my health as they didn't understand it (…) (P10, woman, mean SES, Russell Group university).

Moreover, two female students within the group also mentioned experiences of sexual assault and harassment, and the lack of support received by university in these situations. These experiences resulted in a lack of trust in relation to the university, creating distance from the university as an organisation and in turn, leading to feelings that they did not belong: *"I reported what happened to whichever person I was supposed to and they essentially told me I didn't need any support and they couldn't do anything to help me, and I'd hoped that they'd offer to move him out of my halls, but they didn't do this either"* (P16, woman, low SES, Russell Group university).

Therefore, when students faced challenges due to their group memberships and perceived themselves in a disadvantaged position in comparison with their peers, they conceptualised belonging as more challenging and a less positive experience. Thus implicitly, an important dimension of defining belonging was related to feel support from the institution.

3.2.2 "That things matter": socioeconomic comparisons

For some students, social comparison processes with other students from higher SES were considered important in understanding the barriers they faced to feel they belonged within university. Here, SES was seen to be related to access to different resources that facilitate sharing activities with other students, or having advantages in their academic work:

Maybe economic wise, I felt a bit secluded. In the sense that I was paying my way through the course myself compared to a lot of the other students' parents supporting them. I could not afford good laptop or good clothes, going out every night and this had a negative effect with not being able to keep up with them. I would come into class the next day and feel I had lost out on experiences and felt a bit left out/left behind (P24, man, low SES, non-Russell Group university).

When students found themselves in contexts where they did not feel they belonged due to their SES, a sense of exclusion was described—especially in universities with low participation of students from socioeconomic disadvantaged backgrounds:

I almost feel a sense of anti-belonging to university because I HATE [sic] what it has been made to stand for: bigotry almost (…) And as someone who fits outside the typical demographic I feel as though I don't belong and I don't even want to belong at this point because I have no desire to be associated with a system that doesn't condemn well enough something that I so fully disagree with: discrimination (P1, woman, low SES, Russell Group university).

As described previously, participating in university activities was important for promoting a sense of shared experiences and belonging. In these activities—especially the informal ones (e.g., going for a coffee, a pub), economic resources were

seen as important for academic and informal activities with other students. Financial resources allowed students to meet with others, go out, and share experiences that boosted student's sense of belonging with other students and in turn, with university as they identified as university students:

> *(…) find that not having as much money to spend on resources or clothes to fit in with your peers or coffees and social activities than your peers massively disadvantages you in many aspects including academically in terms of textbooks and paying for tutors...etc* (P1, woman, low SES, Russell Group university).

As social activities facilitated students' sense of belonging and required economic resources, not having those resources to spend with others affected sense of belonging, particularly for socioeconomic disadvantaged students, who felt they needed to try to belong, as belonging will not come up "naturally" and felt almost as something to work on:

> *It was definitely an active effort for me that I had to do consciously to reach out, speak up and try to get myself involved in groups and things. It is quite easy to slip up and stand back and life just keeps going on without you and people form groups and do things without involving you* (P5, woman, low SES, Russell Group university).

3.3 Summary of results

Our results demonstrate that students conceptualised belonging differently, and these definitions varied as a function of student's perceived similarity with other students in their university, and especially of perceived compatibility with university culture. Considering this, we analyse students' definitions of belonging following three main themes: (a) belonging as being authentic, (b) belonging as sharing similar university experiences, and (c) barriers to belonging and identity experiences. Students explained belonging differently according to their perceived understanding of university culture and their own experiences: on the one hand, a group of students defined belonging as being authentic, as they felt accepted for who they were, without feeling they needed to learn about university culture or find shared experiences to feel similar to others. These students did not mention the role of socioeconomic identity experiences nor intersectional identity experiences. However, gender was mentioned just by one student who felt they could express their gender identity orientation at university.

How students approached feelings of similarity with other students or feeling part of the group was different according to their SES, despite not be always explicitly mentioned. Indeed, students with low SES referred to belonging as a feeling they had similar experiences with other students, and celebrated university strategies, such as workshops and welcome activities that made them feel included as equal whilst learning about university life. In contrast, high SES students reported that belonging was focus on being authentic, which was enough to allow someone to

feel that they belong, as they perceived themselves as similar to the university student prototype. Belonging as feeling accepted for their authentic self was also mentioned by low SES students, when their gender or sexual identity was salient in contexts where they perceived their identity would be accepted. Finally, students with less socioeconomic resources than other did not experience belonging, which was aggravated for female students experiencing harassment and sexual abuse within HE settings. Taken together, students' endorsement of a given conceptualisation of belonging is dependent on how they perceive their identities and how particular contexts (e.g. levels of university inclusion, participation of other students from similar groups) might shape these perceptions.

4 Discussion

4.1 General discussion

In this study, we aimed to provide a better understanding of how students conceptualise a sense of belonging in HE. We conducted interviews with HE students to explore the role of their gender and socioeconomic identity experiences in their conceptualizations of belonging in HE context. In line with previous research, belonging to university appears as important for their sense of positive self, academic outcomes, and wellbeing (see Murphy et al., 2020; Walton & Cohen, 2007).

Students definitions of belonging were based on their experiences in higher education and followed three different approaches: (a) belonging as authenticity, (b) belonging as sharing similar experiences, and (c) barriers to belonging and (disadvantaged) identity experiences. These definitions were explained in terms of their experiences of feeling that they belong or not to university. Students' experiences of belonging, and therefore their approaches to belonging, were associated to how they navigated university settings, either in terms of feeling they could be themselves (related to the idea of authenticity) or in terms of learning how to navigate university settings (related to the idea of finding similar aspects with others).

To some extent, how students navigate HE settings was associated with their identity experiences, in terms of their gender or socioeconomic experiences. However, students did not refer to intersectional identity experiences in their conceptualisations of belonging. Hence, they focused on experiences of salient identities, such as gender—in the case of being able to express their gender identity and orientation—or SES—in the case of recognising the barriers they faced to feel they belong due to their lack of financial resources, compared to students from a high SES. These findings support previous research showing that HE settings persist—implicitly and explicitly—promoting SES as a salient identity (Rubin & Wright, 2017).

A sense of belonging can be described in terms of the perceived similarity with other students. This provides further support to previous research showing the critical role of perceived similarity in students' sense of belonging (Allen & Collisson, 2020; Corredor et al., 2020). Furthermore, belonging was seen as sharing the same values and endorsing similarity with other students or with the prototype of a university student—in line with the social identity perspective (Easterbrook &

Vignoles, 2013). From students' interviews, and in line with previous research, it can be interpreted that the university student prototype is the student that knows about university life and can be successful in both academic and social terms (Jackson & Nyström, 2015; Schmader & Sedikides, 2018). Hence, students that have this knowledge will find HE settings easier to navigate and, for some students in particular contexts (e.g., low SES students in elite universities, women in particular STEM disciplines), belonging can be particularly challenging, as they don't see themselves as part of the students prototype and instead of being encouraged to be themselves, they feel the need to "learn" how to be a student and, thus, fit with the prototype. For example, women and low SES students mentioned how important was to share experiences with others and feel to be similar to others students. Furthermore, low SES students perceived that participating in university induction activities, where students can learn more about how university works, facilitated feelings of belonging, in terms of meeting other people in the same position and being closer to the idea of feeling part of the prototype of being a university student. Indeed, in environments where low SES students perceived similarity, they also recognised the importance of authenticity in their conceptualizations of belonging, as other identities (e.g. gender and sexual orientation) became salient in particular contexts where they feel they could be themselves.

Despite the efforts described by universities to promote diversity and inclusion (e.g., Widening Access and Participation policies), students still perceived that the prototype of a university student implies having socioeconomic resources and cultural capital to navigate higher education effectively. When students don't fit with this prototype, they need to learn how to be a student (see O'Shea, 2016). This is likely to result in students from disadvantaged groups (the ones that should be supported by these policies) perceiving themselves to be marginal or peripheral to the university student category (Ellemers & Jetten, 2013), as they shared some aspects of the prototype (e.g. attending the same university), but not others (e.g. knowledge about university). Thus, sense of belonging may be linked, and indeed prompted, not only with social capital (see Ahn & Davis, 2023), but also with cultural capital (Todman, 2020). Moreover, although universities share an official discourse of inclusion and diversity, unofficial experiences and previous knowledge about the university system, as described in the subthemes above, were important for students belonging. For instance, the metaphor of belonging to university as feeling at home illustrates how individuals are attracted to environments (in this case universities, disciplines, and social groups) where they perceive they might fit and belong which, indeed, is particularly the case for students from the advantaged majority within the group (Murphy & Zirkel, 2015; Phillips et al., 2020; Smyth et al., 2019).

Authenticity should be considered in terms of the contexts that signal individuals' fit with the context, rather than a "free choice" (see Aday & Schmader, 2019). Given this, the feeling of authenticity as an important part of belonging was shared mostly by students with a high SES, promoting the sense that to be authentic and belong, individual's SES is fundamental. Identities of individuals from advantaged groups were in line with the prototype offered as a successful student (Cheryan et al., 2009; Ni et al., 2020). Moreover, these individuals have shown more consistency in their self-concepts across different contexts, as being themselves is not associated with

negative outcomes—such as lack of belonging (Murphy & Zirkel, 2015; Veldman et al., 2021), or poor academic performances (Walton & Carr, 2012). On the contrary, the identities they hold are what organisations promote as a prototype (Kraus et al., 2011). In this sense, we can say that, in the context of HE, being authentic is a privilege.

One key dimension of this prototype seems to be SES. Students' definitions showed the relevance of financial resources to feelings of belonging. From the students' perspective, having economic resources is critical to sharing activities with other students (e.g. going for a coffee), being able to study (e.g. buying books), being recognised as similar to other students (e.g., living in the same accommodations) or just being part of higher status groups. As previous research has showed, socioeconomic identity was explicitly referred as an important aspect of belonging by students that did not perceive they belonged (Ferguson & Lareau, 2021; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Stubbs & Murphy, 2020). However, it can also be described that socioeconomic identity was implicitly referred by the ones that did feel they belong: the focus on the role of cultural knowledge about university in students' sense of belonging may signal a different form of talk about SES, as the knowledge about the dominant culture is, most of the time part of high-status groups culture (Dubet, 2000).

Given this, rather than considering particular identities associated to certain belonging experiences, it is important to highlight how belonging experiences are shaped by how individuals perceive themselves in particular contexts, as well as the resources offered to them to navigate HE. Our study showed that when students did not align with universities prototypes of "being a student", they needed to put in action strategies to assimilate with the group norms when the context requires it, instead of being encouraged to be themselves (Jansen et al., 2014). Moreover, for some students their participation in university was difficult and they exclude themselves from university experiences, not because they wanted to do it, but because of the lack of support and resources offered to navigate HE, especially in challenging circumstances.

4.2 Theoretical and practical implications

This qualitative study expands on previous research into the role of authenticity in students' definitions and experiences of belonging (e.g., Reay, 2002). Previous work has shown how authenticity may be a sub-dimension of belonging (Jansen et al., 2014). However, we suggest that this may not be universally true and instead, this may be the case for members that align with the group successful prototype, which in this case seems to be associated with a student that knows how to navigate successfully higher education. To navigate university, contexts are important. Thus, our results contribute to an understanding of belonging as a contextual and dynamic concept, which needs to be defined and evaluated considering the norms, values, and practices of the organisations where individuals participate.

We argue that universities, despite discourses promoting an increase in access and participation of underrepresented groups, continue to be environments associated

with high status and advantaged groups, such as high SES and men, putting more effort on diversity rather than inclusion (Jones, 2022). Thus, the individuals that fit to this prototype—such as high SES individuals or men—are more likely to feel the power to be "authentic" (Kraus et al., 2011), and to consider authenticity as a key aspect of belonging.

Moreover, for students that do not align with the university prototype (e.g., low SES), a sense of belonging and the feeling of connection with others might constrain their sense of authenticity. Indeed, being 'authentic' is not a personal choice rather that a process embraced by feeling safe and part of meaningful spaces and therefore, organisations are responsible for the spaces/environment that they provide to individuals (Aday & Schmader, 2019). This was the case for students from disadvantaged socioeconomic background in institutions where they felt similar and able to being authentic with aspects of their identity that are not accepted in other contexts, such as their gender/sexual orientation. Following this, our study can contribute to a better understanding of the relation between belonging and authenticity, as well as highlighting the fact that individuals perceived status of being a minority/underrepresented is contextual (Mooney & Becker, 2020).

Our study also contributes to the understanding of how belonging is experienced by HE students in educational contexts, as well as the role of cultural and social capital in belonging research. Although the idea of cultural capital was framed in the sociological tradition of Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), it is important for our understanding of social identity processes in educational settings to consider how individuals navigate higher education with differential knowledge, skills, and attitudes according to their social identities. By drawing from insights on cultural capital developed in the sociological tradition and integrating them with psychological insights on social identities, we can start developing a deeper understanding of how students' very conceptions of belonging may be guided by the relative social positions tethered to their (dis)advantaged social identities. This similarly highlights the importance of recognizing that universities are not 'social group-neutral' organisations. Educational environments facilitate advantages for members of certain social groups, especially for those that know how to navigate university and, therefore, perceive they can "fit in" and be themselves at university. Likewise, the prototype of what it means to be a student is not social-group neutral. It represents the dominance of specific social groups, such as those based on gender and especially, SES.

Indeed, students perceive these groups as more advantaged as they already know the rules and norms needed to navigate universities. Individuals that fit with this prototype will feel encouraged to be themselves, as they might perceive that their identities are accepted and even expected as the prototype. In other words, students from high status groups have an advantage in their ability to readily see themselves as fitting with the idea of a university student (Coulon, 2017), as they already have the knowledge to navigate their new identity as students, which facilitate their belonging without a sense of strain, dissonance or effort. Thus, students' affiliation processes -the development of the craft of being a student (Coulon, 2017)—despite being a process that all students go through—has nuanced differences for students with distinct social identities (e.g., relatively high vs. low SES) in terms of access to resources that can support them through this process. Hence, our findings support

previous research showing that inclusion consists of individuals' perceptions of belonging and authenticity (Jansen et al., 2014). Furthermore, we argue that both belonging and authenticity are interrelated—and sometimes conflicting concepts that need to be critically reviewed when HE inclusion interventions are analysed.

Furthermore, to include the concept of "social capital" (Bourdieu, 1984) in how belonging is conceptualised and understood might be helpful to also understand how individuals experience -or lack of—belonging, as well as how universities might perpetuate that some groups keep feeling they don't belong to university, or that they need to change to feel they belong. Although social capital has different definitions (see Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2001), we focus on the idea proposed by Bourdieu (1984) of social capital as resources created and reproduced through social interactions, which are important for understanding students' developed sense of belonging. This conception is fitting with and reflected in students' own reported experiences with and conceptions of what contributes to their sense of belonging. Following this, belonging to different groups—especially groups that are high status or in the majority—can be understood as a form of capital and, therefore, as a source of status. Hence, students aim to see themselves as part of the prototype of being a student: when they do, belonging seems a more "natural" and effortless (fitting or congruent) process for students from high status groups, where they can be themselves, because to some extent it is (insofar as high-status groups are embedded in the student prototype). Students membership in higher status social groups enables a higher sense of belonging to them, both directly (by virtue of their fit to the student prototype) but also indirectly (via greater access to social capital). Moreover, belonging reinforces social capital, providing them potentially even more opportunities (e.g. networking, support). When students don't see themselves as part of the prototype—for example, due to their SES—students actively aim to be perceived and perceive themselves as similar to this prototype and to belong and develop more social capital. However, in order to belong and to have social capital, it is mandatory to know about university dominant culture, this is to have cultural capital.

Hence, our study provides an initial attempt to analyse belonging not only as a psychological variable, but also as a process interrelated with social, structural, and political elements within educational systems. In line with key sociological insights (e.g., Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), we argue that students' definitions of belonging were associated with their sense of knowledge regarding university culture, similar to the notion of "cultural capital" described above. For students from traditionally well-represented groups in HE (e.g. middle and upper class), the access to the "cultural capital" about university has already been acquired, which promotes a different perspective toward belonging. Belonging is not about "learning" how to navigate HE, but about being themselves. From the interviews it is clear that this knowledge has been learned through social relationships with people that have already experienced HE life. Therefore, to belong, students need social capital, which provides them with cultural capital in relation to university. This process can explain why for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, belonging was associated with learning this knowledge and perceiving that other people were also in the process of becoming university students. Thus, belonging experiences may be felt and perceived at the individual-level, yet also be a fundamentally social experience (Dubet, 2000),

whereby students' experiences of belonging—an experience that can be considered as internal—are shaped by social forces, including the norms and values upheld within surrounding institutions (in this case, within students' universities).

Our study also has practical implications, especially for universities. There is still a discussion about the social role of universities and higher education, seeing universities as (a) a means to social equality (Wang, 2022); (b) institutions that should follow a marketing model, which will transform universities into more flexible and efficient institutions (for a critical analysis of this perspective, see Furedi, 2011); or (c) institutions that should adopt a hybrid model acknowledging both their social and instrumental purpose (Kromydas, 2017). With this study, we aim to acknowledge practical implications for universities in their role as promoters of social equality. On this basis, universities need to clarify how their organisational practices to ensure equality might inadvertently create contexts where students from disadvantaged backgrounds feel like they do not belong.

Previous work has shown the importance of considering intersectional experiences in students' sense of belonging (e.g., Mooney & Becker, 2020) and our work provides insights about how intersectional identities might have different belonging experiences in university, yet some identities become more salient in particular contexts (e.g., SES in HE). In this way, our study contributes to the discussion of how multiples social identities are salient in different contexts and circumstances when students talked about belonging in higher education.

Mainly low SES students referred to particular challenges and problems in their university experiences related to lack of belonging, hostile environments, and even sexual abuse and harassment, as well as a sense of lack of support from university following these experiences. Our study can provide information about how these situations were experienced by students and their perception about university support, which can contribute to the design of participative university interventions to improve students' sense of belonging that consider organisational practices that might decrease sense of belonging in particular groups (e.g. women). In some contexts, social belonging interventions try to normalise students' concerns about belonging, to help students to become "less sensitive" towards negative everyday interactions (for a review of belonging interventions in HE, see Easterbrook & Hadden, 2021), but this approach might decrease students trust in university, as well as interpret their feelings of lack of belonging as not important enough and even not real (e.g. they are being too sensitive).

Thus, HE institutions need to promote and apply interventions that are not just focused on teaching students how to navigate HE but review their own support practices. Consequently, instead of promoting students' assimilation with university culture, universities need to review their own structure and processes. That is, not only to focus on individual's actions, but to include structural changes.

4.3 Limitations and future research

Our results must be analysed considering its limitations. First, despite the advantages described for online written interviews, this method presents some limitations in terms of obtaining direct emotional and non-verbal information during the interview (Opara et al., 2021). Although we did not focus our analysis on emotional and non-verbal behaviour from participants, further research could benefit incorporating face-to-face and in person methods (e.g. interviews, discussion groups) to enrich the analyses.

Also, the study was part of a larger project about students' experiences and, in one case, the interview included other topics not included in this study within the same session. Although our focus was on the section about students sense of belonging, it should be acknowledged that in one case the questions about belonging in a session after other topics were discussed. The division of the subset of questions into two different sessions could have caused that this particular case might have had more time to weigh up questions about their academic experiences, university environment and social support, providing more in-depth responses when the topic of belonging was asked. Future research needs to conduct qualitative research on this topic, focusing on particular dimensions and nuances raised by our findings, which allows researchers and students to conduct a more straightforward and concise set of sub questions that can be conducted over one set time.

Our results showed that university context was critical to understand students' conceptualisations and experiences about belonging. However, the exploratory focus of our study did not directly ask about differences among universities inclusion levels or perceived social prestige, nor promote university membership as a salient identity. As the UK university system is highly stratified (e.g. Wakeling & Savage, 2015), this prompts important questions about whether these processes operate similarly at other types of universities. For instance, at more selective type of universities, with low social class inclusion, students at these universities might find belonging, particularly challenging. Likewise, particular disciplines might have a similar effect for some students (e.g., women in some STEM disciplines). Future studies might benefit to look at how students in these contexts define belonging and how they might associate these definitions with their identity-based experiences.

Finally, although our study focused on gender and SES identities, during the interviews students highlighted particular identities as salient, rather than intersectional identity experiences. Future research needs to include different methodological approaches (e.g. experimental studies, longitudinal studies) to prompt the role of intersectional identities when examining belonging, especially as universities have pushed Widening Participation practices that promoted a participation of a wider number of students from different backgrounds.

5 Conclusion

In our study we have investigated how university students conceptualised belonging within the university context, and how their gender and SES experiences promoted particular perspectives about it, using a social identity framework. We observed that, when students perceived themselves as more similar to other students, they conceptualised belonging as being "authentic". This idea was shared mostly by high SES students. When students were from underrepresented groups (e.g., low SES), they actively engaged in activities to feel more "similar" to others, defining belonging as sharing experiences with others instead of endorsing their individuality. However, for some low SES students, belonging was defined considering their lack of belonging experiences.

Our results provided important insights about how students' perceptions about their knowledge and cultural capital to navigate HE was associated by students with their experiences of belonging which, in turn, shaped how students defined belonging: whether as sharing experiences and being more similar to others, or being authentic expecting being accepted by other, regardless of being similar or not. However, when students did not experience belonging, this was associated with students' negative gender *or* SES identity experiences. We propose that, in university, a sense of belonging based on being who you are (authenticity) is dependent on the context and how some identities became more salient than others. This in turn leads to perceive similarity with others and feelings that one belongs. Our study also has practical implications regarding the role of higher education organisational practices and their consequences in how universities approach students' lack of belonging.

Appendix

See Table 1.

Table 1 Demographic data of participants

Pseudonymous	Age	Gender	Year	Subjective social status (score)	University[a]	Interview session(s)
P1	21	Woman	3	Low (2)	Russell Group	2
P2	21	Woman	3	Low (4)	Russell Group	2
P3	21	Man	3	High (8)	Russell Group	2
P4	20	Woman	2	Mean (6)	Russell Group	1
P5	19	Woman	2	Low (3)	Russell Group	2
P6	32	Woman	2	Mean (5)	Non-Russell Group	1
P7	21	Woman	2	Mean (6)	Non-Russell Group	1
P8	22	Man	4	Mean (5)	Non-Russell Group	1
P9	19	Woman	2	Low (3)	Russell Group	1
P10	22	Woman	4	Mean (6)	Russell Group	2
P11	20	Woman	2	High (8)	Russell Group	2
P12	20	Woman	2	Low (3)	Non-Russell Group	1
P13	21	Man	3	High (8)	Russell Group	1
P14	22	Man	3	Low (4)	Non-Russell Group	2
P15	28	Woman	4	High (7)	Non-Russell Group	2
P16	20	Woman	3	Low (3)	Russell Group	2
P17	19	Woman	3	High (9)	Non-Russell Group	2
P18	27	Woman	2	Mean (5)	Non-Russell Group	2
P19	20	Woman	2	High (7)	Russell Group	1
P20	31	Man	2	Low (4)	Non-Russell Group	2
P21	21	Man	2	High (7)	Non-Russell Group	2
P22	19	Man	2	Mean (6)	Non-Russell Group	2
P23	19	Man	2	High (8)	Russell Group	1

Table 1 (continued)

Pseudonymous	Age	Gender	Year	Subjective social status (score)	University[a]	Interview session(s)
P24	28	Man	3	Low (4)	Non-Russell Group	2
P25	20	Woman	3	High (8)	Russell Group	2
P26	20	Woman	2	High (7)	Non-Russell Group	1
P27	21	Man	3	High (7)	Russell Group	1
P28	23	Man	3	High (7)	Russell Group	1
P29	19	Man	2	Low (2)	Non-Russell Group	2
P30	20	Man	3	High (8)	Russell Group	2
P31	26	Man	3	Mean (5)	Non-Russell Group	2
P32	21	Man	3	Low (4)	Russell Group	2
P33	21	Man	2	Low (3)	Non-Russell Group	2
P34	22	Woman	1	Mean (6)	Non-Russell Group	1
P35	19	Man	1	High (7)	Non-Russell Group	1
P36	26	Woman	3	Mean (5)	Non-Russell Group	2

[a]In the UK, Russell group universities are recognised as prestigious and highly selective universities

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Data availability The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Declarations

Ethical approval This study was approved by the University of Exeter, College of Life and Environmental Sciences (CLES) Psychology Ethics Committee (approval for eCLESPsy001713.pdf; participant consent obtained electronically).

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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