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Examining Sense of Belonging and Academic Success for Undergraduate Chinese Students

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Examining Sense of Belonging and Academic Success

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the experiences of undergraduate Chinese international students and how those experiences related to their sense of belonging and perceived classroom performance. Individual interviews were conducted to obtain data for this study. Participants indicated experiences with sense of belonging in several ways, including (1) social support, (2) homesickness, (3) social isolation. These experiences contributed to belong through (1) student organizations and (2) cultural familiarity and integration. Participants also indicated connections with belonging and perceived classroom performance, including (1) educational background, (2) learning habits, (3) self-motivation, and (4) external factors. Recommendations for future research include monitoring the development of belonging over time, expanding the research to a larger and more diverse population, and utilizing quantitative instruments to determine level of belonging and how it impacts a measurable performance.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps being part of a community may simply be a part of life. In a general sense, people look for connections with others and search for a way to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Like most communities in the U.S., the community at this university is composed of students from different backgrounds and ethnicities (Winona State University, 2016). Students come together in this setting to learn concepts and develop skills they hope to use in future or current jobs (Nadelson et al., 2013; Schultz & Higbee, 2007). At the same time, there is a social element to education (Hurtado et al., 2007). As students attend class or go to work, they interact with other people (Saenz, Ngai, & Hurtado, 2007). These interactions may change the way students think and feel about the university (Johnson et al., 2007). Students may no longer wish to attend a university where they feel mistreated, disrespected, or lonely (Tinto, 1975).

Whether experiencing positive or negative events at college, students may begin to develop a sense of belonging on campus. Just like other students, international students are also likely to seek elements of belonging in the community (Glass et al., 2015). While these students face additional challenges, such as potential languages barriers (Lin & Betz, 2009) and living in a different country apart from many family and friends (Wang et al., 2007), they must also face the regular concerns which accompany going to college (e.g., academic planning, time management, and financing). Considering these issues, this study intends to examine a sense of belonging for Chinese international students and provide suggestions for a potentially improved campus climate.

Background of the Problem

One of the most common issues for a sense of belonging in higher education involves diversity and racial climate (Chang et al., 2003). Studies from Booker (2016) noted African American undergraduate women often face challenges other students may not, including racial slurs and lack of support from faculty. Latino students experienced a greater sense of belonging when talking to other students about class activities (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Chinese students already attending college in the U.S. recommended several items for first-time international students (Heng, 2018). Some of these recommendations included understanding the culture and language beforehand, searching for friends with common interests, and keeping an open mind while exploring new things (Heng, 2018). Much of the research shows people from different backgrounds experience and interpret a sense of belonging in different ways (Rankin & Reason, 2005). In addition, individuals may have varying priorities or interests, which might further complicate the goal of understanding and identifying a sense of belonging for everyone on campus. Despite the many challenges, encouraging and seeking diversity on campus leads to several educational benefits, including creativity (Chang et al., 2003) and critical thinking (Pascarella et al., 2001).

Statement of the Problem

Much of the research focuses on underrepresented students who are citizens of the U.S. and how racial or ethnic backgrounds affect a sense of belonging (Samura, 2016; Strayhorn, 2018; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). However, few studies have centered on international students, especially Chinese students (Du & Wei, 2015; Slaten et al., 2016). Since the research demonstrates psychological and educational benefits for belonging (Hausmann, Schofield, &

Woods, 2007; Osterman, 2000), there is an opportunity to identify the needs of Chinese international students and support a sense of belonging on college campuses.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the ways in which Chinese international students experience a sense of belonging on college campuses. This study also seeks to explore the experiences of Chinese international students and how those experiences of belonging relate to their perceived classroom performance. With this information, the study intends to provide meaningful suggestions for leaders and administrators of the campus community, contributing to a well-rounded college experience for all students.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is a structure used to understand the information gathered in a study and to communicate to others the interpretation of the data (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). This study utilized a social constructivism viewpoint to examine a sense of belonging and perceived academic success for Chinese international students at a U.S. college. Social constructivism interprets learning as a process of complex systems that shape reality; in other words, people form and alter reality to understand the world (Fosnot & Perry, 1996). When students form a sense of belonging, they are influenced by the interactions of the social dynamic around them, including faculty, students, staff, administrators, and general community members (Tinto, 2017), as well as their previous experiences like learning environments and cultural norms in countries of origin (Masika & Jones, 2016).

In this study, a sense of belonging as described by Baumeister and Leary (1995) is used as a theoretical framework for understanding the experiences of belonging for international students at college. Baumeister and Leary concluded belonging is a primary human motivation,

in which people constantly seek positive relationships with each other. This emotional and psychological need to belong may have an impact on all students.

Research Method

A qualitative research design was employed for this research. Using this method, the researcher narrows down the context, potentially adjusts over time, and uses the researcher to collect and analyze the data (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). Qualitative methodology supports the collection of diverse data and allows for several methodologies to understand human experiences (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). By focusing on a specific area, the qualitative method provides significant detail about human conduct and the phenomenon being studied (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017).

As a methodology for this study, the researcher used a grounded theory to understand the research problem. Using this approach, the study utilizes interviews and observations of participants to build a theory, which is practical in situations with scarce or emerging data (Ary et al., 2010). Lochmiller and Lester (2017) indicated this method allows researchers to understand the problem through how people understand the content being studied. Since this method suggests social reality is understood from data being used, it most effective when forming meaning from the data collected (Hatch, 2002).

In this study, data were collected through online interviews using a semi-structured, open-ended interview guide. These sessions were audio recorded and later transcribed by the researcher. Confidentiality of the participants was maintained, and the recordings will be destroyed at the end of the study. Participants were also assigned pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality. The semi-structured, open-ended interview guide is presented in Chapter 3 and included in Appendix C.

Rationale for the Research Design

Exploring the experiences of belonging for Chinese international students guided the researcher to qualitative research methodology. Previous studies have provided evidence between the similarities and differences of international students and local students in terms of belonging (Glass & Westmont, 2014). However, detailed studies about international students' adjustment and a sense of belonging are limited (Conway, 2009; Du & Wei, 2015; Slaten et al., 2016). This combined knowledge better equips campus leaders to provide for the needs of international students with low sense of belonging, as well as the rest of the student body, by identifying major concerns among students and understanding situations which may diminish a sense of belonging.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to examine the ways in which Chinese international students experience a sense of belonging on college campuses. This study seeks to explore the experiences of Chinese international students and how those experiences of belonging relate to their perceived classroom performance. A sense of belonging literature review directed this study to the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the experiences of Chinese international students when developing a sense of belonging on college campuses?

RQ2. How do undergraduate Chinese international student experiences contribute to the construction of a sense of belonging and perceived success on college campuses?

Definition of Terms

These interactions are often reviewed to predict whether or not a student will leave the university. In general, the more active and engaged a student is in the campus community and with university activities, the more likely the student is to stay (Tinto, 1975). Below is a list of relevant terms used throughout this study.

Sense of belonging: While there are many ways to define sense of belonging, educators focus on what it means for students in a college setting. In higher education, a sense of belonging refers to an individual's perception of being respected and valued by members of the college community (Mahar, Cobigo, & Stuart, 2013). Strayhorn (2018) defined sense of belonging in another way, describing it for students as "a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community" (p. 4). These connections support students during college and may impact whether or not they can truly be themselves (Hagerty et al., 1992). Furthermore, students who are more involved with peers, faculty, or staff are likely to feel more connected to the university (Hausmann et al., 2007).

Campus climate: Hurtado (1992) described the campus climate as an environment of diversity and inclusion, which impacted student development and learning. In the campus climate survey, Rankin & Associates Consulting (2018) build on that foundation to define campus climate as the viewpoints and actions of students and faculty at college. In this sense, the way people think and behave on campus alters the balance of the setting and impacts students. An optimal campus climate is one in which all students are supported, respected, and nurtured.

Cultural integration: This type of integration incorporates components from different cultures into the classrooms, lessons, and campus environment. As a result, it allows students

from different backgrounds to understand content from familiar experiences (Museus, Yi,

& Saelua, 2017). In general, integration is how well a student fits into a group or community

(Berger & Milem, 1999).

Engagement: Kuh et al. (2008) defined engagement as how much time and commitment

a student has for educational activities. Frequently assessing students' learning habits and

preparing a variety of experiences are some ways to promote engagement (Foster et al., 2012).

International students: These students are not citizens of the U.S., do not speak English

as their native language, and typically have temporary visas (Andrade, 2006).

Limitations

There are four notable limitations in this study. First, the campus climate survey data only

represent a portion of the entire university. This smaller population size may not accurately

reflect the greater campus community. Second, data were collected from students in a small,

public four-year university in Minnesota, and those individuals chose to participate in the study.

By lacking generalizability, the findings from this study may not apply to other universities

across the country (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). As a result, the information here should be

combined with similar studies to provide a complete understanding of the context. Third, some

participants may not be able to express themselves fully in English, which may result in

communication issues or lost information through translation. Understanding and interpreting the

responses may not be completely accurate. Fourth, the interviewer's lack of experience may

restrain the effectiveness of the interviews.

Delimitations

This study focused on undergraduate Chinese international students attending a U.S. college in the Midwest. Participants were delimited to international students who came from China. Interviews were conducted in English, which was not the native language the participants.

Significance of the Study

Results of this study may benefit most college students in several ways. First, this study addresses a gap in the literature as noted by several researchers (Conway, 2009; Du & Wei, 2015; Slaten et al., 2016; Yao, 2016). Second, it further identifies how a sense of belonging is experienced and understood by diverse populations, which allows a broader spectrum to reference when analyzing it. Third, the Open Doors report for 2018 indicated China as the number one place of origin for international students from the previous academic year (Institute of International Education, 2019). Around 33% of international students (363,341 students) came from China, which was nearly a 4% increase from the year before. In the 2012 and 2013 academic year, this university enrolled around 257 international students, about 3.1% of the total population (Rankin & Associates Consulting, 2018). In the 2016 and 2017 academic year, this university enrolled around 264 international students, about 3.4% of the total population. Despite the 8.9% decrease in enrollment between 2012-2017 academic years, the research setting's total population of international students has remained steady. With the increasing body of international students across the nation and at this university, this study may provide insight for administrators about how to improve the retention of this student population by adopting a healthy campus climate that may increase their sense of belonging.

Summary

Chapter one provided essential background information involving a sense of belonging for college students and how certain experiences may change the way students interact on campus. It also introduced the theoretical framework and research method which guides the overall design of the study. Finally, it closed with several limitations for the study and some ways in which the study may be useful to students. Chapter two covers a review of the literature for a sense of belonging among all students, emphasizing some key differences for Chinese international students and local minority students. Chapter three details the methodology and describes the process of collecting and analyzing data. More information about participant population is provided there. Chapter four exhibits the findings from the participant responses. Chapter five holds a discussion and reports suggestions for campus leaders and informs researchers and practitioners on the implications of a sense of belonging for college students.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

As described by Baumeister and Leary (1995), people tend to make connections with those around them, and this human need serves as the premise for a sense of belonging. Researchers have varying names and phrases for sense of belonging throughout the literature. For example, it is also known as social belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), school belonging (Goodenow, 1993), group cohesion (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990), and mattering (Schlossberg, 1989). Despite the many terms, this review of the literature builds on the purpose of this study to explore the experiences of Chinese international students and how those experiences of belonging relate to their perceived classroom performance. This review of the literature also covers the following areas: (a) a background of sense of belonging with an emphasis on how it relates to perceived classroom performance for local students and international students, (b) a continuation of the theoretical framework, and (c) an exploration of the 2018 campus climate report for this university.

A Background of Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging has its roots in psychological research (Goodenow, 1993; Maslow, 1943) and in student integration research for higher education (Tinto, 1975). In his article "A Theory of Human Motivation," Maslow (1943) described belonging as one of the basic needs following safety and biological needs. While he stated there is not necessarily a common theme of basic needs for all cultures, he did suggest people from different backgrounds are more alike than it would first appear. These apparent similarities may provide insight for researchers about the connection of academic success and sense of belonging for all students. Specifically, sense of belonging has been frequently researched and examined to understand integration, persistence,

and academic success (Masika & Jones, 2016; Osterman, 2000). More details on these studies are in the following sections.

Another commonly referenced researcher with foundational works in higher education is Tinto (1975) with his theories on student integration and departure. He asserted students who are unable to integrate themselves into the social atmosphere will likely decide to leave college (Tinto, 1975). At the same time, integration has multiple parts: social integration and academic integration. For example, students may need to balance their time between building relationships with faculty or classmates (social integration) and maintaining grade levels in multiple classes (academic integration). Being integrated into one part of the community and not the other could result in the student choosing to leave the school (Tinto, 1975). Yet, Bean (1985) found a strong social experience supported a better fit at college. This feeling of fitting was critical for some students during the first year of college and allowed them to feel more confident in their college experience overall (Bean, 1985).

After exploring studies about human needs and student integration, Goodenow (1993) researched social support for younger students and defined belonging as a student's "sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class" (p. 25). In her study with middle school children, Goodenow (1993) proposed belonging and support may contribute to motivation for students. Other researchers have mirrored the importance of belonging for motivation in students (Ostermann, 2000). Goodenow (1992) also emphasized the impact of belonging on students' performance and success, especially for students from different backgrounds. Other than feeling connected to other students, faculty relationships had an impact on the student's engagement as well, although it was more noticeable for girls than boys

(Goodenow, 1993). Astin (1984) also described the importance of student involvement with faculty and its implications for guiding students through the college experience.

Building off earlier research in psychology, Baumeister and Leary (1995) identified the need for people to bond with each other in social contexts. In their study, belonging can refer to people feeling connected or related to each other, especially when they feel like they are important to others. This study is covered more later in this chapter in the following theoretical framework section.

Sense of Belonging and Local Students

Reviewing research about the connections between sense of belonging and educational outcomes for U.S. students may help researchers understand the experiences of students in other countries. As a result, studies regarding ethnic minority and majority students in the U.S. informed the researcher.

In a qualitative study, Booker (2016) examined sense of school belonging between students and faculty. In this study, six undergraduate African American women shared their thoughts about the campus community. These students mentioned how important it was to have professors guide them inside and outside of the classroom. Recognition and support from professors in this capacity allowed the students to feel cared for and respected (Booker, 2016). One major challenge indicated by these students was how their comments would often be viewed by others as a viewpoint shared by all African American women. It is possible these kinds of experiences may cause students to think about their state of belonging frequently.

In another study, sense of belonging served as a major part of students' intent to continue at the university (Hausmann et al., 2007). At this large, Mid-Atlantic university, students submitted one of two surveys and were then placed in an intervention group or in a control

group. Students in the intervention group received gifts from the university to show they were remembered and appreciated. Findings showed these students did show an increase in belonging over time, and students who were more involved with friends and family indicated a higher sense of belonging as well (Hausmann et al., 2007). However, this sense of belonging decreased as the year progressed. In this sense, belonging is dynamic and people constantly seek to belong as they change and as the world around them changes (May, 2011). As for differences between ethnically diverse students, the results showed no significant distinctions between their fit at school and their choice to stay (Hausmann et al., 2007). This differs from Luedke's study (2017) which found an interesting dynamic where students of color felt a weak connection to White staff, who only addressed academic events and disregarded personal topics. This led the students to believe genuine relationships were not an option, causing them to pursue staff with diverse backgrounds like their own.

If the diversity of the campus population changes student perception, it may be useful to understand how students perceive this difference. After interviewing over 50 first-year students, Vaccaro and Newman (2016) found a common theme for sense of belonging was people having comfort with each other and the campus environment. In addition, Vaccaro and Newman explored the differences between privileged students and minoritized students, identifying the definitions of sense of belonging from the students themselves. During the interviews, students described how they understood the concept of belonging and experienced life at college. A commonly recurring phrase was *fitting in*. While privileged students did not use the word *safe* or *respect* to describe sense of belonging, many minoritized students did. These differences in the perceptions of campus environment may suggest culturally diverse students understand and experience belonging in unique ways. In that sense, a significant finding from this study is how

belonging means different things to different students and it allows them to be authentically

themselves (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Stated another way, sense of belonging is best realized

when an individual can go through a daily routine without having to think about belonging at all

(May, 2011).

Sense of Belonging and International Students

Studies regarding international students appear to be less commonly researched, and a

review of the literature indicates a need to expand this topic (Glass & Westmont, 2014; Slaten et

al., 2016). While some of the other studies pertained to graduate international students, the focus

of this study is on undergraduate international students.

As more Asian international students choose to attend U.S. universities, Slaten et al.

(2016) intended to find the interactions that most impact sense of belonging on campus. With a

sample of 11 students from a large Midwest university, the researchers conducted interviews to

understand several factors influencing belonging on campus. These 11 participants covered

topics like interpersonal interactions and campus environment, describing their experiences and

perceptions of the surrounding campus (Slaten et al., 2016). Potential barriers included adjusting

to a new culture and learning to communicate in a different language. Some factors that

motivated these students to continue included access to university resources and new academic

opportunities.

Another factor that influences sense of belonging for international students is physical

spaces on campus (Stebleton et al., 2014). These researchers use the term *immigrant* in their

study and discuss the importance of agreeing on a definition to focus on research to support

them. In terms of a college environment, some students may feel more connected to campus if

physical spaces or rooms are dedicated to showcasing and sharing culture differences (Stebleton

et al., 2014). This may be, in part, due to the transition process for immigrant students. More specifically, they may lose a sense of belonging to their homes while also feeling like they do not belong on campus (Stebleton et al., 2014). To support these students socially, findings indicated peer interactions, as opposed to faculty interactions, are more likely to predict a stronger sense of belonging.

Student Engagement and Persistence

Reviewing the literature on local and international students marked several studies which have detailed the importance for sense of belonging in terms of student persistence and retention (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007; Strayhorn 2012, Tinto, 1975). These studies tested the relationship between sense of belonging and persistence for all students. Connections in their findings, such as overall GPA and interactions between first-year students and faculty not necessarily correlating to sense of belonging, may provide insight into the experiences for Chinese international students.

In a quantitative study, Strayhorn (2012) explored the influence of social media websites (e.g., Facebook) on first-year students' sense of belonging and persistence. His survey included a sample of more than 700 students at a large university in the southeast. With responses ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*), one of the variables covered in the survey included sense of belonging, which used the definition from Baumeister and Leary (1995). Findings in this study indicated an inverse connection between social networking sites and sense of belonging. Strayhorn realized it makes sense for students who spend more time online to have fewer opportunities to connect with others on campus. However, Strayhorn also clarified how the results could be interpreted another way. New students who have a low sense of belonging may turn to social media to interact with friends and family. Finally, another finding in this study

showed international students indicated lower levels of persistence and belonging. His suggestion to educators was to discuss these experiences with international students and discover the challenges they face to authorize policies at the university that may support them.

In a study reviewing Tinto's past works on student departure, Hurtado and Carter (1997) tested the experiences of first- and second-year Latino students' sense of belonging to third-year students' belonging. Sense of belonging was defined here as "students' overall perception of social cohesion within the campus environment" (p. 204). Findings in this study showed academic performance did not impact sense of belonging during later years of college for these students. Also, Hurtado and Carter's study found positive outcomes for Latino students who developed working relationships with faculty, whereas a study by Johnson et al. (2007) found students with different ethnic backgrounds showed no major connection to faculty relationships and sense of belonging, except for Latino students having a negative relationship.

Perceived Academic Success

It can be difficult for international students to handle the stress of a university setting without social support (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Glass and Westmont (2014) tested belongingness for these students to determine academic success based on the interactions between individuals from different cultures. Using a sample of both international students and local students, the researchers collected data from the Global Perspective Inventory (GPI), which contains general population information from respondents and a social interaction section. In the GPI, academic success referred to grade point average, while sense of belongingness was constructed from Hurtado and Carter's (1997) definition of being a part of the community on campus. Findings in this study showed discrimination influenced sense of belonging, which in turn impacted academic success (Glass & Westmont, 2014). When a sense

of belonging between culturally diverse students was achieved, grade performance increased for the international students.

Theoretical Framework

Baumeister and Leary (1995) explored a hypothesis about people forming and keeping relationships as a human need. Specifically, the hypothesis stated people have a need to maintain at least some positive and considerable relationships with others. To fulfill this need, people must interact with others in a pleasant way regularly and have a general concern for the well-being of someone else (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In this way, sense of belonging may be interpreted as an indication of bonding with others. In cases where there is a lack of social connection, sense of belonging is reduced and people begin a cycle of behaviors to avoid interacting with others (Twenge et al., 2007). Strayhorn (2018) also described the importance of social connection and how students are "cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers" (p. 4).

This human need to belong even impacts the way humans act, including cognitive and emotional elements (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Osterman, 2000). First, cognition includes the level of intelligence for human beings. Using the belongingness hypothesis, it is expected that people would spend cognitive effort in their relationships. Human thought includes considerable energy about how their relationships with others will be impacted. Second, when the state of belonging changes, the belongingness hypothesis states people should have an emotional response. These responses have a positive or negative affect. For example, meeting someone and falling in love may cause happiness or joy, whereas losing contact with a close friend may cause sadness or stress.

While this desire to belong is important, there are additional stipulations for positive experiences (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). High quality, meaningful relationships drive the belongingness need, and multiple connections with strangers has little impact (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Those who do not satisfy this need to relate with others experience a loneliness which has several detrimental effects. Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggested a lack of belonging may lead to stress, behavioral concerns, and health issues. These outcomes related to a lack of belonging may escalate as students arrive on college campuses.

Impact on Campus Climate

Considering the need to belong may bring positive and negative components, it may be useful to review the impact on campus climate. Since campus climate refers to how students perceive the college environment and how their experiences differ, Rankin and Reason (2005) examined the perception contradictions from students with varying backgrounds. Students appeared to be one of the biggest causes of harassment, so the study suggested educating students about diversity (Rankin & Reason, 2005). Even when White students observed harassment, they still described the campus as friendly and respectful. In a similar study, Harper and Hurtado (2007) described nine themes on campus racial climate, one of which included a lack of space and activities devoted to other cultures. Some of the ethnic minority students identified only one main building as diverse. Asian American participants in the interviews appeared to be content with the campus climate in general, although they also called for more representation of cultural rooms or activities. In her conceptual paper, Gusa (2010) described how White culture on campus can negatively impact the climate through racial undertone within language or tradition. As a result, the state of the campus climate may impact students' persistence (Berger & Milem, 1999).

Further Research

Past studies have focused on local students in higher education. Recent research focuses on ethnic minority students who are U.S. citizens and how racial or ethnic backgrounds affect a sense of belonging (Samura, 2016; Strayhorn, 2018; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Fewer studies have centered on international students, especially Chinese students (Du & Wei, 2015; Slaten et al., 2016). Since the research demonstrates psychological and educational benefits for belonging (Hausmann et al., 2007; Osterman, 2000), there is an opportunity to identify the needs of Chinese international students and support a sense of belonging on college campuses. As a result, recent literature supports this study as it seeks to explore the experiences of Chinese international students and how those experiences of belonging relate to their perceived classroom performance. Leaders and administrators of the campus community may be able to use the latest information about sense of belonging to enrich college experience for all students.

Summary

Chapter two provided a review of the literature on sense of belonging. Further research indicated persistence and academic success are influenced by sense of belonging. A few authors also showed how sense of belonging may differ between students with different backgrounds. While much of the literature detailed the experience for local students, the literature for international students was lacking. As a result, more research centered around sense of belonging for international students may allow scholars to understand this topic from a new perspective. This review also continued to describe the theoretical framework, relating it to the literature and this study. Chapter three details the methodology and describes the process of collecting and analyzing data. More information about participant population is provided there.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was selected as the methodology for this study to examine the experiences of Chinese international students and to interpret a sense of belonging on college campuses. This study explores the experiences of Chinese international students and how those experiences of belonging relate to their perceived classroom performance. This chapter details the methodology in the following sections: (a) research methodology and design, rationale for the method, and research questions, (b) research setting, population and sample, and selection of participants, (c) role of the researcher, instrumentation, and the Institutional Review Board process, and (d) data collection and analysis.

Research Design

A qualitative research design was employed for this research. Qualitative methodology supports the collection of diverse data and allows for several methodologies to understand human experiences (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). This selection was used to understand the experiences of Chinese international students on college campuses. By focusing on a specific area, the qualitative method provides significant detail about human conduct and the phenomenon being studied (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017).

The researcher conducted online interviews with one eligible volunteer participant for each mutually arranged session. Initially, it was anticipated there would be one interview per person. Follow up sessions allowed participants to review transcripts and clarify meaning to gather rich data for analysis as explained later in this chapter. The emergent results using this perspective of research may provide information for campus leaders to consider a sense of belonging for students.

Specifically, this study used a grounded theory methodology. Using grounded theory methods and the constant comparative method of analysis allowed the researcher to develop a theory with the data being collected (Kolb, 2012). Purposeful sampling was used during the selection process to identify Chinese international students based on the review of the literature. Both the qualities and characteristics of the volunteers served as criteria to inform the selection.

Rationale for the Method

Exploring the experiences of belonging for Chinese international students guided the researcher to a qualitative research methodology. Grounded theory methods supported the design of the research by focusing on theory for an emerging process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A recent study by Vaccaro and Newman (2016) explored a sense of belonging for first-year college students also using grounded theory methods. This study intends to use similar methods for purposes of understanding belonging experiences for Chinese international students. The grounded theory approach provides the opportunity to hear the voices of those Chinese international students immersed in the collegiate experience and coping with belonging in a new environment.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to examine the ways in which Chinese international students experience a sense of belonging on college campuses. This study seeks to explore the experiences of Chinese international students and how those experiences of belonging relate to their perceived classroom performance. A sense of belonging literature reviewed in Chapter 2 directed this study to the following research questions:

> RQ1. What are the experiences of Chinese international students when developing a sense of belonging on college campuses?

RQ2. How do undergraduate Chinese international student experiences contribute

to the construction of a sense of belonging and perceived success on college

campuses?

Research Setting

Participants were from a small Midwestern university in Minnesota. According to the

Fast Facts (Winona State University, 2020) information for 2020-2021 academic year, this

university enrolled 6,408 undergraduate students and 716 graduate students. Around 83% of the

student population at the university were White ethnic background and just under 2% were

international students. Number of countries represented was 43, with China being the country

with the highest number of international students at the university. As for gender, almost 68% of

the population were female and 32% were male.

Support available to international students in the research setting includes the

International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS), the Inclusion and Diversity Office, and the

KEAP (knowledge, empowerment, advocacy, and pluralism) center. These resources provide

programs and services to support students with diverse backgrounds in a variety of areas (e.g.,

filing for a visa and creating welcoming spaces). Promoting cultural awareness and encouraging

collaboration between students of all ethnicities is another goal of these resources to empower all

students at this university.

Research Sample

Participants in this sample consisted of five volunteer individuals. Chinese international

undergraduate students attending the university were interviewed for this study with no

restriction to age limit. Three female and two male participants were selected. These selected

participants were Chinese international students who had completed at least one semester at the

university. Also, students from diverse backgrounds were selected to provide a better representation of the population.

Selection of Participants

The International Office sent out an email to all international students on the researcher's behalf. Those who self-identified as Chinese responded and filled out a survey. This survey included gender, educational background in China (e.g., school and city), major of study, and how many semesters the volunteers have completed. This information served as the exclusion criteria for participant selection. The researcher used purposeful sampling to select five participants with diverse backgrounds (e.g., from cities with different sizes or schools with different rankings) and at least one semester completed. Eligible participants were contacted through follow-up emails to request participation in individual interviews.

Role of the Researcher

Qualitative research uses the researcher as the instrument (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). As a result, the researcher in this study conducted interviews and interpreted the responses. The researcher has studied Chinese for two years and has previous experience with diversity and multiculturalism topics in higher education. As part of a small group, the researcher also reviewed the literature and explored the topic of belonging in a general capacity. Participants with a connection to the researcher were not selected so as to avoid conflicts of interest for this study. To reduce and minimize bias, the researcher shared the transcribed data with other researchers for peer debriefing where the participants' names were replaced by pseudonyms. Interview sessions were recorded with an audio device and later transcribed by the researcher. Member checks were conducted with the participants after the themes emerge from the data.

Sources of Data

A semi-structured, open-ended interview guide was used to obtain data for this study. Individual interviews were conducted for each participant. Below is the interview guide with the questions used in each interview.

Semi-Structured, Open-Ended Interview Guide

1. What does the phrase "sense of belonging" mean to you?

2. Please tell me about two or three instances in your life where you felt you belonged.

3. What are some examples where you felt you did not belong?

4. When you think about the experience you have had at [university name], how do you think feelings of belonging or not belonging related to your classroom performance?

5. Describe the students at [university name] in three words.

6. Please give me three words to describe the faculty at [university name].

7. What can a professor do to make you feel a sense of belonging in their class?

8. What kind of interactions do you want to have with classmates and other students?

9. What is something you wish the university would do to make you feel more comfortable or valued?

10. What are some additional comments you would like to make regarding belonging on the [university name] college campus?

Institutional Review Board (IRB) Process

By reviewing the content for responsible conduct in research with human subjects and completing the associated online quiz, the researcher complied with all IRB requirements. Informed consent was provided to participants in English. When potential participants filled out the initial survey for the interview selection process, instructions indicated they were not

required to fill out all sections and they could withdraw from the survey at any time before submission. Responses were received on a secure computer and any identifying information about participants from these surveys was deleted after the selection process.

Data Collection

In this study, data were collected through online interviews using a semi-structured, open-ended interview guide. These sessions were audio recorded and later transcribed into a word processing document by the researcher. These documents were exported to PDF files for encryption, and then the text documents were deleted. Confidentiality of the participants was maintained, and the recordings will be saved on a password-protected hard drive for one year and destroyed thereafter.

Participants were assigned pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality. Each interview lasted under 30 minutes. In addition, interviews were conducted in English by the researcher, but each participant had access to a bilingual interpreter for possible clarification. The Chinese Society Advisor was present in all interviews. These interviews began by briefly confirming the background and schooling experience of participants and then moved forward by focusing on their experiences with sense of belonging on campus based on the semi-structured, open-ended interview guide.

Triangulation

Multiple interview participants were compared for emerging themes. Observations were used to provide more information. In addition, journal articles with similar studies regarding international populations were included for reference. Specifically, theories proposed by other researchers were applied to this study to understand the data from multiple perspectives. Using theory triangulation, Berry's (1997) theory of acculturation and the Culturally Engaging Campus

Environments (CECE) model of Museus et al. (2017) may be applied to understand the data in new ways.

Data Analysis

Analyzing the data came in three phases: initial, axial, and theoretical (Charmaz, 2006). In the initial phase, interviews were covered from beginning to end to develop a direction for upcoming categories. This open approach allowed the researcher to find relevant categories for the study and determine if more information was required (Charmaz, 2006). In the axial phase, important data was connected to form the most relevant categories. This step indicated the participant's understanding of and experience with sense of belonging. In the theoretical phase, notable categories were linked to interpret and describe sense of belonging for Chinese international students. Data were analyzed to find themes leading to an emerging or existing theory. Research questions listed above were answered with the data from these interviews.

To analyze the interview transcripts, constant comparative method was used (Charmaz, 2006). By reading and considering key points to code, the researcher read the complete transcript. Following the identification, codes were considered for possible themes (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). These themes were used to create a narrative from the experiences of the Chinese international students. Emerging information involving sense of belonging was considered for developing a theory or model. Documents from interviews were stored on a password-protected laptop, only accessible to the researcher. Individual documents were encrypted.

Summary

Chapter three provided detailed information about the design and methodology used in this qualitative study. It also provided information about the population and sample of

participants for the interview sessions. In addition, it covered some ethical considerations and the

IRB process. Finally, this study provided information regarding data collection and data analysis.

Chapter four displays the findings from the participant responses. Chapter five includes

recommendations for campus leaders and provides implications for college students regarding

sense of belonging.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

A review of the problem statement and a review of the research design is presented first. Following these reviews is a description of how the data was analyzed. Also, more details are provided about participants. Findings for this chapter are described in the last section. A discussion of the results is included in the following chapter.

This study used a qualitative approach to explore the experiences of Chinese international students and how those experiences of belonging relate to their perceived classroom performance. Two research questions were used to guide the data analysis in this study:

RQ1. What are the experiences of Chinese international students when developing a sense of belonging on college campuses?

RQ2. How do undergraduate Chinese international student experiences contribute to the construction of a sense of belonging and perceived success on college campuses?

Review of the Problem Statement

As described in the first chapter, few studies have focused on international students, especially Chinese students (Du & Wei, 2015; Slaten et al., 2016). Since the research demonstrates psychological and educational benefits for belonging (Hausmann et al., 2007; Osterman, 2000), there is an opportunity to identify the needs of Chinese international students and support a sense of belonging on college campuses.

Review of the Research Design

A qualitative research design was employed for this research. This design was used to examine the experiences of Chinese international students on college campuses. Specifically, this

study used a grounded theory methodology. Purposeful sampling was used during the selection process to identify Chinese international students based on the review of the literature. Both the qualities and characteristics of the volunteers served as criteria to inform the selection.

The International Office sent out an email to all international students on the researcher's behalf. Those who self-identified as Chinese responded and filled out a survey. This survey included gender, educational background in China (e.g., school and city), major of study, and how many semesters the volunteers have completed. This information served as the exclusion criteria for participant selection. The researcher used purposeful sampling to select five participants with diverse backgrounds (e.g., from cities with different sizes or schools with different rankings) and at least one semester completed. Eligible participants were contacted through follow-up emails to request participation in individual interviews.

Description of Sample

Participants included five undergraduate Chinese international students. Three of the five participants (60%) attended a university in China before arriving to this university. One was a Class A Double First-Class university (using a new ranking system in China) with over 50,000 students and two were independent universities with over 21,000 students. Majors represented in the sample were business administration, finance, English literature, accounting, and mathematics. These five participants represented four different provinces of China (identified by high school attendance). One participant (20%) attended high school in northern China, three (60%) in central China, and one (20%) from western China. As for class level, one participant (20%) was a freshman, one (20%) was a junior, and three (60%) were seniors. Please see Table 1 detailing pseudonyms and other attributes.

Table 1

Student Participants

Student	Level	Major
Student 1	Senior	Business administration
Student 2	Junior	Finance
Student 3	Freshman	English literature
Student 4	Senior	Accounting
Student 5	Senior	Math

Data Analysis

Analyzing the data came in three phases: initial, axial, and theoretical (Charmaz, 2006). In the initial phase, interviews were reviewed to develop a direction for upcoming categories. In the axial phase, important data were connected to form the most relevant categories. In the theoretical phase, notable categories were linked to understand and describe sense of belonging for Chinese international students. Data were analyzed to find themes leading to an emerging or existing theory. Research questions listed above were answered with the data from these interviews for each participant.

To analyze the interview transcripts, constant comparative method was used (Charmaz, 2006). By reading and considering key points to code, the researcher read the complete transcript. Following the identification, codes were considered for possible themes (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). These themes were used to create a narrative from the experiences of the Chinese international students. Emerging information involving sense of belonging was considered for developing a theory or model.

To identify emerging themes, each interview question was reviewed and correlated to a research question. Interview questions, prompts, and responses from the five participants are provided in the following section.

Question 1: What Does the Phrase "Sense of Belonging" Mean to You?

Three of the five participants identified sense of belonging as a feeling of home and family. Similarly, three of the five participants suggested a sense of belonging means being in a familiar environment. All participants discussed belonging as a part of being accepted by others, whether it was by friends, family, or the community. Student 5 summed it up as, "It could be a place where your family is at, a place where you had good memories at, or a place where you liked and fit in." Home, acceptance, and comfort were common words used to respond to this question.

Question 2: Please Tell Me About Two or Three Instances in Your Life Where You Felt You Belonged.

Four of the five participants described a specific location when talking about times where they felt they belonged. Three of the participants mentioned home specifically, while one participant mentioned the city of this university, describing a fondness for the natural environment. Two participants mentioned food made them feel belonging, as one participant talked about how it brought up memories of a mother's cooking. In addition, three participants talked about university events. For example, Student 1 talked about positive associations with the Chinese Moon Festival and Student 4 praised the welcome orientation week for new students. Home, social support, and student events were common topics of discussion.

Question 3: What Are Some Examples Where You Felt You Did Not Belong?

Three participants discussed homesickness as examples of feeling like they did not belong. One participant talked about a pre-college experience of moving from a hometown, while the other two participants described missing home after coming to college. Also, a lack of familiarity with surroundings and people was discussed by two participants. Due to language barriers and cultural differences, three participants expressed experiences of social isolation. Student 4 responded with a memory of racism in the campus dorms saying, "I felt so isolated at that time, and I didn't even have the courage to defend my right." One participant reported some policies were the reason for a lack of belonging. Homesickness, social isolation, and discrimination were discussed frequently for this question.

Question 4: When You Think About the Experience You Have Had at [University Name], How Do You Think Feelings of Belonging or Not Belonging Related to Your Classroom Performance?

Two of the five participants reported a positive influence between sense of belonging and classroom performance. Both of these participants discussed being more interested in studying when they felt they belong. One of the two mentioned the influence of professors saying, "I was inspired by one of my mathematics professors, which was why I switched from a [liberal art major]. I enjoyed my learning experience in the math department and worked a lot harder." Two of the participants had mixed feelings about the connection between belonging and classroom performance. One participant noted an experience of struggling with school work even with helpful professors, while the other participant reported a strong education background and being able to work through most situations. Student 2 responded, "It does make me happier when the environment is friendly and enjoyable, but not too much influence on my school work." One

participant said there was not much of an impact on classroom performance. Student 4 reported, "I was always able to focus on my school work despite the surroundings. I enjoyed the experience here, but I don't think it's related to how I did in school."

Question 5: Describe the Students at [University Name] in Three Words.

Four out of the five participants described the students at this university as "nice" or "friendly." Four out of the five participants also detailed the students as "enthusiastic" or "energetic." Three participants also described students as "helpful" or "accommodating."

Question 6: Please Give Me Three Words to Describe the Faculty at [University Name].

Four out of the five participants described faculty as "nice" or "friendly." Three of the participants used the words "helpful" or "reachable" to describe them. Two participants reported faculty as "professional" or "industrious."

Question 7: What Can a Professor Do to Make You Feel a Sense of Belonging in Their Class?

Three participants discussed how a closeness to professors may help them feel belonging in the classroom. Student 5 concluded, "Know my name, care about my school work, and be able and willing to help with my questions. Student 4 added by saying, "Commending my public illustration makes me feel sense of belonging." One participant reported only Chinese professors can give a sense of belonging in the classroom. Language and cultural awareness were cited as the reason.

Question 8: What Kind of Interactions Do You Want to Have With Classmates and Other Students?

Four of the five participants described playing a game or having fun with other students as a desired interaction. Also, four participants mentioned doing school work or group projects

with classmates. Two participants mentioned a desire for mutual respect. One participant talked about learning culture from each other.

Question 9: What is Something You Wish the University Would Do to Make You Feel More Comfortable or Valued?

Three of the five participants talked about university events or student organizations. Two participants indicated they would like to see more job opportunities and scholarships to help international students with their leadership. Also, two participants talked about hoping for more respect for international students.

Question 10: What Are Some Additional Comments You Would Like to Make Regarding Belonging on the [University Name] College Campus?

Four out of the five participants described the university as a great place. Two participants said it was a safe place. Student 4 made some recommendations saying, "I wish the university could keep an open mind for accepting more international students and take in various cultures."

Interview questions 1, 2, and 3 were synthesized to answer research question 1, "What are the experiences of Chinese international students when developing a sense of belonging on college campuses?"

1. What does the phrase "sense of belonging" mean to you?

2. Please tell me about two or three instances in your life where you felt you belonged.

3. What are some examples where you felt you did not belong?

Interview questions 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 were synthesized to answer research question 2, "How do undergraduate Chinese international student experiences contribute to the construction of a sense of belonging and perceived success on college campuses?"

4. When you think about the experience you have had at [university name], how do you think feelings of belong or not belonging related to your classroom performance?

5. Describe the students at [university name] in three words.

6. Please give me three words to describe the faculty at [university name].

7. What can a professor do to make you feel a sense of belonging in their class?

8. What kind of interactions do you want to have with classmates and other students?

9. What is something you wish the university would do to make you feel more comfortable or valued?

10. What are some additional comments you would like to make regarding belonging on the [university name] college campus?

Summary

Chapter four provided a brief review of the problem statement and the research design. Data analysis was covered to describe how information was coded and analyzed for each research question. Following that was a section detailing the participants and information relevant to the study. Finally, findings were presented with direct responses to interview questions for each student. Chapter five focuses on the discussion and conclusions drawn from the findings, as well as leadership implications and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Using the findings from the previous chapter, both research questions are discussed to display meaning. Conclusions are provided through the interpreted meaning. These findings are connected back to the theoretical framework used for this research study. In addition, implications for leadership are addressed and suggestions for campus leaders are covered. Recommendations for future research are also expressed.

This study used a qualitative approach to explore the experiences of Chinese international students and how those experiences of belonging relate to their perceived classroom performance. Two research questions were used to guide this study:

RQ1. What are the experiences of Chinese international students when developing a sense of belonging on college campuses?

RQ2. How do undergraduate Chinese international student experiences contribute to the construction of a sense of belonging and perceived success on college campuses?

Theoretical coding provided five themes gathered from these interviews. These themes represent several ways in which the participants understood and recognized sense of belonging, including relationships, locations, and background.

Discussion

Each participant focused on elements of belonging that were relevant and important to them. As a result, five themes became apparent through the interviewing process. These themes have varying levels of meaning for each participant, and each one is presented and discussed in the following sections.

Data from the interviews are presented by emerging themes. Quotations are used to showcase more specific examples of these themes from each participant. During these individual interviews, students identified their understanding of sense of belonging and talked about interactions they have had and would like to have with other students and faculty.

Interview questions 1, 2, and 3, were synthesized to answer research question 1, "What are the experiences of Chinese international students when developing a sense of belonging on college campuses?" Three themes emerged from these interviews: (a) social support, (b) homesickness, and (c) social isolation.

Social Support

All five participants mentioned social support when discussing sense of belonging. This included interactions with their friends, parents, classmates, or advisors. For example, Student 1 talked about meeting up with Chinese friends to help him feel like he belonged on campus. In addition, Student 5 indicated he would like to be friends with some of his classmates and other students on campus. Several participants talked about meeting up with Chinese friends, but some even mentioned meeting up with classmates.

One participant specifically discussed her interactions with an advisor. According to Student 4, "My advisor gave me many guidelines which helped me overcome some obstacles for my studies and made me feel like I belonged." She also described a time during her junior year while she was preparing for an exam and received an email from her advisor, who encouraged and praised some work she had done. Student 4 further noted on this act from her advisor saying, "I felt that I was not alone, even though the schoolwork sometimes made me feel stressed."

All five participants discussed faculty and the various ways they shape their sense of belonging on campus. Three participants mentioned accessibility and approachability in their

interviews. Most participants agreed about the importance of being able to reach out to their professors when they needed them, whether it was during class or during office hours. Participants in this study also indicated a positive relationship with their professors. Student 5 described how his professors were almost like family, showing him support and guidance when he needed it. Student 3 added how she expects them to "treat every student fairly," which she believes is one of the best ways to make her feel sense of belonging in the classroom. However, Student 2 had a slightly different perspective as she stated, "Only a Chinese professor can give me sense of belonging in the class because they know how we feel and hard it is to study using the second language." This reflects Luedke's study (2017) which found students of color felt a weak connection to White staff and instead chose to connect with staff who had diverse backgrounds like their own.

Standing out as one of the most common themes, all five students discussed social support in some capacity. Some students talked about friends and family, while other students mentioned classmates, faculty, or advisors. As Chinese international students, social support was both a crucial aspect of college life and a challenge several of them had not yet overcome. One finding by Henfield, Woo, Lin, and Rausch (2014) for Asian American honors students showed social support to be a typical (applying to half or more of the cases) resource for students. Seeking support as a resource from others on campus makes sense for most college students, but international students have some additional obstacles. A different culture, language, and background make it difficult for these students to connect with others on campus (Yan, 2017). As a result, they turn to those with similar backgrounds and experiences: friends and family. This decision only makes it more difficult for international students to learn the language and meet new people. Yan (2017) identified some common stressors for Chinese students, some of which

are included in this study, including academic pressure, language barrier, and homesickness and loneliness.

Although some Chinese international students have strong family ties and support systems (Zhang, 1992), the students in this study mentioned a desire to become friends with classmates and other students on campus. Most of them talked about playing games, discussing coursework, or having mutual respect with their peers. Samura (2016) discussed how some students would change themselves or alter their lifestyles in social settings to find a way to fit in. This balance between adapting to social situations on campus and maintaining a self-identity is another challenge for international students.

In addition to friends, family, and classmates, students may turn to faculty or advisors for social support to increase sense of belonging. Museus et al. (2017) listed this type of interaction as holistic support, where students have a faculty or staff member who can provide support in a number of ways and assist the student with any questions or concerns. Booker (2016) identified the importance of this relationship between students and faculty, stating the students considered their professors to be one of the most impactful reasons for remaining at the school. These interactions are important for students as their academic success and future job opportunities may be impacted as a result. In addition, students likely feel this support differs from peer or family as it often takes a more professional angle. Faculty and advisors may help shape the path of international students and lead them to the success they seek.

Homesickness

When asked to describe how they understood sense of belonging and what it means to them, four participants talked about physical environments or locations. In this study, home was the most commonly used phrase, which was usually a personal meaning related to where each

participant was born or raised. Student 1 noted, "Home is the sense of belonging. It really happens because of culture shock and homesickness." When asked about a time where he felt like he did not belong, Student 1 responded, "When I just arrived in the U.S., I lacked English skills. Can't even read, talk, or understand in English. I remembered the first night I slept. It was tough and I missed home." When he talked about his second year after summer break, he mentioned how he did not really want to leave home, even though he considers this university to be a great place.

Student 2 also mentioned home, saying she felt a sense of belonging when she visited places that looked similar to her hometown. She took the meaning one step further when she described how some areas on campus make her feel safe: "[University name] is a safe place. That also helps me feel like I was staying in China." This connection to home was also something Student 3 discussed saying, "I like the natural environment in [city of university]." Student 5 agreed with these statements and amplified it by discussing a time he felt like he belonged stating this:

> My hometown where I was born. It contains all the good memories of my childhood. I always belong there no matter where I am at right now. The second instance in my life where I felt I belonged must be [university name]. I found [university name] is my second hometown in the U.S. I had my best college experiences there, as well as my first impression of the U.S., which was awesome.

> This study recognizes homesickness as a yearning for well-known environments and people, which may occasionally cause symptoms of depression (Van Tilburg, Vingerhoets, & Van Heck, 1996). Effects may include loss, lifestyle changes, or less control for students experiencing homesickness.

While comparing international students and American students, Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) found international students discussed a greater sense of homesickness. Individual level of English skills also played a role in how much a student missed home. Likewise, students in this study who indicated language issues were also more likely to mention homesickness.

When considering the homesickness for some of these Chinese students, it may also be useful to consider the physical environments or locations on or around campus. As describing part of their experience for sense of belonging, students in this study talked about being home in China or being at some location in the city. Azevedo et al. (2018) found many students also mentioned a physical environment for belonging, although many instances included buildings or locations on campus itself. Participants for this study did not mention specific buildings on campus. However, one important area for socialization for college students involves their living arrangements. Yao (2016) discussed how most Chinese participants who had American roommates showed a lower sense of belonging. While this study did not focus on residence halls, Johnson et al. (2007) found a positive association between living on campus and sense of belonging for first-year students. International students may benefit from this connection to support their adjustment to campus life and mitigate feelings of homesickness or loneliness.

Social Isolation

Student 4 gave an example of a time where she felt she did not belong on campus:

I did have some discomforting memories that made me feel like I didn't belong. It was related to racism I think. I lived on campus my freshman year, and I had three roommates. They were all White girls. Two of them majored in elementary education and one of them studied nursing. We lived in a single-room dorm and shared one bathroom. Because of the language barrier and culture difference, I rarely talked with them. I wasn't

a social person, of course. I always kept my door closed. One night when I got back from the library, I saw a note on my door that said "Chinese pussy." I didn't know who did that, but I felt so isolated at that time, and I didn't even have the courage to defend my right.

She went on to say this university's students in general were friendly, but instances like her story may happen and should not be ignored. Other participants did not explicitly mention racism, but they mentioned how they would like to see more respect for international students. Student 1 talked about having respect between students when working together.

As some students discussed hoping to see more respect for international students, other participants communicated about experiencing or feeling moments of social isolation. Student 2 mentioned, "I know that I study in the U.S. only for study, so I did not expect my classmates and other students to do interaction for me." Her way of understanding sense of belonging strongly involved her home and her parents, so she did not even believe finding belonging would be possible with that mindset. Student 4 and Student 1 also experienced social isolation as they learned to handle a new language and a new perspective on campus life.

Findings in the previous chapter, and from other studies (Pan & Wong, 2011; Yan, 2017), indicate students from backgrounds of Asian culture have barriers adjusting to college life at a new campus, potentially leading to stress and social isolation (Yao, 2016). In addition, forms of discrimination or racism appear to impact sense of belonging for students on campus, and international students have the additional challenges mentioned earlier. In turn, social isolation becomes more common for these students. Respondents on the campus climate survey indicated racism is still a problem at this university and considered it a reason to leave the school (Rankin & Associates Consulting, 2018). Participants in this study briefly mentioned or referred to

similar scenarios. Some students touched on what they felt was a lack of respect for international students. According to Lee and Rice (2007), social isolation is more likely to occur for international students due to their lifestyle differences.

Interview questions 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 were synthesized to answer research question 2, "How do undergraduate Chinese international student experiences contribute to the construction of a sense of belonging and perceived success on college campuses?" Two themes emerged from these interviews: (a) student organizations and (b) cultural familiarity and cultural integration.

Student Organizations

Several participants mentioned how welcoming it was to be a part of a student organization or attend an event hosted by a student organization. Student 4 described her experience during one of her first weeks on campus as being welcoming. Due to this, she believed new students from other countries have a great opportunity to feel like they belong. Sharing experiences with other students and enjoying activities together made her feel more connected to other students.

Two participants described a similar experience with how events held by the Chinese Club helped them belong. For example, the Chinese Moon Festival was one event that continued to be mentioned in the interviews. Student 1 was actively involved in the Chinese Club events, and he helped set up various activities throughout the year, including the Chinese Moon Festival. This involvement in a student organization was also directly tied to familiar cultural ties that he liked to share with other students. Student 2 also mentioned the Chinese Moon Festival saying, "I think our university did very well on the activity part. They let students hold Chinese New Year, the Moon Festival. That can help us to find a sense of belonging."

Participants in this study pointed to student organizations or clubs as a significant indicator of belonging. Similar to social support, these organizations provide students with opportunities to meet like-minded individuals with similar interest and backgrounds. For several participants, they served as a unique event to share their culture with others on campus. Again, Samura (2016) described using student organizations for students to reposition themselves socially, where they can find a place and a group of people to fit in. However, these organizations are officially sanctioned by the university and serve as a social platform on a much larger scale than the social support of any individual. Of course, as mentioned in the last chapter, most students talked about the positive influence of the Chinese Club and the Chinese Moon Festival. These organizations and the events they hold have made a tremendous impact on the students in this study and possibly even the Chinese community on campus in general.

Several students indicated the positive effect this had on their perceived academic success. Azevedo, Howell, Mora, Thomas, and Tovar (2018) found not only did student organizations help participants stay engaged, but they also impacted their sense of belonging. Perceived academic success was more enthusiastic for those who discussed having a sense of belonging through social support and student organizations. In addition, these organizations served as a method to demonstrate and share Chinese culture, as well as allow Chinese students to celebrate the events, holidays, and beliefs as if they were back home in China.

Cultural Familiarity and Cultural Integration

Several students mentioned how they would like more people on campus to understand their backgrounds to feel like they belong. These descriptions represent cultural familiarity, which is the opportunity to be understood and recognized by others regarding culture. When Student 2 talked about the many events that are held on campus, she was describing her

experience of cultural familiarity and acceptance. Celebrating Chinese Moon Festival allowed these students to meet new people who shared an interest in Chinese culture, language, or history. At the same time, Student 1 spoke about hoping to see more respect for international students. His experiences suggested he may have come across more classmates and professors who knew little of his Chinese background. However, Student 5 expressed the importance of reaching out to others on campus. Being proactive about sharing his background appeared to be an effective way to enhance cultural familiarity on campus.

Taking it a step further, cultural integration is a way for the university and its faculty to introduce culturally diverse elements into campus life or the classroom. These actions help international students understand information or interact with others in a way more comfortable to them. In this sense, events Student 2 mentioned, like the Moon Festival, play a double role in spreading both cultural familiarity and integration. Student 4 added to this saying, "I wish the university would provide more job opportunities and scholarships to help international students improve their leadership." In her view, creating more opportunities for international students allows them to become more involved and more included. Chinese international students can share their knowledge and their unique perspectives in leadership roles, providing a wide range of ideas and outlooks. Student 4 continued by describing some areas she would like to see improved regarding belonging on campus: "I wish the university could keep an open mind for accepting more international students and take in various cultures. In my opinion, increasing the ratio of diversity faculty might help more students find their sense of belonging." Topics concerning cultural familiarity and cultural integration took on different forms for each student, but the emphasis on improving belonging was shared and evident.

Participants in this study indicated how familiarity with their culture and background helps them have a sense of belonging. One of the indicators for a culturally engaging campus environment in the study by Museus et al. (2017) was *cultural familiarity*, which is where students feel their backgrounds are understood by professors and students. This includes finding and interacting with people on campus who have similar backgrounds and finding a space to connect with those people. While some of the students mentioned an obvious connection to Chinese faculty, it appears this kind of familiarity must extend beyond other Chinese natives. Students who can reach out to their professors and believe they are understood and respected often indicated they felt a closer connection to the university. Professors who are friendly, kind, and reachable appear to make a big difference for students from different backgrounds. Besides these characteristics, professors could simply interact with students to learn more about these backgrounds if they are not already aware. Of course, this kind of extra attention to detail is only made possible when Chinese students are willing and capable of reaching out to their professors.

A similar idea to familiarity was integration, and participants indicated how important it was to have elements of their background joined with the rest of the community as opposed to having to abandon their backgrounds to fit in. Tinto's (1994) model of integration is one of the most commonly referenced works for belonging and retention. In his model, it is more likely for students to graduate if they are more involved, or integrated, into the various social and educational aspects of college. Not only do some authors (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus et al., 2017) suggest an alternative method for understanding belonging through integration, but one study (Foster et al., 2012) has indicated friendship was often mentioned as a reason for staying at college even while surveys showed it was less valued than other elements. Berry (1997) discussed the importance of the dominant group to be accepting of the non-dominant group in

order to have successful integration. Museus et al. (2017) advocated for a new understanding of the concept as *cultural integration*, where cultural elements are injected into the campus life to acknowledge and uplift students from different backgrounds.

Having a piece of their culture available in some form on campus was a common discussion among the Chinese international students who were interviewed. Traditional integration by separating from previous social ties appeared to be much more challenging for these students than as would be expected for local students. Language barriers, cultural differences, and unfamiliar experiences often kept many students from forming relationships with students and faculty in the first place. New opportunities to have their cultural backgrounds present in the classroom or on campus in some form seemed to excite and motivate these students. Such possibilities propelled the students to take the initial steps of connecting with others at the university. In that sense, cultural integration served as a gateway to better opportunities for these students to meet more people, discover the town, and feel like they belong in a place that is clearly far away from home.

Conclusions

Answers to research question 1, "What are the experiences of Chinese international students when developing a sense of belonging on college campuses?" resulted in three types of experiences: social support, homesickness, and social isolation. First, social support is important for international students, but some obstacles and stressors make it more difficult to belong. Second, international students appear to experience more homesickness, which may influence sense of belonging. Third, students with an Asian culture have barriers adjusting to college life at a new campus, potentially leading to stress and social isolation.

Answers to research question 2, "How do undergraduate Chinese international student experiences contribute to the construction of a sense of belonging and perceived success on college campuses?" resulted in two types of situations: student organizations and cultural familiarity and integration. First, student organizations help students feel like they belong and keep them engaged. Second, cultural familiarity and integration help students have a sense of belonging.

Regarding the connection between belonging and perceived success, student experiences of belonging may not necessarily influence perceived success on college campuses without additional external factors. Responses from interview question four suggested that although an individual's experiences could influence the construction of a sense of belonging, they may not influence one's perceived success. Three participants mentioned their educational background, learning habits, and self-motivation played an important role in their school performance despite a positive or negative sense of belonging.

Theoretical Connection

Chapter two covered a hypothesis of human motivation from Baumeister and Leary (1995) about people forming and keeping relationships as a human need. This need to belong was the framework guiding this study. Since Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggested a lack of belonging may lead to stress, behavioral concerns, and health issues, it was important to consider the experiences of college students on campus. Baumeister and Leary concluded belonging is a primary human motivation, in which people constantly seek positive relationships with each other. How sense of belonging in this study connects to the human motivation in this theory is discussed next.

Participants talked about the importance of their relationships with friends, family, and advisors. These connections with other people are often long-lasting, positive relationships which help students feel belonging. Furthermore, the desire for belonging stems from giving and receiving concern. People want to contribute to others' well-being, as well as having others consider their own. Such an interaction is evident between family and friends, but it may be more difficult to understand for the connection of students to faculty and staff. Participants in this study also appeared to have this need to belong, but it did not necessarily include members of the campus community. Some social connections were formed before coming to college, which resulted in the common theme of homesickness among participants. One participant even correlated belonging with home so strongly that she did not see belonging anywhere else to be possible. However, that mentality created opportunities to be uncomfortable, to meet new people, and to learn a new culture. This is similar to a Rankin and Reason (2005) finding where students from different backgrounds had contrasting perceptions of the campus climate. Students' beliefs and interpretations of their surroundings may shape their attitudes of belonging.

Leadership Implications

This study's findings may be useful for university leaders who oversee international students, researchers working with diversity and racial climate, and directors of housing and resident life on campus. As some additional challenges became apparent for international students, university leaders may find it prudent to create an open and welcoming environment for international students. This added support may enhance the student experience and encourage opportunities for students to encounter moments of belonging on campus. Implications covered in the following section are practical. Recommendations for leaders include the following areas: enable students to experience positive social arrangements, initiate pathways for language

development and communication, promote diversity and inclusiveness for all students on campus.

Enable students to experience positive social arrangements. Findings indicated some international students experience social isolation and feelings of homesickness. This study proposes three steps to support students during the learning process of adjusting to college life in a new country. First, inform incoming students about the challenges of living away from home. Reasonable expectations about campus life in their target city may help students adapt to unfamiliar situations and lower the shock during the transition. Second, prepare training sessions and support groups for international students to utilize during their time on campus. Allowing students to ask questions in a controlled environment may reduce stress and anxiety while encouraging them to reach out when they are uncomfortable with a situation. Developing communication skills and practicing classroom fundamentals can ease students into unknown social scenarios. Third, encouraging and providing leadership roles and opportunities for international students empowers them to improve situations for themselves and their peers. It also serves as another method of integration, engagement, and involvement in community events and activities.

Initiate pathways for language development and communication. This study's findings illustrated communication challenges for international students mainly due to language barriers. This communication obstacle might lead to social isolation and increased anxiety. Developing a method for these students to practice and improve their English language skills and interpersonal skills may create opportunities for social connection and belonging.

Promote diversity and inclusiveness for all students on campus. Students and professors alike contribute to the experiences that shape a sense of belonging for international

students. Classrooms and event buildings on campus can serve as a repository for cultural awareness and understanding. At the same time, cultural acceptance and diversity must extend beyond these occasional events or particular buildings. Awareness and recognition should be truly integrated into the very pulse of the campus community. University leaders, administrators, and professors can make this possible by shaping academic curriculum in way that is understood and valued by all students.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study recommends three topics for future research when examining sense of belonging and academic success for international students. First, this study captured the sense of belonging for students at one moment in time to explore their experiences up to that point. As May (2011) suggested, sense of belonging can change over time as students gain new experiences. Future studies may consider looking at sense of belonging as it develops and changes over time for each student. Such a study may give a more accurate representation of how college experiences influence belonging as the semesters progress.

Second, this study conducted interviews using a small sample size at a small, Midwestern university. Expanding this research to universities with a larger population of students with more diverse backgrounds may provide unique experiences that offer new ways to understand the connection between belonging and a campus climate.

Third, this study used qualitative methods to understand student experiences. Using some quantitative instruments to determine level of belonging and how it impacts actual GPA, or some other measurable performance, could contribute to the research by showing clear connections between student experiences and academic success.

Summary

Chapter five discussed common themes from the findings and inferred what this might mean for the student population. Themes for student experiences included social support, homesickness, and social isolation. These experiences contributed to belonging through student organizations and cultural familiarity and integration. Connections between belonging and perceived success were evident through educational background, learning habits, self-motivation, and external factors. This chapter also connected the theoretical framework and the findings to understand the results in a way that links to other studies. Finally, it closed with implications for leadership and recommendations for future research, which included monitoring the development of belonging over time, expanding the research to a larger and more diverse population, and utilizing quantitative instruments to determine level of belonging and how it impacts a measurable performance.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

QUALTRICS SURVEY

11. Choose a gender that best describes you
    a. Male
    b. Female
    c. Other
    d. Prefer not to answer
12. Name of the city where you attended high school
    a. [enter name of city]
13. Name of the university you attended in China
    a. [enter name of university]
    b. Have not attended university in China
14. Major of study at WSU
    a. [enter major]
15. Number of semesters completed at WSU
    a. [enter number of semesters]

APPENDIX B

COMMUNICATION WITH PARTICIPANTS

Recruitment Email Message (Pre-survey)
Hello,

My name is Kurt Bolstad, and I'm a graduate student here at WSU. I'm currently doing research to examine a sense of belonging (归属感) for Chinese international students at WSU. In particular, this study will explore the experiences of Chinese students and how their belonging impacts perceived academic success. As a result, the goal of this study is to provide suggestions for university leaders in order to improve the overall campus experience for students.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please fill out this brief survey about your background. It should take less than five minutes. [LINK] If you agree to participate, responding to the survey questions constitutes your consent. Participation is voluntary and you may stop participating at any time.

Selected participants will receive a second email to cover informed consent and to schedule an interview. This interview is expected to last around 20-30 minutes. Your interview will be confidential and will not be associated with your identifying information. Thank you for your consideration.

Thank you,
Kurt Bolstad

Participant Selection Email Message Follow-up (Post-survey)
Hello,

You have been selected to participate in an interview for the study regarding sense of belonging for Chinese students at WSU. Please read the attached document about informed consent. Once you have read and signed this document, we can schedule a time to meet for an interview. Thank you.

Thank you,
Kurt Bolstad

Reminder Email Message
Hello,

This is a reminder that you have scheduled an interview for [TIME] on [DATE]. The interview will take place at [LOCATION]. You will be interviewing with one researcher and one interpreter. If you can no longer attend your interview, please respond to this message.

Thank you,
Kurt Bolstad

APPENDIX C

SEMI-STRUCTURED, OPEN-ENDED INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. What does the phrase "sense of belonging" mean to you?
2. Please tell me about two or three instances in your life where you felt you belonged.
3. What are some examples where you felt you did not belong?
4. When you think about the experience you have had at WSU, how do you think feelings of belonging or not belonging related to your classroom performance?
5. Describe the students at WSU in three words.
6. Please give me three words to describe the faculty at WSU.
7. What can a professor do to make you feel a sense of belonging in their class?
8. What kind of interactions do you want to have with classmates and other students?
9. What is something you wish the university would do to make you feel more comfortable or valued?
10. What are some additional comments you would like to make regarding belonging on the WSU college campus?