Lecturer–Student Bullying and the Paradox of Belonging in Two Ghanaian Public Universities

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Abstract

Lecturer–student bullying has been linked to adverse academic and psychological outcomes but, little is known about how forms of bullying affect students' sense of belonging in higher education. This explanatory sequential mixed-methods study examined this relationship in two Ghanaian universities. Quantitative data from 642 undergraduates were analysed using multiple linear regression, and qualitative data from 16 selected participants using reflexive thematic analysis to explain findings. Cyberbullying significantly predicted lower levels of belonging, whereas physical, verbal, and relational bullying were not significant predictors. The regression model explained 18.5% of the variance in students' sense of belonging. Contrary to expectations, sexual bullying was positively associated with belonging. The qualitative findings helped explain this paradox by showing that some students perceived lecturer attention associated with sexual bullying as conferring academic advantages, preferential treatment, or social recognition. These perceived benefits appeared to shape students' experiences of belonging despite the exploitative nature of the relationships. Lecturer–student bullying influences students' sense of belonging in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. The findings suggest that belonging within hierarchical educational contexts may not always reflect genuine inclusion but may instead be shaped by unequal power relations and perceived benefits. Universities should strengthen institutional policies, reporting mechanisms, and professional standards to prevent lecturer bullying while fostering safe and authentic forms of student belonging.

Keywords: lecturer–student bullying; sense of belonging; higher education; Ghana; mixed methods; power relations

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Introduction

A sense of belonging is recognised as a determinant of students' academic success, engagement, persistence, and psychological well-being in higher education (Goodenow, 1993; Strayhorn, 2018). Students who feel accepted and valued in their communities are more likely to participate in learning, persist through challenges, and report outcomes. Recent scholarship confirms that belonging is central to students' academic achievement, mental health, and university experience (Allen et al., 2024), fostered through supportive relationships and inclusive institutional environments.

One factor increasingly recognised as threatening students' university experiences is bullying. Although historically studied in schools, growing evidence suggests it also occurs in higher education and involves interactions among students, lecturers, and other university personnel (Gusfre et al., 2023; Marraccini et al., 2018). Lecturer–student bullying may include verbal abuse, relational exclusion, cyberbullying, physical intimidation, and sexual harassment (Gusfre et al., 2023; Moore et al., 2017). Such behaviours are associated with psychological distress, reduced academic engagement, diminished trust in lecturers, poorer educational experiences and belonging at university.

However, relationship between lecturer–student bullying and belonging may be complex. Universities are institutions where lecturers exercise authority over assessment, supervision, progression, and opportunities, so students may not interpret lecturer behaviours as bullying. In the Ghanaian context, such behaviours may be legitimised as disciplinary practices or academic authority, emphasising hierarchical relationships and respect for authority (Gunu, 2019), shaping whether bullying is recognised and lecturer–institution relationships.

These issues are relevant in Ghanaian public universities, where lecturer–student interactions are shaped by cultural expectations of hierarchy, authority, and respect. Despite growing interest in bullying in higher education, evidence from African universities remains limited, especially on lecturer–student bullying. Studies mainly document prevalence and consequences, with less attention to students' interpretations and belonging, while most rely on single methods, limiting overall understanding.

To address gaps, this study employed a sequential mixed-methods design to examine lecturer–student bullying and belonging in two Ghanaian universities. The quantitative phase assessed physical, verbal, relational, cyber, and sexual bullying as predictors of belonging; the qualitative phase explored interpretations and influence. Evidence clarified how unequal power relations shape bullying and belonging in higher education.

Theoretical Orientation

Belonging Theory provides the framework for this study (Goodenow, 1993; Strayhorn, 2018). It proposes that individuals need acceptance, respect, support, and inclusion in social environments. In higher education, students' sense of belonging develops through interactions with peers, lecturers, and the institutional community and is associated with academic engagement, persistence, and psychological well-being. Although belonging is positive, students' inclusion is shaped by contexts. Lecturer–student relationships involve unequal power because lecturers exercise authority over assessment, supervision, and academic progression. Thus, students'

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interpretations of lecturer–student bullying and belonging may be influenced by institutional power relations.

Study Purpose

This explanatory sequential mixed-methods study examined the relationship between lecturer–student bullying and students' sense of belonging in two Ghanaian public universities. Specifically, it investigated the predictive influence of physical, verbal, relational, cyber, and sexual bullying on students' sense of belonging and explored how students interpreted different forms of lecturer–student bullying and explained their influence on belonging.

Quantitative Hypothesis

H_1: Physical, verbal, relational, cyber, and sexual bullying by lecturers will negatively predict students' sense of belonging among undergraduate students in Ghanaian public universities.

Qualitative Research Questions

1. How do students interpret and make sense of different forms of lecturer–student bullying within the cultural and institutional contexts of Ghanaian public universities?
2. How do students explain the ways lecturer–student bullying influences their sense of belonging?

Methods

Research Design

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) to examine the relationship between lecturer–student bullying and students' sense of belonging in Ghanaian public universities. Quantitative data were collected and analysed first, followed by qualitative data to explain the findings. This approach was appropriate because it enabled the study to move beyond statistical relationships to understanding students' interpretations of lecturer–student bullying and their sense of belonging.

Participants and Data Collection Procedures

Quantitative Phase

The quantitative phase comprised 642 undergraduate students drawn from the Faculties of Education at two Ghanaian public universities. The faculties were purposively selected because of their central role in teacher education and professional preparation. Following institutional approval, students voluntarily completed anonymous questionnaires after providing informed consent.

Qualitative Phase

The qualitative phase comprised 16 participants (nine individual interviews and one focus group discussion with seven participants) selected through extreme case purposive sampling from 32 survey respondents willing to participate in follow-up interviews. Participants reporting very high

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or very low levels of lecturer–student bullying were considered information-rich cases because the qualitative phase was intended to explain quantitative findings rather than achieve representativeness. This sampling is consistent with explanatory sequential mixed-methods research, in which qualitative participants are purposively selected to explain and contextualise patterns identified during the quantitative phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Data was analysed through thematic analysis.

Measures

Lecturer–Student Bullying: Lecturer–student bullying was measured using an instrument adapted from the *Student Perception of Professor/Instructor Bullying Scale* (Marraccini, 2013) and supplemented with items reflecting lecturer-initiated bullying in higher education. The instrument assessed five dimensions—physical, verbal, relational, cyber, and sexual bullying—using a five-point Likert response scale ranging from 1 (*never in the past six months*) to 5 (*several times a month in the past year*).

Content validity was established through expert review, and pilot testing informed item refinement. The pilot study yielded an overall Cronbach's alpha of .75. Following exploratory factor analysis, the final subscales demonstrated excellent internal consistency: physical ($\alpha = .96$), verbal ($\alpha = .97$), relational ($\alpha = .96$), cyber ($\alpha = .99$), and sexual ($\alpha = .97$).

Sense of Belonging: Students' sense of belonging was measured using an adapted version of the *Psychological Sense of School Membership* scale (Goodenow, 1993) for the university context. The instrument assessed students' perceptions of acceptance, inclusion, and support within their academic environment using a five-point Likert response scale. Expert review, pilot testing, and exploratory factor analysis supported the validity of the adapted instrument, which demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha > .80$).

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using IBM SPSS. Descriptive statistics summarised the demographic characteristics of the participants, while multiple linear regression examined the predictive relationships between the bullying dimensions and students' sense of belonging. Assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity were assessed before the analyses.

Qualitative data from the individual interviews and focus group discussion were transcribed verbatim and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). The analysis involved familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, development and refinement of themes, and production of the final report. Attention was given to participants' interpretations of lecturer–student bullying and the meanings they attached to these experiences in relation to their sense of belonging.

Integration occurred during interpretation, whereby the qualitative findings were used to explain and contextualise the quantitative results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This integration facilitated a deeper understanding of the statistical relationships by identifying the meanings and mechanisms underlying students' experiences of lecturer–student bullying and belonging.

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Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Cape Coast Institutional Review Board (UCCIRB/CES/2025/089). All participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw without penalty. Participant identifiers were replaced with interview (IDI) and focus group (FG) codes to protect confidentiality, and participants were informed of available counselling services should participation evoke distress. Trustworthiness was established using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the data and member checking, transferability through rich contextual descriptions, dependability through maintaining an audit trail, and confirmability through reflexive practice and peer debriefing. This section presents the findings of the study derived from both quantitative and qualitative data analyses. The quantitative results are presented first, followed by the qualitative findings to provide deeper insight into the patterns observed.

Quantitative Results

Table 1 presents the participants' demographic characteristics, including university affiliation (anonymised), gender, age, and level of study.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Students

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percent
Name of University	University A	367	57.2
	University B	275	42.8
	Total	642	100.0
Gender	Male	336	52.3
	Female	306	47.7
	Total	642	100.0
Age	16-20	54	8.4
	21-25	300	46.7
	26-30	162	25.2
	31-35	71	11.1
	36-40	36	5.6
	41-45	11	1.7
	46-50	8	1.2
	Total	642	100.0
Level of study	100	148	23.0
	200	179	28.0
	300	115	18.0
	400	200	31.0
	Total	642	100.0

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Linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between dimensions of lecturer–student bullying and students' sense of belonging. The model included five predictors, physical, verbal, relational, cyber, and sexual bullying, with the sense of belonging as the dependent variable. Table 2 presents the results of the multiple linear regression analysis.

Table 2

Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Students' Sense of Belonging from Lecturer–Student Bullying

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	*p*
Constant	3.770	0.068	–	55.38	< .001
Physical bullying	-0.165	0.090	-0.302	-1.83	.068
Verbal bullying	0.013	0.083	0.023	0.15	.879
Relational bullying	-0.047	0.075	-0.085	-0.63	.527
Cyber bullying	-0.582	0.098	-1.134	-5.97	< .001
Sexual bullying	0.767	0.066	1.467	11.66	< .001

Note. Dependent variable: Students' sense of belonging. B = unstandardised coefficient, SE = standard error, and β = standardised coefficient.

The overall regression model was statistically significant, F (5, 636) = 28.93, p < .001, indicating that the combined predictors significantly explained the variation in students' sense of belonging. The model accounted for 18.5% of the variance in sense of belonging (R^2 = .185), with an adjusted R^2 of .179, suggesting moderate model fit.

Among the predictors, physical bullying had a negative but marginally non-significant effect on the sense of belonging (B = -0.165, t = -1.83, p = .068). Verbal bullying showed a positive but non-significant effect (B = 0.013, t = 0.15, p = .879), and relational bullying was also not statistically significant (B = -0.047, t = -0.63, p = .527).

In contrast, cyberbullying was a statistically significant negative predictor of sense of belonging (B = -0.582, t = -5.97, p < .001), indicating that higher levels of cyberbullying were associated with lower levels of belonging. Conversely, sexual bullying was positively associated with a sense of belonging (B = 0.767, p < .001). However, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference. This association may reflect reverse causality (students with higher belonging may be more willing to report sensitive experiences), measurement confounding (the scale may capture both coercion and perceived favouritism), or unmeasured third variables. Qualitative data are needed to interpret this unexpected pattern."

Research Question 1

How do students interpret and make sense of different forms of lecturer–student bullying within the cultural and institutional contexts of Ghanaian public universities?

Theme 1: Verbal Bullying as Public Humiliation

Participants interpreted verbal bullying as lecturer authority undermining students' confidence and discouraging participation. Students described these interactions as not isolated experiences

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publicly diminishing dignity and reinforcing unequal power relationships. One participant described how a lecturer reacted after noticing a student dozing during class:

"One student was dozing off in class and the lecturer saw him and he got very angry with the student and began raining insults on the student, calling him names and using the word 'stupid' even on the student. The whole class went quiet. Hmm." (IDI08, Bystander)

Similarly, another participant recounted how a lecturer responded when a student sought clarification about continuous assessment scores:

"This particular guy raised his hands to ask the lecturer what goes into a C.A. because our CA was low compared to the work we have done. The lecturer spoke angrily, saying, 'I have no exams to give to you to write again and I have given you the marks. If you like, come take it and don't come to my office,' on top of his voice. He even insulted the guy. That day the whole lecture became quiet and tense." (IDI09, Bystander)

Participants understood encounters as displays of authority, not harsh communication, silencing students and discouraging participation. When lecturers mocked questions or ridiculed answers, participants saw this as questioning competence rather than supporting learning. Not all regarded insults as inappropriate. One participant remarked:

"As for the insults, it is normal because it happens everywhere. Our parents insult us too." (IDI05, Victim)

This account suggests students viewed verbal abuse through experiences where insults from authority figures were acceptable. Such normalisation may reduce willingness to recognise or challenge abusive behaviour within university.

Theme 2: Relational Bullying as Exclusion and Unequal Treatment

Participants interpreted relational bullying as exclusion and unequal treatment in academia, not direct verbal attacks, conveying that some students were less valued in the university community. One participant described how lecturers publicly embarrassed students who arrived late to lectures:

"Sometimes when a student is late, they will say something bad about the student in front of the whole class. They won't even consider the reason why you came late; they won't ask you for that." (IDI07, Bystander)

Others perceived exclusion through ethnic favouritism and dismissive classroom interactions. As one participant explained:

"Discrimination in a sense that maybe in a class, you consider some people because somehow, they speak Twi. I don't speak Twi... There are some students who might have performed better than those students who were pushed ahead." (IDI06, Victim)

Another participant similarly described being ignored when attempting to contribute during lectures:

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"Sometimes you go to lectures, then you raise your hand to ask questions. Some lecturers see that you are asking too many questions, so some of them wouldn't attend to you..." (IDI03, Victim)

Collectively, these accounts suggest that students interpreted relational bullying as reinforcing unequal lecturer–student relationships by communicating that some students were less deserving of attention, respect, and academic opportunities.

Theme 3: Sexual Bullying as Exploitation of Institutional Power

Participants interpreted sexual bullying as a misuse of lecturers' institutional authority for personal and sexual gain. These experiences reflected unequal power relations in which academic authority was perceived to be exchanged for sexual compliance.

One participant described being sexually assaulted by a lecturer who was also her academic supervisor:

"He has been making comments about parts of my body... he rather came behind me and squeezed my breasts. I felt so humiliated." (FG03, Victim)

Another participant described persistent pressure exerted by a teaching assistant towards her roommate:

"My roommate tells me that he's the one forcing her." (FG07, Bystander)

Participants also described lecturers promising academic and financial benefits in exchange for sexual relationships:

"The lecturer tried as much as possible to lure a female student into sex by telling her that if she gives herself to him, he will change her life... He said he has money and can change her academic life if she gets into a relationship with him." (FG01, Bystander)

Participants interpreted these behaviours as abuses of institutional power that compromised students' autonomy and dignity while demonstrating how academic authority could be exploited for personal benefit.

Research Question 2

How do students explain the ways lecturer–student bullying influences their sense of belonging?

Bullying Undermined Psychological Safety and Acceptance

Participants described lecturer bullying as creating an environment where they no longer felt accepted, respected, or psychologically safe. Beyond victims, bystanders feared becoming targets, creating a classroom climate of anxiety, insecurity, and emotional withdrawal.

One participant explained:

"I'm a person who doesn't miss class because the moment I miss a lecture and you teach I find it difficult understanding... So, because sometimes the lecture hall you don't feel comfortable, you

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don't feel like you're accepted. It's like you have been ignored, rejected and all those. Like you can't even concentrate like that." (IDI06, Victim)

Similarly, another participant observed:

"When some of these things happen, psychologically it affects the students... there need to be safe places in which students can go and report a lecturer... without the fear of being thrown out." (IDI08, Bystander)

Another bystander added:

"I feel threatened because it is my colleague today but it might be me or anyone else tomorrow, so I don't feel safe." (IDI09, Bystander)

Together, these accounts suggest that students understood belonging as closely tied to psychological safety. Bullying disrupted this sense of security by fostering fear, rejection, and uncertainty within the learning environment.

Bullying Reduced Academic Engagement

Bullying also weakened students' connection to the university by disrupting their academic engagement. Some participants responded by avoiding lectures altogether, while others considered changing their academic programmes.

One participant simply stated:

"I stopped attending that lecture." (IDI02, Victim)

Another participant explained:

"It affected my colleague because after it happened, he personally came to me and told me that if he has his own way, he will change his course." (IDI05, Bystander)

These narratives suggest that bullying influenced belonging not only emotionally but also behaviourally, reducing students' participation in academic life and, in some cases, their commitment to their chosen programmes.

Normalising Bullying as a Coping Strategy

Although most participants described bullying as harmful, a few minimised its impact by accepting it as a normal part of university life.

As one participant remarked:

"Well, I was not really affected, I assume it is normal." (IDI05, Victim)

Rather than reflecting well-being, this response appears to be an adaptive strategy through which students normalised bullying under unequal power relations. Such normalisation may obscure psychological consequences and reduce reporting of abusive behaviour.

Sexual Bullying and Distorted Belonging

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Unlike verbal and relational bullying, participants described sexual bullying as producing a paradoxical form of belonging. Some students perceived relationships with lecturers as providing academic advantages, increased social status, and privileged access that distinguished them from their peers.

One participant explained:

"If I should have something to do with him, maybe he might give me grades... Why not?" (FG02)

Another participant similarly stated:

"My colleagues have to come to class... But mine I can choose to get it another way without coming to class or writing these examinations." (FG06)

Participants also perceived that relationships with lecturers could increase their social standing among peers.

"Sometimes too, when your colleagues know you are dating a lecturer, the kind of respect they give to you is different." (FG01)

However, this apparent sense of belonging was often sustained through secrecy and unequal power relations. As one participant reflected:

"Any time a particular lecturer comes to class, he embarrasses one particular female student... but one day we saw her wearing a skimpy dress and enter the lecturer's car. After that, we stopped worrying about her when the lecturer acts that way in class." (FG04)

These narratives suggest sexual bullying fostered distorted belonging rooted in perceived privilege, dependency, and academic advantage, not authentic inclusion. Belonging emerged from unequal relations rewarding compliance while concealing exploitation.

Discussion

The present study demonstrates that lecturer–student bullying is not uniformly associated with students' sense of belonging in Ghanaian public universities. Cyberbullying was associated with lower belonging, sexual bullying showed an unexpected positive association, and physical, verbal, and relational bullying were not significant predictors. Qualitative findings explain these patterns by showing how students interpreted different forms of lecturer–student bullying and how these interpretations shaped belonging within unequal institutional power relations.

The negative association between cyberbullying and students' sense of belonging is consistent with evidence that cyberbullying in higher education undermines students' psychological well-being, academic engagement, and participation within the university community (Cassidy et al., 2017; Bussu et al., 2023, 2025). A recent narrative systematic review also concluded that cyber-victimisation among university students is associated with psychological distress, reduced social functioning, and withdrawal from academic participation, while highlighting gaps in institutional prevention and support (Bussu et al., 2024). Qualitative findings further showed that lecturer

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cyberbullying fostered fear, classroom withdrawal, rejection, and feelings of unsafety, even among non-targets, undermining belonging within the academic community.

The study's contribution is explaining the unexpected positive association between sexual bullying and students' sense of belonging. This contrasts with evidence that sexual harassment in education is linked to psychological, academic, and social outcomes and unequal staff-student power relationships (Karami et al., 2020; Gunby et al., 2024). Qualitative findings suggest some students viewed lecturer attention tied to sexual bullying as bringing advantages, preferential treatment, and recognition. These perceived benefits fostered belonging rooted in dependency and strategic advantage, suggesting students in hierarchical contexts interpreted exploitative relationships as opportunity rather than victimisation, explaining the quantitative finding.

This finding extends understandings of belonging. Belonging is conceptualised as a psychological experience characterised by acceptance, support, and social connection (Goodenow, 1993; Strayhorn, 2018). However, scholarship acknowledges that belonging and identification are shaped by power, status, and access to institutional resources (Anthias, 2008; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Building on these perspectives, the study proposes distorted belonging as a lens for understanding perceived inclusion sustained by dependency, unequal power relations, and anticipated benefits rather than genuine acceptance or psychological safety. Qualitative findings explain the paradox that higher belonging may not reflect supportive educational relationships.

The qualitative findings help explain why verbal and relational bullying were not significant quantitative predictors of belonging despite being described as harmful. Recent research suggests that students' interpretations of lecturer mistreatment are shaped by institutional culture and unequal power relations, affecting whether such behaviours are recognised and reported as bullying (Karami et al., 2020). Several participants viewed verbal insults as normal correction by authority figures, which may weaken its statistical association with belonging despite psychological consequences.

The explanatory sequential mixed-methods design strengthened interpretation by revealing whether lecturer–student bullying was associated with students' sense of belonging and why. Quantitative findings established the direction and magnitude of these relationships, while qualitative findings explained how students interpreted bullying and its mechanisms. Integrating both strands offered a nuanced understanding of institutional power relations shaping students' experiences.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings have several implications for higher education policy and practice. First, universities should recognise lecturer–student bullying as an institutional rather than solely an interpersonal problem because it undermines students' psychological safety, participation, and sense of belonging. Institutional policies should therefore explicitly define and prohibit all forms of lecturer–student bullying, including behaviours that may be normalised within hierarchical academic relationships (Gunby et al., 2024).

Second, the finding of distorted belonging highlights the need to address structural power imbalances between lecturers and students. Universities should strengthen confidential reporting

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mechanisms, ensure transparent investigation procedures, and consistently enforce professional conduct policies to reduce fear of retaliation and enhance institutional accountability (Universities UK, 2022; Gunby et al., 2024).

Third, preventive approaches should complement disciplinary responses. Regular professional development should equip lecturers to exercise authority ethically, communicate respectfully, and recognise how everyday interactions shape students' experiences of safety, inclusion, and belonging.

Finally, counselling centres and student affairs units should support students not only in coping with the consequences of bullying but also in recognising unhealthy relational dynamics in which exploitative relationships are perceived to provide academic or social advantages. Promoting authentic belonging grounded in dignity, fairness, and mutual respect may reduce students' vulnerability to distorted belonging and contribute to healthier university environments.

Limitations

This study has limitations that should be considered. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal inferences about the relationship between lecturer–student bullying and students' sense of belonging, warranting longitudinal research on development over time. Second, data from two public universities in Ghana may limit transferability to other institutional or cultural contexts. Third, the qualitative phase used extreme case purposive sampling to explain quantitative findings rather than achieve representativeness. Although consistent with explanatory sequential mixed-methods research, future studies could use maximum variation sampling to explore experiences. Finally, the study relied on self-reports, which may reflect recall or social desirability biases. Despite these limitations, the mixed-methods design provided evidence, yielding understanding of lecturer–student bullying's influence on students' sense of belonging in hierarchical education contexts.

Conclusion

This study shows lecturer–student bullying does not uniformly affect students' sense of belonging. Cyberbullying undermined belonging, whereas sexual bullying was unexpectedly associated with higher belonging; physical, verbal, and relational bullying were not significant predictors. Qualitative findings explained these patterns through students' interpretations shaped by unequal lecturer–student power relations and broader institutional contexts.

Beyond documenting relationships, the study contributes to scholarship by proposing distorted belonging as a lens for understanding how students may experience inclusion rooted in dependency, unequal power, and perceived academic or social benefits rather than authentic acceptance. This challenges the assumption that belonging is positive and suggests interpreting students' belonging within broader social and institutional contexts.

The study demonstrates explanatory sequential mixed-methods research can explain meanings and mechanisms underlying students' experiences beyond statistical relationships. Findings highlight fostering university environments where belonging is grounded in respect, fairness, psychological

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safety, and ethical lecturer–student relationships rather than power asymmetries or perceived advantage.

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