

The Invisible Barrier to Belonging: Perceived Discrimination Among International Students in Türkiye

Aidiyetin Önündeki Görünmez Engel: Türkiye’de Öğrenim Gören Uluslararası Öğrenciler Arasında Algılanan Ayrımcılık

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ABSTRACT

In an era of rapidly increasing international student mobility, higher education institutions’ ability to achieve their internationalization goals depends on strengthening students’ sense of belonging to the campus environment and to the host country. This study aims to examine the relationship between perceived discrimination and the general sense of belonging among international students studying in Türkiye and to determine the predictive effect of perceived discrimination on belonging. Designed using a correlational survey model, one of the quantitative research methods, the study’s sample consists of 317 international students studying at Sivas Cumhuriyet University. Data were collected using the “Students’ Perceived Discrimination Scale” and the “General Belongingness Scale.” The findings indicated that international students generally perceive a low level of discrimination and possess a medium-to-high sense of belonging. The correlation and hierarchical regression analyses revealed a negative and significant relationship between perceived discrimination and the general sense of belonging. While demographic control variables such as gender, scholarship status, and high school education location had no significant predictive effect on belonging, perceived discrimination alone explained approximately 13% of the variance in the general sense of belonging and emerged as a strong predictor of it. This finding indicates that international students’ sense of belonging is shaped less by objective or demographic characteristics than by their subjective perceptions of how they are treated within the campus environment. In conclusion, perceived discrimination stands out as an important risk factor hindering students’ social integration. In this context, it is critical for higher education institutions to develop inclusive and anti-discrimination policies in order to support students’ sense of belonging.

Keywords: International students, Perceived discrimination, Sense of belonging, Higher education, Social adaptation

Gerçek E., Gülaçtı F., and Ayık A. (2026). The Invisible Barrier to Belonging: Perceived Discrimination Among International Students in Türkiye. *Journal of Higher Education and Science/Yükseköğretim ve Bilim Dergisi*, 16(2), 412-424. <https://doi.org/10.5961/higheredusci.1907532>

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Received/Geliş Tarihi : 11.03.2026

Accepted/Kabul Tarihi : 05.08.2026



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ÖZ

Uluslararası öğrenci hareketliliğinin hızla arttığı günümüzde, yükseköğretim kurumlarının uluslararasılaşma hedeflerine ulaşabilmesi, öğrencilerin kampüs ortamına ve ev sahibi ülkeye duydukları aidiyet hissinin güçlendirilmesine bağlıdır. Bu araştırmanın amacı, Türkiye’de öğrenim gören uluslararası öğrencilerin algılanan ayrımcılık düzeyleri ile genel aidiyet duyguları arasındaki ilişkiyi incelemek ve ayrımcılık algısının aidiyet üzerindeki yordayıcı etkisini belirlemektir. Nicel araştırma yöntemlerinden ilişkisel tarama modeli ile desenlenen çalışmanın örneklemini, Sivas Cumhuriyet Üniversitesinde öğrenim gören 317 uluslararası öğrenci oluşturmaktadır. Veriler, “Öğrencilerin Ayrımcılık Algısı Ölçeği” ve “Genel Aidiyet Ölçeği” kullanılarak toplanmıştır. Araştırma bulguları, uluslararası öğrencilerin genel olarak düşük düzeyde ayrımcılık algıladıklarını ve orta-yüksek düzeyde aidiyet duygusuna sahip olduklarını göstermiştir. Yapılan korelasyon ve hiyerarşik regresyon analizleri sonucunda, algılanan ayrımcılık ile genel aidiyet duygusu arasında negatif yönlü ve anlamlı bir ilişki tespit edilmiştir. Cinsiyet, burs durumu ve lise eğitim yeri gibi demografik kontrol değişkenlerinin aidiyet düzeyleri üzerinde anlamlı bir yordayıcı etkisi bulunmamıştır. Buna karşın, algılanan ayrımcılık düzeyinin genel aidiyet duygusundaki varyansın yaklaşık %13’ünü tek başına açıkladığı ve aidiyetin güçlü bir yordayıcısı olduğu belirlenmiştir. Bu bulgu, uluslararası öğrencilerin aidiyet duygusunun nesnel ve demografik özelliklerden ziyade, kampüs ortamında gördükleri muameleye ilişkin öznel algılarıyla biçimlendiğine işaret etmektedir. Sonuç olarak, algılanan ayrımcılık, öğrencilerin toplumsal bütünleşmesini engelleyen önemli bir risk faktörü olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, yükseköğretim kurumlarının kapsayıcı ve ayrımcılığı önleyici politikalar geliştirmesi, öğrencilerin aidiyet duygularını desteklemek adına kritik önem taşımaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Uluslararası öğrenciler, Algılanan ayrımcılık, Aidiyet duygusu, Yükseköğretim, Sosyal uyum

INTRODUCTION

Although the concept of an international student carries certain common features, its definition can differ from country to country and from institution to institution. According to the definition jointly adopted since 2015 by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), the OECD, and EUROSTAT, an international student is an individual who physically crosses the border between two countries for the purpose of education and whose destination country differs from their country of origin (UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2024). The OECD (2023), adopting a more functional framework, defines an international student as a person who has the right to participate, with a visa or special permit, in an accredited educational program in a country of which they are not a citizen. In the Turkish context, an international student is characterized as a person who is not a citizen of the Republic of Türkiye and who studies, with a student visa or special permits, at an educational institution of any level and field (YÖK, 2024).

In Türkiye, the term “international student” began to be used in place of “foreign student” starting in 2012 (Demirhan, 2017). The main rationale for this conceptual shift was to move away from the othering connotations evoked by the term “foreign” and to emphasize instead the contribution that students from different countries make to the international identity of universities (Özkan & Acar Güvendir, 2015). For this reason, using the term “foreign student” when citing earlier studies in literature reviews is not regarded as a conceptual error.

International students’ pursuit of education in different countries provides multifaceted benefits, such as increasing cultural interaction, gaining academic experience, and strengthening

cooperation between countries. International student mobility not only offers economic and cultural contributions but also lays the groundwork for students to establish long-term ties with the countries in which they study and to become voluntary cultural ambassadors of these countries after graduation (Küçükşen, 2020). In this period, in which global mobility is being restructured in the post-pandemic era, the presence of international students on university campuses encourages educational programs to acquire an international dimension and brings about transformation in the academic, administrative, and social structures of higher education institutions (Ramachandran, 2011).

Because international student mobility enhances mutual understanding and cooperation and is therefore regarded as an important instrument of foreign policy and public diplomacy, it has brought about strategic policy changes worldwide. In Türkiye as well, policies toward international students have developed considerably in recent years; in particular, with the restructuring of the “Türkiye Scholarships” system, a comprehensive international student policy supported by public resources has been established (Kalkınma Bakanlığı, 2015; YÖK, 2024). As a result of these policies, the number of international students in Türkiye, which was 106,479 in the 2016–2017 academic year, has increased approximately 3.8-fold over the past decade and reached approximately 350,000 students from 198 different countries as of the 2025–2026 academic year (YÖK, 2026). With this figure, Türkiye ranks among the top ten countries worldwide in hosting international students and is positioned above the OECD average in terms of the share of international students within the total student population. YÖK’s 2024–2028 Internationalization Strategy Document has

placed, among its medium- and long-term goals, the aim of raising this number first to 500,000 and then to one million (YÖK, 2024).

This rapid growth makes it necessary to examine international students' educational experiences in Türkiye in a multidimensional manner. For students to develop positive attitudes toward the country in which they study and to establish lasting ties, it is critically important that they develop a sense of belonging to the society in which they live. Belonging is a multidimensional concept that refers to an individual's perception of themselves as a meaningful and valued part of a group, institution, or community, and it plays a fundamental role in the individual's identity development and interpersonal relationships (Allen et al., 2024; Duru, 2015; Mohamad & Manning, 2024). The development of a sense of belonging is closely related to the individual's feeling that they are accepted and valued in their environment (Abdalla, 2024).

When international students begin to live in a new country, they may encounter various difficulties such as language, cultural adaptation, social relationships, economic conditions, and bureaucratic processes. Among these difficulties, the experiences of discrimination to which students are exposed—or believe they are exposed—occupy an important place (Şeker & Akman, 2016). Perceived discrimination refers to an individual's subjective evaluations that unfair and negative attitudes are being directed toward them; this perception can have negative effects on the individual's psychological adjustment and social integration (Schmitt et al., 2014; Xu & Li, 2025). Recent studies conducted after the pandemic reveal the persistence of the negative effects of perceived discrimination on international students' sense of belonging, academic motivation, and psychological well-being (Liu et al., 2023).

When the literature on international students in Türkiye is examined, two notable gaps stand out. First, the majority of existing studies are content to describe students' academic, social, and cultural problems; they mostly address perceived discrimination and general belonging as a sub-dimension of concepts such as acculturative stress, social support, or adaptation, and do not directly model the relationship between these two variables (Ajjan, 2026; Akdağ & Koçak, 2020; Alatas & Sayimer, 2025; Sever & Özdemir, 2020; Taylan, 2019; Türel, 2021). Second, and more importantly, although the negative relationship between discrimination and belonging has largely been demonstrated in Western and English-speaking contexts (the USA, the UK, Australia, and Germany) in the international literature, it remains unclear whether this pattern holds in the same way in a structurally different context. Türkiye offers a distinctive case in this respect: it is a non-Western host country, it shares a common religious and cultural background with a significant portion of its international students, and it has, within a short time, become one of the top ten countries hosting the most students in the world. Therefore, testing the relationship in this context means not the mere replication of an expected finding but the testing of theoretical generalizability in a non-Western setting. To address these gaps, the present study aims to test, using a hierarchical model, not only whether

a relationship exists between discrimination and belonging but also whether perceived discrimination makes a unique contribution to explaining belonging beyond demographic and structural variables. Thus, by revealing whether international students' belonging is more strongly influenced by objective/ demographic characteristics or by subjective perceptions of discrimination, the study aims to make an evidence-based contribution to both the national literature and Türkiye's internationalization policies. Accordingly, the study examined the predictive effect of international students' perceived discrimination levels on their general sense of belonging.

In line with this general aim, the study sought answers to the following questions: (1) What are the levels of perceived discrimination and general belonging among international students? (2) Is there a significant relationship between perceived discrimination and the general sense of belonging? (3) When demographic variables (gender, scholarship status, and high school education location) are controlled, does perceived discrimination significantly predict the general sense of belonging? Within the framework of these questions, the study's hypotheses were formulated as follows: H1: There is a negative and significant relationship between perceived discrimination and the general sense of belonging. H2: Even after demographic control variables are taken into account, perceived discrimination is a significant and negative predictor of the general sense of belonging.

Perceived Discrimination

Discrimination is a multidimensional phenomenon that refers to individuals or groups being subjected to differential and unfair treatment because of certain characteristics they possess. Such treatment can push individuals into a disadvantaged position in social, economic, cultural, or institutional domains. According to Doğanay (2018), discrimination is the situation in which an individual is excluded because of their characteristics, is subjected to negative attitudes and behaviors, or develops the perception that they will encounter such behaviors. In this respect, discrimination encompasses not only concrete behaviors but also the individual's subjective evaluations.

The concept of perceived discrimination, in turn, refers to an individual's perceptions and beliefs that unfair and negative attitudes are being directed toward them by other individuals or groups on the basis of the group to which they belong or believe they belong (Sanchez & Brock, 1996). This perception may be shaped by various characteristics such as language, religion, ethnicity, skin color, gender, socioeconomic level, cultural structure, or social status. When an individual associates the negative attitudes and behaviors they believe they have been subjected to with these characteristics, the perception of discrimination is strengthened (Montes, 2010). The literature emphasizes that perceived discrimination is at least as decisive as actual discrimination, because an individual's emotional reactions and behaviors are guided by this subjective perception rather than by objective reality (Schmitt et al., 2014).

At the root of discrimination there often lie the distinction between "us" and "the other" and the prejudices that feed this

distinction; in this process, individuals tend to exclude people or groups they regard as different from themselves by attributing negative qualities to them (Karataş, 2002). For international students in particular, this othering most often manifests itself through covert forms of exclusion that emerge in everyday interactions and are referred to as “microaggressions.” Recent studies reveal that international students are exposed to microaggressions such as the belittling of their country of origin, the questioning of their academic competence, and being pushed into an “inadequate” position on the basis of their accent or language (Rodríguez et al., 2023). Similarly, it has been shown that language- and race-based microaggressions place international students in an “inferior/other” position and that this process damages their sense of acceptance and belonging (Gao, 2025).

Discrimination can arise on different grounds, such as ethnicity, race, gender, age, religion or sect, disability status, socioeconomic status, and physical appearance (Alpaydın, 2023). From the perspective of international students, however, discrimination is experienced mostly on the basis of language differences, accent, cultural incongruity, ethnic identity, religion, and the condition of being foreign. Indeed, a recent study that comparatively examined international students’ perceptions of the learning environment in three countries, including Türkiye, addresses belonging, inclusiveness, and perceived discrimination among the principal themes shaping these students’ adaptation experience (Xu et al., 2025). Recent research reveals that perceived discrimination negatively affects students’ academic adjustment, social relationships, and psychological well-being and that it can increase the risk of psychological crisis by weakening protective resources such as self-esteem and meaning in life (Xu & Li, 2025). Similarly, it has been shown that the perception of discrimination and exclusion directly damages students’ sense of safety and belonging (Liu et al., 2023). The effects of discrimination are not limited to social relationships; it can lead the individual to feel worthless, to withdraw from social life, and to experience a weakening of their sense of belonging. For this reason, perceived discrimination is regarded as an important psychosocial variable that affects an individual’s attitudes toward the society in which they live and the degree to which they feel they belong to it. Examining perceived discrimination in the context of international students is critically important for understanding students’ sense of belonging to the country in which they study and their processes of social integration.

Sense of Belonging

The sense of belonging is a fundamental psychosocial need that refers to an individual feeling that they belong to a group, society, or social environment and perceiving this belonging as meaningful, secure, and valuable. This feeling plays a central role in the individual’s process of establishing and maintaining social relationships and of self-actualization through these relationships. In Maslow’s (1970) hierarchy of needs, belonging is treated as a fundamental need that follows physiological and safety needs and is regarded as one of the important determinants of an individual’s psychological well-being. Accord-

ing to Baumeister and Leary (1995), belonging encompasses not merely being part of a group but also feeling accepted, valued, and supported by that group. In this context, belonging has a dynamic structure shaped by processes of mutual interaction and emotional attachment; to the extent that an individual feels safe and accepted in their social environment, they develop positive attitudes toward that environment, and their level of social adaptation increases.

The general sense of belonging refers to the perception of belonging that an individual develops not only toward a particular group but toward a broader social structure (Hagerty et al., 1992). This feeling is closely related to the individual seeing themselves as a meaningful part of society and developing a perception of continuity and reciprocity in social relationships. A recent systematic review examining belonging in higher education from a twenty-year perspective reveals that the concept is shaped along four fundamental dimensions: connection to peers, to academic and administrative staff, and to the institution; feeling safe and part of a community; being valued and accepted; and a climate in which diversity and inclusion are embraced (Allen et al., 2024). A high level of belonging strengthens the individual’s life satisfaction, psychological resilience, and coping skills.

For international students, the sense of belonging is one of the fundamental indicators of adaptation to the country and the university environment in which they study. These students, who are entering a different cultural and social context, must cope simultaneously with many circumstances, such as language differences, cultural norms, academic expectations, and new social relationships. In this process, feeling accepted, supported, and valued directly affects both their academic achievement and their psychological adjustment. Indeed, a recent study conducted in Germany revealed that a sense of belonging to the university is a strong predictor of international students’ psychological and academic adjustment (Yildirim et al., 2021). Similarly, it is emphasized that, among international students, belonging is positively associated with academic motivation, social participation, and institutional commitment, whereas the construction of belonging is often disrupted by experiences of discrimination and exclusion (Abdalla, 2024; Allen et al., 2024; Dost & Mazzoli Smith, 2023; Mohamad & Manning, 2024). A weak sense of belonging, in turn, is associated with loneliness, a feeling of exclusion, academic failure, and various psychological problems; in a study conducted with international students studying in China during the pandemic, it was found that fear and the perception of discrimination significantly damaged students’ sense of safety and belonging (Liu et al., 2023). For this reason, the sense of belonging is regarded as a critical variable in understanding international students’ educational experiences.

The sense of belonging is significantly affected by the quality of the social relationships an individual establishes with their environment. In particular, perceived discrimination can lead to a decrease in the sense of belonging by damaging the individual’s perception of being accepted and valued. The discriminatory attitudes and behaviors to which internation-

al students are exposed—or believe they are exposed—can cause them to feel like strangers in the society in which they live and to experience social withdrawal. Within this framework, directly examining the relationship between perceived discrimination and the sense of belonging is an important necessity for understanding students' processes of social integration. In conclusion, the sense of belonging has a decisive role in both the individual and the academic lives of international students; strengthening this feeling is of great importance for supporting students' psychological well-being and for creating a more inclusive university climate. For this reason, identifying the factors that affect international students' sense of belonging is instructive for higher education institutions and policymakers.

The Relationship Between Perceived Discrimination and Sense of Belonging

In the international literature, the relationship between perceived discrimination and the sense of belonging is one of the fundamental topics addressed in the context of migration, acculturation, and minority psychology. According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), belonging is one of an individual's fundamental psychological needs, and the threatening of this need leads to marked deterioration in psychological well-being. Within this framework, experiences of discrimination are regarded as stressors that directly target the need for belonging. Meta-analytic evidence synthesizing the negative effects of perceived discrimination on psychological well-being across different samples reveals that this relationship is consistent and strong (Schmitt et al., 2014). Recent research also supports this pattern; it is reported that the perception of discrimination and exclusion weakens students' sense of safety and belonging (Liu et al., 2023) and that perceived discrimination negatively predicts school belonging (Kılıçoğlu & Kılıçoğlu, 2024).

Recent research conducted on international students consistently shows that perceived discrimination is negatively associated with the sense of belonging. In a study examining international students' belonging processes, Abdalla (2024) revealed that experiences of discrimination and racism based on academic, social, and cultural differences are among the most significant obstacles to the construction of belonging. Similarly, in a qualitative study conducted with international students, it was found that students experienced discrimination in the form of covert exclusion, institutional invisibility, and "you don't belong here" messages, and that these experiences created unequal learning environments (Jang & Grimm, 2026). In a study conducted with Chinese international students studying in Australia, a lack of belonging was found to be associated with grief-like reactions and threats to emotional well-being (Zhao et al., 2023). It is emphasized that a weakening of the sense of belonging negatively affects not only social relationships but also academic adjustment and psychological well-being, and that the perception of discrimination is a risk factor that accelerates this process (Xu & Li, 2025; Yildirim et al., 2021). It is noted that this negative effect can be partially mitigated by variables such as social support, cultural context, and individual coping strategies, but that it is observed consis-

tently across different countries and cultural contexts (Schmitt et al., 2014).

Although research on international students in Türkiye has increased in recent years, the majority of these studies have focused on describing students' academic, social, and cultural adaptation processes (Göver & Yavuzer, 2015; Taylan, 2019). Research conducted in the Turkish context reveals that international students perceive that they are, from time to time, subjected to exclusion, prejudice, and discriminatory attitudes. Topal and Tauscher (2020) noted that students can develop a perception of discrimination especially in everyday social interactions and in housing processes; Bulut and Gündoğdu (2020), in turn, stated that students perceive discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, language, and cultural differences and that this situation negatively affects their social adaptation. Recent comparative studies, including those involving Türkiye, also emphasize that belonging and perceived discrimination are decisive themes in international students' adaptation experience (Xu et al., 2025).

Türkiye-based studies that indirectly address the relationship between perceived discrimination and the sense of belonging show that the perception of discrimination weakens students' sense of belonging toward the university and society. Torun and Bozkurt (2019) noted that a decrease in the level of social acceptance perceived by international students negatively affects their feelings of commitment and belonging toward the university; Akdağ and Koçak (2020), in turn, emphasized that experiences of social exclusion and discrimination lead students to feel like strangers in society. Nevertheless, in these studies discrimination has mostly been evaluated as a sub-dimension of concepts such as acculturative stress, social support, or adaptation, and perceived discrimination has not been directly associated with the general sense of belonging (Sever & Özdemir, 2020).

When the national and international literature are evaluated together, it is evident that perceived discrimination is a fundamental psychosocial risk factor that weakens international students' sense of belonging toward society and the institution. Nevertheless, studies in which the relationship between these two variables is examined directly and holistically in Türkiye remain limited. The present study aims to fill this gap in the literature by directly examining this relationship and, in line with the findings obtained, to offer recommendations to higher education institutions and policymakers.

METHOD

This section addresses the research method. The research model, the study group, the data collection tools, and the collection and analysis of the research data are presented.

Research Model

The research model aims, on the one hand, to describe international students' levels of perceived discrimination and general sense of belonging and, on the other hand, to reveal the relationship and the predictive effect between these two vari-

ables. In this respect, the research has both descriptive and predictive features. This research was conducted within the scope of a quantitative research approach and was designed using a correlational survey model. The correlational survey model is a research model that aims to determine the co-variation between two or more variables and the direction and degree of the relationships among these variables (Karasar, 2016). In the research, Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis was used to determine the factors predicting international students' sense of belonging. In this context, demographic characteristics (gender, scholarship status, and high school education location) were treated as control variables, perceived discrimination as the independent variable, and the general sense of belonging as the dependent variable. It is intended that the findings obtained will offer theoretical and practical implications for understanding international students' adaptation and belonging processes.

Study Group

The study group of the research consists of a total of 317 international university students—224 (70.66%) male and 93 (29.34%) female—studying in 18 different faculties at Sivas Cumhuriyet University during the 2023–2024 academic year. The study group was formed using convenience (incidental) sampling, one of the non-probability sampling approaches. In this context, an online questionnaire link was distributed to international students studying in various faculties and departments of Sivas Cumhuriyet University, and data were collected from students who volunteered to participate in the study. The distribution of participants across 18 faculties and numerous departments ensured that the study group encompassed students from different fields. Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling method based on collecting data from volunteer participants whom the researcher can easily access (Büyükoztürk et al., 2012).

Table 1 presents the numerical distribution of the research group according to the demographic variables.

Data Collection Tools

To collect data in the research, the “Students’ Perceived Discrimination Scale” and the “General Belongingness Scale” were used. To determine the participants’ demographic characteristics, a “personal information form” prepared by the researcher was used.

Personal Information Form

The personal information form prepared by the researcher to determine the demographic characteristics of international students contains 7 questions. The international students who participated in the research were asked questions about gender, faculty, department, year of study, whether or not they had received their high school education in Türkiye, their countries and continents, and whether they benefited from scholarship opportunities provided by official or private institutions in Türkiye.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	224	70.66
	Female	93	29.34
Year of Study	Preparatory	16	5.05
	1st Year	73	23.03
	2nd Year	115	36.28
	3rd Year	57	17.98
	4th Year	46	14.51
	5th–6th Year	6	1.89
High School Education (in Türkiye)	Graduate	4	1.26
	No (abroad)	163	51.42
	Yes (Türkiye)	154	48.58
Continent	Asia	205	64.67
	Africa	112	35.33
Scholarship Status	No (no scholarship)	221	69.72
	Yes (scholarship)	96	30.28
Total		317	100

Students’ Perceived Discrimination Scale (SPDS)

The “Students’ Perceived Discrimination Scale” (SPDS) was developed by Gören, Özdemir, and Ötken (2020) to reveal students’ perception of discrimination in educational organizations. The scale is a self-report scale consisting of 16 items and a single dimension, with a five-point Likert type (1: Strongly Disagree, 5: Strongly Agree). The internal consistency reliability coefficient of the scale is .94. In the reliability analysis conducted within the scope of this research, the scale’s Cronbach’s alpha internal consistency coefficient was calculated as .96. This value indicates that the scale exhibits an excellent level of reliability in the present study group.

General Belongingness Scale (GBS)

The scale, developed by Malone, Pillow, and Osman (2012) and adapted into Turkish by Duru (2015), aims to measure individuals’ general sense of belonging. The scale consists of 12 items and two sub-dimensions (acceptance/inclusion and rejection/exclusion). The items are of a seven-point Likert type (1: Strongly Disagree, 7: Strongly Agree). The first 6 items of the scale measure acceptance, and the last 6 items measure rejection. When the rejection items are reverse-scored, the scale can measure the general sense of belonging unidimensionally (Malone et al., 2012).

In the validity and reliability studies conducted by Duru (2015), the internal consistency coefficient for the entire scale was found to be .92, and the test–retest reliability was found to be .84. In the present research, as a result of the analysis con-

ducted by reverse-coding the rejection items, the Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient for the overall score of the scale was determined to be .82. High scores obtained from the scale indicate that the individual has a strong perception of belonging.

Data Collection Process

Data were collected on a voluntary basis from international students studying at the university through an online questionnaire form. Before the data collection process, the necessary explanations about the purpose and scope of the study were provided to the participants, and their informed consent was obtained. In this context, ethics committee approval for the study was obtained from the Human Research and Educational Sciences Ethics Committee of Erzincan Binali Yıldırım University (Date: 03.06.2024, Decision No: 10/09). During the administration of the scales, the principle of confidentiality was adhered to, and no identifying information was requested from the participants.

Data Analysis

To assess the construct validity of the two measurement instruments in the present sample, confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were conducted prior to hypothesis testing. A single-factor model was specified for the Students' Perceived Discrimination Scale and a two-factor model (acceptance/inclusion and rejection/exclusion) for the General Belongingness Scale, and the adequacy of each model was evaluated using the χ^2/df ratio, the comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR).

Before beginning the analysis of the data obtained in the research, it was tested whether the data set was suitable for parametric statistical techniques. In this context, the normality of the data distribution was first examined; it was found that the skewness and kurtosis values were in the range of -1 to $+1$ and that the mean, median, and mode values were close to one another. In addition, as a result of examinations conducted through scatterplots and histograms, it was determined that the data exhibited a normal distribution and met the preconditions for parametric tests. The equality of variances across groups was checked with the Levene F test, and the variances were found to be homogeneous.

Before the regression analysis, the presence of outliers that could affect the validity of the analysis was examined through Mahalanobis distance and Cook's values. Since no outliers at a level that would affect the data analysis were found, no participant was removed from the data set. For the assumption of independence of errors, the Durbin–Watson (DW) value was checked; since the obtained value ($DW = 2.03$) fell within the range of 1 to 3, it was determined that there was no autocorrelation problem. In addition, the multicollinearity problem was examined, and the VIF values were confirmed to be below 10.

The three demographic variables entered as controls—gender, scholarship status, and location of high-school educa-

tion—were selected on both theoretical and methodological grounds. Each has a documented association with the acculturation, discrimination, and belonging experiences of international students: gender shapes both exposure to and appraisal of discriminatory treatment; scholarship status indexes students' financial security and their formal institutional ties to the host country; and whether high-school education was completed in Türkiye serves as a proxy for pre-existing familiarity with the Turkish language, culture, and social networks, all of which are theoretically proximal to belonging. These three variables were prioritized in order to keep the control block parsimonious relative to the focal predictor, given the sample size ($N = 317$), thereby preserving statistical power for the hierarchical test of perceived discrimination. The other demographic variables collected in the study—year of study and continent of origin—were not entered as controls: year of study overlaps conceptually with the host-country exposure already partly captured by the location of high-school education, whereas continent of origin comprised only two broad and unevenly distributed categories (Asia/Africa) whose coarse dichotomy risks obscuring within-group heterogeneity and is theoretically less proximal to the perceptual mechanism examined here. These variables nonetheless represent promising moderators for future research with larger and more balanced samples.

For the main purpose of the research, a two-stage Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis was conducted to determine the factors predicting international students' sense of belonging. Before the analysis, the categorical variables of gender (Female = 1, Male = 0), scholarship status (Recipients = 1, Non-recipients = 0), and high school education location (Türkiye = 1, Abroad = 0) were converted into dummy variables (dummy coding) to make them suitable for analysis. In the first block of the regression analysis, the demographic control variables (gender, scholarship status, and high school education location) were included in the model; in the second block, the main independent variable, the perceived discrimination score, was added to the model. The significance level in the analyses was accepted as $p < .05$. In addition, to evaluate the practical significance of the perceived discrimination variable added to the model, Cohen's f^2 effect size was calculated, and the obtained value was interpreted according to Cohen's (1988) criteria.

FINDINGS

Prior to testing the study's hypotheses, the measurement models underlying the two scales were examined through confirmatory factor analysis. For the single-factor SPDS, all 16 items loaded strongly and significantly on the latent Perceived Discrimination factor (standardized loadings = .61–.91, all $p < .001$). For the GBS, the two-dimensional structure (acceptance/inclusion and rejection/exclusion) was supported, with all items loading significantly on their respective factors (acceptance = .78–.89; rejection = .73–.90, all $p < .001$). The fit indices obtained for both measurement models are presented in Table 2. As can be seen, the uniformly high standardized loadings and the low SRMR values support the construct validity of

both instruments in the present study group; the somewhat elevated RMSEA values are consistent with the ordinal metric of the items and the item redundancy typical of lengthy Likert-type scales. A supplementary estimation based on polychoric correlations yielded a comparable pattern of strong loadings.

The means, standard deviations, and minimum and maximum values of the scores obtained from the Students' Perceived Discrimination Scale and the General Belongingness Scale used in the research, as well as the internal consistency coefficients of the scales, are presented in Table 3.

When the data in Table 3 are examined, it is seen that the mean of the scores obtained by international students from the Perceived Discrimination Scale is $M = 2.09$ ($SD = 0.89$). Considering that the scale is scored between 1 and 5, it can be said that the level of discrimination perceived by the participants is low. The mean of the scores obtained by participants from the General Belongingness Scale, in turn, was determined to be $M = 4.79$ ($SD = 1.16$). According to the score scale ranging from 1 to 7, this result indicates that international students' sense of belonging toward the university environment is above the medium level. As a result of the reliability analyses of the scales, the Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient for the Perceived Discrimination Scale was calculated as .96, and the coefficient for the General Belongingness Scale was calculated as .82.

A Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to determine the direction and strength of the relationship between the level of discrimination perceived by international students and their level of general sense of belonging. The analysis results are presented in Table 4.

According to the analysis results, it was determined that there is a medium-level, negative, and statistically significant relationship between perceived discrimination and the general

sense of belonging ($r = -0.364$, $p < .01$). This finding indicates that as students' perceived level of discrimination increases, their general sense of belonging decreases.

When the mean values of the variables are examined, it is seen that the level of perceived discrimination is at a low-to-medium level ($M = 2.09$, $SD = 0.89$) and the general sense of belonging is at a medium-to-high level ($M = 4.79$, $SD = 1.16$). Accordingly, it can be said that, in general, students do not perceive a high level of discrimination but that their sense of belonging is relatively strong.

The obtained correlation coefficient reveals that perceived discrimination is an important variable for general belonging and that there is a significant relationship between these two constructs. This result also forms an appropriate basis for the regression analyses carried out in the subsequent stages of the research.

A two-stage hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the factors predicting international students' sense of belonging. In the first stage of the analysis, gender, scholarship status, and whether high school education was received in Türkiye were added to the model as control variables. According to the first-stage results, the demographic control variables did not explain a significant amount of variance in the sense of belonging ($R^2 = .010$, $F(3, 313) = 1.082$, $p > .05$).

In the second stage of the analysis, the main independent variable, "perceived discrimination," was included in the model. In the second stage, the model as a whole was found to be significant ($F(4, 312) = 12.52$, $p < .001$), and the addition of perceived discrimination to the model provided a significant increase in the proportion of explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = .128$, $\Delta F = 46.35$, $p < .001$). When the standardized regression coefficients (β) are examined, it is seen that perceived discrimination is a strong

Table 2. Model Fit Indices for the Confirmatory Factor Analyses

Model	$\chi^2(df)$	χ^2/df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA [90% CI]	SRMR
Perceived Discrimination (single factor)	556.90 (104)	5.35	.90	.89	.12 [.11, .13]	.05
General Belongingness (two factors)	241.93 (53)	4.56	.93	.92	.11 [.09, .12]	.05

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Coefficients for the Scale Scores

Scale	Number of Items	n	$\bar{X}$ (Mean)	SD	Min	Max	α
Perceived Discrimination	16	317	2.09	0.89	1.00	5.00	.96
General Sense of Belonging	12	317	4.79	1.16	1.25	7.00	.82

Table 4. Results of the Correlation Analysis Between Perceived Discrimination and General Sense of Belonging Scores

Variables	M	SD	1	2
1. Perceived Discrimination	2.09	0.89	1	
2. General Sense of Belonging	4.79	1.16	-.364**	1

Note. $n = 317$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 5. Results of the Hierarchical Regression Analysis for the Factors Predicting the Sense of Belonging

Variables	β (Step 1)	β (Step 2)
Step 1: Control Variables		
Gender (Female = 1)	.002	-.001
Scholarship Status (Recipients = 1)	.005	.022
High School Education (Türkiye = 1)	.100	.068
Step 2: Independent Variable		
Perceived Discrimination		-.359***
R ²	.010	.138
ΔR^2	.010	.128***
f ² (Effect Size)	-	.148
F Change (ΔF)	1.082	46.35***

Note. β values indicate standardized beta coefficients. ***p < .001.

and negative significant predictor of international students' sense of belonging ($\beta = -.359$, $p < .001$). In other words, even when students' demographic characteristics are controlled, as their perception of discrimination increases, their sense of belonging decreases significantly. Perceived discrimination alone explains approximately 13% of the change in the sense of belonging ($\Delta R^2 = .128$). The Cohen's f^2 effect size value calculated to determine the practical significance of the perceived discrimination variable added to the model was found to be 0.148. According to Cohen's (1988) criteria, this value indicates that perceived discrimination has a medium effect size on the sense of belonging. The final model established explains approximately 14% of the total change in the sense of belonging ($R^2 = .138$). The results of the hierarchical regression analysis are summarized in Table 5.

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

In this study, the predictive effect of the level of discrimination perceived by international students studying in Türkiye on their general sense of belonging was examined. The correlation analysis revealed a medium-level, negative, and significant relationship between perceived discrimination and general belonging ($r = -.36$); the hierarchical regression analysis, in turn, showed that even after demographic variables were controlled, perceived discrimination was a strong and negative predictor of the sense of belonging ($\beta = -.36$). This main finding not only confirms the theoretical starting point of the study but, as discussed below, also offers important implications from several theoretical and practical perspectives.

This relationship is consistent with the theoretical framework that positions belonging as a fundamental and universal human psychological need. According to Baumeister and Leary's (1995) need-to-belong theory, an individual has a strong drive to establish meaningful and lasting social bonds; the frustration of this need leads not only to negative emotions but also to systematic deterioration in adjustment and well-being. The

experience of discrimination functions precisely as a signal of rejection targeting this need to bond and weakens the individual's perception of belonging toward the community in which they find themselves. This finding coincides with meta-analytic evidence synthesizing the negative effect of perceived discrimination on psychological well-being across different cultural contexts (Schmitt et al., 2014) and with recent research showing that, among international students, belonging is disrupted by experiences of discrimination (Abdalla, 2024; Dost & Mazzoli Smith, 2023; Kılıçoğlu & Kılıçoğlu, 2024; Kim, 2024; Liu et al., 2023; Mullen & Li, 2025). The association of a lack of belonging with grief-like reactions in the study conducted with Chinese students in Australia (Zhao et al., 2023) shows how deep the emotional cost of frustrating this need can be.

The most noteworthy finding of the research from a theoretical standpoint arises from the contrast between the two stages of the hierarchical regression model. Whereas demographic variables such as gender, scholarship status, and whether high school education was completed in Türkiye explained only 1% of the change in the sense of belonging and were not found to be significant, perceived discrimination alone explained approximately 13% of this change. The practical equivalent of this contribution is also strong: the effect size calculated for perceived discrimination is medium (Cohen's $f^2 = 0.148$; Cohen, 1988) and forms a marked contrast with the negligible contribution of the demographic variables. This pattern strongly implies that what determines an international student's sense of belonging is not their objective or structural characteristics (who they are, where they come from, how they are financed) but their subjective evaluation of how they are treated in the social environment in which they find themselves. In other words, belonging is not a fixed quality carried by the individual but a dynamic perception produced together with the institutional and relational climate. This interpretation is consistent with the social-psychological approach proposing that belonging is largely based on the interpretation of social cues (Walton & Cohen, 2011) and with recent systematic reviews defining belonging as a multilayered, climate-sensitive phenomenon (Allen et al., 2024; Mohamad & Manning, 2024). Consistent with this relational reading, recent evidence indicates that the effect of perceived discrimination on international students' well-being operates through their appraisal of the host community: community satisfaction has been found to mediate the discrimination–well-being relationship, and its protective weight differed between Asian and non-Asian students (Kim, 2024). The most important practical conclusion of this finding is the following: interventions targeting only the student's characteristics (for example, language preparation or orientation programs) will be insufficient on their own; belonging will be strengthened only when the relational climate itself becomes fair and inclusive.

The second noteworthy point lies in the apparent tension between the descriptive findings and the predictive findings. The participants' average perception of discrimination is low ($M = 2.09 / 5$), and their belonging levels are above the medium level ($M = 4.79 / 7$). Although this picture appears positive at

first glance, the fact that even a low level of perceived discrimination predicts belonging so strongly points not to the prevalence of the problem but to the disproportionate magnitude of its effect. Indeed, the fact that, despite the low average perception of discrimination, the effect reaches a medium magnitude directly concretizes this disproportionality. This situation is consistent with recent literature showing that discrimination is experienced mostly not in open and crude forms but in covert and everyday forms—that is, microaggressions—such as the belittling of one’s accent, the questioning of academic competence, institutional invisibility, or implications of “you don’t belong here” (Gao, 2025; Jang & Grimm, 2026; Rodriguez et al., 2023). It is known that individuals in a minority position develop a heightened sensitivity to cues about whether or not they belong and that, for this reason, even infrequent or ambiguous signals of exclusion can create a disproportionate effect on belonging (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Therefore, the finding that “the level of discrimination is low” should be read not as a justification for complacency but, on the contrary, as a call for institutional sensitivity toward invisible and low-intensity othering.

As a whole, these findings contribute to the literature on international students’ belonging at two levels. At the theoretical level, by comparing demographic and perceptual predictors within the same model, the study empirically supports the understanding that belonging is a relational and contextual process rather than an individual or demographic variable. At the national level, this study stands out as one of the limited number of studies that directly and holistically model the relationship between perceived discrimination and general belonging, in a field in which research on international students in Türkiye has mostly remained descriptive and has generally addressed discrimination as a sub-dimension of concepts such as acculturative stress or adaptation (Akdağ & Koçak, 2020; Sever & Özdemir, 2020). In this respect, the present findings both converge with and diverge from the existing literature: they align with relational and climate-based accounts of belonging (Allen et al., 2024; Walton & Cohen, 2011), while diverging from approaches that foreground demographic or background characteristics as primary determinants of belonging, given that in the present model such characteristics carried negligible explanatory weight. For instance, whereas Brunsting et al. (2024) reported that international students’ region of origin and gender accounted for meaningful differences in belonging and adjustment at U.S. universities, in the present sample these characteristics were statistically negligible—a discrepancy that may partly reflect the comparatively greater cultural and religious proximity between many international students and their host society in Türkiye.

The results obtained also carry important implications for higher education policies. Considering Türkiye’s internationalization strategy, which aims to increase the number of international students to 500,000 and then to one million in the medium and long term (YÖK, 2024), it is evident that this quantitative growth will be sustainable only when it is supported by qualitative inclusiveness; for students’ establishment of

lasting ties with the host country and their transformation into its voluntary representatives depend directly on their experiences of belonging. Within this framework, the priority area of intervention indicated by the findings is the campus climate. Supporting academic and administrative staff with intercultural sensitivity training against the covert discriminatory behaviors and microaggressions that are often displayed unwittingly; expanding shared work spaces, peer-mentoring systems, and inclusive campus activities that foster meaningful and continuous interaction between international and local students; and establishing reliable and solution-oriented support mechanisms through which students can report the exclusion they experience without hesitation are recommended as concrete steps toward strengthening belonging. Such interventions require the emphasis to shift from the expectation that the student should “adapt” toward the institution’s responsibility to “produce an inclusive environment.”

The findings of this research should be evaluated within the framework of certain limitations. First, the study was conducted with students studying at a single university (Sivas Cumhuriyet University); this limits the generalizability of the findings to different institutional and regional contexts. In addition, the fact that the data were collected through voluntary, convenience (non-probability) sampling constitutes another limitation regarding the sample’s power to represent the population and the generalizability of the findings. The gender distribution of the sample also constitutes a similar limitation; only 29.34% of the participants are women, and 70.66% are men. Although this distribution largely reflects the male-dominated composition of the international student population at the institution where the research was conducted, the relatively limited representation of women restricts the generalizability of the findings to female international students. In this study, gender was treated only as a control variable and, since it had no significant effect on belonging, no gender-based comparative interpretations were made; nevertheless, it is recommended that future research be conducted with samples that are more balanced in terms of gender. Second, since the research was conducted with a cross-sectional and correlational design, it is not possible to make a causal inference among the variables; the relationship between perceived discrimination and belonging may also operate bidirectionally. Third, the data were collected with self-report scales, and the possibility of an effect arising from common method variance should not be disregarded. Finally, the fact that the final model explains approximately 14% of the change in belonging shows that the greater part of the variance is determined by factors not addressed in this study (for example, social support, language proficiency, academic integration, and contact with the host society).

These limitations also offer fruitful directions for future research. First of all, studies conducted with larger and more diverse samples in different cities and universities can test the generalizability of the findings. Longitudinal designs can illuminate the direction over time and the possible causality of the relationship between discrimination and belonging. Examining separately the effects of covert (microaggression) and overt

forms of perceived discrimination on belonging will provide a finer understanding of the nature of the effect. In addition, testing the mediating or moderating roles of variables such as social support, acculturative stress, language proficiency, and academic adjustment can reveal the conditions under which the relationship strengthens or weakens. Finally, supporting the quantitative findings with qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews will make the subjective meanings of students' experiences of discrimination and belonging more holistically visible.

In conclusion, this research reveals that, for international students studying in Türkiye, perceived discrimination is a primary psychosocial risk factor that weakens the general sense of belonging independently of demographic characteristics. The findings show that international students' social integration is possible not so much through objective conditions as through a fair, inclusive, and othering-free relational climate; in this respect, the study offers a guiding framework for both higher education institutions and the decision-makers shaping internationalization policies. Reducing the perception of discrimination—an invisible barrier to belonging—is an investment that will strengthen not only students' well-being but also Türkiye's position in the global education arena.

Acknowledgments: The authors thank all the students for their support during the data collection process and for their voluntary participation.

Funding: This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that they have no potential conflict of interest related to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Informed Consent: Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Participation was on a voluntary basis, and confidentiality was strictly maintained.

Data Availability: The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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