GeoJournal (2024) 89:187
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-024-11173-9

Place-belongingness in real-life contexts: A review of practical meanings, contributing factors, and evaluation methods

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Accepted: 11 July 2024 / Published online: 17 August 2024
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Abstract Place-belongingness is conceptualized as the subjective aspect of geographical belonging. Drawing upon a review of empirical studies spanning over a decade, we clarify this concept in real-life contexts, where people assign practical meanings to their place-belongingness. Thematic categorization of these practical meanings yields an extended definition of the concept. We also reclassify the factors contributing to place-belongingness and examine how it emerges in real-life scenarios. This review provides insights into methods for evaluating place-belongingness, emphasizing the need for a validated measurement tool for assessing the impact of interventions. Our findings highlight the promising role of information technologies in enhancing place-belongingness, although it is an unmapped terrain. The review suggests intensified attention to sustainability, the politicization of resources, and non-belonging within place-belongingness research. Moreover, we accentuate place-belongingness as a point of departure for unveiling the underlying inclusion/exclusion structures.

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Keywords Place-belongingness · Belonging · Evaluation methods · Empowerment · Politics of belonging

Introduction

The need for a sense of belonging is intrinsic to human nature and can profoundly influence both personal and social aspects of life. Therefore, the importance of addressing the lack of belongingness to specific places cannot be overlooked, specifically, in a world marked by compulsory or voluntary movements due to challenges like wars, ecocide, and economic hardships. However, belonging is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that challenges its understanding and evaluation.

Across diverse disciplines, researchers have put forward numerous conceptualizations and frameworks to navigate the complexity of belongingness. (see, for instance, studies by Allen et al. (2021), Kuurne and Vieno (2022), Probyn (2015), and Yuval-Davis (2006)). Through the lens of human geography, Antonsich (2010) argued that belonging should be analyzed at the intersection of two interwoven aspects: politics of belonging and place-belongingness. Politics of belonging indicate all inclusion/exclusion discourses imposed by socio-spatial structures. At the same time, belonging has a subjective facet known as place-belongingness. This subjective dimension is defined as the feeling of being at home

in a place. According to Antonsich (2010), in this definition, the notion of home transcends materiality and refers to such symbolic characteristics of place as familiarity, comfort, and security.

Prior to Antonsich's work in 2010, Proshansky et al. (1983) were among the pioneers in employing the term of place-belongingness. According to their research, place-belongingness stands in contrast to place aversion and entails a profound emotional connection to one's home and neighborhood. However, Proshansky and colleagues did not extensively explore this emotional connection, leaving the concept somewhat self-explanatory. Instead, their emphasize was on the sense of place identity, which is a component of self-identity and can be influenced by place-belongingness. Around the same period, other environmental psychologists also began embracing the concept of place belongingness (without a dash) in the 1980s. Particularly in natural and recreational settings, place belongingness often has signified affiliation with a place through social bonding and membership (Hammitt et al., 2006; Raymond et al., 2010).

Antonsich (2010), however, broadened the concept to encompass not only social connections but also cultural, autobiographical, economic, and legal factors that contribute to the subjective sensation of territorial belonging. He also delved deeper into the nature of place-belongingness by contrasting it with the politics of belonging.

It's noteworthy that place-belongingness addresses a distinct question compared to similar environmental psychology-originated concepts like place attachment, bonding, and rootedness, all of which convey a positive emotional attachment to a place. While these adjacent concepts suggest a propensity for being close to a place and the lack of desire for another (Hammitt et al., 2006; Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001; Scannell & Gifford, 2010), place-belongingness is conceptualized to answers the question of "where do I belong to?" (Antonsich, 2010)—a question of profound significance in our mobile world.

Empirical research on place-belongingness quickly emerged after the concept´s inception. Researchers started exploring its significance in addressing challenges within different domains, notably in migration, youth, cultural, and territorialization studies (as seen in research by Isakjee (2016), Lieblein et al. (2018), and Stiernström and Arora-Jonsson (2022)). Furthermore, the concept has extended its influence to other areas, for example, empirical studies concerning museum experiences (Price & Applebaum, 2022) and sustainability (Holloway et al., 2021).

The growing number of empirical studies underscores the need for comprehensive reviews that focus on elucidating, strengthening, and evaluating place-belongingness within real-life contexts. Such reviews help researchers and practitioners locate and evaluate place-belongingness in their research and interventions. However, at the moment, there is a dearth of extensive reviews. In this article, we narrow this gap by conducting a systematic review to clarify the concept´s meaning in real-life contexts, reveal the factors contributing to place-belongingness, and summarize evaluation methods employed by researchers. In the following sections, we describe our systematic method and, after quantifying the prevalence of studies, we appraise the quality of included studies. Finally, we discuss the results and conclude with expectations for future research.

Method

This article followed the PRISMA 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021) to systematically review previous literature and provide a comprehensive, reproducible, and detailed report. PRISMA (the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) stands as an evidence-based minimum set of items designed for reporting in systematic reviews and meta-analyses. Its primary goal is to assist authors in enhancing the overall quality of reporting for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (Sarkis-Onofre et al., 2021). By adhering to PRISMA guidelines, authors can contribute to clearer, more comprehensive, and higher-quality documentation of their research, ultimately advancing the transparency and reliability of systematic reviews and meta-analyses in academic literature. We focused on place-belongingness in empirical studies and narrowed down our screening to address the following research question:

(1) What does place-belongingness mean in real-life contexts?
(2) What factors contribute to place-belongingness, and how do they relate to the practical meanings?
(3) How do researchers measure place-belongingness?

The first question concerned the interpretation of place-belongingness in real-life situations, where individuals express their subjective sense of belonging to a place through various practical meanings. Discovering these practical meanings can deepen our comprehension of the concept and aid in addressing related challenges. The second question involved categorizing the factors contributing to place-belongingness and establishing connections between these factors and the identified practical meanings. The third question delved into the evaluation methods researchers employ in empirical studies.

Search term and databases

"Place belongingness" was the search keyword. The absence of a hyphen symbol (-) in the keyword was intentional because it functions as an AND operator in specific databases. Nevertheless, records that featured "place-belongingness" with a hyphen were also valid, and we considered them during the screening process. The keyword was applied to search within both article titles and content bodies. Since place-belongingness is a multidimensional concept expected to be discovered in diverse disciplines, we conducted the search process across different databases to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant records.

Identification of included studies

Before commencing the screening process, we eliminated records that did not meet the following criteria. As detailed in the introduction section, the place-belongingness concept introduced by Antonsich (2010) addresses the unique question that differentiates it from earlier concepts. Therefore, records that were disseminated before the publication of Antonsich's (2010) *Searching for Belonging: An analytical framework* were removed. We identified studies documented as English-language, full-text articles published in peer-reviewed journals or conference proceedings. Filters provided by databases were utilized to eliminate irrelevant records.

Once the relevant records were identified, we carried out a double-checked screening process. During this process, the first author examined titles and abstracts, while the second and third authors reviewed the findings to ensure that the gathered materials were empirical studies wherein place-belongingness was evaluated as a dependent variable, qualitatively or quantitatively. Materials that were non-empirical or involved place-belongingness as an independent factor were excluded, as they were unlikely to cover the evaluation methods, contributing factors, and practical meanings associated with place-belongingness.

Upon retrieving full-text studies, an additional double-checked process was conducted to exclude duplicate articles, materials lacking adequate methodology or result sections, and studies that did not pertain to place-belongingness as the subjective facet of geographical belonging. Within the included studies, references were scrutinized to identify other eligible materials. Google Scholar was used to identify records that cited the included studies. Any potential new records undergo a screening and evaluation for eligibility, maintaining the quality criteria previously mentioned.

Data extraction

The first author reviewed the retrieved full-text studies to extract relevant information addressing the research questions. Subsequently, the other authors independently verified the extracted data to mitigate the possibility of biased analyses. To enhance the credibility of this review, we also gathered the necessary data for evaluating the quality of the included studies. We employed the seven principles put forth by Klein and Myers (1999) to assess qualitative studies. For quantitative ones, the hierarchy of facts, as proposed by Okoli (2015), could be applied for assessment. Utilizing data extraction tables aided in the systematic organization and reporting of essential information, including:

- The source of included studies (author(s), publication date, journal, database)
- Practical meanings assigned to place-belongingness
- Independent variables that contribute to place-belongingness
- Methodological characteristics of included studies

Synthesis

After collecting the required data, a thematic coding phase helped produce answers to the research

questions. A double-checked process independently conducted by the second and third authors improved the reliability of the synthesis procedure for reaching the following information:

- The quality assessment of included studies
- Practical meanings of place-belongingness in real-life contexts
- Factors that contribute to place-belongingness
- Attributions of practical meanings to contributing factors
- Place-belongingness evaluation methods

Results

Included articles

The identification of material with the potential to be included in the screening process concluded on November 29, 2022. This process generated 260 records across 9 databases (refer to Fig. 1). However, only 191 records were able to proceed to the screening process. During the screening, 163 records were eliminated as their titles and abstracts did not indicate empirical investigations into the sense of belonging to specific places. The full-text versions of 28 records, which met the screening criteria, were retrieved for eligibility assessment. After excluding the article in which place-belongingness was not related to the subjective sense of geographical belonging and removing 5 duplicated studies, the identification process resulted in 22 included studies.

Notably, the *Taylor & Francis* database produced a significant number of results (as depicted in Fig. 2). Conversely, place-belongingness received comparatively less attention in *IEEE* and *ACM* digital libraries, which primarily focus on disseminating scientific works in computer sciences and information technologies.

The 22 included articles were published across 18 different journals, with four of these journals contributing more than one article each. This distribution highlights the multidisciplinary nature of place-belongingness research, spanning across various academic domains (Fig. 2).

Quality of included studies

All the studies we included were qualitative, at least when examining place-belongingness. To assess the quality of these studies, we applied the seven principles of interpretative field research outlined by Klein and Myers (1999). These principles encompass the hermeneutic circle, contextualization, interaction, generalization, multi-interpretation, dialogical reasoning, and suspicion.

Each article we reviewed displayed the hallmarks of interpretative fieldwork, with clearly interconnected components aligning with the hermeneutic circle principle. Additionally, all these studies demonstrated contextualization, emphasized interactions between researchers and subjects, presented findings that could be generalized, and allowed for multiple interpretations. For instance, Yee et al. (2022) contextualized the historical, geographical, political, social, and ethnographical situation of the Togoru coastal settlement in Fiji. Strnadová et al. (2018) explained how they utilized focus groups to improve the interaction between researchers and participants. Lindegaard Moensted (2020) could widely generalize her findings to show how marginalization impacts participation. Holloway et al. (2021) could reflect respondents´ different perspectives and interpretations by projecting their conflicts in decisions about the future of family farms.

On the other hand, none of the reviewed studies engaged in iterative dialogical reasoning processes, which require researchers to confront their preconceptions that initially guided their research design (Klein & Myers, 1999). Although some researchers, for instance, Njwambe et al. (2019), contradicted previous findings, their research process did not involve the iterative cycle of revising preconceptions and establishing new intellectual research foundations. It is worth noting that that some experts believe that while the dialogical principle can be beneficial, it´s not always compulsory to follow (Klein & Myers, 1999).

The only factor distinguishing the quality of included articles was rooted in the suspicion principle. Suspicion about participants´ biased interpretations was evident in only six studies. In three of these studies, researchers confirmed that the interviewers´ identities influenced respondents´ narratives (Njwambe et al. 2019; Smets & Sneep, 2017;

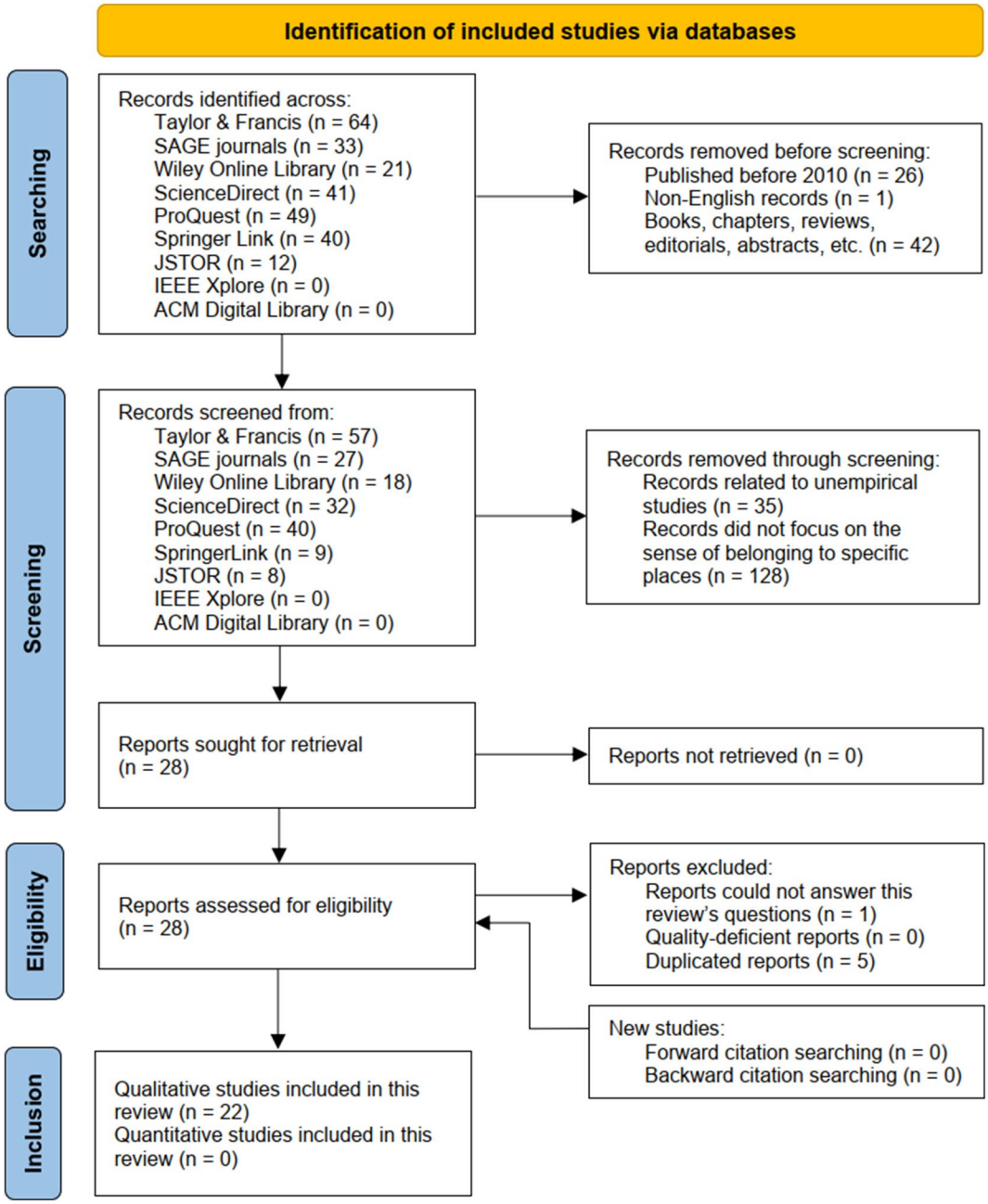


Fig. 1 Search process for included studies

Visser, 2020). Moreover, Zeveleva and Bludova (2019) described how Crimean students in Moscow actively avoided discussing issues connected with Ukraine-Russia tensions. Huizinga and van Hoven (2018) adopted a sensitive approach to meet cross-cultural research demands. Köhne and Rasch (2018) showed their sensitivity to the response of a group of interviewees biased against an extractive project. Since the suspicion principle appeared to have a limited impact on the results of the reviewed studies, all the included studies were deemed eligible for use in this review.

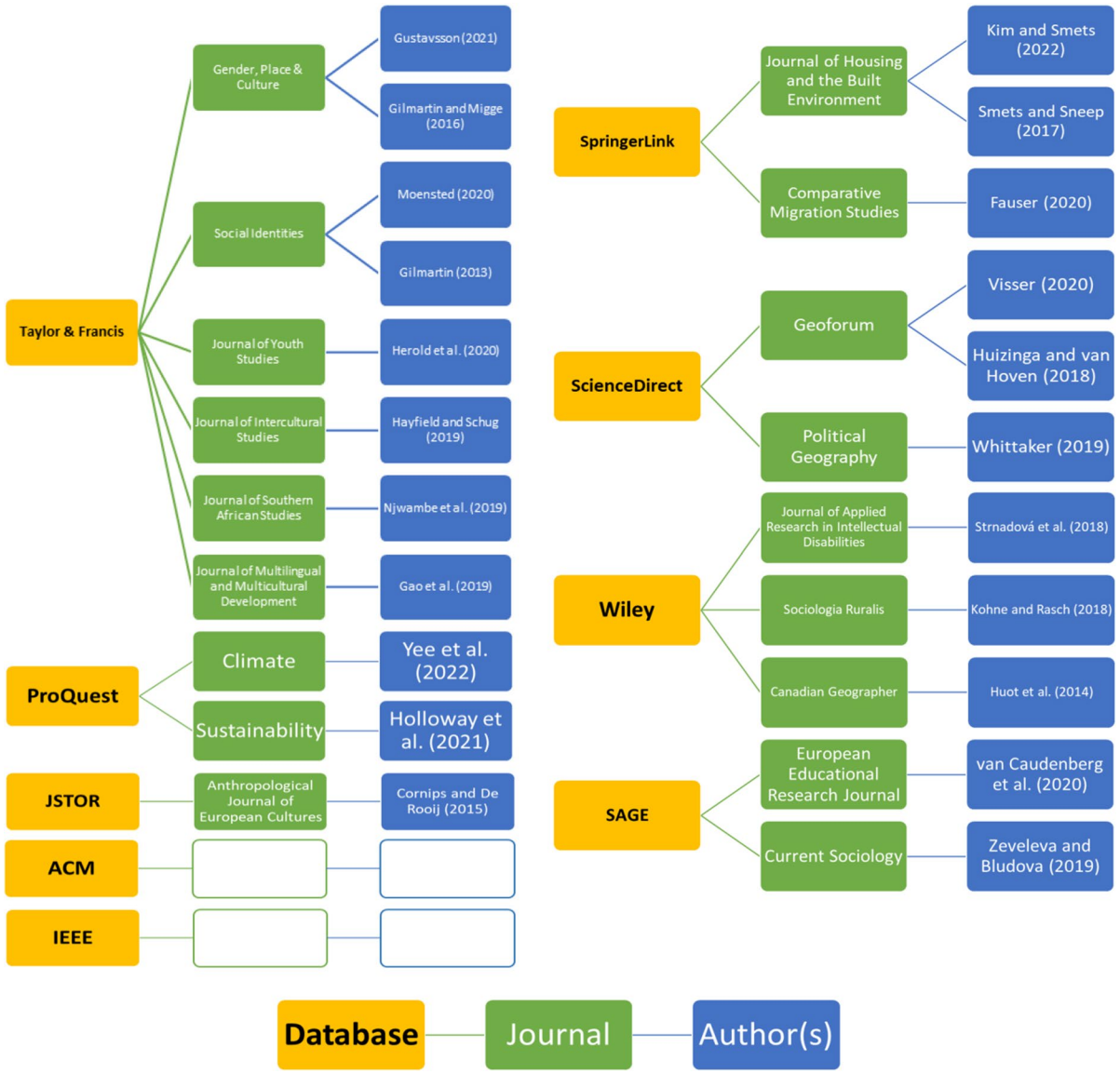


Fig. 2 Included studies across journals and databases

Practical meanings

Among the reviewed articles, participants explicitly used the term "belonging" to articulate their feelings in only a few cases (Gao et al. 2019; Lindegaard Moensted 2020). The term was more commonly employed when they felt the absence of belonging, as evidenced in studies by Huot et al. (2014), Kim and Smets (2022), Njwambe et al. (2019), Strnadová et al. (2018), Whittaker (2019), and Yee et al. (2022). Instead, individuals frequently conveyed their place-belongingness through meanings associated with the symbolic characteristics of the place.

Among these symbols, the notion of *home* held the central position (as shown in Table 1). *Feeling at home* was consistently emphasized, albeit with varying levels, in all the studies as the primary interpretation that individuals put on their subjective sense of belonging to a place. For instance, this can be observed in the studies by Gustavsson (2021), and Caudenberg et al. (2020). When participants spoke of feeling fit, familiar, welcomed, understood, or

Table 1 Practical Meanings Assigned to Place-Belongingness

References	Feeling at Home	Feeling Accepted	Feeling Secure	Feeling Comfort	Emotional Attachments	Feeling Empowered
Yee et al., 2022	✓	✓	✓	Not found	✓	Not found
Kim & Smets, 2022	✓	✓	✓	✓	Not found	✓
Holloway et al., 2021	✓	Not found	✓	✓	✓	Not found
Gustavsson, 2021	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Not found
Lindegaard Moensted 2020	✓	Not found	✓	Not found	Not found	✓
Herold et al., 2020	✓	✓	Not found	Not found	Not found	✓
Visser, 2020	✓	✓	Not found	✓	✓	✓
Fauser, 2020	✓	✓	✓	Not found	Not found	Not found
van Caudenberg et al., 2020	✓	✓	Not found	✓	Not found	Not found
Zeveleva & Bludova, 2019	✓	Not found	✓	✓	✓	Not found
Hayfield & Schug, 2019	✓	✓	✓	✓	Not found	✓
Whittaker, 2019	✓	✓	✓	✓	Not found	✓
Njwambe et al., 2019	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Gao et al., 2019	✓	✓	✓	✓	Not found	✓
Huizinga & van Hoven, 2018	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Not found
Strnadová et al., 2018	✓	✓	✓	Not found	Not found	✓
Köhne and Rasch 2018	✓	Not found	✓	Not found	✓	Not found
Smets & Sneep, 2017	✓	Not found	Not found	Not found	✓	Not found
Gilmartin & Migge, 2016	✓	Not found	Not found	Not found	Not found	Not found
Cornips & De Rooij, 2015	✓	✓	Not found	Not found	Not found	Not found
Huot et al., 2014	✓	✓	Not found	✓	Not found	Not found
Gilmartin, 2013	✓	✓	Not found	Not found	Not found	Not found

respected, they were often referring to their sense of belonging. We have grouped these descriptions together under the category of *feeling accepted*. Fauser (2020) and Gilmartin (2013) exemplified this practical meaning. *Feeling secure* was another practical meaning that arose from physical, social, and psychological factors, such as safe environments, a trustworthy future, and self-esteem (Hayfield & Schug, 2019; Kim & Smets, 2022; Caudenberg et al. 2020; Zeveleva & Bludova, 2019). *Feeling comfort* was also a common means of expressing belonging, often equated with peace of mind and relaxation, as seen in the study by Yee et al. (2022). *Emotions* such as the sense of pride (Holloway et al., 2021) or beauty (Yee et al., 2022) attached to a place were indicators of place-belongingness. Furthermore, *feeling empowered* was manifested as a practical meaning. This empowerment was granted by socio-spatial structures that shape formal and informal rights, such as the freedom of religion, the ability to make choices about activities, deciding where to live or invest, and expressing oneself (Gao, Lai, and Halse 2019; Hayfield & Schug, 2019; Kim & Smets, 2022; Njwambe et al. 2019; Strnadová et al. 2018; Visser, 2020; Whittaker, 2019). Additionally, empowerment was represented in participatory activities (Herold et al. 2020; Lindegaard Moensted 2020), as participation is a categorical term of power (Arnstein, 2019).

The practical meanings we discovered were interconnected. For example, being socially accepted could result in experiencing both safety and a feeling of empowerment (Whittaker, 2019). Feeling secure translated into a sense of comfort, whereas the absence of acceptance led to discomfort (Hayfield & Schug, 2019; Visser, 2020). Emotional attachments, feelings of security, and feelings reinforced each other (Holloway et al., 2021). Furthermore, across all the studies, the concept of home was not self-sustaining; individuals felt at home only when they experienced a sense of welcome, security, comfort, empowerment,

or when they enjoyed the emotions associated with the place (see, for example, Kim and Smets (2022) and Yee et al. (2022). As mentioned, each discovered practical meaning indicates a symbolic aspect of the place. Therefore, the identified links between the practical meanings can illustrate how symbolic characteristics of a place can reinforce and complement each other.

Contributing factors

We identified four categories of factors contributing to place-belongingness (Table 2). As suggested by Antonsich (2010), place-belongingness was frequently influenced by memories. Yee et al. (2022) distinguished between first-hand memories of a place and indirect ones that continue over generations. Based on our findings, it was more feasible to create a category of factors that can personalize place-belongingness as a psychological and embodied phenomenon. This category of personal elements includes not only direct and indirect memories but also plans, perspectives, tempers, hobbies, and body maps (for example, refer to studies by Gustavsson (2021), Herold et al. (2020), Lindegaard Moensted (2020), and Visser (2020)).

The second category of factors was connections. This category encompasses participants´ family bonds, social relations, or brief encounters in a place (Fauser, 2020; Huizinga & van Hoven, 2018; Caudenberg et al. 2020). Moreover, connections can extend to physical interactions with animals, environments, and objects (Gustavsson, 2021). Another significant aspect of this category was the role of information and communication technologies, such as social networking sites, in facilitating virtual connections (Gilmartin & Migge, 2016; Njwambe, Cocks, and Vetter 2019; Strnadová, Johnson, and Walmsley 2018).

Four types of resources were found to contribute to place-belongingness: material, economic, educational, and legal resources. Researchers focused on various examples of these contributing resources, including access to food and shelter, job opportunities and income, educational access, residence permits, land tenure, and engagement with sustainability

Table 2 Factors Contributing to Place-Belongingness

References	Personal Elements	Connections	Resources	Cultural Factors
Yee et al., 2022	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kim & Smets, 2022	Not found	✓	✓	Not found
Holloway et al., 2021	✓	✓	✓	✓
Gustavsson, 2021	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lindegaard Moensted 2020	✓	✓	Not found	✓
Herold et al., 2020	✓	✓	✓	✓
Visser, 2020	✓	✓	Not found	Not found
Fauser, 2020	✓	✓	✓	✓
van Caudenberg et al., 2020	✓	✓	Not found	Not found
Zeveleva & Bludova, 2019	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hayfield & Schug, 2019	✓	✓	✓	✓
Whittaker, 2019	✓	✓	Not found	✓
Njwambe et al., 2019	✓	✓	✓	✓
Gao et al., 2019	✓	Not found	✓	✓
Huizinga & van Hoven, 2018	✓	✓	Not found	✓
Strnadová et al., 2018	✓	✓	Not found	Not found
Kohne and Rasch 2018	✓	✓	✓	✓
Smets & Sneep, 2017	✓	✓	✓	✓
Gilmartin & Migge, 2016	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cornips & De Rooij, 2015	✓	✓	Not found	✓
Huot et al., 2014	Not found	✓	Not found	✓
Gilmartin, 2013	Not found	✓	Not found	✓

policies and initiatives (Fauser, 2020; Gilmartin & Migge, 2016; Gustavsson, 2021; Holloway et al., 2021; Köhne & Rasch, 2018; Yee et al., 2022; Zeveleva & Bludova, 2019). Many researchers outlined that the absence of these resources could diminish place-belongingness (Njwambe et al. 2019; Smets & Sneep, 2017; Caudenberg et al. 2020).

Cultural factors created another category, primarily focused on instantiations of shared culture. This category encompassed aspects such as shared language, accent, lifestyle, values, rituals, customs, and skills (Gilmartin, 2013; Köhne & Rasch, 2018; Njwambe et al. 2019; Whittaker, 2019). Additionally, hospitality culture and cultural tolerance fell within this category (Fauser, 2020).

Culture had considerable potential for making boundaries by providing a context that emphasized differences. Disparities in language, gender, race, and nationality were frequently identified as factors that could negatively impact place-belongingness (Gilmartin, 2013; Huot et al., 2014; Caudenberg et al. 2020; Whittaker, 2019). Different lifestyles, traditions, and ethics could play the same role (Gilmartin & Migge, 2016; Kim & Smets, 2022; Lindegaard Moensted 2020). Stereotypes, labels, prejudices, and discrimination were the other visible boundary makers arising from cultural context (Cornips & de Rooij, 2015; Gao et al. 2019; Strnadová et al. 2018).

Cultural context could also transform personal elements, connections, and resources into boundary-makers. Some personal elements, such as experiences, expectations, and assumptions, emerged as boundary makers in different contexts (Hayfield & Schug, 2019; Holloway et al., 2021; Kim & Smets, 2022). It could reshape the dynamics of social connections, leading, for instance, to a sense of place-belongingness deprivation among individuals with intellectual disabilities (Strnadová et al. 2018) and tenants in disadvantaged neighborhoods (Smets & Sneep, 2017). Through socio-spatial discourses, cultural context could obstruct place-belongingness among recipients of resources like social security benefits by making them feel like a burden on the host community (Huizinga & van Hoven, 2018).

Formation of place-belongingness

As evidenced in preceding sections, various factors in real-life situations can contribute to one's place-belongingness, the sentiment often conveyed through practical meanings. Table 3 illustrates the connections between these contributing factors and practical meanings, highlighting potential ways for the cultivation of place-belongingness. According to the studies, personal elements, for example, cherished memories, motivations, and aspirations, can instill a sense of being at home (Gustavsson, 2021; Holloway et al., 2021; Njwambe et al. 2019; Yee et al., 2022). Family or social bonds, and connections with animals, environments, and objects can also promise this feeling (Herold et al. 2020; Kim & Smets, 2022; Whittaker, 2019). Economic, academic, and legal resources positively impact this place-belongingness semantic constituent (Fauser, 2020; Caudenberg et al. 2020; Zeveleva & Bludova, 2019). Furthermore, being at home can be fostered by such cultural factors as shared traditions, values, and languages (Cornips & de Rooij, 2015; Gao et al. 2019; Gilmartin, 2013).

Shared experiences and stories can provide participants with a sense of inclusion (Njwambe et al. 2019). Social relations and family ties can allow them to feel identified and respected (Gustavsson, 2021; Caudenberg et al. 2020; Visser, 2020). Observing cultural codes can lead to feelings of social acceptance (Cornips & de Rooij, 2015; Gilmartin, 2013; Whittaker, 2019). Moreover, they find a welcome in societies with a hospitality culture (Fauser, 2020).

Table 3 Existent Attributions of Practical Meanings to Contributing Factors

Contributing Factors	Feeling at Home	Feeling Accepted	Feeling Secure	Feeling Comfort	Emotional Attachments	Feeling Empowered
Personal elements	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Connections	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Not found
Resources	✓	Not found	✓	Not found	Not found	✓
Cultural factors	✓	✓	✓	Not found	Not found	✓

Personal links to the past can provoke a sense of security (Zeveleva & Bludova, 2019). Similarly, physical or technology-aided connections with people, environments, and objects can result in the same place-belongingness interpretation (Gustavsson, 2021; Whittaker, 2019). Resources can ensure the security of food, ownership, residence, investment, education, intellectual development, employment, and income (Fauser, 2020; Köhne & Rasch, 2018; Yee et al., 2022). Factors like hospitality, cultural tolerance, shared traditions, and shared language give participants a sense of safety (Gao et al. 2019; Holloway et al., 2021; Kim & Smets, 2022; Zeveleva & Bludova, 2019).

Comfort within a place can stem from a variety of personal elements, including memories and experiences continuing over generations, plans for the future, or self-rule personalities (Holloway et al., 2021; Huot et al., 2014; Njwambe et al. 2019; Zeveleva & Bludova, 2019). Environmental interactions are another source of comfort (Gustavsson, 2021), as are interpersonal and social connections (Gao et al. 2019; Hayfield & Schug, 2019; Caudenberg et al. 2020).

Memories can enable participants to attach emotions, such as beauty, pride, and tranquility, to a place (Holloway et al., 2021; Njwambe et al. 2019; Yee et al., 2022; Zeveleva & Bludova, 2019). Moreover, social relationships encourage dwellers to attach a sense of pleasure to their neighborhoods (Smets & Sneep, 2017; Visser, 2020).

As a personal element, autonomous characters can result in a sense of independence and empowerment (Strnadová et al. 2018). Resources can ensure financial independence and support freedom of action (Hayfield & Schug, 2019; Yee et al., 2022). Cultural norms grant young people the right to choose their clothes and perform religious practices (Gao et al. 2019; Whittaker, 2019). Shared values of sustainability can also exemplify cultural factors that empower residents to claim their rights (Köhne & Rasch, 2018).

In numerous instances, the practical meanings became evident because of the insufficiency of contributors. For example, a lack of access to resources endangered participants´ sense of being at home (Strnadová et al. 2018) and security (Holloway et al., 2021). Some participants reported feeling unaccepted and uncomfortable due to inadequate language skills and experiences of discrimination (Gao et al. 2019; Kim & Smets, 2022). Such cases are not included in Table 3 as they do not refer to place-belongingness formation but indicate its absence.

Methodological characteristics of included studies

In the included studies, researchers recruited participants who varied in number, age, gender, ability, and background (Table 4). Number of participants ranged from 3 (Caudenberg et al. 2020) to 62 (Holloway et al., 2021). In addition to studies focusing on specific age groups, for example, seniors (Fauser, 2020), many researchers provided readers with participants´ age information. Gender was a central research theme in studies like Gustavsson (2021) and Gilmartin and Migge (2016). Researchers rarely provided detailed information about the physical or mental abilities of the interviewees. The only exception was the article by Strnadová et al. (2018), who collaborated with intellectually disabled individuals.

Ethnic and social backgrounds played a significant role in participant recruitment. This was explicitly evident in studies focusing on individuals of migrant origins, as seen in the research by Hayfield and Schug (2019), farmer families (Holloway et al., 2021), fishery families (Gustavsson, 2021), and in papers examining disparities between social classes (Cornips & de Rooij, 2015; Smets & Sneep, 2017). In many cases, researchers like Visser (2020) and Whittaker (2019) concentrated on minorities or vulnerable groups.

Urban areas were a predominant setting for researchers exploring place-belongingness. Nevertheless, their findings often hint at a multi-scale sense of belonging, encompassing, for example, not only a neighborhood but also a sense of belonging to one´s country (Huizinga & van Hoven, 2018; Visser, 2020). The scale of the research setting varied widely, ranging from individual schools (Gao et al. 2019) and neighborhoods (Kim & Smets, 2022) to entire regions (Cornips & de Rooij, 2015), islands (Yee et al., 2022), or even entire countries (Gilmartin, 2013). These settings could illuminate various social, political, academic, or environmental issues. For instance, studies conducted on farms (Holloway et al., 2021) and disadvantaged neighborhoods (Smets & Sneep, 2017) pinpointed specific cultural challenges, while those focused on educational settings disclosed social and educational problems (Gao et al. 2019; Caudenberg et al. 2020).

Table 4 Methodological characteristics of the studies

References	Participants	Settings	Data collection methods	Data analysis software	Observed ethics
Yee et al. (2022)	Locals	Togoru, Fiji	Talanoa interview Transect walk	NVivo	Ethics approval
Kim and Smets (2022)	Syrian refugees	Car Town area, Seoul, South Korea	Interview Conversation Observation	Not found	Informed consents
Holloway et al. (2021)	Farmer families	livestock farms, Northern Ireland	Work and Talk Interview	Not found	Ethics approval Informed consents
Gustavsson (2021)	Fishery-background women	England Wales Scotland	Interview	Not found	Pseudonyms
Lindegaard Moensted (2020)	Young black refugees	A disadvantage neighborhood, Australia	Workshop Interview Field-note	Not found	Pseudonyms Ethics approval
Herold et al. (2020)	Local youths	Rural areas, Denmark	Interview	Nvivo 11	Not found
Visser (2020)	Migrant-background youths	Tottenham area, London	Interview Observation Conversation	Nvivo	Pseudonyms
Fauser (2020)	German retirees	Alanya, Turkey	Interviews Internet blogs Memo-writing	Atlas.ti	Ethics approval
van Caudenberg et al. (2020)	First/second generation young migrants	A large city, Flanders, Belgium	Interview	Not found	Not found
Zeveleva and Bludova (2019)	Crimean bachelor students	Moscow, Russia	Interview	Not found	Pseudonyms Informed consents
Hayfield and Schug (2019)	Non-Nordic immigrants	Faroe Islands, Denmark	Interview	Nvivo	Pseudonyms
Whittaker (2019)	Second-generation Welsh Muslims	Wales	Interview Focus group	Not found	Not found
Njwambe et al. (2019)	Xhosa-speaking urban–rural migrants	Centane and Cape Town, South Africa	Interview Conversation Observation	Not found	Pseudonyms
Gao et al. (2019)	Low socio-economic class migrant students	A secondary school, Hong Kong	Interview Focus groups	Not found	Informed consents
Huizinga and van Hoven (2018)	Syrian male refugees	Residential neighborhoods, Northern Netherlands	Interview Walking interview	Not found	Pseudonyms Informed consents
Strnadová et al. (2018)	White participants with disabilities	New South Wales and Victoria, Australia	Focus group	Not found	Pseudonyms Informed consents Ethical approval
Köhne and Rasch (2018)	Locals Activists Politicians	Noordoostpolder, Netherland	Interview	Not found	Pseudonyms
Smets and Sneep (2017)	Tenants Owners	A disadvantaged neighborhood, Netherlands	Observation Conversation Interview	Not found	Pseudonyms
Gilmartin and Migge (2016)	Migrant mothers from EU or English-speaking countries	Rural and urban areas, Ireland	Interview	Not found	Not found

Table 4 (continued)

References	Participants	Settings	Data collection methods	Data analysis software	Observed ethics
Cornips and De Rooij (2015)	Members of two carnival associations	Heerlen, Limburg, Netherlands,	Observation Interview	Not found	Not found
Huot et al. (2014)	French-speaking immigrants	London, Ontario, Canada	Interview Mental map Observation Interview	Not found	Ethics approval
Gilmartin (2013)	British-background migrants	Ireland	Interview	Not found	Not found

All the studies were centered on investigating the presence or absence of place-belongingness, and as a part of this approach, informal interviews were a standard method for data collection (Table 4). These interviews took various forms, such as narrative (Gustavsson, 2021), semi-structured (Herold et al. 2020), unstructured (Gilmartin, 2013), and online (Zeveleva & Bludova, 2019). In some cases, interviews were complemented or validated through methods like observation and textual document analysis (Köhne & Rasch, 2018; Lindegaard Moensted 2020).

Researchers conducted conversations and organized focus group sessions to encourage participants to express themselves. Additionally, some studies employed unconventional methods such as '*Talanoa'* interviews, which are rooted in Pacific Island societies (Yee et al., 2022), '*Work and Talk'* sessions (Holloway et al., 2021), and mental maps (Huot et al., 2014). Only a few researchers utilized computer-assisted methods during the analysis phase, which predominantly involved coding and thematic content classification (Table 4).

In most of the studies, the privacy of participants was diligently safeguarded. Pseudonyms were used not only for the names of participants but also for the places (Hayfield & Schug, 2019; Smets & Sneep, 2017). Many researchers obtained informed consents from participants and secured ethical approvals from their respective universities or other relevant institutions. In one case (Fauser, 2020), privacy regulations made some data unpublished.

Discussion and conclusion

This review enhances our understanding of place-belongingness within real-life contexts, where it predominantly becomes apparent as an absent phenomenon, and individuals express it through practical meanings that symbolize the qualities of a place. The notion of home holds a central position among these symbolic qualities; however, it does not fully manifest without the presence of other attributes. Based on the practical meanings, feeling at home constitutes a major facet of the subjective sense of belonging to a place, yet it does not encompass the entirety of the sensation, necessitating an extended definition of the concept: place-belongingness is a sense of being at home in a place where individuals can feel accepted, secure, comfortable, empowered, or emotionally attached.

Antonsich (2010) emphasizes that a sense of place-belongingness does not exist outside of the network of politics of belonging. In other words, like other feelings, place-belongingness is intricately tied to external factors. These external dynamics of belonging, referred to as politics of belonging, include the socio-spatial discourses and practices of inclusion and exclusion. Therefore, exploring the sense of place-belongingness can unveil not only individuals' well-being challenges stemming from the lack of belonging but also shed light on power distribution structures that obstruct their inclusion. Moreover, by delving into place-belongingness, we uncover both the barriers and pathways for citizens' advancement on the ladder of

civic engagement – a journey directly influenced by the level of power individuals possess, as discussed by Arnstein (2019).

We reclassified factors contributing to place-belongingness into personal elements, connections, resources, and cultural factors. Personal elements have psychological and embodied dimensions. This category comprises memories and experiences, visions and plans, temperaments and attitudes, mental capacities, and physical capabilities (see, for example, (Strnadová et al. 2018; Whittaker, 2019; Yee et al., 2022)). Connections go beyond personal and social bonds, as belonging can be felt in more-than-human relationships with animals, environments, and objects (Wright, 2015). Moreover, information and digital technologies can form a foundation for connections that enrich place-belongingness (Gilmartin & Migge, 2016). Resources include economic, material, educational, and legal services and facilities. The availability of resources can amplify one's place-belongingness, while their scarcity hinders its development (Kim & Smets, 2022). However, when politicized by socio-spatial structures, resources can carry out a contradictory function (Huizinga & van Hoven, 2018). Cultural factors strengthen place-belongingness when they signify convergences. Conversely, they also can reflect the volatile nature of place-belongingness when culture serves as a context that highlights dichotomies (Strnadová et al. 2018).

We underlined identified connections between the contributing factors and the practical meanings associated with place-belongingness to show how a cultivated sense of place-belongingness may emerge. These connections can be valuable in studies investigating the impact of interventions on individuals' level of place-belongingness. In other words, such patterns assist researchers in identifying and affecting the areas that are likely to be influenced. For instance, interventions such as storytelling sessions emphasizing personal narratives can lead to observable shifts in all the practical meanings individuals attribute to their sense of place-belongingness (please see Table 3). As another example, researchers can more readily gauge the impact of resources on individuals' place-belongingness by monitoring changes in their feelings of security, empowerment, and being at home. Nonetheless, it's worth noting that the interconnectedness of these practical meanings may result in alterations in other aspects as well.

Most empirical studies on place-belongingness as a dependent variable primarily adopt a qualitative approach. The quality of these studies is acceptable, but we recommend devoting greater attention to the narratives of participants who might carry biases in forthcoming research. The studies encompass a diverse range of settings, and participants often experience a multiscale place-belongingness. The number of participants is constrained by the scope delineated by the qualitative data collection methods. Typically, research findings indicate either the presence or absence of place-belongingness. However, the spectrum between these two extremes remains unexplored mainly due to the lack of a standardized measurement scale.

Among the databases, *Taylor & Francis* emerges as the most suitable choice for publishing empirical research on place-belongingness, mainly when the focus is on gender and social identity. It is also worth citing that while certain studies have underscored the role of information technologies in enhancing place-belongingness, our search for this keyword in *IEEE Xplore* and *ACM Digital Library* databases yielded no results.

Based on the review findings, we suggest the following directions for further research:

Information technologies show promise in fostering place-belongingness. There are examples of how researchers have utilized information technologies to improve the sense of belonging to a place via social media connections (Herslund, 2021; Pavón-Benítez et al. 2021), digital storytelling sessions (Heck & Tsai, 2022; Marshall, 2021), and place-making practices (Edensor & Mundell, 2021). A comprehensive literature review can elucidate what potential information technologies have for enhancing place-belongingness.

Resources can become political through socio-spatial discourses. The power apparatus may manipulate resources to subjugate and disempower citizens, which can reverse the development of place-belongingness. We call for research addressing the impact of politicized resources on place-belongingness.

The sense of belonging to a place is acknowledged as a significant driver of sustainability (Mayer & Frantz, 2004; Sadownik & Gabi, 2021). On the other hand, our findings substantiate the role of sustainability in promoting place-belongingness, whether as a culture or when it is put on paper and formalized

as a legal resource to steer initiatives and actions that provoke this sense. Based on this mutual amplification between sustainability and place-belongingness, we propose the sustainability-place-belongingness reinforcement circle as a novel area of focus worthy of further conceptualization and detailed exploration.

Antonsich (2010) argued that the absence of place-belongingness manifests as emotions of loneliness, isolation, alienation, and dis-placement. Phenomenological exploration of these feelings of non-belonging, as noted by Lähdesmäki et al. (2016), can provide critical analyses of place-belongingness from previously unexplored perspectives.

For future research, developing a validated place-belongingness scale, for instance, a survey tool that can be generalizable over various real-life contexts, would be fruitful. Assessing the level of place-belongingness helps measure and compare the impact of interventions, for example, social, psychological, or technological ones. Additionally, it can aid in studying inclusion/exclusion dynamics. With its identified practical meanings and contributing factors, this review can serve as a basis for developing such a scale.

Funding Open Access funding provided by University of Jyväskylä (JYU).

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