



# Approach to the sense of belonging: construct for the marketing of entrepreneurships in higher education

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## Summary

This article investigates the potential of belonging as a marketing argument, focusing on customer behaviors driven by this sense of connection with brands. This variable is explored using six robust indicators to define the sense of belonging and its relationship with customer behavior. The research was carried out in the context of Higher Education, highlighting the transformation of this area to offer continuous training and innovative skills. The article highlights the importance of incorporating belonging into marketing strategies, especially for educational institutions seeking to optimize student engagement, especially in those institutions that are the result of ventures and that have given rise to new institutions. This study reveals the sense of belonging of graduates to their institutions and highlights its importance in various sectors. Companies must strive to cultivate a sense of belonging among their customers, using marketing strategies and policies to build lasting relationships and consolidate their ventures. This latent variable has the potential to influence customer behavior and therefore deserves further study.

**Keywords** Higher education · Sense of belonging · Entrepreneurship · Loyalty

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## Introduction

Today, the potential of using belonging as a marketing argument lies in the ability to build meaningful relationships with consumers. When brands make consumers feel part of something bigger, they are not just selling products, they are creating experiences and emotional connections that can last over time. Belonging thus becomes an essential element to build and maintain strong relationships with customers.

In entrepreneurship, building a strong brand identity is essential. Marketing plays a crucial role in communicating this identity effectively. When entrepreneurs manage to convey an authentic and engaging narrative (Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2024) through marketing, the foundation is laid for the consumer's emotional connection and sense of belonging to the brand. In both entrepreneurship and marketing, creating communities around the brand is an effective strategy. Communities not only create a sense of belonging, but also facilitate direct feedback, customer loyalty, and word-of-mouth promotion (Surej & Rouxelle, 2022). Successful entrepreneurs use marketing strategies to encourage engagement and build strong communities.

To address these concerns in the context of entrepreneurship, it was decided to study the field of Higher Education (HE), as universities and other educational institutions seek strategies to guarantee their sustainability. In the last two decades, universities have faced globalization, which implies worldwide competition. Innovation, through new programs and methodologies, is key to standing out among institutions. To respond in a more entrepreneurial way to the growing demand for higher education, it is suggested that universities be more entrepreneurial and seek external resources, being more financially independent from states.

Large international investors intensify the purchase of national educational groups who seek high returns in a sector in full transformation.<sup>1</sup> Virtual schools or online courses as new forms of education stimulate entrepreneurs to invest in education and are known as “*edupreneurs*” (Lacatus & Staiculescu, 2016) whose entrepreneurial motivation is passion driven towards emotional experiences and creative process (Galindo-Martín et al., 2023).

True financial independence for educational institutions will only be achieved if they generate the revenue necessary to maintain their activities, such as programs and degrees. Attracting students becomes a challenge, comparable to more traditional business contexts, highlighting the importance of considering pre-admission as a business process in the management of Higher Education institutions (HEi) and their rapid development of public and private together with competence of competition, high registration fees and limited government financing exert pressure on universities and institutions of higher education to embrace market-oriented relationship management strategies (Gordan et al., 2012). Universities are aware that strong relationships with all interested parties, including students, will help them face market challenges, face the environment in constant change and capitalize on the opportunities that these changes present. To achieve this goal, universities also

<sup>1</sup> [elpais.com/economia/negocios/2021-10-24/los-fondos-de-capital-riesgo-ponen-sus-manos-en-la-educacion-espanola.html](https://elpais.com/economia/negocios/2021-10-24/los-fondos-de-capital-riesgo-ponen-sus-manos-en-la-educacion-espanola.html).

use different online communication channels, including websites, email and social media channels to interact with their students (John & De Villiers, 2022), moreover the connection of alumni with their HEi is a multidimensional variable that can capture the complexity of student's relationship. The connection consists of relatability, dependence and a sense of community, which combine the experiences of the students with the university services (Maulana et al., 2023).

Brand branding, understood as the ability of companies to generate recognition and admiration in their customers, raises questions about how it can go beyond simply being known and influence attitudes and feelings. Despite the controversies that may arise when addressing this variable as an explanatory argument for behavior, we propose future research along this line to deepen the understanding of this dynamic.

Understanding customer behavior is crucial in marketing research, and advances in technology and data analytics open new opportunities for deep insights. In this article, it is explored the inclusion of sense of belonging as a significant variable in marketing science and examine its potential impact on customer behavior toward brands and companies. Traditionally, marketing research has focused on factors such as price, quality, convenience, and promotion to influence customer decisions. However, recent advances highlight the importance of emotional and psychological drivers in customer actions. Sense of belonging, encompassing connection, identity and affiliation, emerges as a key factor in understanding customer behavior. This article seeks to integrate the sense of belonging into existing marketing models, presenting it as a valuable argument and, the sense of belonging is proposed as a useful marketing tool in HEi. To this scope, a survey was applied to these organizations, in order to integrate the sense of belonging into marketing models, given the potential to transform customer relationships with brands and companies.

In this way, the main question addressed is whether the sense of belonging can influence repurchasing decisions. The article aims to shed light on the potential use of the variable as an effective marketing tool. In marketing, continuous efforts are made to improve customer-related decision-making processes and measure variables such as perceived quality, value and satisfaction, which have become key arguments for managers. But, also the membership idea has great potential as a complement to the exhaustive list of variables that marketers, both in academia and the field, need to monitor and control as a component of the belonging. Although belonging has often been associated with customer loyalty, it goes beyond mere attitudes and represents a distinct form of behavior exhibited by highly engaged customers deeply connected to a particular company. In the context of HEi, strategies focused on promoting student identification are gaining importance, with the aim of improving student progression and engagement (Mahoney et al., 2022).

In summary, the current article provides information to address the following research question: how does the sense of belonging influence the repurchase intention of the alumni to return to Higher Education institutions?

However, before asking this question, it will be necessary to configure the sense of belonging variable, proposing several indicators that allow this pride to be measured. That is, the article has been developed by proposing six indicators as components of the sense of belonging and whose levels can be measured through the responses given by clients, or in this case, alumni of the HEIs. These components

are: positive references, participation in events, membership in an association, following on social networks, donations to institutions and recommendation for recruitment, with the community of alumni of the institution being the one that carries out these actions in relation to your Institution.

Therefore, these considerations allow us to propose several hypotheses about the components of the sense of belonging such as:

- H<sub>1</sub>: Positive reference is an indicator of the sense of belonging variable.
- H<sub>2</sub>: Participation in events is an indicator of the sense of belonging variable.
- H<sub>3</sub>: Membership to an association is an indicator of the sense of belonging variable.
- H<sub>4</sub>: Follow up on social media is an indicator of the sense of belonging variable.
- H<sub>5</sub>: Donation to the institution is an indicator of the sense of belonging variable.
- H<sub>6</sub>: Recommendation for a recruiting is an indicator of the sense of belonging variable.

## Theoretical framework

Today, marketing refers to customer communities and uses the concept of affiliation to create links between companies and their customers (McAlexander et al., 2002). Affiliation, based on pride in belonging to a brand, can be used as a strategy to retain customers and change repurchase behavior. Creating a marketing strategy based on pride, or the sense of belonging, can be one possibility among others to increase the profitability of companies and brands.

Sentiment-based marketing proposes that what customers feel about a product or brand can be used as an argument for loyalty marketing. The variable pride or sense of belonging has been studied from points of view based on psychology or sociology, but to date there are no relevant references that include the sense of belonging as a useful tool for marketing studies. On the other hand, in the education context some researches begin to point out that a strong social presence should be created in online learning communities (Swan, 2003; Swan et al., 2009), in which a sense of belonging and connection develops and strengthens the motivation and involvement of students (Lee, 2021). Online cooperation with other students gives a feeling of belonging to a group” and this element is valued higher, incredibly, by students with a low level of academic performance than by those who obtain better results (Arsenijević et al., 2023).

Communities tend to identify themselves based on similarity or identification among their members (neighbourhood, occupation, taste, or devotion to a brand) (McAlexander et al., 2002). Assuming that a sense of belonging develops in a market community, what effects would the sense of belonging have on customer behavior? Would a sense of belonging influence repurchase behavior?

Repurchase as a consequence of a sense of belonging is a fascinating phenomenon in consumer behavior. When customers feel emotionally connected, valued, and part of a community associated with a brand, they are more likely to choose to make a repeat purchase. The sense of belonging creates deep-rooted loyalty, where

identification with the brand goes beyond the commercial transaction. This loyalty based on emotional and social connection can translate into repeat purchasing decisions, contributing significantly to the sustained success of a company. Repurchase, in this context, becomes a tangible indicator of the strength and depth of the relationship between the brand and the consumer, highlighting the strategic importance of cultivating a sense of belonging in marketing strategies.

Belonging is a concept that has not been widely discussed or researched. The literature on the concept is scarce and much of it is narrative rather than empirical (Hagerty et al., 1992). Membership involves the recognition and acceptance of one member by another member of a group (Anant, 1966).

Although academic literature has explored belonging as an influential variable in human behavior from the perspectives of psychology and sociology (Bachrach & Zautra, 1985; Doolittle & MacDonald, 1978; Hillery, 1955; Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974; McMillan & Chavis, 1986:9), has rarely been approached from an economic perspective. The connection between the sense of belonging and repeat purchase, evidenced by brands that generate loyalty through a pride of belonging, has been scarcely explored in economic terms. Academic literature cites the need to identify as many uses of the concept as possible; an initial stage of concept analysis (Walker & Avant, 2005). Belonging can be considered from psychological, sociological, physical, or even spiritual perspectives. Anant (1966) pointed out that belonging, from a psychological point of view, is an internal affective or evaluative feeling or perception. It is the feeling of belonging when a person perceives themselves valued by an external reference, experiencing an adjustment between themselves and that reference. Sociologically, it implies affiliation to significant groups or systems, observable through behaviors such as participation in a group or social networks.

This component of belonging, closely linked to educational institutions, connects students and alumni with them. In addition to the sociological aspect, belonging encompasses physical possession, including objects, people, or places (Hagerty et al., 1992). This concept aligns with the corporate brand approach (Curtis et al., 2009), where brands, in addition to connecting with users, must foster belonging through interaction and engagement. This engagement can be achieved through content tailored to specific groups (Lasorsa et al., 2012), such as future students (Rutter et al., 2016). Thus, pride, in terms of the emotional connection that some brands generate in consumers, is essential. Brands like Harley-Davidson exemplify this pride, evident in owners' strong emotional connection to these recognizable motor-cycles. This sense of belonging and pride extends to other brands in different sectors, such as Ferrari, Lamborghini, and Porsche, being used strategically in customer relationship marketing.

Pride of ownership marketing goes beyond relationship marketing which, when it first appeared, was a business idea that earned the favour and loyalty of customers by satisfying their wants and needs (Berry, 1995).

Therefore, in order to frame the concept of belonging, there are also references for this works as Strayhorn (2018) defined: "In university terms, sense of belonging refers to the social support perceived by students on campus, a feeling or sense of connection, and the experience of caring or feeling cared for, accepted, respected, valued, and important." For the campus community or others on campus, such as

faculty, staff, and peers" and other definitions have emerged from the reflections of scholars, as a feeling validated by students through program design and interactions with peers and faculty (Santangelo et al., 2022; Santa-Ramirez, 2022).

### **Pride of belonging: the theory of community feeling**

In Hillery (1955) the first definitions of community and group cohesion appeared. From 1955 to the second decade of the twenty-first century, the idea of community has changed a lot. McMillan and Chavis (1986:9) defined belonging as a feeling of community: "a feeling that members care about each other and the group, and a shared belief that members' needs will be met by their commitment to being together."

Previously, other authors had developed Sense of Community Scales (SCS) such as:

- Doolittle and MacDonald (1978) designed a 40-item scale to measure communicative behaviors and attitudes at the community or neighbourhoods' level of social organization.
- Glynn (1981) designed a questionnaire distributed to randomly selected members of the Division of Community Psychology of the American Psychological Association.
- Bachrach and Zautra (1985) and Kasarda and Janowitz (1974) developed a measure with seven items: feeling at home in the community, agreement with the values and beliefs of the community, satisfaction with the community, feeling of belonging to the community, interest in what happens in the community, feeling an important part of the community and attachment to the community. The authors found this scale to be internally consistent.

A sense of belonging, although intrinsically powerful in its ability to forge emotional and social connections, can be a temporary and highly context-sensitive phenomenon (Dost & Mazzoli, 2023). The ephemeral nature of this feeling manifests itself in specific situations or moments in which people experience a momentary connection with a brand, community, or group. Factors such as events, marketing campaigns, or changes in the environment can influence the intensity and duration of the sense of belonging. Furthermore, sensitivity to context means that what creates belonging at one time may not be equally effective at another. This dynamic nuance highlights the importance for companies to understand the temporality of belonging and adapt marketing and engagement strategies based on changes in the environment and the changing needs of consumers.

To develop the sense of belonging applied to marketing we will take as a reference the pride of belonging of the graduates, a good starting point to build a model based on the sense of belonging in a HEi, which could be in professional schools. The authors Gruen et al. (2000) conceptualized and empirically examined the relationship-building efforts of professional associations, which are the provision of basic services, rewards for contributions, dissemination of

organizational knowledge, member interdependence-enhancing activities, and dependence on external requirements of membership.

In line with this theme, the commitment relationship between alumni and IES reinforces the importance of strengthening aspects related to a weak alumni culture (Pedro et al., 2021). HE providers must adopt customer-centric, service-oriented tactics and actions and must earn the trust and loyalty of customers from their marketing practices (John & De Villiers, 2022), the result of which can also be the alumni membership development.

It is also theorized that three components of commitment: affective, permanence, and normative differentially mediate the correlation between associations' relationship-building efforts and their members' relational behaviors (member retention, exchange-based participation, and exchange-based co-production). cooperation) (Gruen et al., 2000).

In the HE context, there are multiple forms of membership and membership organizations; professional associations provide an interesting and important context for developing and testing theories about membership relations, some of them very similar to an alumni organization, for example. These relationships are characterized by a formalized agreement that includes regular payment of dues and annual membership renewal. Members choose their level of participation and consumption of the benefits offered by the association (Gruen et al., 2000).

Also, if a former student is a follower of a social network (X-before Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, or Tik-Tok), it can be assumed that there is a link and interest in the institution: a feeling of belonging, without a doubt. The importance of social networks as a platform for social interaction, communication and marketing is evident today. More and more companies in various sectors have already integrated or plan to integrate social media applications into their marketing programs. Institutions are showing growing interest in the potential of social networks as a marketing tool (Constantinides & Stagno, 2011).

On the other hand, some authors have studied how social networks influence teacher-student relationships within educational institutions (Arteaga-Sánchez et al., 2014; Roblyer et al., 2010).

Aaker et al. (2004) have made significant contributions to the understanding of brand-consumer relationships and sense of belonging. Their research has explored how people develop emotional connections with brands and how these connections affect consumer behavior. Similarly, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) have addressed the construction of brand communities and how these communities contribute to the consumer's sense of belonging. They have highlighted the importance of consumer interactions and participation in forming online communities that reinforce brand loyalty.

Cornwell (2020) focuses on the connection between sense of belonging and sports marketing. His studies have shown how identification with sports teams and events can generate a strong sense of belonging and loyalty among consumers. Finally, Nardini et al. (2022) have explored how community-based marketing strategies can influence consumer sense of belonging. Their work highlights the importance of creating shared brand experiences that strengthen emotional ties to the brand.

Our research develops the pride of belonging to an institution, considering that it can be built on six components: WOM, presence at events, membership in an association of the institution, recommendation for recruitment, financial support and following on social networks of some platforms. of the institution.

### Components of the sense of belonging

With the advent of social media, customer relationship management strategies have changed, and companies have been forced to consider new ways of interacting with their consumers and customers. Although sense of belonging and other behaviours related to human pride have been described to a large extent by some disciplines (psychology, sociology, politics), this concept has been little addressed by companies and even less by marketing.

By developing the sense of belonging in this research, we aim to demonstrate that, through pride of belonging to styles, fashions and brands, companies can encourage repurchase in their customers. This is in line with our objective: to model repurchase behaviour through pride of ownership in HE institutions. The review literature and the state of the art show some ideas that we will apply to define the sense of belonging variable and model it: among them, we can highlight word of mouth, membership in associations, following institutions on social media, collaboration with non-profit causes, recommendation of grantees to hire, etc.

Thus, following the first study on belonging-based marketing, the construct of sense of belonging based on the following components, which can be measured in the survey, has been used and studied in different researches. Matarranz (2021) points out the components of the sense of belonging variable of alumni of HEi and the references related to the components.

Moreover, the authors, Hsu et al. (2015) highlighted the importance of satisfied alumni in providing financial support to their educational institutions, creating employment opportunities for subsequent graduates, and engaging in positive word-of-mouth communication.

The components identified by Matarranz (2021) are discussed in more detail below:

**Word of mouth (WOM)** Word of mouth plays a crucial role in the relationship between students, graduates and potential applicants to a university or college (Alves & Raposo, 2007; Athiyaman, 1997; Bean & Bradley, 1986; Hsu et al., 2015; McAlexander & Koenig, 2001). Like employees in labour organisations, university students share membership criteria and interact frequently with other members of the institution (Bean & Bradley, 1986).

Alves and Raposo (2007) suggest that high levels of student satisfaction lead to favourable word-of-mouth communication, such as recommending programmes or returning as graduate students. These behaviours align with a graduate's pride or sense of belonging requirements. They also argued that student satisfaction influences loyalty and positive word-of-mouth actions. Satisfied students tend to show loyalty to their institution and engage in positive word-of-mouth actions



**Table 1** Variables for measuring social media interaction in HEIs

Variable	Description and Measure
Use of social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Twitter tweets—the number of tweets from the HE Twitter account.</li> <li>• Twitter interaction—the number of direct interactions with other Twitter users.</li> <li>• Website links on Twitter—the number of website links posted on Twitter.</li> <li>• Facebook conversations—compilation of various Facebook interactions that took place over the 7 days. These interactions include liking an HEI; posting on an HEI page; liking, commenting on or sharing an HEI post; answering a question; RSVPing to an event; mentioning an HEI page in a post; and tagging an HEI page with a photo.</li> </ul>
Social media validation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Twitter followers—the number of users following the HE twitter account (with IES tweets displayed in the user's feed).</li> <li>• Facebook likes—the number of users who like the IES Facebook page.</li> </ul>
Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student recruitment performance—UCAS provides data on the number of applicants to an HEI and the number of places accepted. Thus, the demand per UCAS place is an accepted measure of student recruitment performance.</li> </ul>

(Athiyaman, 1997). It is important to note that satisfaction directly influences word-of-mouth actions and not only indirectly (Alves & Raposo, 2007).

**Social media network (SNS) monitoring** The use of online marketing, in particular social media marketing has gained significant attention in HE marketing (Brech et al., 2017; Constantinides & Stagno, 2011, 2012; Kuzma & Wright, 2013; Leng, 2012; Palmer, 2013; Rekhter, 2012; Rutter et al., 2016; Sandlin & Peña, 2014). Most universities have a presence on at least one social media platform, with Facebook and Twitter being the most widely used platforms (Brech et al., 2017). Universities usually have a main Facebook page to target various interest groups, such as potential students, current students, and alumni. In addition, specific brand pages are also established (Brech et al., 2017).

Universities use social media platforms to increase the authenticity of their recruitment marketing materials. For example, student-written blogs are used on admissions websites to provide authentic experiences and views about campus life, thereby fostering connection and identification with university students by prospective students (Sandlin & Peña, 2014). The authenticity of blogs is perceived when student bloggers share personal details and feelings about campus life, even when the main topic is admissions and university-related activities.

Sandlin and Peña (2014) highlighted the role of connection and identification with university students in shaping prospective students' expectations and feelings of belonging during the university search process. Several studies have explored the use of social media channels, including Twitter, by universities for purposes such as marketing, student recruitment, student support and communication with alumni (Kimmons et al., 2017; Lackovic et al., 2017; Palmer, 2013; Ricoy & Feliz, 2016; Sarwar et al., 2019; Tur & Marn, 2015). However, in our research, we focus specifically on the role of social media as a marketing and communication tool with alumni according to Table 1.

If interaction with social media networks prior to student recruitment fosters an early sense of pride in belonging to the university (Rutter et al., 2016), it is reasonable to assume that the feeling of belonging should persist as students complete their studies and become alumni, while maintaining interaction with the university's social media network.

These components of word of mouth and social media network monitoring contribute to our understanding of the feeling of belonging and its relationship to repurchase intention in the context of higher education institutions.

**Event participants and social life** Social life emerges as a dimension to measure the satisfaction of university students and for most students, social life is an important and satisfying activity at university (Betz et al., 1970) and, therefore, students who view their social life positively are expected to be more satisfied with their university experience (Bean & Bradley, 1986). Betz et al. (1970) included as social life opportunities to achieve socially relevant goals, such as dating, meeting compatible or interesting people, making friends, participating in campus events and informal social activities. The role that a sense of belonging plays in educational contexts and living environments is essential. Involvement experiences reveal how students' sense of belonging can be inspired or diminished, such as when they run for office in student government or pledge a sorority (Strayhorn, 2018), and in general a sense of belonging should be considered to be present when students participate in social events and engage in the social life of their universities (Astin, 1984; Bean & Bradley, 1986; Mael & Asforth, 1992; Strayhorn, 2018; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

Student engagement refers to both academic and social (e.g., extracurricular) activities: the investment of physical and psychological energy in different objects or activities, occurring along a continuum (Strayhorn, 2018). Activities such as "working on campus, living on campus, interacting with peers, being a member of clubs, and socialising with faculty members are types of engagement that are measured according to Engagement Theory" (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

In relation to the feeling of belonging, engagement is conceptually distinguished in at least two ways according to Strayhorn (2018):

1. Engagement refers to the amount of time and effort students devote to their academic responsibilities, such as studies, and to other activities, such as sports and clubs "that lead to the experience and outcomes that constitute student success" (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).
2. Engagement refers to how institutions invest resources and structure learning opportunities to "encourage students to participate in and benefit from such activities" (Wolf-Wendel, et al., 2009).

Involvement in the social life of the university is positively associated with students' sense of belonging to the university, according to the positive correlations found between students' participation in campus activity (e.g. working on a committee/organisation) and their perception of campus support and belonging (Astin, 1984; Strayhorn, 2018). All of this development is based on students' participation

and engagement during their time at the institution and as undergraduates. However, we will try to apply this idea to alumni and how they could also get involved and participate in some university activities for them, as a sign of belonging.

**Membership of alumni associations** There are many forms of membership and membership organizations (Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Gruen et al., 2000; Mael & Asforth, 1992; Newman & Petrosko, 2011; Strayhorn, 2018; Stuart, 2009). These relationships are characterised by a formalised agreement that includes the payment of regular dues and an annual renewal of membership (Gruen et al., 2000).

Identification is defined as the "perception of belonging to an organisation" of which the person is a member. Alumni, as future customers, in their role as members, identify with organisations (Bhattacharya et al., 1995). The latter authors pointed out that organisations can resort to more direct strategies to ensure identification by consumers: for example, non-profit organisations, such as museums, try to create identification by attracting consumers "to themselves" by making them members. The phenomenon of identification also occurs in the case of an organisation's employees as in the case of alumni of an educational institution according to some organisational researchers such as (Dutton et al., 1994; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Mael & Asforth, 1992; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986).

Mael and Asforth (1992) stated that when a person identifies with an organisation, they perceive a sense of connection to it and define themselves in terms of the organisation. The existence of both formal and informal alumni organisations in American educational institutions dates back to the early nineteenth century (Brubacher, 2017). For the alumnus, continued affiliation with the alma mater often provides intellectual stimulation, prestige, identity stability and a vehicle for altruistic or tax-motivated giving (Pickett, 1986), while alumni provide various types of support: financial donations, recruitment, career counselling or job placement for graduates, participation in alumni events, and volunteer support for funding applications and organisational events (Mael & Asforth, 1992).

Authors Mael and Asforth (1992), together with the other authors cited above, explained that affiliation entails several affiliation behaviours included in our variable, such as: financial support, recruitment, career counselling or job placement for graduates, which are described below.

**Grants for institutional development** In recent decades, HEi increasingly consider their alumni as valuable sources of both information and financial support (Cabrera et al., 2005; Gaier, 2005; Hsu et al., 2015; Mael & Asforth, 1992; Volkwein, 2010; Weerts & Ronca, 2008). Since the 1980s, more and more campuses have been using alumni surveys to assess the impact of the university experience on students' cognitive and non-cognitive development (Cabrera et al., 2005). It has been said that alumni are the financial backbone of educational organisations (Bakal, 1979) and that "few constituents are more important to an institution than its alumni" (Ransdell, 1985).

However, positive experiences with institutions are not enough to drive alumni financial support; the most important indicators are: age, family, income, vocational

and educational background, current job duties and responsibilities, board membership in profit and non-profit organisations, honours, achievements, publications, creative works, leisure activities and hobbies, spouse's vocational and educational background, board membership, activities, achievements and awards, as well as age and schooling of children and grandchildren (Cabrera et al., 2005).

Consistent with this argument, Weerts and Ronca (2008) also suggested that ability variables related to gender, residence and general civic engagement tend to predict alumni donors. Donor alumni often play important roles as volunteers and political advocates.

In recent years, HE institutions increasingly treat their alumni as sources of valuable information and financial support (Volkwein, 2010). Hsu et al. (2015) referred to alumni satisfaction as a factor related to financial support. Satisfied alumni can help educational institutions financially (Gaier, 2005).

**Recommending the recruitment of scholarship holders** A sign of belonging is the belief that the best professionals a recruiter can hire as employees for a company have studied at the same university or college as the recruiter (Hsu et al., 2015; McAlexander & Koenig, 2001; Volkwein, 2010; Weerts & Ronca, 2008). Alumni can offer good prospects for academic asset programmes and are often used as mentors in student recruitment (Volkwein, 2010).

McAlexander and Koenig (2001) noted that satisfied alumni generate a positive word-of-mouth effect and provide jobs for subsequent graduates. Alumni volunteers also provide other important services, such as mentors, recruiters and leaders of alumni clubs that raise the profile of the institution in their areas (Weerts & Ronca, 2008). If the recruiter had a good experience during the stay at your university and considers the level of knowledge acquired to be high, he/she will select a graduate from your institution. This criterion would be related to the feeling of belonging that we want to investigate in this paper.

The importance of alumni is great in this role, as they can provide a more objective view and better assess the appropriateness of curricula to job requirements (Hsu et al., 2015).

The literature shows that sense of belonging can be used in two circumstances. On the one hand, Strayhorn's (2018) sense of belonging theory refers to the student's academic success (Cisneros et al., 2019) and, on the other hand, the sense of belonging is prolonged after the stay at the university if alumni satisfaction is high (Hsu et al., 2015).

And so, after leaving the university, alumni may continue to maintain a relationship with the institution through cooperation by offering internships to students, offering employment to recent graduates, or cooperating in research projects (Dlagic et al., 2014), beyond WOM as a cause of loyalty (Alves & Raposo, 2007; Hsu et al., 2015).

To address this question, in this study we suggest breaking down the sense of belonging into six parts. We suggest that these parts would represent alumni behaviours and attitudes that can be applied to marketing of HEi.

In short, we hope that a sense of belonging will become an important issue in a sector such as HE, where links between alumni themselves and between alumni and

their institutions can grow and be maintained over time. We believe that this topic will be very important for entrepreneurial projects for new higher education institutions that will try to link alumni so that they want to return to the institutions.

## Methodology

To design the belonging variable and its explanation for this paper, the HE context has been used. Research conducted in three HEi sought to link the repurchase intention variable through alumni's sense of belonging. The introduction of pride in belonging or sense of belonging as a model variable for the research is because we believe it can explain some behaviours related to repurchase intention.

## Sample

The consolidation of all the data allowed us to obtain a sample of 359 participants. Three universities participated in this research by organising a survey of their graduates (one Spanish, one American and one Colombian higher education institution).

The fieldwork was carried out in three universities by means of a survey sent to alumni of the institutions: in Spain, the United States and Colombia. A total of 359 responses were received, enough responses for the number of relationships that have been proposed in the model.

The questionnaire consists of three parts. The first one is divided in four blocks, one block for each of the independent latent variables that are integrated into the model: quality service perception (20 questions), perceived value (6 questions), satisfaction (8 questions) and sense of belonging (6 questions). To answer these questions, a Likert scale from 1 to 7 is used, considering that 1 represents total disagreement or that the probability that it occurs is 0% and 7 represents a total agreement or that the probability that it happen is 100%.

## Method of analysis

The tool for this study is PLS-SEM for a multivariate analysis, and SmartPLS was the software used. The sense of belonging variable was constructed with six indicators, as explained above: WOM (SOB1), participations in events of the institution (SOB2), membership in institutional associations (SOB3), following in social networks (SOB4), donations for the institution (SOB5) and recruitment of grantees for the companies themselves (SOB6).

The first step in this research was to check the external loading factors of the reflective indicators of the sense of belonging variable. The indicator will remain part of the variable if its loading factor is higher than 0.7 (Carmines & Zeller, 1979), but a loading factor higher than 0.6 can also be considered part of the variable measure (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988).

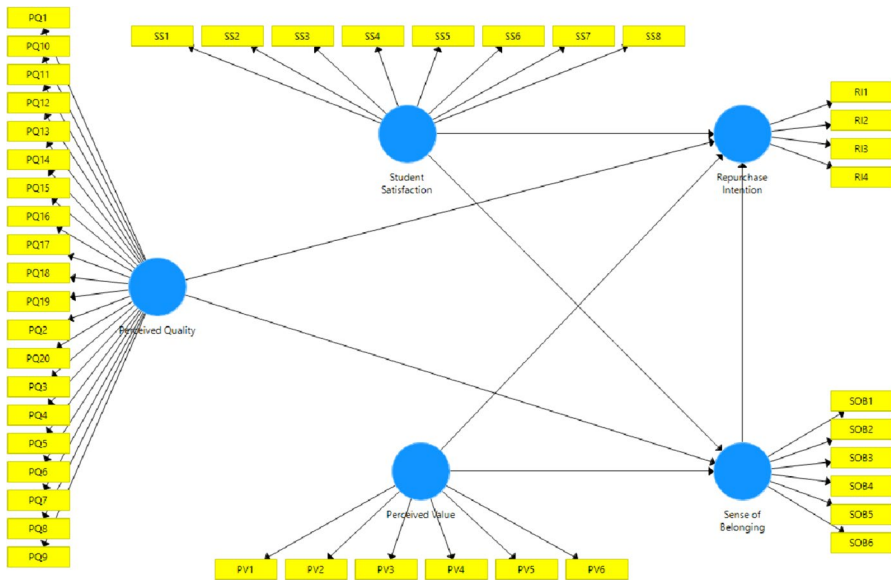


Fig. 1 General study model. Source: Matarranz (2021)

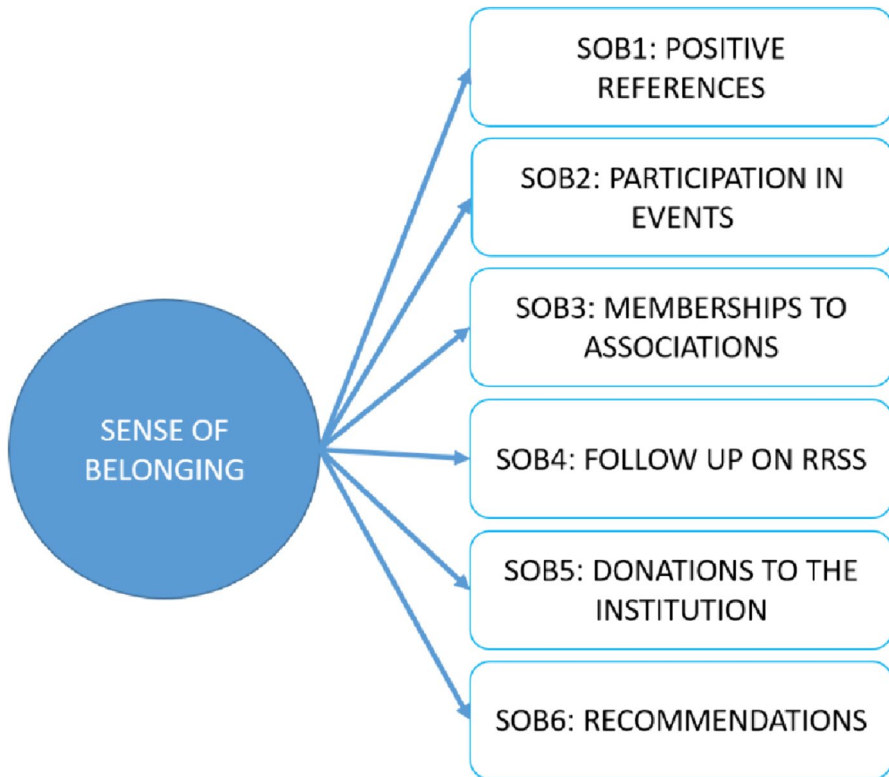
For the research, the tool based on PLS analysis was used to determine which indicators can be included in the sense of belonging variable. The conditions of the PLS technique require a prior analysis of the measurement of the model and its variables, showing the relationships between the latent variables and their measurements (indicators).

This work has its origin in a model that includes other variables also linked to repurchase intention. This model included perceived quality, perceived value, student satisfaction and sense of belonging to study how they influence students' intention to repurchase their educational institutions.

The research used as a reference for this article was a reflective analysis of the measurement model that included: the calculation of internal consistency reliability, convergent validity (examining the external loadings of the indicators to determine the average variance extracted (AVE) of each construct) and discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker criterion) (Hair et al., 2017) (Fig. 1).

However, the scope of this article will only be the calculation of the factor loadings for the sense of belonging variable. This first step will be a validation of the quality of the measure using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The variable to be assessed is valid when its indicators measure what it is really intended to measure and involves considering two types of validations: content and convergent, the former depending on the researcher's criteria and the latter related to the shared variance of the indicators for the latent variable (Aldás & Uriel, 2017).

To test whether the convergent validity of a model measuring pride of belonging is good, the mean of the standardised factor loadings should be around 0.7 or higher (Hair et al., 2017) and each one separately should be above 0.6 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). In the PLS, item reliability is assessed by examining the loadings and all



**Fig. 2** Reflective indicators of the sense of belonging variable. Source: Own elaboration

of them exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.7 (Carmines & Zeller, 1979). On the other hand, the average variance extracted (AVE) of the indicators for the latent variable should be greater than 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Another aspect to take into account in these indicators is their internal consistency (as part of the reliability of the tool), which can be assessed using Cronbachs' alpha and the composite reliability coefficient (CR), as defined (Aldás & Uriel, 2017).

## Results

Figure 2 and Tables 2 and 3 show the results of the external load indicators and the CA, RC and AVE that have been obtained for the case studied.

These results obtained through the PLS-SEM model, using SmartPLS, in a first evaluation yielded the convergent validity of the proposed model: since all the indicators that are part of the variable and the mean of the extracted variable (AVE) were values above 0.7 or very close to it (Carmines & Zeller, 1979; Hair et al., 2017), which would allow explaining more than 50% of the variance of the variable.

**Table 2** External loading factor of the reflective indicators of the sense of belonging variable

<b>SENSE OF BELONGING</b>	
<b>SOB1</b>	0.844
<b>SOB2</b>	0.817
<b>SOB3</b>	0.743
<b>SOB4</b>	0.781
<b>SOB5</b>	0.680
<b>SOB6</b>	0.860

**Table 3** Internal consistency and convergent validity for the sense of belonging construct

<b>Latent variables</b>	<b>Cronbach's Alpha (CA)</b>	<b>Composite reliability (CR)</b>	<b>Average variance extracted (AVE)</b>
Sense of belonging	0.879	0.908	0.628

Cronbach's Alpha, as a measure of internal consistency, and the composite reliability obtained will also serve to confirm the validity of the model for the measurement of this construct (Hair et al., 2017; Martínez Avila & Fierro Moreno, 2018). Therefore, these results allow us not to reject the hypotheses proposed above. Initially, for this work, the six planned components can be considered as possible parts of the sense of belonging that can be used to predict repurchase in the context of HE.

## Conclusions and discussion

This study focuses on measuring alumni's sense of belonging to their institutions and highlights the importance of this variable in various sectors. Sense of belonging has been related to Psychology and Sociology over time, but we intend that the sense of belonging can be associated with products, services or brands that have meaning for customers, providing them with status, differentiation, emotional ties, and loyalty to the client.

The indicators used to construct the sense of belonging variable may vary depending on the circumstances and nature of the customer-company relationship. This study aims that sense of belonging can be hold by six indicators: WOM, social media network (SNS) monitoring, event participants and social life, membership of alumni associations, grants for institutional development and recommending the recruitment of scholarship holders.

While different indicators may be required for specific relationships, some aspects should be universally represented when measuring ownership. These include following the brand or company on social media, participating in brand-sponsored events or being a member of brand clubs. Therefore, incorporating some of these indicators into the measurement of belonging sense is often advisable.



Sense of belonging can be a valuable approach to marketing as it aligns with the objectives of building customer loyalty and encouraging repeat purchases. As a driver, belonging can contribute to customer profitability. Therefore, companies should focus on fostering a sense of belonging among their customers. Managers can drive this objective through their marketing strategies and policies, thereby building long-lasting customer relationships.

Different industries and sectors can benefit from measuring sense of belonging, as higher levels of ownership are often associated with higher customer repurchase and retention. However, specific considerations will arise depending on the sector and the benefits that customers derive. For example, the benefits offered by banks or insurance companies may differ from those associated with brands in the automotive industry. Sense of belonging may also be influenced by factors such as the origin of the company and how customers can identify with it. These points highlight the need for further studies and research to explore the various aspects of belonging over time.

Equally, entrepreneurial projects or new business can gain more profitable if they get that customers are loyalty, and they have developed certain sense of belonging to the companies. Different factors can influence the sense of belonging, and investigating these factors can provide valuable information.

In conclusion, this research was focused on understanding alumni behaviour and proposes the sense of belonging as a predictive variable in marketing. The study establishes the internal consistency and validity of the variable using multivariate analysis techniques. Sense of belonging is defined by six indicators, five of which exceed the recommended threshold of 0.7 in the analysis of a sample of 359 respondents.

Sense of belonging is a latent variable that holds potential for studying customer behaviour. As marketing science continues to explore customer-company interactions, understanding the role of belonging can offer insights into loyalty and repurchase. While this study focuses on the HE sector, and the unique relationship between students and institutions, similar attitudes, preferences, and communication tools can be applied in other sectors, particularly where there is a long-standing customer-company relationship, high perceived value, and a sense of differentiation.

Therefore, it is recommended to incorporate these indicators in the evaluation of the variable for other studies in which a certain sense of belonging can be measured with all or, one of the six indicators shown in this article.

## Limitations and future lines of research

The fieldwork that serves as the basis for this article, although it has an international dimension, was limited to three institutions, which is a limitation as a basis for the study. This would give rise to the application of similar models to those used in other educational institutions. Furthermore, it raises the possibility of further exploring new dimensions of this sense, or pride of belonging and how it can be used in other areas. Brands such as Ferrari or Harley-Davidson have managed to develop customer pride in the brand over time and the management of this effect on the

customer could be positive. The development of this concept we believe can be useful, above all, to take initiatives that seek to foster the links and bonds of belonging of customers towards companies or service provider brands, mainly as an economically profitable decision, which helps the financial sustainability of these.

In this research, the variable sense of belonging has been modelled with six indicators or components that allow us to understand it. The components are a set of behaviors related to Alumni and we admit that others could be used for the model of this variable. However, given that some of our components are closely linked to new Marketing trends, such as the monitoring of social networks or WOM and, on the other hand, others are classic arguments of human behavior (membership, donation, recommendation...), we argue that using these components in future research will be interesting.

And finally, we hope that some entrepreneurial projects can obtain advantages since of a first moment if they can detect the following of customers in social media or membership for customer clubs.

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