THE BELONGING PROCESS: HOW LOW-INCOME, BIPOC & FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS ON BYU CAMPUS EXPERIENCE BELONGING

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THE BELONGING PROCESS: HOW LOW-INCOME, BIPOC & FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS ON BYU CAMPUS EXPERIENCE BELONGING

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ABSTRACT

THE BELONGING PROCESS: EXPERIENTIAL SAMPLING OF FEELINGS OF BELONGING OF LOW-INCOME, BIPOC & FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS ON BYU CAMPUS

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This mixed-methods study employed the Experience Sampling Method (ESM; Csikszentmihályi, Larson, 1984; Zirkel et al., 2015) to document the feelings and experiences of belonging for 22 low-income, BIPOC, first generation college students and a comparison group of 15 White, middle-upper class students at Brigham Young University (BYU), a predominantly White, middle class, religious university. Due to, among other things, these demographic realities, BYU grapples with structures and cultures that marginalize minority students on campus. Data analysis from ESM surveys, interviews, and focus groups reveal that regardless of background (i.e, including White middle-class students), participants experienced a sense of exclusion at BYU. However, BIPOC, low income, and first-gen participants experienced exclusion with more frequency and in a wider array of settings than the comparison group. Of the three marginalized subgroups that I studied, BIPOC students reported experiencing the highest level of social exclusion on campus. Low-income and first-gen students that are White described themselves to be an “invisible minority,” which allowed for a higher sense of social inclusion but a lower sense of acknowledgement. Data also revealed a phenomena
I term “White anxiety,” in which White comparison participants felt uncertainty and anxiety about how to appropriately manage their White privilege and majority status on BYU campus. This data varies from previous racial theories on Whiteness such as White fragility.
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INTRODUCTION

Despite increased college enrollment rates, students from minority demographics continue to exhibit the lowest degree completion rates in the nation—54% for Hispanic students, 40% for Black students, compared to 64% for White students. First-generation students, another national minority on college campuses, lag even farther behind other minority groups with regards to degree attainment; only 26% of students whose parents did not complete a bachelor’s degree graduate in under 6 years (NCES, 2019). Colleges lose money on stop-out students, or previously enrolled students who have discontinued their degree. Keeping these students in college has become a point of both ethical and financial concern for colleges across the country.

Minoritized students face multiple barriers to education at once, a status often referred to as “doubly disadvantaged” (Jack, 2019). Many report facing financial restraints, overt or implicit racial discrimination, and higher rates of family obligations while at college (Banks, et al. 2019). Additional challenges emerge as minority students encounter unfamiliar social and academic environments during their first semesters (Farris & Chan, 2022). Such barriers—experienced disproportionately by disadvantaged students—reduce degree completion. To counteract demographic disparities in graduation rates, extensive research has been done to develop policies and practices that promote student retention (Burke, 2019). From recent literature the theme of student belonging has emerged as a means to anchor students in the college experience (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015). However, a national survey of college students found that low-income, BIPOC, and first-generation students feel less belonging on campus than dominant-group students (Gopalan & Brady, 2020).
Studies on sense of belonging frequently exclude contextual details regarding the occurrences and situations that lead to feelings of inclusion or exclusion among low-income, BIPOC, and first-generation students. Surveys and solicited feedback on the belonging experience often lack the longitudinal timeline necessary for comprehending the evolution of these emotions over time. The purpose of this study is to provide a contextually rich description of how students of different demographic groups experience belonging and exclusion. In addition to considering belonging among low-income, first-generation, and BIPOC students, this study involves a comparison group of White, middle and upper-middle class students to both compare how belonging is experienced in various demographic groups and observe majority-minority group relations as an indicator of belonging.

In the following sections, I will discuss both my quantitative and qualitative findings from this research. The qualitative findings will offer several insights. First, they will offer ideas about why the quantitative findings are statistically weak. Second, they will discuss specific rhetorical patterns across participant populations that help to contextualize the experiences of belonging at BYU across the demographic groups studied. Finally, I will discuss an emergent theme from the qualitative data gathered from the White, middle-class comparison groups that suggests a permeating sense of uncertainty about how to appropriately interact with minority student groups—particularly students of color.

DEFINING BELONGING & THE IMPORTANCE OF BELONGING
Definitions of belonging vary widely in literature. Numerous studies attribute the desire to belong to humanity's inherent need for stable social connections (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). However, researchers differ in their descriptions of what achieving a sense of belonging entails. Hagerty defines a state of belonging as the sense that one is “an integral part of that system or environment” (1992). Goodenow and Grady describe a state of belonging in an education setting as a student’s intrinsic sense that they are valued, accepted, and respected (1993). Others define belonging as a student’s sense of connection to their campus environment, level of harmonization with the campus culture, or sense of support from administration, faculty, and peers (Allen et al., 2021; St-Amand et al., 2017; Slaten et al., 2016). In this research, belonging is defined as a combination of the aforementioned sentiments: a sense of belonging is the sense that one is a valued participant in the campus community and is accepted, connected, and supported by administration, faculty, and their peers.

In addition to its integral role in college retention, belonging is attributed to well-being, academic self-confidence, higher achievement, and increased academic engagement (Ulmanen et al., 2016). A sense of belonging hinges upon a complex interplay of environmental, social, and cognitive factors that nurture students' feelings of connection with their university (Meehan & Howells, 2019). Researchers studying how belonging is developed find that a student’s sense of connection to the social atmosphere of their campus is more important than their academic achievements (Ahn & Davis, 2020). Though their interactions with faculty and administration can increase commitment to the university (Pedler et al., 2022), studies find that a student’s ability to relate to and feel accepted by their peers is a greater indicator of a sense of belonging. As
such, campus is not the sole locus of belonging. Living environments (i.e. home life) and social contexts also play a significant role in shaping the student experience (Ahn & Davis, 2020).

METHODS

Research Site

A report released in 2021 by Brigham Young University's Committee on Race, Equity, and Belonging (CoREB) stated that BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) students feel the “sting of racism” on BYU campus. With 98% of students being members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the student body at BYU is drawn heavily from Church members in the U.S. As such, the demographics of the student population largely reflects the demographics of the Church in the United States. Approximately 19% of the student body are students of color, and 29% of students are Pell-eligible. The students at BYU are predominately White and, over the past fifty years, increasingly affluent. Faculty are similarly racially homogenous—89% are White (Brigham Young University, 2023).

Several additional studies on community and belonging have been conducted at BYU. Two of these studies have focussed on the efficacy of belonging measures on campus, finding limitations with both the University Inclusion Index and the Sense of Community Index (Cope, et al., 2020; Zierenberg, et al., 2022). This study employs a new method to measure belonging, and offers qualitative data to contextually support quantitative findings.
Participants

A total of 42 participants were recruited for this research from the College of Family Home and Social Science (FHSS). Participants came from a variety of majors and years of study within FHSS. Out of the total 42 participants, 15 participants were White, middle/upper-middle class non-first-generation students. These students acted as a comparison group. The remaining 22 participants represented minority demographics on campus [See Image 1 for demographic distribution and overlap]. A total of 5 participants opted out of the research partway through the semester.

In this research, “first-generation” students are defined as students whose parents have not completed a degree in higher education. We define “low-income” students as students who qualify for Pell Grant funding or qualified before they were married.

PROCEDURE

This research involved three forms of data collection: surveys, one-on-one interviews, and focus groups. Surveys were distributed using the Experiential Sampling Method (ESM). The ESM mitigates memory-based inaccuracies in self-reported survey data by prompting participants to respond to surveys at randomized times throughout the day (Csíkszentmihályi & Larson, 1984; Zirkel et al., 2015). Across Fall semester of 2022,
participants in this research received a link on their phones that, when clicked, took them to a survey with a series of short questions designed to capture their feelings and experiences at various times throughout the day (N=1,132). In order to provide a variety of times of reporting, each of the four times when the students are pinged during the day were randomly assigned between each of the four time intervals of 8am-12pm, 12pm-4pm, 4-8pm, and 8pm-12am using a randomized time generator.

The ESM was developed in response to concerns that retrospective self-reporting methods are inherently biased because of inaccurate recollection. The method has been used in the field of psychology to increase the ecological validity of research on psychological reactions to certain environments. The ESM is designed to track psychological regularities to reveal three things: the characteristics of a person, the characteristics of their environment, and the relationship between the two. In this research, I sought to measure emotional responses to the BYU campus environment across several demographics. Randomized data collection periods allowed us to capture the emotional state of participants in a variety of locations and social situations. The length of the data collection period—approximately 15 weeks—allowed for longitudinal analysis of changes to emotional state across a semester, both individually and by group
demographic. However, quantitative trends from these data are not generalizable to the whole BYU campus.

In addition to ESM surveys, participants were encouraged to participate in one of four focus groups held across the semester, one focus group specifically for the comparison cohort. These focus groups were one hour long. Focus group facilitators used a semi-structured format, allowing participants to direct the discussion of their experiences at BYU.

Participants also completed two semi-structured interviews—one at the beginning of Fall semester, 2022 and one at the beginning of Winter semester 2023 (Total interviews = 64). These interviews were held over video-call technology. In addition to questions about belonging at BYU, researchers encouraged participants to provide supplemental context to responses given in ESM surveys. Focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed for discourse analysis.

Quantitative Methods

The dependent variable of this study, sense of belonging, was measured from a five indicator Likert scale in response to the question, “While engaged in this activity, did you feel like you belonged?” Respondents rated their sense of belonging at the time of answering the survey from a scale that ranged from 1, “Not at all” to 5, “Very much.”
The unit of analysis in the quantitative analysis portion of this study was participant group. Subjects were assigned their participant group based on a questionnaire distributed at the beginning of the study. The variable contains 8 categories, which account for the intersectional identities of various participants. The total analytical sample of the ANOVA test on belonging across participants groups was 1,132 survey responses.

This research uses an ANOVA test to measure the variance of mean belonging scores between participant groups. The null hypothesis of this research is that no significant differences exist in the mean sense of belonging scores between participant groups. The alternative hypothesis is that significant differences in average sense of belonging do exist between participant groups. The significance level used in this research was 0.05. Findings with p-values below this threshold were considered statistically significant.

**Qualitative Methods**

Interviews and focus groups were analyzed using thematic analysis via coding in MaxQDA 2022, a qualitative data processing tool. After reading through transcripts several times to determine general themes within the data, researchers discussed together to develop a coding scheme. With the developed coding scheme, researchers divided
transcripts evenly and coded according to the scheme. Transcript packets were then rotated and recoded to increase intercoder reliability.

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Table 1 features the results of the ANOVA test of belonging and participant group. Probability of F is less than 0.05, making the results significant. As such, I can reject that null hypothesis and conclude that significant variance exists in the sense of belonging between participant groups.

An OLS regression of the relationship between sense of belonging and participant group resulted in largely insignificant coefficient values. However, being a BIPOC student was significantly related to a 0.36 decrease in mean sense of belonging score. This is consistent with the qualitative data that found that, on average, BIPOC participants experienced high amounts of exclusion at BYU. Figure 1 demonstrates the average differences in average sense of belonging across participants who are exclusively low-income, BIPOC, or first-generation. First-generation and comparison group students had a similar average sense of belonging. The group with the lowest mean sense of belonging was exclusively BIPOC students, even among the intersecting participant group means featured in Figure 2.

The quantitative analysis from the ESM surveys demonstrated that significant differences do exist in the sense of belonging between participant groups. However, the results measured in the OLS regression were predominantly non-significant, excluding the coefficient for BIPOC students, which showed a significant 0.36 (out of 5) decrease in mean sense of belonging if a participant was BIPOC. As such, the quantitative results
from this dataset were largely inconclusive. However, they support the theory that there is a relationship between mean sense of belonging and participant group.

One potential explanation for the lack of conclusivity in the quantitative data is the nature of the ESM. The ESM focuses on capturing individuals' feelings of inclusion in specific moments rather than their overall sense of belonging at BYU. This design may present challenges in gauging the depth of emotions related to belonging and exclusion, as it operates on a more surface level. Qualitative interview data reveals a key distinction: White students experience episodic moments of exclusion, whereas students of color or those with lower incomes may perceive a broader sentiment that BYU is not inherently supportive of individuals like them. In broader terms, White comparison students felt a consistent sense of belonging to BYU campus that was abstract, even while experiencing concrete moments of exclusion. The difference between abstract and concrete sense of belonging, however, may not be effectively captured by an intermittent survey that measures emotions at specific intervals.

Another limitation to the quantitative portion of this study is that the results are not statistically generalizable to all of BYU. Not only is the participant group small, but they were recruited from one of eleven colleges on campus. This may have biased student responses.

| Table 1. Results from ANOVA test of the relationship between sense of belonging and participant group |
|----------------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Source               | Partial SS | dF  | MS   | F    | Prob>F  |
| Group                | 28.11     | 7   | 4.016| 6.33 | 0.000   |
| Residual             | 712.954   | 1,124| 0.634|      |        |
| Total                | 741.064   | 1,131| 0.655|      |        |
| $R^2$                | 0.038     |     |      |      |        |
| Adjusted $R^2$       | 0.032     |     |      |      |        |

QUALITATIVE RESULTS
In the upcoming sections, I will delineate the experiences of belonging and exclusion for BIPOC, low-income, and White comparison participants. Throughout these sections, there is discernible evidence pointing to the exclusionary impact of a widely-recognized stereotype attributed to BYU students. Since first-gen students belong to the first and second groups, with the exception of two participants, I will integrate their experiences into the aforementioned sections. These sections will provide context for how participants perceive the environment of belonging on campus. The context provided in these sections will inform the last section of the paper, in which I will discuss an emergent theme from the comparison group data that I label “White anxiety.”

**BYU Stereotype**

The homogenous makeup of BYU’s demographics likely contributes to what I repeatedly heard in interviews with students, and is what I call the “BYU stereotype.” This is a persona that is as widely recognized as it is criticized within the student body. Understanding the BYU stereotype is crucial for comprehending the role of belonging within the BYU community. For both the comparison group and the main group, one’s sense of belonging was often tied, sometimes explicitly, to the extent to which one’s own personal characteristics aligned with what one identified as the BYU stereotype.

It is important to note that the students did not indicate that the BYU
stereotype is being propagated by BYU's outward marketing and self-presentation. Nonetheless, the BYU stereotype seems pervasive. It is integrated into BYU classroom rhetoric, the subject of jokes among friends, extending itself even beyond the realm of BYU campus to the communities of potential BYU applicants. However intangible the source, there is no question that the BYU stereotype plays a tangible role in belonging on BYU campus. Those who fit the stereotype draw on this fact to ground their belonging to BYU campus. Those who fall outside the bounds of the stereotype must navigate how to reconcile their identities with the perceived norm.

Of course, in our participants’ responses, descriptions of the BYU stereotype ranged in complexity. Some descriptions are simple as, “White, members of the Church.” Others included more detail. For example, according to one low income student, the stereotypical BYU student is, “Smart and charismatic and intellectual and responsible, athletic, and musical and capable in every single facet of life and ha[s] lots of friends, very popular.” A consensus emerged from the interviews that the foundational elements of the BYU stereotype encompassed being White, highly intelligent, belonging to the upper-middle class, and actively practicing members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Beyond these fundamental pillars, participants noted additional layers, including serving an LDS mission and marrying within the Church, as integral components of the stereotype.

The BYU stereotype is exclusionary for several reasons. First, the stereotype creates and reinforces tangible in-groups and out-groups at BYU. For example, a White, upper-class student that plays the piano belongs to the in-group, while a Black, low-income student belongs to the out group. The BYU stereotype effectively produces an
implicit sense of belonging for some students while leaving other students constantly anxious about whether or not they actually fit into the student body. Belonging at BYU, then, can be signaled by demographic characteristics, not contribution to the overall community.

Thus, although the stereotype can reinforce belonging for the majority demographic at BYU, it can produce feelings of exclusion for minority group students. Felix, a White middle-class participant, remarked in his interview that he is the “stereotypical Mormon boy that comes to BYU.” When asked to share if there was a time when he felt excluded at BYU, he shared a moment when he was struggling in one of his Spanish classes to keep up with the material. As he reflected on the experience, he remarked, “It's usually in class when I'm struggling to understand what's happening. [That’s] when I start feeling like I don't belong in, maybe not BYU in general, but just like in the major I'm doing, or the class that I'm doing.” Felix’s experience highlights an important point: every student interviewed, regardless of background, had stories to tell of moments when they felt a sense of exclusion at BYU. Yet seeing one’s own identity reflected in the BYU stereotype can act as an anchor in these moments, making the moment of exclusion feel more superficial. One comparison participant even remarked, “I feel like I belong at BYU because I fit the mold.” In this way, membership in the fundamental aspects of the BYU stereotype can act as a cushion for marginalizing experiences as the stereotype indicates to them, “people like you belong here.”

This produces a broad, diffuse, and systemic feeling of exclusion from the BYU community that may be one of the primary differences between the main and comparison group. Although the comparison group may experience individual moments where they
are excluded, they generally feel like they belong. In contrast, the group of students that I studied expressed that they regularly feel like they are excluded because they cannot conform to the intangible mold of what a BYU student should be.

Our third concern with the BYU stereotype is its visual aspects. For those marginalized groups on campus whose physical appearance deviates from the BYU stereotype, belonging to the in-group is impossible. In particular, I refer to students of color, whose exclusion from the BYU stereotype begins with their own appearance. The BYU stereotype is socioculturally systemic, but I have no evidence that it has been institutionalized at BYU. It is an emergent social phenomena that affects those in our study and one of the principle foundations of belonging at BYU.

White Comparison Students

As mentioned above, participants in the comparison group, like the other demographics, experienced moments of exclusion at BYU instigated by a perceived inability to fulfill the BYU stereotype. However, adherence to other factors of the stereotype mitigated these instances—fleeting moments of exclusion did not lead the comparison group to characterize themselves as an excluded group on BYU campus.

On average, the comparison group felt a higher sense of belonging than their minority counterparts across various settings and company. However, qualitative responses from interviews and open-responses in surveys reveal specific instances in which comparison participants experienced a sense of exclusion. Academic achievement and political affiliation were the most frequently mentioned sources of exclusion for the comparison group.
Brigham Young University is ranked 89th in the nation, with several programs such as accounting and advertising ranking in the top 10. Within the LDS population, BYU-Provo is the most competitive among its other counterparts in Hawaii and Idaho. Many participants identified BYU as a highly competitive school and mentioned its academic rigor as a primary stressor. Intelligence, considered a fundamental element of the BYU stereotype, played a role in shaping participants' sense of belonging at BYU as they compared their academic achievements to their peers. For example, Jasmine is a White student who recounted that there are moments in her classes when, “I just feel like I'm not getting what everyone else is getting from the readings. And so then I feel like I'm failing in that aspect or that I'm not doing as well as everyone else.” She attributes this to her own self-confidence and her ability to be “smart enough to be here. In this regard, she says, the source of her belonging is more “internal.”

Likewise, Leah, a White first year student living in on-campus housing, felt a general sense of belonging at BYU. Occasionally, however, she questions herself. She told a story of a friend who felt like a failure because she received a 75 on an exam. Leah, however, “just couldn't believe that she was that upset about it.” About herself, she said she feels like, “It's okay if I’m not doing perfect 100% of the time. It's okay, if I mess up.” When surrounded by people who have “higher expectations for themselves,” however, she finds herself wondering, “Are these people smarter than me?” In those moments, she admitted, “I feel like I belong, but if I'm thinking about it, then I'm like, Oh, wait, do I really belong?” Her experience is common among other comparison students. While they identify an overall sense of belonging at BYU, most recall moments when the high academic standards of the student body challenged their sense of security.
Another source of alienation for the comparison group was differences of political affiliation. For example, Allen is a White student from a more liberal area of Washington state. In one of his surveys, he remarked, “I am White and blonde so I look like I fit, but politically I feel very different.” When people assume that he is politically conservative, Allen feels “invalidated.” According to him and several other participants in the study, being conservative at BYU seems expected, especially among male students. Of note, however, statistical data indicates that among the leading colleges in the US, BYU is one of the most politically diverse with 48% conservative, 32% liberal, and 20% moderate (FIRE, 2023). While there exists a common perception of conservatism at BYU, the statistical data underscores a diverse political landscape among students. Students pertaining to the socially-perceived political minority, however, may feel socially isolated.

In summary, despite the overall sense of belonging experienced by the comparison group at BYU, moments of exclusion, particularly related to academic performance and political affiliation. These moments, however, are less impactful than those experienced by other demographic minority groups on campus. The following sections offer summaries of the thematic patterns pertaining to belonging and exclusion among BIPOC and low-income students on campus, with first-generation student experiences integrated into the previously mentioned groups.

*Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC)*

In this section, I will summarize the data gathered from our 14 participants of color. These students come from a variety of backgrounds, cultures, and socioeconomic
statuses. Our interviews with these students concurred with what was found in the 2018 Diversity Report—students of color feel the “sting of racism” on BYU campus (BYU, 2021).

Emily is a first-generation Latina student from southern California. She came to BYU for the spiritual draw of attending an institution that aligned with her religious views. Emily also attended SOAR, a BYU summer program that introduces multicultural students to BYU campus and college life. Her experience and the friends she made at SOAR solidified her desire to attend BYU. Her first year living on campus in Helaman Halls, however, was much more isolating. “I was so surrounded by the same culture, you know, just the general Middle America White culture. And that was so prevalent. And there wasn't anything wrong with it. But it definitely was not who I was.” Emily experienced frequent stereotyping her first year. She often heard people say things like, “Oh, you're Latina. You must be spicy, you must be feisty.” With these marginalizing experiences, Emily found herself asking, “Who am I in this context?” She related that she went through a phase of rejecting her Latina heritage to “tr[y] to be part of the in group.” Yet despite her efforts, she never felt included. “I didn't go on very many dates my freshman year,” she said. “I was very aware that it was because I don't look like most people.”

Emily’s experiences are an example of what I term on-sight exclusion, or exclusion based on visible attributes. As mentioned in the introduction, a pillar of the BYU stereotype is Whiteness. Therefore, students of color who are not White-passing fall, upon sight, beyond the stereotype’s bounds. On-sight exclusion functions with the BYU stereotype as a mechanism of instant othering, whether inherent or purposeful. This
affects the interactions between BIPOC and White BYU students both inside and outside of the classroom. Emily, for example, eventually “made peace” with her Latina heritage and feels that she is more true to herself, but also noted that since then, there have been moments when BYU has been “pretty lonely.” Her husband, who is also Latino, has become her center of belonging while off campus. On campus, however, she still consistently feels like a part of the out-group. As an example, she spoke about the first days of any given semester when people choose seats in class:

“I understand people sitting next to each other because they know each other. But like, people that don't know each other at all, they won't sit next to me. And again, I don't think it's because people are inherently racist and hate Latinos. I think I just present as pretty different looking…And it's easier to just engage with what is familiar.”

Watching her classmates avoid sitting next to her “sets a precedent” for the rest of Emily’s BYU experience. When asked to remark about her feelings towards BYU, Emily said kindly, “I love BYU because it's my alma mater and I love the education it gives me but not necessarily because of the community it [has] provided.” Her experience of on-sight exclusion by her classmates is an example of the BYU stereotype at work. As students gravitate towards the perceived “normal,” on campus, those who are BIPOC are left isolated.

Jia Li, an Asian-American student, grew up in one of the more diverse towns in the United States. Being on BYU’s homogenous campus is jarring for her, particularly in her first year when she lived in Heritage Halls, BYU’s on-campus housing. Jia Li had a similar experience to Emily in her first year. She said, “I remember trying really hard” to be a part of the BYU community. “I changed the way I dress, changed the way I talked.” Despite her efforts, “it just felt like no matter what I did, I was still treated as Other.”
Like Emily, Jia Li found a social community to which she felt like she belonged after her first year. Yet she, too, struggles to feel belonging in the classroom, where she often feels like she is not the “intended audience.”

It is important to delimit the manifestation of on-sight exclusion at BYU. First, not all students of color are affected by on-sight exclusion. Those who are White passing, for instance, are unlikely to experience it. Second, White students with outwardly “unique” characteristics can also face on-site exclusion. For example, Helen is a White student with a sleeve of tattoos. She reports that students often stare at her and she has the sense that students see her as “unclean” because of her tattoos - to the point that some even physically avoid her. She noted that these experiences seem particularly heightened in her religion classes. This is likely due to proscriptions against tattooing among members of The Church of Jesus Christ. Thus, her tattoos can become the basis for on-site exclusion.

Here I simply note one key difference between Emily’s and Helen’s experiences of on-site exclusion: whereas Emily’s exclusion comes from her being Latina, a category that our Church has no proscriptions against, Helen’s comes from her choice to engage in a practice proscribed by the Church. No matter how Emily chooses to present herself, the color of her skin acts as a barrier to inclusion - she is always marked as “outside” of what is normative at BYU since she doesn’t look like the “familiar,” “standard,” or “normal” BYU student.

When Alicia, a Black participant, decided to attend BYU, she commented that she thought the racial demographics of BYU would be more similar to her hometown in Alabama, where black families like hers were not the only family of color in the
congregation. Upon arriving at BYU, she was surprised to find herself in the less than 1% demographic. Though she is in one of the more ethnically diverse majors, she is frequently the only student of color in her classes and finds this to be uncomfortable. Alicia has found safe spaces among friend groups and clubs on campus, her exclusion from the majority is something she confronts “on a daily basis” as she engages in the most essential aspect of being a student – attending classes.

The consequences of on-sight exclusion is not just social isolation. In a school that is 81% White, BIPOC students often receive unsolicited attention and comments from their White peers. In response to a question asking Alicia to share any experiences she has had when she has felt marginalized at BYU, she said,

“One of the big ones is people asking me what sport I'm here for, which gets really annoying. Or more freshman year when you're talking about getting into BYU, people will either say or imply that the only reason I got in was because I was black... that [it was] affirmative action without knowing my scores or experience or anything, just assuming based on my appearance that that was why I was at BYU.”

Many of our participants of color had similar experiences to Alicia where White students had made comments to them such as, “the reason why [you] got into BYU is because [you’re] Asian, and [you’re] a woman” or, “[BYU] wants more diversity, that's why like you're here,” or, “you're just in that program because you're Hispanic.”

Regardless of the intentions of the speaker, these statements communicate to students of color at BYU that others do not consider them to belong naturally in BYU’s student body. Their admission to BYU is only by artificial and forced means - whether by “affirmative action” programs or race or gender biases (arbitrarily) introduced by the admissions office.
There is a range of reactions to on-sight exclusion from our participants. Many have turned to communities, clubs, and events on campus such as Hispanos Unidos, Luau, KPop Club, Black Student Union, Fiesta, among others that offer safe spaces—places where their interests and other identities are more likely to supersede their appearance. “I go to the Kpop Club, but everybody's crazy about Kpop there and nobody cares what color you are. We just have fun,” said one Asian student. Others, like Emily, find community and belonging outside of BYU with friends, roommates, and family. However, the experiences of on-sight exclusion were poignant landmarks in every BIPOC participant’s BYU experience, easy to recollect and laden with feelings of rejection and disillusionment. One student said, “being in a group full of White people makes you feel like you're an imposter. And it makes you feel like you're not good enough.” Jia Li echoed this comment, saying about her experience with White classmates, “As much as I become friends, there's still a part of me that's like, I don't look the part.”

In conclusion, on-sight exclusion manifests as more than social isolation. Students of color are victims of unsolicited, racially biased comments from their peers in classrooms, social events, and even in their own homes. These experiences, marked by feelings of rejection and disillusionment, underscore the pervasive challenges of belonging for students of color on BYU campus.

Low-Income Students

Unlike the participants of color, our low-income participants did not experience on-sight exclusion. Rather, their experiences of exclusion came from assumptions on
both a systemic and interpersonal level that disregarded the significant burden of being a low-income student.

Tyson is a White male from a low-income household in southern Utah. He is also a first generation student. He says, “In a lot of circumstances, as I'm working with colleagues, they all tend to assume that I'm in the majority in all factors, just because I am [the majority] gender-wise and racial-wise.” When only 1.8% of students belong to the bottom socioeconomic quintile, the assumption among most students is that everyone is middle or upper class. Based on appearance, Tyson fits into the BYU stereotype. Yet, he is what I call an “invisible minority” on campus. “I wouldn't be able to pick out any other low income students,” He admits. “Which definitely makes you feel lonely.” While there are several clubs on campus dedicated to minority student groups–Black Student Union, Women in Economics, Hispanos Unidos–there is no club on campus for the poor. Being low-income on campus can be an invisible, unacknowledged struggle that is different from the difficulties of being a visible minority.

Other participants brought up the “lack of awareness” that their peers had about the potential struggles of being low-income and a full-time student. Laurie is White and low-income. She joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when she was a late teen. She grew up poor and was offered full-ride scholarships to several other universities but applied to BYU to be with other LDS students. BYU offered no financial assistance. Even though she would be paying her own way, she felt strongly that BYU was the right place for her. Since her first year, Laurie has worked multiple jobs while also taking a full class load in order to make ends meet. Most of these jobs have been on-campus. Laurie said, “if I could make enough money with one job, I'd love to work one
job. But because wages are low on campus, which are the most easily accessible jobs, I can't just have one.” Her combined work and class schedule make it difficult to find time to take tests in the testing center or attend clubs, office hours, and other extracurricular events.

Last summer, Laurie attended the Jerusalem study abroad. In her interview, she remarked that it was not only a challenge to pay for the program but,

“My biggest sacrifice of going [to Jerusalem] was that I wasn't going to be able to work spring and summer. And I wasn't going to be able to make that money and save up that money for this year.”

Even though she had a positive experience on her study abroad, she remarked, “Going into this year, I was really, really stressed, dipping into all my savings just watching it go so fast and only spending it on necessities and trying to decide: how much food I’m gonna get for this week? How can I spread it out? Is there a way that I can drink more water and eat less so that it lasts longer? Stuff like that.”

After struggling to afford food in the beginning of the semester, Laurie heard about BYU’s food insecurity resources and went to the Dean’s Office to receive assistance. After emphasizing the importance of self-reliance, they redirected her to her local bishop. Laurie walked away feeling embarrassed. She remarked, “Clearly I want to provide for myself. My whole life I've been self reliant. This is the first time in my life where I was like, Oh, this is getting really tough for me.” Laurie spoke about feeling constantly exhausted and anxious from managing the financial burden of college. Her words echoed those of Jo, another low-income participant that spoke at length about her struggles to pay for her education while maintaining good grades; “I think people
underestimate the mental and physical cost that needing to stay on top of your finances requires,” said Jo.

Laurie, Jo, and others also lamented the fact that their burdensome schedules limit their ability to authentically connect to campus events and opportunities. The balance between the financial and social aspect of college is one that most BYU students can navigate, if not with ease then with a substantial safety net. Low-income students do not have this luxury. Indeed, they feel that they miss out on the “regular college experience” because they “need money to live.” Going out to eat with roommates, seeing a movie, ticketed BYU events—these cost money that low-income students don’t have. One low-income student commented about her social expenses, “How do you balance that while also trying to pay for living as a person?” Participants remarked that navigating this balance between their social life and limited budget was “isolating,” “disheartening” and frequently made them feel “out of place” in the BYU social sphere.

An additional challenge that low-income students face is that their financial burden goes mostly unnoticed from their peers and professors. In Dana’s art classes, “if you can't pay for the supplies for the class, then you're out of luck.” Similarly, Jo said, “You don't get extended deadlines in classes because you have a job. They view that as a choice. You're taking on that many hours. And that's your responsibility, when it's like no, I have a job because I need a job.”

Jo is careful to clarify that there are several professors who acknowledge and accommodate for financial struggles. But, she emphasized, “they are the exception, not the rule.” In several interviews, participants were asked if they felt that BYU was aware of the struggles of being a low-income student. For those who answered this question, each responded that while having several isolated experiences in which a faculty member
or advisor offered accommodations and additional support for low-income students, they
did not feel that the university sufficiently acknowledged their needs.

Likewise, roommates and friends in the majority that grew up middle and upper-
middle class have class-reflective lifestyles that inhibit low-income students’ ability to
relate to their experiences. Tyson, for example, recounted in his interview that every
holiday he goes back to his home in southern Utah where his family owns a small farm.
In one particular instance, he recalled taking a break while cleaning pig pens to look
through social media. He recalled, “some of my friends were in Disney World, some of
my friends were in Europe, some friends were in Japan, or wherever it was. And I'm like,
Yep, I'm cleaning up pig pens. Yep.” Low-income students often struggle to connect with
their peers or close friends due to a lack of shared experiences. This challenge is
exacerbated by the fact that their friends may be unaware of their differences, assuming
instead that they share the same background.

Differences in class-reflective lifestyles emerge in a microscale with patterns of
everyday life. Activities like grocery shopping, social events, dating—all of these create
environments where low-income students feel more constrained than their wealthier
peers. Participants remarked that they noticed, and at times are even “hyper-aware” of
these differences from their wealthier peers. Their counterparts, however, are often
unaware of these differences until circumstances require that low-income participants call
attention to their financial status.

Being exposed as a low-income student can be equally exclusionary and
uncomfortable for participants. One participant recalled that her first-year roommates
stopped inviting her to events once they realized she could not afford their chosen
activities. Other participants reported feeling “hurt” or “awkward” when they had to decline invitations or ask “Is there a cheaper option?” when others in their party do not share the same financial constraints. In these moments, their minority status becomes “visible” to their peers. But rather than foster acknowledgement and support, participants reported that their exposure as low-income individuals frequently led to a sense of exclusion and otherment.

The presumption that all students at BYU possess a financial safety net results in inadequate support structures for low-income students on campus. This assumption further contributes to situations where low-income students feel reluctant to draw attention to the specific challenges associated with their economic status, both within the classroom and in their social circles.

Results from Exploratory Analysis: White Anxiety

When considering the issue of belonging on college campuses, it is essential to consider how demographic groups on campus associate, paying particular attention to how majority groups interact with minority groups. In the interviews and focus groups held with the comparison population, White students expressed uncertainty over how to appropriately interact with minority students on campus, with a particular emphasis on how to interact with BIPOC students. I call this uncertainty “White anxiety.” Below, I will offer a brief overview of how White anxiety coincides with existing racial theories. Then, I will discuss potential reasons for its appearance on college campuses. After establishing this background, I will conduct an exploratory data analysis to examine how
White comparison students in this study encountered White anxiety. Finally, I will discuss the implications of White anxiety for community-building at BYU.

**Background on White Anxiety**

Data from this study finds evidence of various racial theories at work on BYU campus. Racial theory is a constantly shifting landscape (Mills, 2020). The United States, in particular, has a convoluted racial history characterized by slavery, violence, discrimination, systemic bias, and ongoing racial struggle (Omi & Winant, 2014). Modern sociologists point to racialization as the process through which racism is sustained (Hochman, 2019). In recent years, burgeoning research states that “race” in and of itself is socially constructed. Yet the lived experience of those of a particular race is real (Blum, 2010; Templeton, 2013). As such, the term “racialization” has grown in popularity to describe the construction of racial categories by externally imposing racial labels on a relationship, social practice, or group (Murji, et al., 2005; Garcia, 2003).

Racialization stemmed from the 15th century concept of nationalism. Key facets of modernity—colonization, imperialism, capitalism—necessitated a systematic hierarchy of power. At first, such authority stemmed from nationality (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2016). However, as slaves and indentured servants arrived into the New World, racial lines became a stronger source of division; the White servant could be assimilated into affluent society while the black slave could not (Fields, 1990). From these divisions stemmed White supremacy, or the belief that White individuals are inherently superior to those of other races. White supremacy was an overt dogma up until the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-twentieth century (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2016).
Though the Movement made racial discrimination illegal, the deep-set roots of White supremacy remained primarily unscathed. Indeed, research demonstrates that racial disparities continue to exist across various sectors such as health, education, and economic mobility (Williams & Mohammed, 2009; Mickelson, 2003; Collins, et al., 2017). The source of such disparities, however, is more elusive. As such, modern racial theory lacks a hegemonic model. In the past century, sociologists have posited a variety of models through which to perceive the sources of racialization, how it is sustained, and its effect. Several of the leading theories from among these are colorblindness, symbolic racism, White fragility, and White spaces.

Color Blindness theory is that Whites have developed nonracial explanations that serve as justifications for contemporary racial inequality, absolving themselves of responsibility for the status of people of color. Whites rationalize this inequality by attributing it to market dynamics, natural phenomena, and cultural limitations of people of color (Apfelbaum et al., 2012). For example, they may link Latinos' high poverty rates to stereotypes about work ethic and explain residential segregation as a result of natural group tendencies (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Symbolic racism posits that Whites avoid appearing racist, yet still carry racial biases. Whites are able to mask their biases under the guise of political, moral, or social stances that are racially ambiguous (McConahay & Hough Jr, 1976). These modern forms of racism are less overt, and therefore more difficult to disrupt (Lipsitz, 1995).

White fragility, first coined by Robin DiAngelo in 2016, is a side-effect of modern racism and White aversion to being labeled “racist.” Her seminal work portrays the White individual as racially entitled, unaware of their Whiteness and the privileges
they enjoy because of it. As such, they lack the stamina to confront the consequences of their racial identity. Instead, DiAngelo’s White man reacts to threats to his sense of racial comfort with anger, confusion, and defensiveness (DiAngelo, 2016). Likewise, White space is a result of racial biases and White fragility. White spaces are characterized by a significant presence of White people and a lack of black individuals. White spaces can exist anywhere; neighborhoods, workplaces, campuses, stores. In White spaces, individuals of color are held suspect. When a racial slur or the underlying attitude is expressed, it directly conveys to the black person that they do not belong (Anderson, 2015).

This research does not favor one racial theory over another. In fact, I assert that these theories are not mutually exclusive or comprehensive. Additionally, I aim to introduce another racial theory into the discourse, which I refer to as "White anxiety." The concept of White anxiety varies from the theories presented by Robin DiAngelo in his research on White fragility. While DiAngelo's concept focuses on the defensive White individual, the notion of White anxiety gives rise to an individual who grapples with interpreting social cues related to race, despite understanding the importance of doing so. While White fragility remains prominent among White populations, recent events in the United States have made it less universal. Amid the terrors of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic came what the media labeled a “racial reckoning” for White Americans across the country. Though definitions vary, the most simplified definition of racial reckoning is acknowledging one’s role in maintaining systemic racism and racial privilege. In 2020, race riots due to police violence combined with racial disparities in pandemic deaths brought racism to the forefront of American discourse. As a result, White Americans
were propelled out of the world of racial comfort that DiAngelo describes, where they could be racially blind to their own Whiteness.

Since first appearing in the media, the phrase “racial reckoning” has permeated into scholarship and higher education—several universities such as Harvard, University of Chicago, and University of Washington have since developed classes that discuss the Pandemic and the impact of the “racial reckoning” on modern America. Regardless of political affiliation, the current generation of college students have been steeped in discussions about diversity, Whiteness, belonging, prejudice, and their role in American society.

White anxiety seems to be the product of a younger generation navigating a new racial and intersectional dynamic in a nation upheaved by rhetoric of White supremacy and White privilege. Rather than a process of denial, White anxiety is a form of acknowledgement—it indicates that White participants know they are White and as a result are privileged. On BYU campus, it also indicates that they are aware of their majority status and how that may affect minority students. Most importantly, White anxiety is an expression of uncertainty about what the White majority should do and how they should act given the privilege they know they have.

Nevertheless, White anxiety bolsters the divide between majority and minority groups—a division fueled not by prejudice, but by fear. It inhibits cross-demographic relationships and exacerbates the isolation felt by certain demographics on campus due to their minority status.

White Anxiety at BYU
The comparison group recognized that their demographic makes up the large majority of BYU, often citing it as an anchor to their sense of belonging. One comparison student put in a survey response, “I feel like I got into the average demographic at BYU by being White and from Utah.” Again, for White students, the BYU stereotype functions as a mechanism to indicate a sense of belonging.

At the same time, many also recognized the reverse effect that being BIPOC would have. One student stated, “There’s been a stereotypical image created of what a BYU student should look like. I think that if people perceive that they don't fit that mold, that can cause them to feel like they're not a part of it [BYU community].” Another student spoke about a student of color in her otherwise all White class, “She probably feels so out of place.” Here the White students I spoke with generally recognized that the BYU stereotype presents a challenge for inclusion for minority students.

Because of this, a common worry among comparison participants was that through actions, attitudes, or words, they would unintentionally support and solidify barriers to inclusion for minority students. White students often described encounters where they felt unsure, even paralyzed, about how to act in a way that would foster the inclusion of minority students around them. For example, Jasmine is a White student from a middle-class family in California. In one interview, she spoke about her experiences talking to students of color during class discussions. When hearing their experiences, Jasmine remarked that she “doesn’t quite know how to react” because she “can’t fully relate to it.” As a result she said, “I think my fear is that I don't know what the best course of action is. And so I kind of get paralyzed and worry about choosing the wrong one. Even though I feel like the only course of action is just to be kind, which, I mean, I feel like I do
anyway. But because it's such an important question right now, I sometimes fear that I'm going to say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing. And then I’m [afraid] of doing nothing, because I'm scared it's worse than doing the wrong thing. And so I just get confused about what I should do.”

Jasmine’s response exemplifies the feelings of other White participants as they interact with students of color at BYU.

Many comparison group students expressed a genuine desire to have diverse relationships. Scarcity, however, creates a “another level of caution. You don't want to be subconsciously picking up a friend, or treating someone differently because of where they're from or what they look like” said Zach. White students worry that befriending students of color will come across as disingenuous, or even as an act of tokenization. “I don't want it to be perceived that I'm doing it with mal intentions,” said one student.

Because BYU campus is predominantly White, it is common for classes to have no, or only one student of color. This amplifies White Anxiety. One participant shared about having a Black girl in their otherwise White class, “I want to make sure she doesn't feel like I'm ever purposely ignoring her…maybe I shouldn't feel that way, and just treat her like normal, but I think I did try to be extra nice.” Even students who grew up in more diverse neighborhoods found that BYU’s homogeneity increased their anxiety about interacting with minority students in class, particularly students of other races. “I had Black friends growing up, but since being at BYU, it's just a weird thing,” said one student. When she began sitting next to the only Black girl in class, [name] said, “I wonder how she feels in the class. I wonder how she feels about me. Am I helping her? Do I help her feel like she belongs?”
Permeating through the interviews with comparison students was a sense of guilt for their less diverse social groups, and uncertainty about how they can be more inclusive. In particular, White students worried over racial homogeneity in their social circles and the right way to create relationships with other races. “Sometimes you're just scared of offending somebody,” said Tyson. “And so you don't want to reach out and somehow hurt their feelings.” White students at BYU create social circles with people more similar to them. While this is a natural human tendency, it excludes the minority students, affirming their sense that they are “other” on BYU campus.

In conclusion, for most of the comparison students interviewed recognize their demographic majority as a source of their personal belonging, yet they are equally conscious of the reverse effect it may have on BIPOC students. The fear of unintentionally reinforcing barriers to inclusion and the struggle to navigate interactions with students of color underscore the pervasive influence of White anxiety on campus. The scarcity of minority representation at BYU amplifies this anxiety, leading to feelings of guilt, uncertainty, and tentative searches for the right approach to foster inclusivity. Interviews with White students highlight a need for tools and resources to help majority students at BYU confront and navigate the complexities of racial dynamics.

CONCLUSION

Brigham Young University’s demographic homogeneity and strong religious affiliation make it a particularly interesting subject of study for community-building and belonging. Results from this study reveal differences in the manner in, and extent to which, White upper and middle class students experience belonging and students
belonging to the BIPOC, low-income, and first-generation minority groups. Interviews found that all groups had moments of exclusion at BYU. White comparisons students, however, felt a continually abstract sense of belonging. Minority students, however, did not. Extensive qualitative data revealed that BIPOC students experienced frequent occurrence of on-sight exclusion, in which their inability to visually assimilate to the BYU stereotype of Whiteness led to discrimination and frequent racialization. Low-income students at BYU are the invisible minority; they conform to the visual BYU stereotype but their socioeconomic status limits their ability to participate in the same activities, events, resources, and college experiences as their more affluent peers. Unlike the comparison group, students from the minority groups felt more exclusion on BYU campus.

This study also considered the alternate side of the belonging process by examining how the majority demographic on campus interacts with the minority. Emerging from this study was the concept of White anxiety. White anxiety contributes to feelings of exclusion at BYU. Students of color cannot differentiate between avoidance driven by prejudice and avoidance rooted in fear. White anxiety emerges from uncertainty about the role of racialization in social interactions, especially within predominantly White spaces. White students face difficulties in determining when and how to acknowledge race and navigate racial classifications with their BIPOC classmates. Their evasion may be well-intentioned, or a form of self-preservation. Yet it can be perceived as direct exclusion from the campus community. This perpetuates patterns of belonging and exclusion at BYU. However, it is essential to acknowledge that the emergence of White anxiety could mark a positive shift in the timeline of racial
dynamics. Prejudice is challenging to alter, especially when efforts to address it are met with denial. In contrast, anxiety can be addressed; tools can be devised to contemplate how cross-demographic interactions might improve.

As BYU contemplates ways to foster a stronger community on campus, it is crucial to examine how the 80% interacts with the 20%; the deficiency may reside in the majority rather than the minority. Initiatives aimed at equipping students with resources, rhetoric, and training that directly addresses White anxiety could enhance White students’ ability to interact with minority demographics on campus. While this approach may not entirely eliminate the BYU stereotype, it has the potential to create isolated moments that sharply contrast with the prevailing messages embedded in the stereotype of who belongs at BYU and who does not.


BYU Committee on Race, Equity, and Belonging. (2021). (rep.). *Report and Recommendations of the BYU Committee on Race, Equity, and Belonging*. Provo, UT: Brigham Young University.


Appendix A
Experiential Sampling Survey

Q1. Please state your name:
Q2. At the moment you received this survey....

What kinds of things were you thinking about?

Q3. Where were you?

Q4. What is the MAIN thing you were doing?

Q5. What other things were you doing?

Q6. Why were you doing this particular activity?
[ ] I had to
[ ] I wanted to
[ ] I had nothing else to do

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Quite</th>
<th>Very Much</th>
<th>Not Applicable</th>
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<td>How self-conscious were you?</td>
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<td>Did you feel good about yourself?</td>
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<td>Were you in control of the situation?</td>
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<td>Did you feel like you belonged?</td>
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<td>Did you feel like you were a contributing member of the activity?</td>
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<td>Were you living up to your own expectations?</td>
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<td>Were you living up to the expectations of others?</td>
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Q8. Regarding this activity.....

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<td>How important was this activity to others?</td>
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<td>How successful were you at what you were doing?</td>
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<td>Do you wish you had been doing something else?</td>
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<td>Were you satisfied with how you were doing?</td>
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<td>How important was this activity in relation to your overall goals?</td>
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<td>Do you feel like what you were doing was accepted by those around you?</td>
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Q9. Describe your mood when you received this survey.

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<td>Socially Connected</td>
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Q10 Please briefly explain why you feel this way.

[ ] Explain in the box below  ____________________________________________________

[ ] I prefer not to answer

Q11 Who were you with when you received this survey? (select all that apply)

[ ] Close Friend (state how many)
[ ] Acquaintance (state how many)
[ ] Roommate (state how many)
[ ] Alone
[ ] Strangers (describe)
[ ] Immediate Family (describe)
[ ] Coworkers
[ ] BYU Faculty Member
[ ] Tas
[ ] Other (describe)

Q12 So far, have you had an experience when you felt like you impacted someone else's sense of belonging?