



A New Approach to Sense of Belonging in the 21st Century: Virtual Belonging

21. Yüzyılda Aidiyet Duygusuna Yeni Bir Yaklaşım: Sanal Aidiyet

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Article Type: Review Article

Application Date: 25. 12. 2023

Accepted Date: 30. 12. 2023

To Cite This Article: Bayram, S. E. ve Barut, Y. (2023). A new approach to sense of belonging in the 21st century: Virtual belonging. *Kahramanmaraş İstiklal Üniversitesi Psikoloji Dergisi (KİÜ)*, 1(1), 1-13.

ABSTRACT: *The sense of belonging, which includes feelings such as belonging to a group, embracing the successes of the group, sharing the joys and sorrows of the group, being accepted by the group members, and having a respected position in the group, is divided into various variations and shows its effect in daily life today. One of these variations that occurred as a result of the changes and developments in many areas at the beginning of the 21st century is virtual belonging. In summary, virtual belonging can be evaluated as individuals assigning themselves a role in communities in virtual environments where they choose to be based on their interests and personal characteristics, seeing themselves as a part of the community, and their efforts to create unique value in their lives within this framework. The most suitable platforms where virtual belonging can be observed are undoubtedly social media platforms in digital environments. YouTube and Twitch are at the forefront of these social media platforms. Just as it is important to meet the need for belonging functionally and healthily, it is also important to meet the feeling of "virtual belonging", one of the perceptions of belonging that have emerged today, especially in ensuring individual happiness and psychological balance. In addition, this article is a review study that includes a new concept explanation. First of all, the research examined the traditional sense of belonging. Then the concept of virtual belonging was explained. Since the concept of virtual belonging is new and it is a concept that is intended to bring the psychology literature by researchers, the concept was introduced in the relevant section.*

Keywords: *Belonging, social media, virtual belonging, virtual platform*

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ÖZET: Bir gruba mensup olma, mensup olduğu grubun başarılarını benimseme, grubun sevinçlerine ve üzüntülerine ortak olma, grup üyeleri tarafından kabul edilme ve grupta saygın bir konuma sahip olma gibi hisleri barındıran aidiyet duygusu, günümüzde çeşitli varyasyonlara bölünerek günlük hayatta etkisini göstermektedir. 21. yüzyılın başlarında birçok alanda yaşanan değişimler ve gelişmeler neticesinde gerçekleşen bu varyasyonlardan birisi de sanal aidiyettir. Sanal aidiyet, özet olarak bireylerin kendi ilgileri ve kişisel özelliklerine göre bulunmayı tercih ettikleri sanal ortamlardaki topluluklarda kendilerine rol biçmeleri, kendilerini söz konusu topluluğun bir parçası olarak görmeleri ve bu çerçevede hayatlarında özgün değer oluşturma çabaları olarak değerlendirilebilir. Sanal aidiyetin gözlemlenebileceği en uygun platformlar, şüphesiz dijital ortamlardaki sosyal medya platformlarıdır ve bu sosyal medya platformları arasında YouTube ve Twitch ön plandadır. Aidiyet ihtiyacının işlevsel olarak ve sağlıklı bir şekilde karşılanması ne kadar önemliyse günümüzde ortaya çıkan bu aidiyet algılarından birisi olan “sanal aidiyet” duygusunun da bu şekilde amaca uygun biçimde karşılanması, özellikle bireysel mutluluğun ve psikolojik dengenin sağlanması bağlamında önemlidir. Yeni bir kavrama açıklık getiren derleme çalışması niteliğindeki bu makalede de öncelikle geleneksel aidiyet duygusuna dair incelenen araştırmalara yer verilmiştir. Sonrasında ise sanal aidiyet kavramı açıklanmıştır. Sanal aidiyet kavramı yeni bir kavram olduğu ve araştırmacı tarafından psikoloji literatürüne kazandırılması amaçlanan bir kavram olduğu için ilgili kısımda kavram tanıtımı gerçekleştirilmiştir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Aidiyet, sanal aidiyet, sanal platform, sosyal medya

1. INTRODUCTION

The sense of belonging is the whole feeling of belonging to a group, embracing the goals and achievements of the group, being accepted in the group, and having a place in the group (Maslow, 1954). According to Hagerty et al. (1992), belonging is one's experience of being valued, needed, or important relative to other people, groups, organizations, environments, and spiritual dimensions. In this context, it is defined as living in harmony with other people, groups, organizations, environments, or spiritual dimensions through shared or complementary characteristics. A sense of belonging is a subjective feeling that includes a deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences. It contributes to people's mental, physical, social, economic, and behavioral outcomes (Allen et al., 2021).

Belonging not only makes people good but also does people well and contributes to well-being. It contributes to people in terms of physical and mental health benefits, positive relationships with people, and success in academics and work. With all these, belonging contributes to people's well-being (Pogosyan, 2021). Belonging is crucial in human health, behavior, and overall experience. Additionally, the absence of a sense of belonging is synonymous with negative constructs like loneliness, disconnection, and isolation. There are four crucial components of belonging which are competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions (Allen et al., 2021). Figure 1 shows these four interrelated components of belonging:

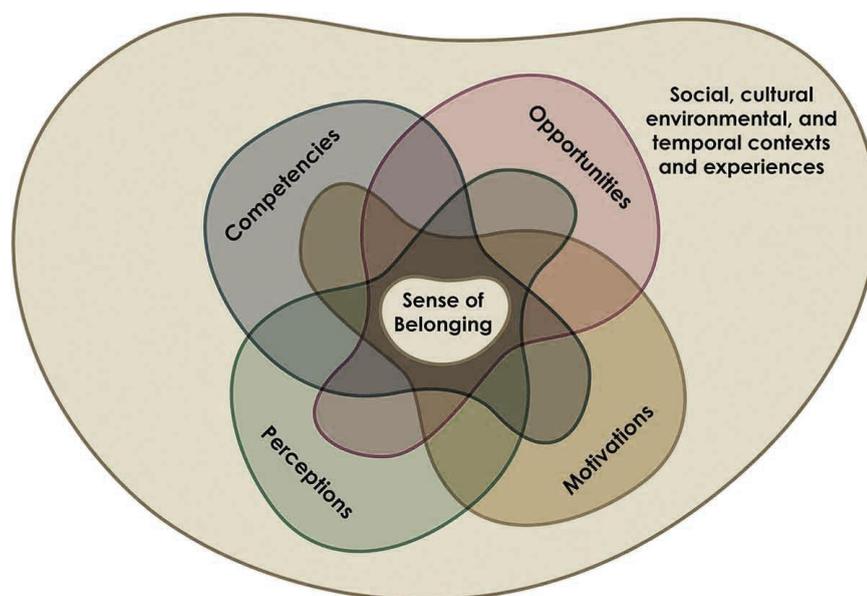


Figure 1: *Four interrelated components of belonging (Allen et al., 2021)*

Allen et al. (2021) emphasized that belonging is a dynamic feeling and experience that occurs from four interrelated components that stem from and are nurtured by the systems individuals are a part of:

- 1) **Competencies for Belonging:** This component of belonging encompasses the skills and abilities that individuals possess. These competencies play a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging. When individuals have the necessary skills to engage in social interactions, communicate effectively, and build relationships, it enhances their ability to connect with others and establish a sense of belonging.
- 2) **Opportunities to Belong:** The second component of belonging focuses on the availability of opportunities that enable individuals to belong. This component involves removing or reducing barriers that may hinder individuals from fully participating and engaging in social groups or communities. By creating inclusive environments, providing equal access, and promoting diversity, opportunities to belong are enhanced, allowing individuals to feel included and valued.
- 3) **Motivations to Belong:** Motivation plays a significant role in individuals' sense of belonging. This component refers to the inner drivers that individuals possess, which enable them to actively seek out connections and engage in social interactions. When individuals are motivated to belong, they are more likely to put in the effort to establish and maintain meaningful relationships, contributing to their overall sense of belonging.
- 4) **Perceptions of Belonging:** The final component of belonging centers around individuals' thoughts, interpretations, and responses when engaging in positive or negative interactions and connections. It involves the cognitive aspect of belonging, including the perceptions individuals have about their sense of belonging and how they interpret feedback from others. Positive perceptions of belonging lead to increased self-esteem, confidence, and satisfaction with social connections, reinforcing individuals' sense of belonging.

Belonging's four crucial components given above mutually reinforce and influence each other as individuals navigate various social, environmental, and temporal contexts (Allen et al., 2021). These components interact with and are influenced by relevant social environments, ultimately leading to consistently high levels of belonging that contribute to positive life outcomes. These four components of belonging - competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions - are interconnected and influence individuals' overall sense of belonging. By developing and nurturing these components, individuals can experience a stronger sense of belonging, leading to positive social connections, increased well-being, and enhanced life outcomes. Understanding and addressing these components can guide the creation of environments and communities that promote a deep and meaningful sense of belonging for individuals.

Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that humans possess an inherent desire for interpersonal attachments and a sense of belonging. The authors explore the psychological, social, and evolutionary factors that contribute to this fundamental need. They review a wide range of research findings, conceptual frameworks, and theories related to the need to belong. They discuss how the need for social connection influences various aspects of human behavior, including emotional well-being, mental health, self-esteem, and social interactions. The authors emphasize that the lack of belonging can have

detrimental effects on individuals, leading to feelings of loneliness, social isolation, and psychological distress. Furthermore, the authors highlight the importance of social bonds and relationships in promoting resilience, happiness, and overall psychological well-being. They argue that satisfying the need to belong is crucial for individuals to thrive and fulfill their potential. It has greatly influenced the understanding of human motivation, emphasizing the significance of social connections and belongingness in shaping individuals' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Maslow (1943) presents the theory of human motivation, which has had a crucial impact on the field of psychology. Maslow proposes a hierarchy of needs, with the need for belonging and social connection being fundamental motivations driving human behavior. Maslow's theory suggests that people have a hierarchy of needs that they strive to fulfill, with physiological needs at the base, followed by safety needs, belongingness and love needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs at the top. The need for belonging is placed within the social needs category, emphasizing its importance for human well-being. The article explores how the need for belonging influences individuals' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Maslow argues that when the need for belonging is not adequately met, individuals may experience feelings of loneliness, isolation, and a lack of purpose. Conversely, fulfilling the need for belonging can bring about a sense of connection, acceptance, and belongingness, contributing to overall psychological well-being. Maslow's work shapes people's understanding of human motivation and the significance of belongingness in people's lives.

Baumeister and Tice (1990) explore the relationship between anxiety and social exclusion. They investigate how the experience of social exclusion can elicit feelings of anxiety and the potential consequences of this emotional state on individuals' well-being and behavior. They conduct a thorough review of existing research and propose a theoretical framework to understand the link between anxiety and social exclusion. They argue that social exclusion can be a significant source of anxiety, as it threatens people's need for social connection and belongingness. The authors discuss how anxiety resulting from social exclusion can lead to various negative outcomes, both in terms of psychological well-being and behavior. They highlight that people who experience social exclusion may exhibit defensive behaviors, such as self-protective strategies, aggression, or withdrawal, to cope with their anxiety. By examining the complex interplay between anxiety and social exclusion, Baumeister and Tice (1990) contribute to understanding the psychological processes when people feel excluded from social groups or contexts. Their research sheds light on the potential consequences of social exclusion on people's emotional state and subsequent behaviors. The findings of this article have implications for understanding and addressing the negative impact of social exclusion on individuals' mental health and social functioning. By highlighting the link between anxiety and social exclusion, Baumeister and Tice's (1990) work underscores the importance of fostering inclusive environments that promote social connection and reduce anxiety-inducing experiences. In general, Baumeister and Tice's (1990) work provides valuable insights into the relationship between anxiety and social exclusion. Their research

contributes to understanding the emotional and behavioral consequences of social exclusion, emphasizing the need for interventions and strategies to mitigate the negative effects and promote inclusive social dynamics.

2. METHOD

This article is a review study that includes a new concept explanation. First of all, the research examined the traditional sense of belonging. Then the concept of virtual belonging was explained. Since the concept of virtual belonging is new and it is a concept that is intended to bring the psychology literature by researchers, the concept was introduced in the relevant section.

3. SENSE of VIRTUAL BELONGING

Technological advances since the 21st century have had an impact on many areas. Social media platforms are one of the most important areas. The development and change of social media platforms have had a huge impact on society. This effect has caused various evolutions in many needs of people. One of these needs is people's need to belong (Maslow, 1943) and this need has undergone significant evolution because of these various outcomes.

In the contemporary era, the advent of digital technologies has given rise to brand-new avenues for fulfilling the fundamental human need for belonging (Pogosyan, 2021). Particularly among the younger generation, individuals are increasingly seeking and establishing connections and a sense of belonging in virtual environments, facilitated by various social media platforms and other online platforms. As social structure evolves, it is evident that the concept of belonging is also undergoing significant transformation. Traditional forms of belonging, such as membership in physical communities or social groups, are now being complemented, and in some cases even replaced, by virtual forms of belonging. These virtual environments provide individuals with opportunities to connect, interact, and establish social bonds, transcending the limitations of physical proximity and expanding the possibilities for social connection.

Young people have embraced these virtual environments as platforms for fulfilling their need for belonging. Through social media platforms, online communities, and other digital platforms, they can create and maintain social connections, share experiences and interests, and forge a sense of identity and belonging within these virtual communities. The emergence of these brand-new belongings in the form of virtual environments has significant implications for understanding social dynamics and the fulfillment of the need for belonging. It challenges conventional notions of belonging that were primarily tied to physical proximity and face-to-face interactions. Instead, individuals now can cultivate belongingness in a realm that transcends geographical boundaries and temporal constraints. Moreover, these virtual environments offer unique opportunities for individuals to explore and express their identities, find like-minded individuals, and establish connections that may not have been possible in traditional physical communities. The virtual world provides a platform for individuals to connect based

on shared interests, affinities, and values, offering a sense of belonging that is not limited by traditional demographic or geographic constraints.

Hall (2014) suggested that when people meet their need to belong, they should examine their similar characteristics to other people, rather than their different characteristics, and look for ways to belong within this framework. It would be natural for people to meet their belonging needs within this framework. However, today people do not necessarily have to find other people in physical spaces. Many virtual environments and social media platforms that have emerged within the framework of technological developments have created an important opportunity for people to meet their belonging needs through virtual means. In this context, the existence of the concept of virtual belonging, which is the subject of this article, emerges.

The concept of virtual belonging encompasses the phenomenon in which individuals actively assign themselves a role within the virtual communities they select, based on their interests and personal characteristics. In this context, individuals perceive themselves as integral members of the chosen virtual community, forging a sense of identity and connection. Moreover, they contribute to the community by creating and offering unique value to other members. Virtual belonging involves the deliberate process of self-identification and role assignment within the virtual communities that people engage with. By aligning themselves with specific communities that resonate with their interests, values, and preferences, individuals actively participate in shaping their sense of belonging. This active involvement allows individuals to construct a meaningful and purposeful connection with the virtual community, fostering a sense of inclusion and shared identity. In addition to identifying with the virtual community, individuals create and contribute unique value to enrich the experiences of other members. This value can manifest in various forms, such as sharing knowledge, providing emotional support, or offering creative contributions. By actively engaging and contributing to the community, individuals reinforce their sense of belonging and establish themselves as valuable members of the virtual environment.

This concept of virtual belonging highlights the dynamic nature of online interactions and the evolving role of digital platforms in facilitating social connection. It emphasizes the active agency of individuals in selecting and engaging with virtual communities, allowing them to craft their sense of belonging. By doing so, individuals can find a space where they feel understood, accepted, and valued for their unique qualities and contributions. Understanding the dynamics of virtual belonging has important implications for individuals, society, and the design of online platforms. It offers insights into how individuals seek and cultivate a sense of belonging in the digital realm, and the potential benefits and challenges associated with virtual communities. Moreover, acknowledging the value that individuals bring to these communities can inform the development of strategies to foster a positive and supportive virtual environment that nurtures a sense of belonging and encourages meaningful contributions.

Elitaş and Keskin (2014) provide an insightful explanation of virtual belonging as the commitment individuals exhibit towards the virtual codes that govern their interactions within the context of their evolving perceptions of reality. Virtual belonging involves individuals' active engagement and alignment with the norms, values, and expectations that define the virtual environment in which they participate. As individuals navigate the digital realm and interact with others through various online platforms, they become part of a dynamic social fabric that is shaped by virtual codes. These virtual codes encompass the rules, behaviors, and shared understandings that guide interactions within the virtual community. People's commitment to these virtual codes is influenced by their changing perceptions of reality. As individuals engage with the digital world, their understanding of what constitutes reality expands to include the virtual dimension. They recognize that the virtual environment is not a separate entity detached from reality, but rather an integral part of their lived experiences. This realization prompts individuals to invest themselves in the virtual codes that govern their interactions, as they acknowledge the significance and impact of the virtual realm on their sense of belonging.

The most important virtual environment where virtual belonging can be observed consists of social media platforms. Social media platforms are virtual communities that affect daily life, mediate people's informal interactions, and change the rules and conditions of social interaction (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). The two most critical social media platforms today, where virtual belonging can be observed among social media platforms, are Twitch and YouTube. These two platforms offer content producers the opportunity to broadcast live and earn money from their content; they also offer their viewers the opportunity to watch live broadcasts interactively and donate and support the content creators they follow.

By examining the interactions between content creators and viewers on the two platforms over the years, it has been observed that a connection has been observed between these two groups over time, this connection provides internal motivation, and the audience strengthens this connection with financial support to content creators. On these two prominent platforms, viewers can turn their support for content producers into financial support through various functions of the platform such as donations and subscriptions. As a result of financial support actions like donations, subscriptions, etc., each content creator has a variety of personalized rewards and ways to say thanks to their audiences. With these methods, the audience feels important, honored, and valuable in the community. It can be stated that because of all these outputs, a sense of belonging is formed. The belonging observed in this context differs from the concept of belonging mentioned in the previous sections of this article with some features. In the sense of belonging here "virtual belonging", there are no obligations such as people coming together physically, having met face to face before, or having a common past. The outputs of all these mentioned elements can be provided in the same way in a short time or suddenly by coming together on a virtual platform through people's electronic devices (such as computers, tablets, and phones).

Along with these differences, virtual belonging also has similarities with traditional belonging. One of these similarities is that there are some symbols, common slogans, and speech styles adopted by the community. On these platforms, people can express themselves with various elements provided by platform-specific mechanisms. For example, one of these mechanisms that the Twitch platform has is emotes. Through emotes, people can express what they want to say or convey their emotions using these expressions using a single or fewer characters. For example, Table 1 shows the Twitch platform's emotes.

Table 1: *Emotes of Twitch and Their Meanings* (Emotes, n.d.)

Emote	Emote's Meaning
 (Kappa)	An expression of sarcasm or sarcastic humor
 (HeyGuys)	A greeting emote is used by people new to the chat
 (LUL)	Laughter. The emote version of Laugh Out Loud
 (CoolStoryBob)	Used sarcastically when someone is saying something unimportant or babbling
 (4Head)	Laughter, but in a slightly mocking way
 (Jebaited)	For when someone is "baited or tricked"
 (NotLikeThis)	Used to express dismay at an outcome, usually due to bad luck or a misplay
 (WutFace)	Used to express shock, disgust, or to note a loud, disruptive noise on stream
 (SeemsGood)	Casually agreeing that something is good or okay. Twitch's own "thumbs up"
 (ResidentSleeper)	For when there's a lull in action, a boring cut scene or event, or when someone literally falls asleep
 (TwitchUnity)	Twitch Unity is Twitch's way of celebrating diversity and inclusion in the community

Within the Twitch platform, apart from the general emotes provided, content producers can create their own unique emotes. These custom emotes, exclusive to each content producer, gradually become the shared language of the community (Emotes, n.d.). They allow individuals to express their emotions and thoughts in a distinctive and meaningful way. Depending on the content creator's preferences, these emotes can be given to the audience as rewards for various achievements, such as subscribing for a specific period or attaining a certain loyalty score. By granting followers the privilege of using these special emotes, content creators foster a sense of belonging within their virtual community. When viewers utilize these emotes, they experience a deepened connection to the content producer's

community, which boosts their motivation and establishes meaningful connections with the content creator and other community members. This sense of belonging and connection contributes to the existence of virtual belonging within the Twitch platform.

These unique emotes serve as a form of symbolic representation, allowing individuals to communicate and interact in a way that is specific to the virtual community. The shared language created through these emotes enhances the sense of unity and common identity within the community. As individuals use these special emotes, they signal their affiliation and engagement with the content producer's community, strengthening their bonds and fostering a deeper sense of belonging.

So, the presence of custom emotes within the Twitch platform plays a significant role in fostering virtual belonging. These emotes, created uniquely by content producers, form the basis of a shared language within the community. When viewers utilize these emotes and earn the privilege to use them, they experience a sense of belonging, increase motivation, and establish meaningful connections with the content producer and other community members. Thus, the existence of virtual belonging is evident within the framework of this context. Another context in which can be seen the effect of virtual belonging is the platform's channel point mechanism. "Channel Points" is a customizable points program that allows broadcasters to reward members of their community with a variety of benefits, including some perks typically reserved for subscribers. Channel points are a way to show followers' support and to gain recognition, from watching the channel. The points which are earned by followers are channel-specific and accumulate automatically when followers watch that channel while logged in. The more support the followers give, the more points they earn.

Virtual belonging also manifests in the context of a platform's channel point mechanism, which serves as a tangible representation of the impact of virtual communities. One such example is the utilization of "Channel Points," a customizable points program designed to reward members of a broadcaster's community with various benefits, often including perks typically reserved for subscribers. Through the channel point system, followers can demonstrate their support for a broadcaster's channel and gain recognition within the community. As followers engage with the channel by watching its content while logged in, they automatically accumulate channel-specific points. The more support and engagement followers provide, the more points they earn. This mechanism serves multiple purposes within the virtual community. Firstly, it allows followers to actively participate in the channel's activities and fosters a sense of belonging by rewarding their commitment and engagement. By accumulating channel points, followers feel a sense of achievement and validation, as their support is acknowledged and appreciated.

Moreover, the channel point system creates a unique opportunity for broadcasters to strengthen their relationship with their community. By offering exclusive benefits and rewards through channel points, broadcasters can further incentivize follower engagement and deepen their connection with their

audience. This reciprocal exchange of support and recognition enhances the sense of belonging within the virtual community, as followers feel valued and appreciated for their contributions. Overall, the channel point mechanism exemplifies how virtual belonging is experienced and reinforced in online platforms. It provides followers with a means to actively participate, demonstrate support, and gain recognition within a virtual community. By offering a tangible and customizable rewards system, channels can foster a sense of belonging and encourage meaningful engagement among their followers. Understanding and leveraging such mechanisms can contribute to the development of strategies that promote healthy and functional forms of virtual belonging within online communities.

4. DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

People need to meet their belonging needs functionally and healthily for both their physiological and psychological health (Allen et al., 2021; Maslow, 1943; Pogosyan, 2021). People must fulfill these needs functionally and healthily to promote their overall health and happiness. Extensive research has underscored the significance of belonging in human lives, highlighting its profound impact on various aspects of well-being. Belonging is a fundamental human need that encompasses the desire to connect with others, form meaningful relationships, and establish a sense of inclusion and acceptance. When individuals experience a sense of belonging, it positively influences their physiological health by reducing stress levels, enhancing immune system functioning, and promoting overall physical well-being. Additionally, belonging fulfills crucial psychological needs, such as the need for companionship, support, and validation, which are essential for individuals' mental and emotional equilibrium. Numerous studies have emphasized the profound implications of belonging for individuals' overall health and happiness. Researchers have documented the correlations between a sense of belonging and improved mental health outcomes, including lower rates of depression, anxiety, and other psychological disorders. Moreover, individuals who feel a strong sense of belonging are more likely to experience higher levels of life satisfaction, self-esteem, and overall psychological well-being. To meet their belonging needs effectively, individuals must seek out healthy and functional means of connection and integration. This necessitates cultivating authentic relationships, engaging in meaningful social interactions, and actively participating in communities that align with their values, interests, and aspirations. By actively pursuing functional and healthy forms of belonging, individuals can create a supportive and nurturing social environment that contributes to their overall physiological and psychological health.

Therefore, it is paramount that the need to belong, being a fundamental and crucial need, is fulfilled comprehensively in various aspects of individuals' lives. It is incumbent upon experts and researchers to develop diverse strategies to address this need effectively. To do so, it is crucial to examine the evolution of the need to belong in contemporary times and conduct thorough research in this domain. The concept of "virtual belonging," as explored in this study, arises as a significant outcome of the ongoing changes and developments in the understanding of belonging. These changes have shaped the way people seek and experience a sense of belonging. However, it is important to note that the evolution

of belonging may have led to other outcomes that are yet to be fully explored and understood. Hence, it becomes imperative to scientifically investigate these outcomes and their implications. Understanding the concept of "virtual belonging" introduced in this article holds great significance. This study aims to contribute to the existing literature by introducing and examining the concept of "virtual belonging." By shedding light on the dynamics of virtual belonging, this research seeks to expand understanding of this evolving phenomenon. Moreover, it is crucial to explore the manifestations and implications of virtual belonging in various domains of individuals' daily lives, encompassing both personal and professional contexts. Consequently, it becomes essential to incorporate rigorous scientific studies that delve into the intricacies of virtual belonging. By conducting in-depth research and analysis, it can be better comprehended the complexities of virtual belonging and its impact on individuals and society. This knowledge can serve as a foundation for developing effective strategies and interventions that foster healthy and functional forms of virtual belonging. These strategies should be informed by empirical findings and aimed at promoting positive online interactions, strengthening social connections, and ensuring individuals' well-being in the virtual realm.

In conclusion, the fulfillment of the need to belong holds immense importance for individuals' holistic health. The concept of "virtual belonging" emerges as a significant outcome of the ongoing evolution of belonging. By introducing this concept and conducting further research, it is possible to gain deeper insights into the dynamics of virtual belonging. It is vital to explore the implications of virtual belonging across various spheres of life, integrate scientific studies, and develop strategies that facilitate healthy and functional forms of virtual belonging.

Conflict of Interest Declaration

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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