Research Article

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Sense of Belonging as a Predictor of Intentions to Drop Out Among Black and White Distance Learning Students at a South African University

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Abstract: Sense of belonging plays an essential role in the retention and success of distance learning students. This study investigated the influence of a sense of belonging on the intentions to drop out among black and white distance learning students at a university in South Africa. A total of 831 participants were surveyed and constituted the sample of this study. The study was conducted using a quantitative research approach. The independent samples t-test results showed that there are racial differences in students’ perceived sense of belonging towards the university, with black students ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 0.84$) scoring significantly higher on the sense of belonging compared to white students ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 0.79$). Additionally, multiple linear regression analysis results showed that a sense of belonging significantly predicts intentions to drop out of university among black and white students. The results suggest that minority students in distance learning institutions should be supported to enhance their sense of belonging towards their learning environment. Furthermore, the results indicate that distance learning institutions should consider multiple strategies to foster a sense of belonging among students and improve the rates of retention.

Keywords: academic success, belongingness, distance learning, dropout, retention

1 Introduction

Sense of belonging plays a pivotal role in the success of university students. Research demonstrated a link between sense of belonging, retention, and the success of university students (Pedler, Willis, & Nieuwoudt, 2022; Strayhorn, 2012). Additionally, a sense of belonging has been found to predict academic persistence intentions among university students (Strayhorn, 2020). Nonetheless, not all students are able to find their niche in the institutional environment. For instance, Perez (2020) and Strayhorn (2020) reveal that the sense of belonging varies by race, with white students experiencing greater levels of belonging to the institutional environment than their black counterparts. Moreover, the sense of belonging has been reported to vary by institutional typologies, with distance learning students reporting lower levels of belonging than contact learning institution students (Perez, 2020). This suggests that racial identity may contribute to students’ feelings of belonging in distance learning institutions, and thus affect their desires to persist in their studies.

The aim of this study, therefore, was to investigate racial differences in perceived sense of belonging towards university (i.e., comparing perceptions of sense of belonging), between black and white students at a distance learning institution. Additionally, the study sought to investigate whether the sense of belonging, comparatively, could influence the intentions to drop out between black and white students. Sense of belonging has been identified as a fundamental aspect of strengthening students’ academic persistence intentions and aiding them to complete their studies (Strayhorn, 2012, 2020). Hence, it is envisaged that the study could assist in highlighting the essence of cultivating belongingness in distance learning institutions and among students who struggle with belonging issues due to their racial identities, to help minimise their intentions to drop out and improve the rates of retention.

2 Literature Review

Distance learning is a type of learning characterised by delivering teaching through technology and other multimedia to students who are not physically present in a...
traditional educational setting such as a classroom (Bušelić, 2012). It is learning that takes place remotely using several forms of communication to facilitate teaching activities. Distance learning broadens educational opportunities to students who do not have the privilege to study in contact learning institutions. Segoe (2014) posits that the emergence of distance learning has marked a turning point in the provision of educational opportunities for individuals who have been excluded from traditional forms of learning. This is because distance learning has increased access to students who previously could not afford to pursue tertiary education due to affordability, employment commitments, domestic responsibilities such as child-rearing, and others. Thomas, Herbert, and Teras (2014) add that distance learning presents an opportunity to access higher education for disadvantaged students who are based in rural areas, non-traditional students, caregivers, as well as students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. This is particularly the case in South Africa where distance learning has proved to be a model of learning that offers educational opportunities to disadvantaged population groups and other individuals who otherwise would not have the opportunity to further their studies.

Despite the advantages associated with distance learning such as increased access and study flexibility, distance learning institutions experience numerous challenges, one of which is student dropout. Waugh and Su-Searle (2014) highlight that, globally, dropout in distance learning institutions exceeds that of traditional learning institutions. For instance, Bart (2012) and Herbert (2006) report that distance learning institutions in the United States of America (USA) recorded a 10–20% higher dropout rate than traditional learning institutions. In Europe, dropout in some distance learning institutions was reported to be 40% (Simpson, 2010), whereas in South Africa, it was estimated to range from 59% to 68% (John, 2013; Subotzky, 2010). These figures signal retention challenges among distance learning institutions and are concerning given the increased demand for distance learning globally since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, a need to understand issues that lead to dropout and curb the high rates of attrition in distance learning institutions is warranted.

A number of students from various backgrounds drop out of their studies. However, dropout is more pronounced among economically disadvantaged and under-represented groups (Bawa, 2015; Busby, 2019; Yao, 2019). For example, the majority of students dropping out of university in the United Kingdom (UK) and the USA, respectively, are black and often come from poor backgrounds (Sanchez & Kolodner, 2021; Social Market Foundation, 2017). This is also the case in South African institutions of higher learning where more black students have been reported to drop out compared to their white counterparts (Motsalo, Ningpuanyeh, & Susuman, 2018; Ottu & Mkhize, 2018). In his seminal theory of student departure, Tinto (1975) highlights that racial attributes influence students’ integration into the institutional environment. In turn, students’ integration into the academic and social systems of the learning environment determine their academic persistence (Tinto, 1975).

Several factors may play a role in the dropout of black students. These include, for example, lack of cultural connection to the university curriculum, difficulties in establishing relationships with academic staff and students from different backgrounds, lack of institutional transformation, and financial stressors (Ottu & Mkhize, 2018; Sanchez & Kolodner, 2021; Social Market Foundation, 2017). Letseka and Breier (2008), for example, posit that some of the factors exacerbating dropout among students are poverty and their debt to the funding agencies which fund their studies. For distance learning students, dropout may be exacerbated by lack of preparation in studying through distance learning, limited knowledge by members of faculty to teach through distance learning, lack of family or employer support, and feelings of social isolation (Morgan & Tam, 1999; Rovai & Wighting, 2005). These challenges may lead to psychological distress and compel students to drop out of university.

Psychological factors have been reported to contribute to student dropout. For example, a lack of sense of belonging to the university has been found to influence dropout among students (Strayhorn, 2012). A sense of belonging refers to a feeling of affinity and that one fits in as a part of the institutional community (Hausmann, Feifei, Woods, & Schofield, 2009). It is a feeling of connectedness and that one regards themselves as an integral part of the institution. Sense of belonging is also associated with feelings of being cared for and that one matters to the institutional community in which they are a part. Research highlights several benefits associated with a sense of belonging. For instance, studies reveal that a sense of belonging is associated with positive mental health outcomes such as reduced stress, increased self-esteem, and positive mood (Begen & Turner-Cobb, 2015; Newman, Lohman, & Newman, 2007; Pittman & Richmond, 2007). Academically, a sense of belonging has been found to contribute to students’ academic success and retention (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Thomas, 2012). Roffey, Boyle, and Allen (2019) reveal that a sense of belonging is important for student’s academic success because it helps buffer the effects of psychological distress and boost academic engagement among students. This suggests that belonging to the institutional environment offers potential benefits for succeeding academically through averting distress and strengthening persistence desires.
Indeed, a sense of belonging to the university has been found to increase students’ commitments to the institution and the likelihood of persisting (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002). Students who have a sense of belonging towards their learning institution tend to be academically motivated and likely to put more effort into their academic tasks and also have efficacious beliefs which influence their academic engagement (Sánchez, Colón, & Esparza, 2005; Zumbrunn, McKim, Buhs, & Hawley, 2014). A sense of belonging contributes to a positive learning experience among distance learning students (Bok, 2019). Studies reveal that a sense of belonging helps with diffusing feelings of social isolation associated with distance learning and also reinforces negotiations and co-creation of knowledge among students (McConnell, 2006; Thomas et al., 2014). Scholars elaborate that while social isolation may lead to negative psychological experiences, especially in distance learning, fostering a sense of belonging and a culture of inclusion among students can play a key role in improving the rates of retention by motivating students to put effort into their studies (Dean, 1961; Krause, 2005; Strayhorn, 2012). This suggests that to increase persistence in distance learning, students need to have a sense of belonging towards their institution.

While the sense of belonging has been found to have positive implications on students’ academic success, its absence may lead to dropout. Rovai and Wighting (2005) highlight that students who do not feel a sense of belonging towards their learning environment tend to invest their efforts in seeking belonging rather than in learning, failure of which may lead them to drop out of the institution. A lack of sense of belonging has been identified as a key contributor to ineffectiveness, lack of satisfaction, and dropout among distance learning students (Bok, 2019). Sedgwick and Rougeau (2010) argue that when students do not feel valued and respected in the institution or do not feel that they belong, they are more likely to drop out of their studies.

Despite sense of belonging being identified as an important factor in students’ academic success, evidence shows that black students have a lower sense of belonging towards their learning environment than their white counterparts (Johnson et al., 2007). For instance, in their study investigating sense of belonging among diverse American students, Shaheed and Kiang (2021) found that white students reported a greater sense of belonging than black students. According to Strayhorn (2012, 2020), this is because black students are less likely to identify with the values and norms of the wider institutional community and make interpersonal connections. Another study conducted in 13 European higher education institutions revealed that white students had a stronger sense of belonging than black students (Yorke, 2016). In South Africa, black students have been found to struggle more with persistence than their white counterparts due to institutional factors that affect their sense of belonging such as the institutional culture and limited support structures (Williams, 2012). Moreover, Bitzer and Wilkinson (2009) found that black students in South African universities have to negotiate a sense of belonging to their institutions along racial lines based on the history of segregation, exclusion, and inequality. This makes it challenging for them to find a sense of belonging to their university and further undermines their chances of persisting academically. A sense of belonging is important for students from various backgrounds to complete their studies; however, if it is inadequate, students may drop out before completing their qualifications (Strayhorn, 2012). Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods (2007) and Strayhorn (2020) found that a sense of belonging predicts intentions to drop out among black and white students.

A few empirical studies have been conducted globally to demonstrate how a sense of belonging is related to students’ intentions to drop out of university (Hausmann et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2020). Additionally, and to the knowledge of the researcher, no study has been conducted elsewhere to investigate racial differences in students’ sense of belonging and how belongingness influences the intentions to drop out, particularly at a distance learning institution. The only study known to the researcher which investigated racial differences in students’ sense of belonging was conducted in the USA and at contact learning institutions (Strayhorn, 2020). Hence, this study sought to replicate Strayhorn’s (2020) study, however, with a focus on a distance learning institution. It was envisaged that the findings of the study would provide some insight into how distance learning students could be supported through revitalising institutional mechanisms to increase their sense of belonging so that they could persist academically.

Given that a sense of belonging has been found to influence the intentions to drop out of university, and that black and white students have been reported to differ in terms of their perceived sense of belonging towards their university, the study therefore sought to test whether there would be racial differences in students’ perceived sense of belonging towards their university. In addition, the study sought to test whether the sense of belonging would predict the intentions to drop out of university between black and white students. Therefore, the following research questions guided the study: (1) Are there racial differences in students’ perceived sense of belonging towards their university? (2) Will a sense of belonging significantly predict intentions to drop out of university between black and white students?
3 Methods

3.1 Participants

This study was conducted with undergraduate students from a distance learning university in South Africa. The university offers vocational and academic programmes. The majority of the students at the university are female and black. The researcher was based at the institution in which the study was conducted. Hence, participants were selected conveniently. The information and communications technology (ICT) department distributed the survey to approximately 77,000 students and those who were eligible for participation completed the questionnaire. A total of 831 participants completed the survey and therefore constituted the sample. The participants were black and white, since the purpose of the study was to draw a comparison of the sense of belonging between the two racial categories. Out of the sample, \( n = 630 \), 75.8% were black and \( n = 201 \), 24.2% were white. The enrolment per faculty was as follows: \( n = 29 \), 3.5% (Agricultural and Environmental Sciences); \( n = 56 \), 6.7% (Accounting Sciences); \( n = 89 \), 10.7% (Economic and Management Sciences); \( n = 250 \), 30.1% (Education); \( n = 136 \), 16.4% (Law); \( n = 212 \), 25.5% (Human Sciences); and \( n = 59 \), 7.1% (Science, Engineering and Technology). The age range was 18–63 years (\( M = 28.12 \); SD = 7.48).

3.2 Data Collection Procedure

The researcher prepared the survey questionnaire using SurveyMonkey. The survey link was distributed to students by the institution’s ICT department. Students received the link with the invitation to participate in the study via their official student e-mail addresses. Prior to taking part in the survey, students read the information letter and the consent form and signed it electronically before providing responses to the questionnaire.

3.3 Instruments

Sense of belonging. Sense of belonging was measured using the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM; Goodeenow, 1993). This instrument is used to measure a sense of belonging across a variety of contexts, including the university context (Jackson, 2016; Zumbrunn et al., 2014). The PSSM is an 18-item Likert-type comprising items such as “I sometimes feel as if I don’t belong to my university” and “I feel proud to belong to my university.” These items were rated on a Likert scale with options ranging from (1) Not at all true to (5) Completely true. Negatively stated items were reverse-coded. In this study, the PSSM scale was found to have a reliability coefficient of \( \alpha = 0.83 \).

Intentions to drop out. The intentions to drop out were assessed using a College Persistence Questionnaire (CPQ [Davidson, Beck, & Milligan, 2009]). The CPQ assesses the intention to re-enrol for a qualification, the likelihood of attaining a qualification, and thoughts of completing the qualification (Davidson et al., 2009). Further, the CPQ focuses on identifying students who are likely to drop out and also determines variables that discriminate between students likely to persist in their studies and those likely to abandon their studies without attaining a qualification (Davidson et al., 2009). The instrument comprises statements such as “I wish I were at another university” and “Lately I have been giving a lot of thought to dropping out of university altogether.” These were rated on a 5-point Likert scale with options ranging from (1) Strongly disagree to (5) Strongly agree. Negatively stated items were reverse-scored. The CPQ yielded a reliably coefficient of \( \alpha = 0.61 \). Although relatively low, Ponterotto and Ruckdeschel (2007) argue that a reliability coefficient of at least 0.60 is considered acceptable for psychological research instruments.

3.4 Data analysis

The statistical software SPSS version 28 was used to analyse the data. The data analyses in this study included descriptive statistics, independent samples \( t \)-test as well as a multiple linear regression analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to measure the demographics characteristics of the participants, independent samples \( t \)-test to measure if there are racial differences in students’ perceived sense of belonging towards their university, and multiple linear regression analysis to determine if the sense of belonging could significantly predict intentions to drop out of university between black and white students. Plots of residuals and predicted values were used to assess the linearity between dependent and independent variables before conducting linear regression analysis. The pattern of the data suggested a good fit for the linear models. Gender, family’s socioeconomic status, and parents’ level of education were entered in the regression model as covariates due to their potential influence on students’ academic success (Aina, 2013; Behr, Giese, Teguim Kamdjou, & Theune, 2020;
Riegle-Crumb, King, & Moore, 2016), and K-1 dummy codes were created before entering the covariates into the regression equations (Figure 1).

**Ethical Considerations:** The study received ethical clearance from the institution’s College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee. Prior to taking the survey, participants were informed that it was voluntary to take part in the survey and that they could withdraw at any time before submitting their questionnaire without any penalty. Further, participants were informed that their participation would be anonymous and that the information collected would be treated with confidentiality.

### 4 Results

#### 4.1 Independent Samples t-Test

The first hypothesis of the study sought to test whether there would be racial differences in students’ perceived sense of belonging towards their university. Students’ perceived sense of belonging towards university was measured between black and white students. The independent samples t-test results revealed that black students ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 0.84$) scored slightly higher on perceived sense of belonging than white students ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 0.79$), and these differences were statistically significant, $t(289) = 5.72$, $p < 0.01$. Therefore, suggesting that black students have greater levels of perceived sense of belonging to the university than their white counterparts. The graphical representation of mean differences is shown in Figure 2.

#### 4.2 Regression Analysis

Multiple linear regression was conducted to test whether the sense of belonging could significantly predict intentions to drop out of university between black and white students. The first model tested the hypothesis with black students, whereas the second model tested the hypothesis with white students. Gender, family's socioeconomic status, and parents' level of education were considered as covariates across the models. The first model was found to be statistically significant, $F(4.625) = 71.380$, $p < 0.01$, and explained about 31.4% of the variance in the intentions to drop out. Furthermore, the results revealed that a sense of belonging ($\beta = -0.55$, $t = -16.68$, $p < 0.001$) significantly predicted the intentions to drop out among black students. Moreover, the results indicated that a sense of belonging negatively correlated with the intentions to drop out.
The study also tested whether the sense of belonging could predict intentions to drop out among white students. The results revealed a statistically significant model, $F(4.196) = 34.680$, $p < 0.01$, which explained about 41.4% of the variance in the intentions to drop out. The results further revealed that sense of belonging ($\beta = -0.63$, $t = -11.58$, $p < 0.001$) significantly predicted the intentions to drop out. In addition, a sense of belonging was found to have a negative relationship with the intentions to drop out (Table 1).

### 5 Discussion

Sense of belonging has been identified as an important factor for the retention and success of distance learning students (Bok, 2019; Leece, 2014). Nonetheless, finding a sense of belonging and connecting to the institutional community remain a challenge for distance learning students due to limited interaction with peers and members of faculty. Thomas (2012) highlights that distance learning institutions are incapacitated in terms of nurturing supportive peer and staff-student relationships. This is because these institutions are characterised by geographically disperse and diverse students who do not share a place-based context (Leece, 2014), and as a result, this poses a challenge for the institutions to foster a sense of belonging.

Sense of belonging is context-dependent, and different individuals may experience belonging in varying ways. This study sought to establish whether there would be racial differences in students’ perceived sense of belonging towards their university, focusing on a sample of black and white distance learning students. The results revealed that there are racial differences in terms of students’ perceived sense of belonging towards their university, with black students scoring significantly higher on their sense of belonging compared to white students. These findings are not in line with previous studies conducted in the USA which revealed that white students scored higher on sense of belonging compared to black students (Johnson et al., 2007; Shaheed & Kiang, 2021; Strayhorn, 2020). For instance, Strayhorn (2020) found that white students had a higher perceived sense of belonging towards university compared to their black counterparts, thus showing contrasting findings to this study.

![Figure 2: Mean differences between black and white students.](image)

**Table 1:** Regression analysis with regard to the effects on intentions to drop out

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>$B$</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>$t$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Model 1 (Black)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of belonging</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.55</td>
<td>-16.68</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>0.845</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family’s socioeconomic status</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>0.187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ level of education</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.741</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Model 2 (White)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of belonging</td>
<td>41.4%</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.63</td>
<td>-11.58</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family’s socioeconomic status</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>0.014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ level of education</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.935</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $p < 0.05$. 
One possible explanation for the varying findings could be the contexts in which the studies were conducted. For example, in the USA, black students are considered a minority whereas white students are considered a majority based on the country's population demographics. Contrarily, in South Africa, black students are considered a majority whereas white students are considered a minority based on the country's population demographics (i.e., the South African population comprises more black than white people). This is also reflected in the higher education student enrolment statistics. Therefore, a likelihood for the contrary experiences of students’ perceived sense of belonging could be due to population representativity in the institutions of higher learning where minority (i.e., white) students have limited opportunities to interact with fellow students with whom they share a common racial attribute that they can identify with. Indeed, McCann, Lacy, and Miller (2014) and Strayhorn (2020) confirm that lack of racial identification within the institutional community diminishes students' sense of belonging, makes it difficult for students to fit in, undermines their confidence, and eventually leads them to drop out of university. In the same way, Byrd and Chavous (2011) posit that racial identity influences students’ feeling of belongingness and their academic achievement. The findings of this study are supported by the Racial Identity Theory which highlights the importance of the meaning that individuals attach to their group membership in social contexts (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998).

In the context of this study, the findings, therefore, suggest that white students should be supported to enhance their sense of belonging towards the university since they constitute a minority. For instance, the university could initiate orientation and inclusivity programmes to support these students and make them feel that they are part of the institution. The programmes, among other things, could focus on identifying specific integration challenges that white minority students are struggling with. In addition, these programmes could focus on providing counselling to minority students who experience challenges relating to integration and belongingness. The university could also encourage the students to join ethnic student organisations to help foster a sense of belonging to their learning environment. This is because such organisations contribute to creating culturally affirming spaces for university students (Museus, 2008). Additionally, through these organisations, students can share common experiences and help each other to meaningfully deal with common integration issues through peer support. These programmes could prove to be useful, particularly for distance learning students who have limited interaction with the institutional community.

Globally, distance learning institutions use different mediums to teach and interact with students (Burns, 2011). These mediums or tools, such as online discussion forums and blogs, should be exploited to promote belongingness and inclusivity. For example, lecturers could use the teaching tools to encourage values of inclusion in the course or curriculum. Further, the pedagogy should promote sensitivity towards other cultures, acknowledge individual differences, and encourage students from diverse racial groups to establish relationships and work on common academic goals. This, arguably, may help minority students feel accepted in the institutional community and enhance their sense of belonging. A study focusing on a supportive institutional environment and cultural diversity in enhancing the sense of belonging at a South African university found that a supportive institutional environment and cross-cultural interaction serve as strong predictors of students’ sense of belonging (Owusu-Agyman, 2021). Thus, affirming the importance of a pedagogy and institutional climate that promotes diversity and inclusivity.

The findings of the current study suggest that distance learning institutions should prioritise institutional policies that promote racial inclusivity not only at an institutional level but also at the pedagogical level. Further, the policies should cater to the needs of the minority through advocating for special services such as counselling, mentorship, and orientation programmes. Identifying and appointing individuals responsible for assessing inequitable patterns relating to race may also be important for curbing issues that impede inclusivity, and thus help with fostering belongingness (Strayhorn, 2020).

A sense of belonging has been reported to influence dropout in university students. Hence, the second hypothesis of this study sought to test whether the sense of belonging could significantly predict intentions to drop out of university between black and white students. The results revealed that a sense of belonging was a significant predictor of the intentions to drop out among black and white distance learning students. In addition, the results showed that a sense of belonging explained 31.4% of the variance in the intentions to drop out in black students and 41.4% of the variance in the intentions to drop out in white students, respectively, thus, suggesting that the intentions to drop out among white students were greatly determined by sense of belonging challenges whereas the same belonging challenges contributed relatively less to intentions to drop out among black students. The standardised beta coefficients also confirm this by indicating that a sense of belonging had more influence on intentions to drop out in white students (−.63) than it did in black students (−.55). Therefore, this indicates that white students may have struggled more with finding belonging than black students. Hence, their needs should be
prioritised so that they find a fit between themselves and the institutional environment. However, the same form of support should be accorded to black students in other distance learning institutions where they constitute a minority so that they find belongingness and thrive in their studies (Strayhorn, 2020).

The findings of the study indicated that sense of belonging is a significant predictor of intentions to drop out. These findings are similar to previous studies which found that sense of belonging is related to and influences the intentions to drop out among black and white university students (Perez, 2020; Strayhorn, 2020), therefore underscoring the importance of a sense of belonging for the success of university students. The results of this study are essential for understanding belongingness in distance learning institutions and highlight the need for these institutions to strive for an institutional environment that promotes belongingness through racial integration.

There are several ways to impart belongingness in distance learning institutions. One of the ways in which belongingness could be imparted to students includes, for example, continuous faculty training which has been reported to be vital for fostering belonging in distance learning students (Perez, 2020). Distance learning is different from contact learning; therefore, members of faculty and teaching staff should be exposed to trainings that are relevant for teaching in distance learning institutions. These trainings could, for example, focus on time management and social presence. Indeed, time management and social presence in distance learning are important for keeping students connected and improving their sense of belonging. This is because a lack of time management and social presence leads to a decline in communication (a fundamental characteristic of distance learning), discourages students, makes them feel that they do not matter, and compels them to discontinue their studies (Sithole, Mupinga, Kibirige, Manyanga, & Bucklein, 2019).

Teaching through distance learning requires a student-centred approach. Therefore, students should be accorded an opportunity to suggest suitable ways to improve their belongingness to university. For example, distance learning institutions may undertake belonging assessment surveys to determine students’ views on ways to improve their sense of belonging. This will in turn make students feel that their views are respected, and their academic experiences are valued by the university. Sense of belonging may also be assessed at a teaching level through course evaluation surveys where students’ suggestions for fostering belongingness are gathered. This means that a bottom-up approach rather than a top-down approach may be considered for fostering a sense of belonging among distance learning students.

6 Limitations and Implications for Practice

This study offers important insights into understanding the linkage between a sense of belonging and intentions to drop out in distance learning students when race groups are considered. Nonetheless, some limitations of this study are worth noting. The study used a cross-sectional design; therefore, data were collected from participants at a single point with no follow-ups. Thus, it did not afford the researcher time to study and understand students’ belongingness experiences over a longer period. Hence, researchers may consider replicating the study using a longitudinal design in future studies. A mono-method (i.e., quantitative approach) was used to conduct the study. This may have been a disadvantage since students were not afforded an opportunity to narrate their academic experiences pertaining to a sense of belonging to their university. Researchers should consider expanding on this study by using mixed-method designs to generate more robust findings in future studies. The convenient sample used may have affected the generalisability of the results. Hence, in future studies, researchers may consider using alternative sampling techniques to increase the generalisability of the results.

Despite the limitations, this study makes a pivotal contribution to the discourse on race and belonging in distance learning institutions since studies on belongingness and racial differences have mostly focused on contact learning institutions (Hausmann et al., 2009; Owusu-Agyman, 2021; Shaheed & Kiang, 2021; Strayhorn, 2020; Williams, 2012). The study provides an important foundational understanding of how racial minorities should be supported to boost their belongingness in distance learning institutions. To achieve this, the study suggests the following implications worth consideration by distance learning university administrators and stakeholders. First, distance learning institutions should consider a dedicated student support and counselling office for minority students. Second, the institutions should initiate student diversity and inclusivity programmes focusing on teaching and encouraging students to embrace diversity and promote inclusivity in their learning. Thirdly, universities should encourage students to join student organisations to find their belonging niche in the institution (Strayhorn, 2020). Lastly, universities should consider enacting compulsory policies requiring lecturers to embed ways of promoting inclusivity through teaching in their curriculums.

7 Implications for Theory

Theoretically, the study enriches understanding of how a sense of belonging is linked to racial identity. Similar to
prior research, the findings of this study prove that affiliation to a racial group is foundational for strengthening a sense of belonging among students (Hunter, Case, & Harvey, 2019). The study, therefore, builds on previous theories of a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012, 2019), which advocate for a multitude of strategies for cultivating a sense of belonging, including focusing on identity issues. Additionally, the study paves the way for future studies that will develop belonging theories in academic contexts to consider racial identity as one of the key factors that underpin and inform theories of a sense of belonging.

8 Conclusion

This study serves as a reference point for university administrators, practitioners, and other stakeholders to understand the interrelatedness of race, belongingness, and academic success in distance learning institutions. The findings of the study urge distance learning stakeholders to be cognisant of the social context to enhance learning. The social context refers to the space in which distance learning takes place. McIsaac and Gunawardena (2004) suggest that the social context in distance learning institutions should reduce patterns of discrimination by providing equality in terms of social interaction among students who may be different in terms of racial identity. In support of the argument, Dost and Mazzoli Smith (2023) highlight that racial groups may have considerable concerns about belonging at university as a result of their social identities, which make them vulnerable to fears of being perceived negatively in the academic setting, and precipitate the desires to drop out. Hence, the Critical Race Theory advocates for higher education institutions that are inclusive (Hiraldo, 2010). Promoting inclusivity, social integration and equality between students of varying races may engender sense of belonging (McCann et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2020), which is crucial for curtailing the intention to drop out.

A sense of belonging is vital for the retention and success of distance learning students. When students regard themselves as an important part of the university where their needs are satisfied, there is a greater chance that their qualifications will be completed. This is because belongingness cultivates affinity between students and helps them feel that they matter to the institutional community and that a university context is a place where they should be to actualise their academic aspirations.

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References


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