

belonging

تعلق

CAPSTONE PROJECT BY MADISON VANDERHOOF

A sense of belonging

احساس شامل بودن

“the subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences—is a fundamental human need that predicts numerous mental, physical, social, economic, and behavioural outcomes”

-Kelly-Ann Allen

My Capstone project explores the theme of *belonging* by drawing on a range of perspectives of refugees in Malaysia to reveal the many ways people find connection to their identity, to others, and to their environment. I was drawn to this topic after repeatedly encountering the idea of belonging throughout my internship, while organizing art competitions, engaging with students, hearing families share about their cultures, facilitating discussion sessions, and listening to student speeches advocating for refugees.

Across all these moments, I noticed a range in how people’s experiences of belonging varied in relation to Malaysia.

These experiences inspired me to create a project that brings together a mix of these perspectives into a single medium to emphasize the diversity of experiences and the shared human desire to belong.

The responses in this project were collected using printed questionnaires in Dari & oral interviews in English.

I believe that everyone deserves to feel that they belong somewhere and that they have a place to call home. Through this project, I aim to amplify the voices of those I have worked alongside and illuminate the lived experiences of refugee adolescents living in a transit context such as Malaysia.

How long have you lived in Malaysia?

about
four
years

six months
(the weather
in Malaysia is
very good)

Eight
months

almost
eleven
months

two and a
half years

about
two
years

one year
and five
months

One year
and three
months

How would you describe your relationship with your current environment or community?

I describe my relationship with the community through friendship and honesty. If someone asks me for help, I help them.



If I had the right or permission to work as a free human being, I would truly feel very calm and happy. At the moment, I do feel somewhat okay, but I constantly feel stressed because of the police.

Our current place is Malaysia. Malaysia has very good weather.

So far, I have a good relationship with the environment and with the people of Malaysia. They are very kind people, and I have not had any problems with anyone. I have made many friends and feel that I can communicate even better with others. In the beginning, it was very difficult for me to adapt to the new environment and connect with new people.

I have a very good relationship with my friends and the people around me.

Which aspects of your environment make you feel comfortable or "at home"?

Being away from war, explosions, suicide attacks, and discrimination makes me feel comfortable.

Speaking kindly with my brothers.

Listening to music and talking with my family.

Boxing makes me feel comfortable.

When I see many people, both from my own country and from other countries, living here, I feel some sense of belonging and comfort. However, being far from our homeland never truly feels good.

Personally, I really like going out with my friends. However, because of our migrant status and fear of the police, I prefer to stay in my room.

My school and the homes of my close relatives.

Simple things around me make me feel comfortable and at home, such as being with my family, familiar sounds, or places that hold memories. When I am in a place where people are kind and accept me as I am, I feel that I belong to them. Things like books and photos also give me peace.

Is there anything in your current environment that makes you feel restricted or separated?

Are there any characteristics in your surroundings that make you feel distant or homesick?

Yes. Being migrants makes us feel limited and separated.

I miss my brother

Sometimes when my opinions are not taken seriously or are ignored, I feel that I do not belong in that environment. This lack of attention makes me feel unseen

Yes, being away from my friends.

Yes. Because we do not have **organizational cards*** we constantly feel unsafe. We are also worried about our parents, brothers, and sisters when they are outside the home and feel that they are in danger.

Yes, because home is home. No place can ever be like your homeland, even if you are in paradise, if it does not truly belong to you.

Yes, being far from my friends. I cannot speak Dari everywhere. Right now, I am writing in Persian.

How often do you spend time in places that are meaningful or important to you?

Most of my time is spent at school, which is very important to me. Sometimes I also attend motivational workshops, which help me feel better.

When I am in a place where there is no one, I feel a sense of importance.

From time to time, I try to spend time in places that give me peace and a good feeling, such as libraries or nature. These places are meaningful to me because they give me energy and a sense of belonging.

In places where I feel calm, for example, a quiet and beautiful park, where the meaning of silence can be felt.

Yes. Every afternoon we go to the park, play football with our friends, and enjoy ourselves.

What role do nature or public spaces play in your sense of connection and belonging?

Since every land is God's land, my feeling toward God's earth is one of gratitude to the Merciful God

They help me feel happy and connected. Nature and public spaces help me avoid loneliness and make me feel that I belong somewhere.

Nature plays an important role. I can spend time with my friends, go for long walks on Fridays, sit in nature, and talk.

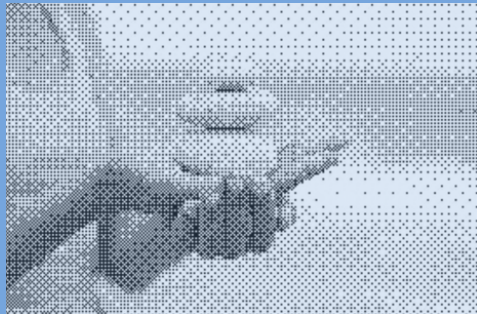
They give me good feelings, calmness, comfort, and a sense of self-importance

They play no role. I cannot feel a sense of belonging in my surroundings because I am not used to this environment. Perhaps it will take time for me to adapt

They play a very valuable role. They bring happiness, create memories, and help strengthen our sense of belonging. They also make our relationships with others closer and stronger.

To what extent do you feel supported by your friends, those around you, or your community?

Simply having inner peace and mental calmness in an environment is itself the greatest form of support from friends, people around you, and society.



After my family and my God, I do not need anyone else.

My family has supported and encouraged me in all my progress. Some people are very good, and with them we can communicate honestly and sincerely.



I do not feel supported.

How does your cultural or personal background influence how you feel a sense of belonging?

My cultural and personal background gives me a sense of being a stranger. In my current environment, it means that one's homeland is like a mother; no land can truly become your own homeland, and no mother can ever be like your own mother.

My cultural background connects me to memories and to kind people.

We are people who have always been oppressed both in our own country and during the time we lived as migrants in countries like Iran. This has affected our spirit and has not allowed us to have a strong sense of well-being.

this is a secret; I cannot say it.

What activities, experiences, or moments make you feel that you truly belong somewhere?

When a person performs their duties comfortably and properly, they feel as if they are in their own homeland, helping and serving their people and their land

Being with my family and spending time with good friends

playing football

When I do boxing

Being in a place where I feel that I belong

I have never felt that I truly belong here

When you think about "belonging," what comes to your mind?

Belonging means being connected. It means something feels like it is mine.

I think of safety and acceptance.

Afghanistan and my family.

A feeling of strangeness comes to my mind.

I feel happy when everyone accepts me.

How has your sense of belonging changed over time?

It has changed a lot

Yes, it changes over time. When you go to a new place, at first you feel like a stranger, but gradually, by meeting new friends, the feeling of belonging becomes stronger.

It depends on the feeling of that moment.

If you truly feel at peace and time seems to move according to your will, that means you feel a sense of belonging.

It has changed through studying

It has changed slightly compared to the first days I arrived in Malaysia, but I feel that this is more a habit than a true sense of belonging.

It has not changed.



be·long·ing



happiness felt in a secure relationship; "with his classmates he felt a sense of belonging"



INTERVIEW

1

Q: What aspects of your surroundings make you feel most comfortable or at home?

Probably the fact that they all wear hijabs... in your country... when you wear a hijab, they give you, like, weird looks, I think. But here, since it's an Islamic country, it's way more comfortable for wearing a hijab and be in something in common. It's not something rare. Feels comfortable.

Q: Is there anything that makes you feel limited in your environment?

Yes, a lot. Since I'm a refugee, I'm not able to do much things. So I'm not able to do a lot of things as a refugee, so it makes my opportunities limited.
So yes.

Q: Are there any parts of or features of your environment that maybe make you feel disconnected or excluded?

The fact that their countries has like never experienced war, and they have been improving day by day, and my country has been in war for more than like 50 or 40 years, so I feel like I'm a bit different from them. I grew up in environment where it was fight, wars, but they grew up like kids my age. They grew up in a more calm environment, more opportunities for girls, where it was gender equality more but in my country, as you know that girls are not allowed to study until grade six, they're allowed, so that's it,

Q: How would you describe your connection to your current environment?

It's pretty good since...I learned English, it's been way more easier to communicate. From the first year and the second years... I didn't know much English, so it was way too hard for me to communicate with people who weren't from my country. But since I learned I gained confidence to make new friends from different countries and different nations.

Q: Does your culture or personal background shape where you feel like you belong? Do you feel connected to your cultural or personal background?

Yes, because, like so much of us are from same country in my building, in my class. So we all know our own cultures, and we know how to talk to our culture... how to respect our cultures and talk. So I feel like it's very good to talk... you know, some people who don't know the culture... might be a bit hard to communicate or feel belong with them. But if he or she is Afghan it's way better.

Q: What advice would you give to someone who might be struggling to find a sense of belonging?

Probably just communicate. Most of people look mean or don't want to talk, but if you get to know them, it's way better. So try to communicate.
If you communicate, you will get friends. If they don't get your friend, you will not lose anything. You just You just try. It's free to try. So try to act better. Get friends and those things,

Are there any parts of your environment that don't make you feel connected, or make you feel like excluded?

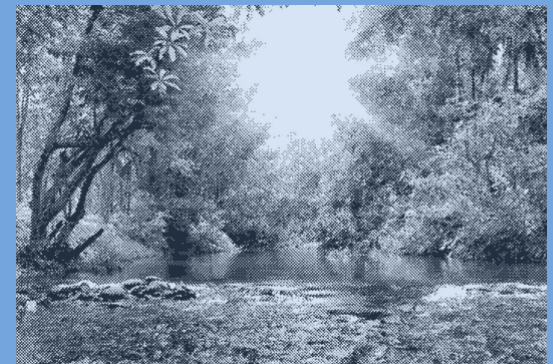
I like my own country too. So mostly I sometimes miss there too, because...yeah. I love there too. So yeah, only missing my own country.

What role does nature or public space play in your sense of connection? How important is nature and public spaces for you feeling connected?

For me... nature means beauty... sometimes it even knows me. Like, know me. How do I feel. Or like I can most of the time I talk with plants or other things, and I love them. I think they always listen to me.

Are there any activities or moments that have made you feel like, "wow, like I really belong here"?

Okay, one time I went with my family... I went to a riverside, and I love that place, and after that, I feel like I belong in here.



What changes (big or small) do you think make places feel inclusive or supportive?

Maybe to everyone... think about others and don't only think about themselves like their own benefits.

INTERVIEW

2

INTERVIEW

3

When do you feel most seen or understood by others?

When I come to school. That's... great with teacher, some of the kindness of teacher... some of my friends are classmates or outside. That's the best thing when I be at class.

"If you give us everything... if you give us Malaysia, we don't feel good."

"But if, when we get our country, that make us, like, so grateful, so excellent."

"Every time we push, every time we keep...saying...
we will never forget our motherland."



INTERVIEW

4

How would you describe your connection to your current environment? Do you feel connected to the environment here?

Yes, actually, I like the people in Malaysia and my friends are they're good, and also I like the teachers in my schools. They're friendly, kind, and they have, they have, like ability to teach better... I didn't disrespect. I didn't see the disrespectful from the police or something. Yeah, that's my experience here, and also that it's great.



In what ways do you feel connected to the people around you? Like? What like? How do you feel connected to other people around you?

First, when I speak English to some they're not my own language. I can become friends easily, and I like that. And yeah, I think English can help me a lot to find a friend here.

Do you feel like you belong to just one place, or do you feel like you belong to many different places or groups?

Yes, that's a good question. I feel like, because I go to many countries...I feel like its kind of fun, but it's difficult for my family. It's difficult to find a good job here, and language is difficult. And also for me, it's good. Because I'm teenager, I can make more experience. And for my family and my father it is quite difficult



Are there any activities or moments that make you feel like you belong somewhere, like either inside the school or maybe some an activity?

I like playing football with my friends in my country. That was so fun. I can't forget that. That was very good feeling for me. After that, I didn't play football. Any never I play after when I lived from Afghanistan. So now, I'm here. I train in Muay Thai with my friends. It feel me good.

Are there any people or places or experiences that have, like, made your connections feel stronger.

"Yes. Teacher, my culture... my own culture. Because my own culture is...like, very friendly when we see each other. We invite to home... have a couple of tea or something. It's a good culture".

"Teacher, but you cannot find anywhere in this cultural teacher. I miss it so much".

What advice would you give to someone who's maybe struggling to find a place where they feel like they belong?

"Actually, when you come first here... you feel like that you're new here, and you feel like I'm not one of here... Now I feel like that also so because it's not my country... and we cannot use everything here. ...it's quite difficult. And especially, I think my father feels more because he (is) also outside. He works outside, and... he feels... he knows how it feels.

So, I hope we can find a place... like my own country... no worries, and we can get a job, study well, and have a better future."

Legend

Please note that ellipses (...) have been used only to omit filler words for the sake of clarity. No changes or interpretations of individuals' responses were made in the creation of this project.

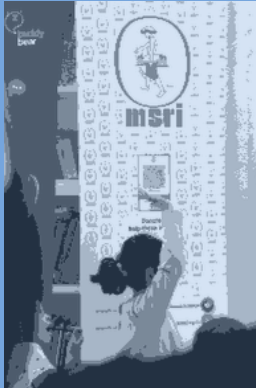


organization cards* - UNHCR-issued ID cards which are documents that identify individuals as refugees or asylum-seekers under the protection of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Belonging definition:

Allen, K. A., Kern, M. L., Rozek, C. S., McInerney, D., & Slavich, G. M. (2021). Belonging: A Review of Conceptual Issues, an Integrative Framework, and Directions for Future Research. *Australian journal of psychology*, 73(1), 87-102.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2021.1883409>

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The Malaysian Social Research Institute (MSRI) is a non-profit organization dedicated to advocating for the poor, hungry, marginalized and politically under-represented people in the local communities of Malaysia and across the world. MSRI seeks to improve communities standards of living and make a long-lasting impact mainly through grassroots projects and educational initiatives. Beyond helping local communities, MSRI also works with refugee and asylum-seeker communities whose country of origins are within the Middle Eastern, Central Asian and African regions; which include Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, Syria, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen.

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Thank you

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