Negotiating sense of belonging: the experiences of religious students at Utrecht University

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Abstract

An online dashboard developed by Utrecht University shows that religious students report a lower sense of belonging compared to their non-religious peers. This current study investigates how religious students at Utrecht University perceive and negotiate their sense of belonging, exploring the influence of social networks, religious and academic identity, and the broader sociopolitical climate. A qualitative approach was used, consisting of eight in-depth interviews with students from Christian and Muslim backgrounds enrolled in various academic programs at Utrecht University. The findings show that most students generally feel positive about their academic experience. The students identify key factors contributing to their sense of belonging, including respect and social networks like student associations. However, Muslim students in particular face challenges, such as limited prayer rooms and lack of halal food options. Both Christian and Muslim students experience tensions between religious and academic perspectives. Some students reported concealing their religious identity to avoid negative academic consequences, which research shows can diminish one's sense of belonging. Additionally, recent global events, especially the Israel-Palestine conflict, highlighted how the university's stance on political matters affects student's connection to the institution. This study highlights the need for universities to adopt a more dynamic understanding of belonging that reflects its ever-changing nature. Interventions such as continued support for religious associations and responsiveness to sociopolitical issues are crucial to creating an inclusive academic environment where all students feel seen, heard, and valued.

Keywords: sense of belonging, university, religion, social capital, identity, sociopolitical climate

Introduction

An online dashboard developed by Utrecht University sheds light on an important issue: religious students report a lower sense of belonging and experience higher levels of discrimination compared to their non-religious peers. This dashboard, titled *Belonging@UU*, was designed to provide insights into students' experiences of belonging at the university (Universiteit Utrecht, n.d.). The dashboard shows how different student groups experience their sense of belonging. While most students report feeling a sense of belonging at Utrecht University, religious students report a lower sense of belonging compared to their non-religious peers (Universiteit Utrecht, n.d.). The dashboard also shows that 8.4% of religious students experience discrimination, compared to 4.7% of the non-religious students (Universiteit Utrecht, n.d.).

Examining sense of belonging in the university context is important, as it represents a period in which students experiment with different identities in an effort to develop a cohesive and stable sense of identity (Adams et al., 2006).

Although there is no information on the overall number of religious students at Utrecht University, there is indication that the student population is becoming more diverse. This includes a growing proportion of students with Turkish or Moroccan backgrounds (Universiteit Utrecht, 2023). Research shows that individuals with a migration background often report experiencing discrimination based on both their religion and ethnic background simultaneously (Andriessen et al., 2020). The university's growing diversity emphasizes how critical it is to understand the difficulties experienced by religious students.

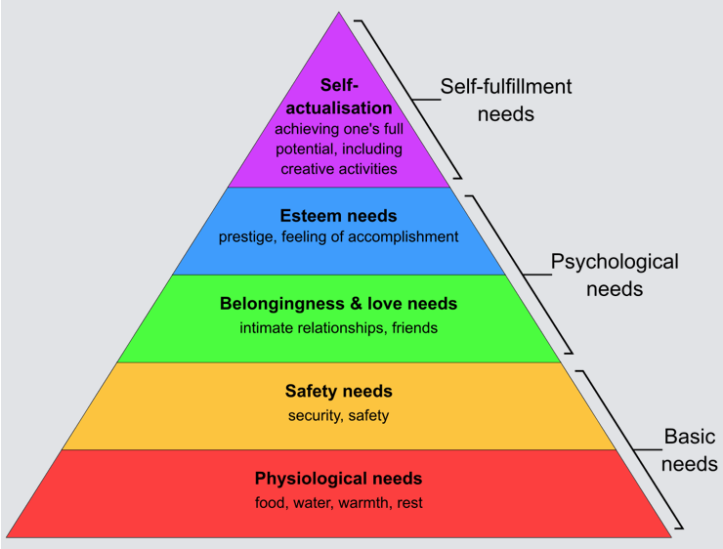
Although much research has been conducted on students' sense of belonging, there is still a lack of research focusing on this topic within the Dutch context. A significant amount of research exists on sense of belonging among first-year university students (Hausmann et al.,

2007; Hoffman et al., 2002). Additionally, several studies have examined sense of belonging among students at religious universities (Morin, 2017; Quiñónez, 2021).

However, the gap in the existing literature is the lack of research focused on the Dutch context, particularly at Utrecht University. Each societal context is unique, shaped by cultural, social and institutional factors that influence student's experiences. A person's sense of belonging is affected by their environment (Chiu et al., 2016). This makes it essential to explore this topic within the specific context of the Netherlands, and more specifically, at Utrecht University.

This study fills a research gap by offering qualitative insights into the experiences of religious students at Utrecht University. It expands existing research by exploring an underexamined context and provides valuable perspectives on the experiences faced by religious students at Dutch universities.

Belonging is a human need with significant implications for individual well-being. Belongingness is presented in Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1954). This hierarchy consists of five levels, ranging from the most basic needs, such as food and water, to more subjective needs such as prestige and self-actualization (see figure 1). Maslow (1954) suggests that people need to meet their basic needs before they can move on to higher-level needs. Belongingness is positioned at the third level. However, an increasing body of literature suggests that belongingness may be a more essential need than originally thought (Chez & Zhou, 2019). Some scholars argue that a sense of belonging is nearly as important as food (Chez & Zhou, 2019).



(Figure 1. Hierarchy of needs)

When this need to belong is not fulfilled, it can have negative consequences for an individual's motivation, academic performance, as well as their mental and physical well-being (Gomes, 2020). For example, research indicates that students who feel a sense of belonging are more likely to demonstrate institutional commitment and persist in completing their academic programs (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002). In contrast, students who struggle to integrate into their institution are at a higher risk of dropping out (Chen & Zhou, 2019). Furthermore, a stronger sense of belonging is associated with higher academic performance (Fischer, 2007). It may also reduce stress and thereby improve students' mental health (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). Therefore, it is important that students perceive their university as a supportive community to which they feel connected (Chen & Zhou, 2019).

In addition to the individual factors influenced by a sense of belonging, it is equally important to consider the broader societal context. Discrimination against Muslims occurs frequently in the Netherlands, more so than discrimination against non-religious individuals or Christians (Andriessen et al., 2020). According to a rapport by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2024), almost 50% of Muslims in the Netherlands reported experiencing

discrimination. Andriessen et al. (2020) suggest that discrimination undermines the sense of belonging within a nation. Research indicates that the education sector has the highest reported rates of discrimination compared to other areas of society. In 2018, 22% of students in the Netherlands reported experiencing discrimination, including discrimination based on religion (Andriessen et al., 2020).

This study aims to address the following research question: *"How do religious students at Utrecht University perceive and negotiate their sense of belonging on the Utrecht University campus?"*. In addition, several sub-questions will be explored: *"In what ways do social networks contribute to the sense of belonging for religious students at Utrecht University?", "How do religious students at Utrecht University navigate between their religious identity and their academic identity, and how does this impact their sense of belonging?",* and *"How does the sociopolitical environment influence students' sense of belonging?"*

By exploring these questions, this study aims to provide valuable insights into how religious students experience and negotiate their sense of belonging. It also aims to identify the specific factors that shape their experiences. Ultimately, these insights can support the development of policies and practices aimed at improving inclusion and support for religious students in Dutch universities.

Theoretical framework

In this section, a clear definition of sense of belonging will be provided to guide the study. Next, factors that influence an individual's sense of belonging, social capital, social identity, and the sociopolitical environment, will be explored.

Sense of belonging

In the literature, the concept of sense of belonging is defined in multiple ways. For example, Hausmann et al. (2007) define sense of belonging as the extent to which individuals experience a sense of connection to a social group. Tinto (1993) offers a dual definition, distinguishing between academic and social sense of belonging. A student experiences a social sense of belonging when they get along with fellow students and professors and feel a sense of connection (Tinto, 1993). An academic sense of belonging occurs when students feel at home within the learning environment and identify with both the academic program and the teaching methods (Tinto, 1993). Strayhorn defines sense of belonging as: "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group or others on campus" (Strayhorn, 2012, p.3). This study adopts Strayhorn's definition, as it aligns with the theoretical framework and empirical findings discussed in this research.

Social capital

Social capital plays a crucial role in shaping a person's sense of belonging, particularly through the social networks and relationships individuals form. According to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, social capital refers to the resources and opportunities individuals gain through their social connections (Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009). Hausmann et al. (2007) found that students who received social support from peers, faculty, and family at the beginning of the academic year were more likely to report a strong sense of belonging. Similarly, Chiu et al. (2016) showed that individuals with stable and supportive social networks tend to experience a greater sense of belonging compared to those who lack such connections.

Social capital can be categorized into bridging and bonding capital (Park & Bowman, 2015). Bridging capital connects individuals across different backgrounds, while bonding capital

refers to relationships among individuals with shared backgrounds or identities. While bonding capital has been shown to positively influence students' sense of belonging (Jensen & Jetten, 2015), bridging capital does not appear to have the same effect.

Religious student associations provide a clear example of how bonding capital can enhance belonging. Park and Bowman (2015) found that religious student associations foster close relationships among students with shared beliefs or backgrounds. Studies on religious student associations have shown that these organizations positively impact students' sense of belonging (Cradit & Wawrzynski, 2018; Seedat & Roopchund, 2024). For minority students in particular, these spaces often function as safe environments where they can express their identities and build relationships with like-minded peers (Seedat & Roopchund, 2024). In this way, bonding social capital, cultivated through student associations, plays a crucial role in enhancing sense of belonging.

Social identity theory

Social identity is another key factor in shaping a sense of belonging, particularly in the university context, which represents a period when students experiment with and define their identities.

According to Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory, individuals categorize their social world by distinguishing between ingroups and outgroups (Froehlich et al., 2023). This categorization process plays a role in shaping both personal and group identities. Individuals have a desire to foster a positive personal identity as well as a positive social identity, which is shaped by the groups to which they belong (Froehlich et al., 2023). This need for a positive social identity is fulfilled when individuals perceive their ingroup as standing out positively compared to others. However, when this need is unmet, it can lead to feelings of social identity threat (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2005). Such threats are more common in groups with lower social status,

for instance, religious students in non-religious university environments. Research shows that when individuals feel threatened by negative stereotypes related to their religious background, their sense of belonging can be diminished (Froehlich et al., 2023).

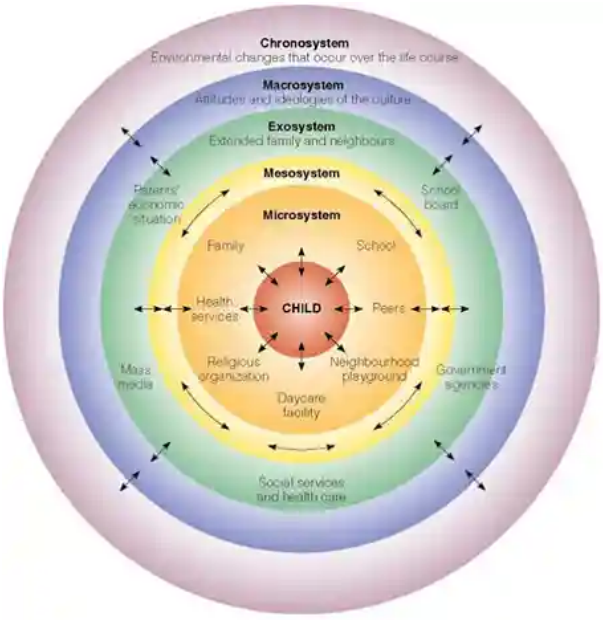
There is sometimes a perception that religion and science are in conflict. This conflict is less about opposing truth claims, such as the origin of life, and more about religious scientists not fitting in with the norms of the scientific community (Scheitle & Dabbs, 2021). Studies show that religious scientists often hold back from openly expressing their beliefs due to fears of stigmatization (Scheitle & Dabbs, 2021). This can be understood through the lens of social identity theory, which suggests that individuals may experience internal conflict when multiple identities, such as being both religious and scientific, clash. These conflicts can lead to negative consequences, including stress. To reduce this stress, individuals may try to conceal one of their identities (Scheitle & Dabbs, 2021). However, research indicates that such concealment is ineffective. Hiding one's religious identity can weaken an individual's ability to form connections within the scientific community, ultimately diminishing their sense of belonging to the scientific community (Scheitle & Dabbs, 2021).

Thus, while the desire to conceal certain aspects of one's identity may arise from a desire to fit in, it often has the counterproductive effect of weakening the very sense of belonging that individuals seek to protect. This insight might be relevant for religious students at Utrecht University, who experience an interaction between their religious identity and the academic community. Social identity theory offers insight into how the categorization of ingroups and outgroups impacts a person's sense of belonging, especially when conflicting identities, such as religious and academic, clash within university environments.

Sociopolitical environment

Besides the more personal factors that contribute to a sense of belonging, it is also important to consider the broader context. Bronfenbrenner developed a model called the ecological systems theory (see figure 2), which illustrates how different levels of society influence an individual's development. In this model, he identifies the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem (see figure 2). The chronosystem focuses on environmental changes that occur over the life course. Social movements, global conflicts, and pandemics are examples of environmental changes.

Sociopolitical environments can negatively impact psychological processes at the micro-level, such as the sense of belonging (Rosario & Destin, 2024). For example, research shows that COVID-19 has impacted the sense of belonging of students (Mooney & Becker, 2021). When the sociopolitical context threatens racially minoritized groups, individuals may be even more vulnerable to its effects (Rosario & Destin, 2024). Therefore, religious students may experience a lower sense of belonging due to sociopolitical changes.



(Figure 2. Bronfenbrenner model)

Social capital, social identity theory and the sociopolitical environment together provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence a students' sense of belonging. They demonstrate that a students' sense of belonging is influenced by intrinsic psychological needs, external social interactions and the broader societal context.

Methods

Participants and design

A qualitative research approach was selected for this study to examine how religious students perceive and negotiate their sense of belonging at Utrecht University. To explore and understand students' sense of belonging, qualitative research offers an appropriate approach, as it helps illustrate experiences, interactions, social settings and participant's own perspectives (Fossey et al., 2002). Additionally, qualitative methods are particularly effective for examining sensitive topics (Rodriguez, 2018). Research by Powell et al. (2018) shows that children identify religion as a sensitive topic.

In total, eight semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted. In-depth interviews are designed to explore participants' underlying experiences (Hijmans & Kuyper, 2007). Moreover, interviews were chosen to give participants a voice, allowing them to share their stories.

For this qualitative research, a selective sampling method was used. Some participants were approached through the researcher's personal network, while others were approached using the snowball method. After receiving consent, contact information was shared with the researcher, who then contacted participants. The information letter clearly stated the researcher's identity, the purpose of the study, and informed participants that participation was voluntary and their identities would remain anonymous in the final paper (see Appendix 1).

Participants were aged between 18 and 24. Six participants were female, and two were male. They came from different religious backgrounds, including four Christian and four Muslim

students. They were enrolled in a variety of academic programs, including Law, History, Islam & Arabic, Religious Studies and Interdisciplinary Social Sciences.

It is important to note that this sampling method may result in selection bias. Since participants were recruited through the researcher's personal network and the snowball method, they may not be fully representative of the broader population of religious students at Utrecht University. For instance, the majority of the participants were female. This could influence the interpretation of the findings. Allmark (2004) states that factors such as gender can be understood as a key indicator of underlying cultural differences. These differences may play a crucial role in shaping the social phenomena explored through qualitative research (Allmark, 2004).

Procedure

Prior to the research, the Ethical Review Board of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences at Utrecht University approved the research plan. The interviews were conducted either in person or online via Microsoft Teams, depending on the setting in which the participants felt most comfortable. One interview was conducted on the Utrecht University campus, another in a café, and the remaining six were conducted online.

The informed consent form outlined the aim of the research and assured participants that their anonymity would be protected. Anonymity was maintained by not using participants' names and by only presenting characteristics that could not be traced back to them by a third party. Additionally, the form stated that participation was voluntary and that participants were not obligated to answer any questions they felt uncomfortable with. It also clarified that participants could withdraw from the interview at any time, even after it had taken place.

Before each interview, permission was requested for audio recording. Participants were also given the opportunity to ask questions beforehand. At the end of each interview, participants were offered the option to receive the results and were thanked for their participation. The

interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were guided by a topic list (see Appendix 2), which included questions based on key concepts from the literature, such as social capital and social identity.

Ethics

For this research on sense of belonging, some interview topics could be perceived as sensitive. For example, questions about how religious beliefs influence one's sense of belonging. However, participants were always given the option to decline to answer any question or, if necessary, to withdraw from the interview entirely. This was also clearly stated in the information letter participants received prior to the interview. Furthermore, interviews began with less sensitive topics and gradually moved to more sensitive ones, once a level of trust had been established. Moreover, all questions were phrased in an open, rather than judgmental, way.

Some participants may belong to vulnerable groups. For instance, Muslim students, who can be considered vulnerable due to experiences of Islamophobia and discrimination in society. The interviews were conducted with sensitivity to this context, ensuring a safe and respectful space for participants to share their experiences. Questions were asked in a neutral and open-ended way to avoid making assumptions.

As a researcher, it is important to reflect on one's positionality and consider how this might influence the research process and outcomes. Although not religious, growing up in the Netherlands often involves implicit exposure to Christian-secular norms and values, which can shape one's worldview regardless of personal belief. As a secular student at Utrecht University, the researcher acknowledges the limitations in fully understanding the lived experiences of religious participants. Recognizing this positionality is crucial for remaining aware of potential assumptions and blind spots throughout the research process.

The researcher's positionality became especially evident during one interview. At the end of the conversation, the participant remarked that she had expected questions regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict. The researcher had not initially considered how this issue might relate to the concept of belonging. This moment of reflection resulted in a reconsideration of the theoretical framework. Moreover, it contributed to a broader understanding of the topic and revealed valuable information for answering the research questions.

Analysis Strategy

The interviews were transcribed verbatim into a Word document and coded using Nvivo, a software program for analysing qualitative data. After transcription, the interviews were deleted.

During the first round of coding, open coding, codes were assigned to text fragments. These codes could be either deductive or inductive. In deductive research, existing theories are examined first, followed by the collection of data (Doorewaard et al., 2015). Deductive codes are therefore derived from the literature. However, according to Doorewaard et al. (2015), in-depth interviews also provide opportunities to discover new insights directly from the data, which aligns with an inductive approach.

The second round of coding, axial coding, focused on exploring the relationships between themes, identifying similarities and differences. Codes were grouped based on a common theme, resulting in overarching codes. This stage allowed for a more structured and organized understanding of the data.

In the final phase, selective coding, the researcher identified the main categories and themes. Based on this analysis, a code tree was developed, consisting of three main codes (see Appendix 3).

A thematic analysis was conducted using these main codes to interpret and explore the key themes that emerged from the data. After the data analysis was completed, the transcripts, informed consent forms, and Nvivo files were securely stored in the researcher's personal Yoda account.

Results

General findings

Religious students generally reported positive academic experiences, tough their sense of belonging varied based on different factors. Layla shared: *"The three years I spent there were truly wonderful years. I honestly wouldn't want to change a thing. I really have no complaints about it. It just felt very familiar and comfortable.".* Additionally, participants expressed satisfaction with their decision to study at Utrecht University. Key factors influencing this decision included the university's proximity to home and the appeal of its academic programs. One student described her relationship with the university as purely transactional, without deeper emotional or social ties. Nevertheless, most participants reported a general sense of belonging to the university, they feel like they are part of the institution. This feeling was influenced by respect and understanding, the university's efforts to support student well-being, for example through initiatives like the well-being week and equal treatment by fellow students and teachers. Fleur said:

"I'm the only one in the class who wears a headscarf, and I remember feeling a bit nervous about that on the first day—wondering if I would feel different from my fellow students. But not at all. I feel like I'm treated exactly the same as everyone else. That's where I really feel that sense of belonging."

However, not every student experienced such equal and respectful treatment. For instance, Yasmina had a different experience:

"For a very long time. I really had that imposter syndrome, like—do I even belong here, or am I actually good enough? [...] It was really strange that I was the only woman there, the only woman of colour, the only woman with a different religion, and visibly as well, as I wore a headscarf. So, it was really… I often got looks like, "Yeah, but what do you know?" You know? And whenever I wanted to say something, it was like, "Oh, there she goes again," as if I wasn't saying anything useful."

This experience likely influenced Yasmina's sense of belonging, especially since many participants identified equal and respectful treatment as essential to fostering such a feeling. This emphasis on respectful interaction not only emerged from the participants' experiences but also aligns closely with the definition of sense of belonging in this study. Strayhorn (2012) highlights respect, acceptance, and being valued as key components of sense of belonging.

Christian students appeared to experience a sense of belonging more naturally, whereas Muslim students reported more challenges in feeling fully included. Several factors contributed to this more complex and sometimes less inclusive experience for Muslim students. These included the visibility of alcohol in university spaces, limited availability of halal food options, and difficulty locating prayer rooms. Such factors not only created practical challenges but also contributed to the feeling that Muslim students were not fully recognized or respected within the university. These experiences likely impacted their sense of belonging, again aligning with Strayhorn's (2012) emphasis on the importance of feeling accepted, cared for, and valued within a community.

The majority of participants highlighted the importance of belonging for academic success and personal motivation. Some even stated they would consider leaving the university if they did not feel a sense of belonging. A stable foundation and a sense of belonging were seen as essential for completing their studies. This finding aligns with existing literature, which suggests that a sense of belonging increases students' likelihood of staying engaged with their institution and successfully finishing their studies (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002).

The analysis of the interviews revealed that sense of belonging is a complex concept with multiple dimensions, these dimensions do not stand alone but are related to each other. Hence, the following sections will focus on the three dimensions that emerged most prominently during the interviews: social capital, academic and religious identity, and the sociopolitical climate.

Social capital

As outlined in the theoretical framework, social capital plays an important role in shaping a student's sense of belonging. Across most interviews, participants identified social networks, such as family, friends, teachers, fellow students, and student associations, as key contributors to their feeling of connection at the university.

For participants studying Islam and Arabic or Religious Studies, the university's small-scale learning environment contributed to their sense of belonging. Those enrolled in these smaller academic programs highlighted the benefits of intimate classroom settings, where teachers are more approachable. This accessibility often resulted in more personal attention, which, in turn, motivated students to put in greater effort. Eva emphasized the importance of forming personal connections, which she felt was easier in a more intimate academic setting:

“Well, for me, connection is actually really important. I think it really depends on the small scale, I think it’s about being able to build personal connections with people. And I think that happens less easily in a really large group.”

In addition to the ease of forming personal connections in small-scale settings, participants noted that being the only one wearing a headscarf in a group of 10 students felt more comfortable than being the only one wearing a headscarf in a large group.

Participants also spoke positively about the guidance they received from tutors. Reinier shared the following:

"And I also had a tutor,[...] and I had three check-in moments with this tutor that year. Just to see how things were going — how are you doing, are you managing, have you passed everything, and where do you want to go next? That was really nice. I just found it a bit unfortunate that the university only assigned me that tutor in the first year, and after that... well, it felt like they basically said: 'Figure it out yourself.' I think there could have been more of a sense of belonging if those roles had continued to exist.”

This quote reveals that students value personal connections with tutors and that such relationships influence their sense of belonging. Research by Hausmann et al. (2007) supports this, showing that students who receive social support and engage in interactions with peers and faculty are more likely to report a higher sense of belonging.

This sense of belonging was further strengthened by students’ involvement in study and student associations. These associations enabled participants to meet peers and feel more connected to university life. Layla reflected on how her connection to the university grew over time due to her involvement in the Islamic student association:

"For example, at Drift, I noticed that the number of people with a migration background walking around there was very limited. I remember every time I had exams at the Uithof, [...] I was like, wow… what kind of world is this? I found it really striking to see, because suddenly I saw people with a migration background. I genuinely thought, where have you all been this whole time? Then I came across an Islamic student association, and I joined them. I even became a committee member, because I felt like — yeah — this sense of connection is something every, in my case, Muslim student deserves. And that's a feeling I really want to share with others. That visibility needs to grow so much more."

This quote shows that student associations are important in creating a sense of belonging. Student associations are places where students can connect with others who share similar interests and beliefs. This corresponds with the concept of bonding capital, a category of social capital that connects individuals with shared backgrounds or identities (Park & Bowman, 2015). According to research, bonding capital positively influences student's sense of belonging (Jensen & Jetten, 2015). Similarly, Seedat & Roopchund (2024) found that Muslim student associations foster a sense of belonging by offering social support. This is reflected in Layla's experience, where her involvement in an Islamic student association helped her feel more connected. Social capital, especially bonding capital, plays a key role in fostering student's sense of belonging at the university by facilitating personal connections and supportive networks.

Academic and religious identity

Besides social capital, students' academic and religious identity also has an impact on their sense of belonging. Navigating between academic and religious identities can be a complex and often challenging process, as highlighted in the literature. For some participants, these

identities are closely intertwined, while for others, a clear distinction exists. This tension is particularly pronounced among students studying Islam and Arabic or Religious Studies, where academic content may, at times, conflict with personal religious beliefs. The content presented at university may differ from what is taught in the mosque or church. Amina described this challenge:

"*I think that when Dutch students receive certain information from a teacher, they are more likely to absorb it and perhaps even see it as truth. Whereas, as a practicing Muslim, when I receive that same piece of information, before I can see it as truth, I would need to look into what Islam says about it, what the scholars say. To what extent is it actually accurate, and to what extent is it influenced by, for example, Western ideas and norms and values? Before I would even consider it to be the truth."*

Students like Amina feel the need to separate their academic and religious identities in order to succeed academically. Writing papers or engaging in discussions often requires them to put aside their personal religious beliefs, driven by a concern that deviating from the expected academic perspective could negatively affect their grades or relationships with teachers and peers. This perceived pressure to conform to a secular academic norm can create internal conflict, as students may feel they must choose between personal beliefs and academic success. Research shows that concealing one's identity to avoid such conflict can lead to a lower sense of belonging to the scientific community (Scheitle & Dabbs, 2021).

However, this experience is not exclusive to Muslim students; Christian students also reported challenges related to navigating their religious and academic identities. Hannah explained that, in her view, the university approaches religion from a more sociological or anthropological perspective, which triggered her to reconsider aspects of her own faith:

"Yes, you're engaged with religion all day, so that can be quite challenging. And you're also engaging with religion in a very different way than in your personal faith life. So, in that sense, you could see them as two separate things, because you're approaching it in a completely different way. But still, what you learn has a big impact on your personal faith, at least for me. Because you're exposed to very different perspectives, and that really makes you reflect on everything."

This quote illustrates the complex interplay between academic learning and personal faith. The university expects students to "leave personal beliefs at the door", yet for many, this separation is neither practical nor desirable. Instead, they navigate and negotiate between the two identities. For instance, by starting conversations with peers. Some religious students view their presence in a secular environment as a positive and meaningful opportunity for dialogue and connection. This contrasts with literature suggesting that religious researchers often hesitate to show their beliefs for fear of stigmatization (Scheitle & Dabbs, 2021). Reinier shared how his faith encourages open conversations:

"Oh, it's from my faith that I find it important to occasionally start conversations with the people around me about religion. And I always find it really annoying when people approach those conversations like, "I believe this, and now I'm going to convince you of my view." I'm more interested in asking, "Do you relate to it? Do you find it interesting? Or is it not really your thing?"—so that I get a sense of who else is studying here and how they view life. At the student association I'm part of, which is a Christian student association, we're always encouraged to start conversations about topics like this in our work groups. And I think a big part of the

connection I now feel with my fellow group members has come from having those conversations—really because I was encouraged to do so by my Christian student association."

Similarly, Hannah spoke about the value of offering a different perspective to her secular peers, especially during class discussions. She described her role as a Christian in a secular context as "shining light" on her fellow students:

"Well, as a Christian, you're kind of like a light in the darkness. Because you know the light of God and you can pass that on and reflect it to others. So then, a secular world is seen as a kind of dark world where you have the opportunity to show what it means to be a Christian."

These reflections highlight the multiple and contradictory ways in which students negotiate their religious and academic identities. It seems that Muslim students more often face challenges and therefore try to hide their personal religious beliefs, while, on the other hand, Christian students tend to use their faith as a social tool that fosters connection and belonging. This finding relates to the concept of bridging capital. Bridging capital connects individuals across different backgrounds. While limited research directly links bridging capital to a sense of belonging, it may contribute indirectly by fostering inclusivity and promoting intercultural understanding. This aligns with Strayhorn's (2012) definition, which emphasizes the importance of feeling accepted and respected.

Sociopolitical climate

In addition to social capital and identity, a key theme that emerged from the interviews was the importance of the sociopolitical environment. Broader societal changes and historical events play a role in shaping student's sense of belonging as an ongoing process. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory, particularly with the chronosystem, which represents the outermost layer of his model. The chronosystem emphasizes how changes over time affect

individual development and well-being. For example, references to the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing conflict in Palestine illustrate how such events can influence students' perceptions of belonging. These issues enter the academic space and affect how students relate to their institution. This matches with research stating that sociopolitical environments influence students' sense of belonging (Rosario & Destin, 2024). Yasmine started about the Israel-Palestine conflict and explained that, on this level, she does not feel a sense of belonging with the university. Amina also mentioned the conflict toward the end of her interview. Her reflections revealed a deep emotional response to what she perceived as the university's passivity:

"Yeah, that's just such a huge and sad situation right now, and I really notice that. To what extent does a university actually engage with that? The more I see that an institution takes a stance, the more I respect it. I remember there was a university somewhere in Amsterdam that, for example, ended its relationship with an Israeli university. Yeah, they just cut ties. Mad respect for that, really. I have a lot of respect for that, because you're listening to what your students are saying. You're listening and you're responding. I wish Utrecht could do the same."

She continued:

"How many more times do you want students protesting and demonstrating in front of a faculty building? How often does that need to happen? Clearly, your students are saying something, and you're just not listening—despite the fact that what they're saying is deeply grounded. I find that really disappointing."

These quotes reflect Amina's disappointed with Utrecht University and suggest that a university's stance on politically and ethically charged issues can directly impact student's

emotional connection to the institution. In her case, a perceived lack of responsiveness diminished her sense of belonging and trust in the university. Institutional silence can be interpreted as disregard for student voices, especially on matters that deeply affect their identities. According to the literature, sociopolitical contexts can influence psychological processes at the micro-level, such as sense of belonging (Rosario & Destin, 2024). This is particularly true when the context poses a threat to racially minoritized groups (Rosario & Destin, 2024). Therefore, Amina might experience a lower sense of belonging.

However, this issue is not exclusive to Muslim participants. Reinier, a Christian student, also described feeling tense during this time:

"From my own perspective, I can say that I've always felt very welcome here, also as a Christian student. I did find it a bit more tense during the time when there were a lot of discussions about Israel and Gaza. Traditionally, the Christian church tends to support Israel, and at the moment, the general opinion in the Netherlands is that Israel is clearly in the wrong. And well, I really should read up more on the topic, so I decided not to get involved in those discussions. [...] At the time, I was a bit worried that people would come up to me and say, 'You're Christian, so you support Israel, and now we're going to tell you what we think about that.' That didn't happen, but in that whole situation—especially with buildings being occupied in Utrecht, including our own faculty building being taken over by pro-Palestinian activists—I did have a moment where I thought, 'Oh dear,' and found it a bit unsettling."

Reinier went on to express concern about how the university might respond under pressure. He mentioned that he would not feel connected to the university if it had cut ties with Israel purely because of pressure from the demonstrations.

In both cases, the experiences of the students reflect how the sociopolitical environment, as described by Bronfenbrenner, can influence students' sense of belonging with the university. This shows that a previously stable sense of belonging can change, belonging is not static but shaped by changing circumstances. The students' reflections also show that how a university engages with polarizing or politically sensitive issues can influence students' trust in the institution, and, ultimately, their sense of belonging with the university.

Therefore, the university's stance in such situations plays a crucial role in shaping how students relate to the institution and to each other. If students feel that their identities or viewpoints are marginalized or misunderstood, the university's response may lead to their disengagement. In this way, institutional decision-making influences students' sense of belonging. The results also show that whatever course of action the university takes, it will inevitably affect the sense of belonging of one group or another, meaning the university can never fully satisfy all parties. This is especially true when the sociopolitical issue has a religious dimension such as the conflict between Israel and Palestine. In contrast, during the COVID-19 pandemic, differences between groups tended to be smaller.

Conclusion

This study explored how religious students perceive and negotiate their sense of belonging. To examine this, eight in-depth interviews were conducted with religious students at Utrecht University. The findings revealed that belonging is a complex concept, influenced by multiple dimensions. Moreover, belonging is not a fixed concept, but something that shifts, depending on the circumstances.

The results show that the participants generally have a positive view of the university; they are happy with their choice to study there, and most of them feel a sense of belonging to the university. This sense of belonging is related to respect, understanding, and equal treatment.

However, Muslim students appeared to face more challenges related to belonging, often because their identities were not fully recognized within the university environment.

Social networks play an important role, not only relationships with fellow students and teachers, but also religious student associations influence a student's sense of belonging.

In addition, students studying Islam and Arabic or Religious Studies sometimes find it difficult to navigate between their religious and academic identities. Some participants hide their religious identity out of fear of receiving lower grades or harming their relationships with teachers. Others use their religious identity to initiate conversations with their non-religious fellow students, which in turn helps them feel more connected. These conversations can be seen as bridging capital which, through intercultural understanding, may foster a stronger sense of belonging.

Finally, the sociopolitical climate has a strong impact on students' sense of belonging. In particular, the conflict in Palestine and the university's response to it have affected both Christian and Muslim students. The university's approach influences whether students feel heard and understood, and this affects their sense of connection to the institution.

Limitations

This study provides valuable insight into the experiences of religious students at Utrecht University concerning their sense of belonging and the factors that contribute to it. By conducting eight in-depth interviews with students from various academic programs, the research captures a broad perspective on how belonging is perceived across both large and small academic programs.

However, the study also has several limitations. The sample size was small and consisted mainly of women, which means the findings are not easily generalizable. As a result of this gender imbalance, it was difficult to explore potential gender-based differences in the experience of belonging. A more balanced distribution of men and women in the sample might have revealed

additional patterns or perspectives. Since gender can be a key indicator of underlying cultural differences that may significantly influence how social phenomena are experienced (Allmark, 2004). Therefore, further research with a larger and more diverse sample is necessary to build upon these findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic.

Implications

Belonging is a human need, as shown in the hierarchy of needs by Maslow (1954). Therefore, universities must take a proactive and flexible approach to foster an inclusive environment. Several recommendations are made based on the findings of this study.

First, this study suggests that the definition of belonging by Strayhorn (2012) may be too static to fully capture its ongoing development. Universities should consider adopting a more dynamic and inclusive definition that acknowledges this fluidity.

Second, a key finding of this research is that religious student associations play a vital role in creating a sense of belonging for students. The university should therefore actively support these associations through funding and efforts to enhance their visibility on campus.

Third, the study reveals that students' sense of belonging is influenced by the university's stance on sociopolitical issues. Universities should therefore take informed and inclusive positions on relevant issues and communicate openly with students about the actions they are taking. In addition, it is crucial for universities to recognize that belonging is not a one-time goal to be achieved and then forgotten. Rather, it requires ongoing attention, reflection, and supportive policies that respond to students' evolving needs.

Fourth, participants expressed a need for recognition of the challenges involved in navigating conflicting identities. Universities could establish mentorship programs led by individuals who have lived experience in balancing dual identities. These mentors can provide support, something that was noted as lacking when students were advised to "leave their religious identity at home".

Finally, the study reveals that respect and understanding are factors contributing to sense of belonging. Therefore, promoting intercultural understanding across the campus community is essential. The university should invest in intercultural understanding, for instance through dialogue sessions or workshops, so all students feel respected, understood and more connected to their university.

Ultimately, creating a lasting sense of belonging means recognizing it as a dynamic process, one that requires ongoing attention and support for all students.

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Appendix 1: Information letter

Beste,

Fijn dat je wilt deelnemen aan mijn onderzoek! Ik ben momenteel bezig met de master Youth Development and Social Change aan de Universiteit Utrecht en ik doe onderzoek naar het gevoel van verbondenheid op de universiteit, specifiek gericht op de ervaringen van religieuze studenten. Het gevoel van verbondenheid heeft invloed op persoonlijke aspecten zoals mentale gezondheid en academische prestaties, daarnaast kan dit onderzoek ook helpen bij het verkrijgen van een beter inzicht in hoe de universiteit een inclusievere omgeving kan bieden voor iedereen. Voor dit onderzoek wil ik graag religieuze studenten interviewen over hun ervaringen met het gevoel van verbondenheid op de universiteit. Mijn doel is om meer inzicht te krijgen in deze ervaringen en de factoren die hierin een rol spelen.

Het interview zal ongeveer 45 minuten duren. Ik zal onder andere vragen stellen over jouw ervaringen op de universiteit en jouw ideeën over welke factoren bijdragen aan het gevoel van verbondenheid. Deelname is volledig vrijwillig, je bent niet verplicht om op alle vragen te antwoorden, je kunt altijd een pauze nemen tijdens het interview en je mag het interview op elk moment stoppen. Ook na deelname aan het interview kun je altijd nog afzien van jouw medewerking. Alle gegevens zullen dan worden verwijderd. Het interview is volledig anoniem, wat betekent dat jouw naam of andere persoonlijke gegevens nergens genoemd of gedeeld zullen worden met derden. De gegevens worden opgeslagen op een beveiligde server van de Universiteit Utrecht en worden na vijf jaar vernietigd.

Je zou mij enorm helpen door deel te nemen aan het onderzoek. Zo kan ik meer inzicht krijgen in hoe religieuze studenten een gevoel van verbondenheid aan de universiteit ervaren en welke factoren een rol spelen bij dit gevoel.

Als je nog vragen hebt mag je mij altijd bellen, een berichtje sturen (06-25020935) of een email sturen (s.bongers1@students.uu.nl). Of, als je dat wenst, kun je contact opnemen met mijn begeleider Rik Huizinga (r.p.huizinga@uu.nl). Als er klachten zijn over het onderzoek, kun contact opnemen met de klachtenfunctionaris van de Universiteit Utrecht (klachtenfunctionaris-fetcsocwet@uu.nl). Voor meer informatie of vragen over privacy kun je de website van de functionaris gegevensbescherming raadplegen (https://www.uu.nl/organisatie/praktische-zaken/privacy/functionaris-voor-gegevensbescherming) of mailen naar (privacy@uu.nl).

Vriendelijke groeten,

Swaan

Appendix 2: Topic list

Ik ben bezig met het schrijven van mijn masterscriptie en ik doe onderzoek naar hoe studenten met een religieuze achtergrond zich verbonden voelen met de universiteit. Hiervoor wil ik graag religieuze studenten interviewen over hun ervaringen met het gevoel van verbondenheid voelen op de universiteit. Dus daarom heb ik jou gevraagd om daar iets over te vertellen. Ik zal dus wat vragen gaan stellen over dit onderwerp, en het interview zal ongeveer 45 minuten duren. Deelname is volledig vrijwillig, dus je bent niet verplicht om te antwoorden en je kunt altijd een pauze nemen of stoppen met het interview. Verder is het interview anoniem en zullen de gegevens worden opgeslagen op een beveiligde server van de Universiteit Utrecht en worden ze na vijf jaar vernietigd. Heb je vooraf nog vragen?

Introductie vragen

- Kun je iets over jezelf vertellen? (naam, leeftijd, woonplaats, werk, studie etc.)
- Waarom heb je gekozen voor de Universiteit Utrecht?
- Kun je iets vertellen over je studietraject?
- Hoe ervaar je je keuze voor deze studie/universiteit?/ Ben je blij met je studiekeuze?

Hoofdvragen

- Kun je iets vertellen over je relatie met je medestudenten?
- Kun je iets vertellen over de band met je docenten?
- Wat betekent het voor jou om je ergens verbonden mee voelen?
- Kun je beschrijven waarom je je wel of niet verbonden voelt met de universiteit?
- Hoe belangrijk vind je het om je verbonden te voelen met de universiteit?
- Op welke manier denk je dat jouw gevoel van verbondenheid je leerervaring beïnvloedt?
- Wat zijn voor jou de factoren die kunnen bijdragen aan dit gevoel?

- Hoe dragen vrienden/familie volgens jou bij aan een gevoel van verbondenheid?
- Op welke manier denk je dat religie invloed heeft op jouw ervaringen op de universiteit?
- Hoe navigeer je tussen je religieuze identiteit en je academische identiteit?
- Kun je een voorbeeld geven van maatregelen of initiatieven van de universiteit die je helpen je meer verbonden te voelen? (gebedsruimtes/studentenverenigingen/halal eten/bars met alcohol/rooster met ramadan/haram om rente te betalen?)
- Heb jij het idee dat de universiteit genoeg doet om iedereen welkom te laten voelen?
- Hoe zou de universiteit een nog inclusievere plek kunnen worden voor religieuze studenten?

Afsluitende vragen

- Hoe zou de universiteit er volgens jou uitzien als inclusiviteit volledig gerealiseerd zou zijn?
- Wat zou je aan religieuze studenten meegeven die hier willen gaan studeren?
- Is er nog iets wat je graag wilt vertellen wat ik niet heb gevraagd?

Dankjewel voor het deelnamen aan dit interview!

Appendix 3: Code tree

Sociaal kapitaal	
Relatie met docenten	Deductief
Relatie met medestudenten	Deductief
Belang van studentenvereniging	Inductief
Invloed van Kleine studie op verbondenheid	Inductief
Belang van tutor	Deductief
Belang van studievereniging	Inductief
Belang van mentor	Deductief
Sociaal-politieke omgeving	
Invloed van COVID-19 op verbondenheid	Inductief
Invloed van Israël-Palestina conflict op verbondenheid	Inductief
Academische en religieuze identiteit	
Religieuze identiteit meenemen naar de universiteit	Deductief
Licht schijnen op seculiere medestudenten	Inductief
Religie belangrijker vinden dan studie	Inductief

Religie niet durven bespreken met medestudenten	Deductief
Twijfel over eigen geloof	Inductief
Verwevenheid van twee identiteiten	Deductief

Appendix 4: Reflection on Interdisciplinarity

The use of theoretical insights from multiple scientific (sub)disciplines contributes to understanding the problem investigated in this study. This problem, the lower sense of belonging among religious students compared to non-religious students at Utrecht University, is complex. Examining it from only one disciplinary perspective would not capture all the different dimensions of the concept of sense of belonging. Therefore, I have chosen to draw on various theoretical insights from multiple scientific disciplines, each focusing on a different aspect of sense of belonging.

First, Maslow's hierarchy of needs is used to highlight the importance of sense of belonging. This psychological theory focuses on individual motivation and personal growth. It states that the need for belonging, a psychological need, emerges after basic needs like food and water are met. Next, social capital is discussed. Social capital is considered a sociological theory that emphasizes the networks and relationships between people. This is followed by social identity theory, which is again a psychological theory focussing on how individuals identify themselves. Finally, Bronfenbrenner's model is examined, with particular attention to the outer layer, the chronosystem, which emphasizes the sociopolitical climate. The influence of social and political changes over time can be understood as sociological. Thus, this study focuses on sociological and psychological theories, and this interdisciplinary perspective is important as it allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the concept of sense of belonging, considering both individual and societal factors.

Besides different scientific disciplines, insights and perspectives from stakeholders outside academia, such as the religious students interviewed, contribute to understanding the problem of sense of belonging. Their lived experiences offer rich insights that theory alone cannot capture. The perspectives of religious students are important in bridging the gap between science and practice, as they reveal practical challenges within the university environment. The results of the

thesis highlight the importance of listening to these students. They provided valuable insights, such as the impact of the Israel-Palestine conflict on their sense of belonging. This suggests that Strayhorn's (2012) definition, used in this study, is too static. The concept of sense of belonging needs to be refined to include its dynamic and context-dependent nature. Thus, stakeholder input is essential in translating theoretical insights into meaningful, practical change.

Furthermore, the use of multiple scientific research methods in investigating the problem led to a deeper understanding of the research problem as well. First, the dashboard provided by the Utrecht University was used to identify where and what the problem was regarding sense of belonging, capturing broader patterns. This dashboard showed that religious students experience a lower sense of belonging compared to their non-religious peers. However, the dashboard data did not reveal the reasons or factors influencing this sense of belonging. Therefore, conducting qualitative interviews with religious students was essential to gain detailed, personal insights into their experiences within the university context. These different scientific research methods complement each other: interviews offer depth, while surveys reveal general patterns. Together, they create a more nuanced understanding of the issue.

Finally, the use of multiple analytical levels in investigating sense of belonging led to a deeper understanding of the research problem. By considering various systems perspectives, this approach helps capture the complexity of factors influencing the sense of belonging. This includes the individual level, which is addressed by social identity theory and Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The interpersonal level includes social capital, while the societal or cultural level focuses on the sociopolitical climate. Together, these analytical levels influence one another and lead to a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

Overall, integrating multiple disciplines, stakeholder perspectives, research methods, and analytical levels provides a nuanced understanding of the complex issue of sense of belonging among religious students, ensuring that both theoretical and practical dimensions are addressed.

Appendix 5: AI Statement

For this document, I used artificial intelligence (AI) as a tool to assist in improving spelling/grammar of the original text. Specifically, I employed OpenAI's ChatGPT to help with the grammar check. I provided the original draft of the text and asked for suggestions to improve its grammar and spelling. Prompts used: *"Can you improve the grammar and spelling of this text?".* This prompt was used to request AI assistance in improving the spelling of the original text I wrote. The final output reflects my understanding of the original content and learning goals, and I am fully responsible for the final submission.