

# DEMYSTIFYING STUDENT-UNIVERSITY IDENTIFICATION AMONG VIRTUAL TEFL CANDIDATES: THE CASE OF IRAN

**Esmael Ali Salimi<sup>a</sup>, Zahra Banitalebi<sup>b</sup>**  
(<sup>a</sup>ecasalimi@atu.ac.ir; <sup>b</sup>zahra.banitalebi@gmail.com)

*Allameh Tabataba'i University*  
*South Allameh St., Saadat Abad, Tehran, Iran*

**Abstract:** Student-University Identification (SUI) of virtual students in higher education is one area of identity that receives less attention. This study aimed to explore the SUI of a purposive sample of five virtual students studying Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) at the Ph.D. level in Iran. Investigating SUI in higher education among virtual TEFL Ph.D. candidates potentially contributes to demystifying a complex relationship of factors, such as cultural experiences, linguistic backgrounds, and online environment challenges. Using phenomenology, the study investigated the identities of the participants by thematically analyzing semi-structured interview data. The findings revealed the participants' various ways of identifying with a university, the subsequent consequences of identification, and the obstacles preventing them to develop SUI. The findings indicated that several factors at play are unique to doctoral candidates. The faculty prestige, research-based concerns, and nature of online media were identified to be crucial aspects of SUI for the TEFL Ph.D. students. Universities are thus advised to provide appropriate direction for virtual candidates. The study also found that some students perceived a lack of competence in TEFL, which, in turn, acted as a barrier to their SUI. To alleviate this problem, further research needs to identify what is lacking in teacher education university programs and what initiatives are required to improve TEFL students' professional development and help them become confident English teachers.

**Keywords:** TEFL, higher education, online learning, educational policy, SUI

**DOI:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.15639/teflinjournal.v34i1/97-115>

The mere idea of being a part of a group engenders a sense of ethnocentrism (Hogg, 2016). Therefore, social categorizations, and hence social identities, are fundamental building blocks of understanding one's self. Student-University Identification (SUI) is the extent to which students define themselves in terms of their university values and affiliations (Ashforth et al., 2008). Simply put, a feeling of attachment to the university is called SUI (Balaji et al., 2016). According to Social Identity Theory (SIT), students who strongly identify with their universities are likely to develop a firmly established sense of oneness with their universities (Tajfel, 1978). Research has shown that a higher SUI is associated with numerous benefits for students, such as widening their social networks (Ashforth et al., 2008), improving their academic achievements (Wilkins et al., 2016), and fostering positive behavioral intentions (Balaji et al., 2016; Wilkins & Huisman, 2013).

Not only do students benefit from a strong SUI, but universities also take advantage in several ways. First, to maintain their competitiveness, universities need to build an enduring relationship between the institute and students (e.g., Balaji et al., 2016; Schlesinger et al., 2017; Trullas et al., 2018; Yao et al., 2019). Second, SUI supports promising intentions and attitudes towards universities (Ashforth et al., 2008; Duesterhaus & Duesterhaus, 2014) which results in higher reputation. Third, it increases the students' donation giving (Ashley, 2018), and hence, financial power of institutions to proliferation.

Given the rewarding outcomes of SUI for both students and universities, exploring the antecedents and consequences of SUI has attracted much attention in different fields, especially management, business, marketing, psychology, and education (e.g., Abdelmaaboud et al., 2021; Balaji et al., 2016; Schlesinger et al., 2017). However, no relevant research has been undertaken with a focus on either Ph.D. or TEFL students. This gap needs to be filled due to several reasons. First, taking advantage of interdisciplinary opportunities is what the field of TEFL seems to be lacking (Mirhosseini et al., 2022). Second, as one negotiates a sense of self through language, TEFL university students who speak English as a foreign language have a venue to relate to a larger number of communities. The added element of different languages and cultures may affect their identities (Li, 2021; Salemi & Abadi, 2022). Third, it is argued that for adaptation and achievement in higher education, SUI plays an important role (McAlpine, 2017). Fourth, online learning environments may create challenges and tensions in understanding of academic life, building rapport, provoking motivation (Kaufmann & Buckner, 2019; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2020), identification struggles (Cutri & Mena, 2020), and finally keeping their social and classroom identities apart (Dennen & Burner, 2017). Lastly and most importantly, higher education aims to cultivate TEFL students' professional socialization and academic identity. Students' academic identities are created in negotiation with values, standards, and belief systems of higher education institutions (Henkel, 2005). However, without knowing about the antecedents, consequences, and barriers of SUI, reaching this goal would be impossible. Nor would it be feasible for higher education institutions to improve their branding and university image which guides students' confidence and performance (Abdelmaaboud et al., 2021). There should be a concerted effort to provide a comfortable environment in which students can get the best of education to their full potentials. Altogether, besides giving hints on how to support educational development, investigating SUI in higher education among virtual TEFL Ph.D. candidates may demystify a complex relationship of involving factors in identification, such as cultural experiences, linguistic backgrounds, and online environment challenges.

Ph.D. candidates face many challenges during the doctoral journeys (Li, 2021). These challenges might be strengthened or weakened by many factors, including government policies and varied educational setting (McAlpine, 2017). For example, a student may feel discomfort and face inner conflicts because of a new environment. In this case, the following adaptations, attitudes, and strategies that doctoral students adopt in response to that challenged self might change students' identities. This perspective often draws from SIT and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Theory of Wenger (1998) defines identification as a way of learning to become a member in a given community of practice. Membership in a group in which people, sharing similar professional expertise and interest, interacting with each other to achieve common goals is the main prerequisite to construct identity. Similarly, SIT theorizes that identity is developed

through membership in social categories determined by the society which are interrelated with regard to power and status (Tajfel, 1978). These theories both assume that the environment entails particular cultural norms, attitudes, and behaviors, and individuals act based on the requirements of a certain environment to fit in.

McAlpine (2012), relying on a five-year research program, has reconceptualized a view of doctoral student's identity that included students' agency, the interplay between the academic and personal aspects of students, and the effects of students' pasts and imagined futures. This theoretical framework was called identity-trajectory. The major arguments in such perspective are that students create their own histories in enacting their intentions. Further, identity is situated within past experiences and desired imagined careers. More importantly, it highlights institutional influences in the process of doctoral students' identification (McAlpine, 2012).

Such line of thinking underscores a situated perspective to doctoral students' identity in which the role of universities is prominent. In this regard, identification is a process of reconciliation of memberships in multiple communities of practice. As online media has the potential to change the nature of communication and work (McAlpine, 2017; Salimi & Banitalebi, 2023), and thus the type of students' practices and memberships, online learning may represent confrontations, negotiations, and reconciliations absent in face-to-face learning. Encountering such situations, students' assimilations to the norms of the new environment may affect their identities in general and SUI in particular. SUI was introduced to identity research by Mael and Ashforth (1992) to specifically take into account the process by which students establish their identities through constructing a self-image associated with a particular university. Although research in this area is not scarce, a marginal stream of studies has focused on higher education (Stephenson & Yerger, 2014) as well as antecedents and consequences of SUI (Balaji et al., 2016). In a study, Abdelmaaboud et al. (2021) explored the effect of SUI on student's advocacy intentions, including engaging in inspiring communications about the university, recommending it to others, and supporting it. Data were collected from 718 respondents through questionnaires. Considering this relationship both directly and indirectly through students' satisfaction and trust, they found SUI as an influential factor in students' advocacy intentions. In other words, a higher SUI was manifested in participants' satisfaction and trust which consequently led to more supportive behaviors. Also, the role of gender in the relationship between SUI and advocacy behaviors appeared to be significant in their study.

Previous literature has identified some factors as antecedents of SUI. Balaji et al. (2016) postulated a model of SUI antecedents and consequences in higher education. Based on this model, they developed a questionnaire having SUI antecedents and supportive behaviors ordered by levels of intensity, ranging from suggestions for improvement to participation in future activities, as the SUI consequences.

In a similar vein, studying the antecedents of SUI, Hawass (2020) examined the impact of a mediating factor, passion to learn, on the interrelationships between SUI and student-professor interaction as well as the association between SUI and university reputation. The results confirmed a direct positive effect of reputation on SUI. Moreover, passion to learn was found to be mediating the association between SUI and student-professor interactions.

Some scholars believe that even not having direct interaction with an organization, individuals are able to develop a sense of attachment and self-concept in relation to that specific

organization (e.g., Wilson et al., 2008). In this respect, components of SUI among high school prospective university students were investigated by Wilkins and Huisman (2013). Results showed that when prospective higher education students perceived higher prestige and similarity with a university, they experienced a stronger SUI, leading to positive behavioral intentions. Other studies also considered the potentials of other elements on SUI, such as the influence of organizational socialization on SUI (Medina-Craven et al., 2020) and the association between SUI and brand identification (Fazli-Salehi et al., 2019).

This small aggregate of earlier research, however, has been concerned with predictive components of SUI and to a lesser extent the consequences of SUI. Unfortunately, studying the barriers to SUI seems to be left unnoticed in existing literature. As a result, impeding factors of SUI have not been identified and this may hinder the efforts of taking proper initiatives to enhance SUI. Unless the barriers are identified, the areas in need of reconsideration and improvement to work through SUI would not become unfolded.

The principal role of technology in identity studies deserves more attention (Norton & Costa, 2018). Technology mediates self-expression by multiple means it offers (Klimanova, 2020). There have been calls and concerns to explore whether distance learning is capable of keeping students together as a community (Chatham-Carpenter, 2017; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2020; Reedy, 2019). Although there has been discussion over the constraints and advantages virtual environments create for doctoral students (e.g., McAlpine, 2017), the case of SUI has not been appropriately investigated for online doctoral university students.

Further, previous research mostly embraced quantitative methods such as questionnaires to study SUI. As students' experiences are shaped by multiple influences in the social contexts, adopting a deterministic approach to understand their experience as an objective reality seems faulty. Qualitative analyses, instead, attempt to detail, discover, and demystify situations (Kumar, 2018). Therefore, adopting such a perspective can deepen our knowledge about the procedures students take to identify with a university.

Interestingly, the context of the present study and its participants may also provide new insights into the intersection of education and identity. Both private and state universities in Iran operate under the codes of the Ministry of Higher Education that maintains tight control over the teaching methods and content of textbooks (Mirhosseini & Khodakarami, 2015). Since context plays a significant role in the identification, it would be stimulating to consider an educational setting in which language students are in demand for sufficient global culture (Rashidi & Najafi, 2010) and experience several challenges in doctoral education (see Hemmati & Mahdie, 2020 for a summary). To this purpose, the present study engaged in an exploration of SUI in Iranian university students studying TEFL online. The following research questions were proposed:

1. What are the antecedents of SUI for virtual TEFL students at Ph.D. programs?
2. What are the consequences of SUI for virtual TEFL students at Ph.D. programs?
3. What are the barriers to SUI for virtual TEFL students at Ph.D. programs?

## **METHOD**

Conceptualizing students' experiences with university in a virtual setting as a phenomenon can open new horizons to specify the roles language, technology, and policy play in building SUI. Phenomenology in its interpretive type aims to characterize and interpret the essence of a contextualized experience as a phenomenon (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) enables researchers to collect rich details of subjects' contextual experiences (Smith et al., 2009). In this study, qualitative data were gathered through interviews and supplemented by memoing.

### **Participants and Research Setting**

A purposive sample of five virtual Ph.D. candidates studying English-related majors in private and state universities in two cities in Iran was chosen to take the interviews. Emphasizing on collecting rich enough data rather than a large sample size, IPA usually has a sample of three participants (Smith, 2004) without seeking any point of theoretical saturation as in grounded theory (Gill, 2020). A sample size of three to six may allow the researchers to engage with each individual case long and deep enough so as to generate an elusive perspective of divergence and convergence in the phenomenon of interest (Smith et al., 2009). As individuals' construction of lived experiences is mediated through their social and contextual backgrounds (Klimanova, 2020), an introduction of the study context can facilitate sense-making and interpretation.

Teacher education in Iran is mainly the responsibility of private and state universities. TEFL programs offer coursework at BA, MA, and Ph.D. programs covering various facets of English language teaching, such as linguistics, teaching methodologies, and assessment. TEFL MA students need to undergo some stages to get acceptance from a university for a Ph.D. program. First, they have to obtain an acceptable score in the Iranian National University Entrance Exam. Then, depending on their achieved scores, they may select some universities. After that, they will be invited to have interviews with the target universities, and final Ph.D. candidates will be selected among the interviewees. Ph.D. programs usually take five years, and during their first two years, TEFL Ph.D. candidates take several theoretical courses. Upon passing the required courses, they will choose their supervisors and work on their dissertations.

This study intended to collect data from participants having enough experience with their universities. To make sure of it, students beginning the second year of university were chosen. Students at Ph.D. levels can easily understand the content of interviews in English. Therefore, the proficiency levels of students were not scrutinized. As gender was found to be an influential factor (Abdelmaaboud et al., 2021), the researchers excluded men to have a homogeneous sample. Females have been reported to develop stronger levels of identification (Abdelmaaboud et al., 2021) and consequently are more informative and able to add insights into the picture. Another affecting factor on SUI was reported to be university status (Fazli-Salehi et al., 2019). Having that in mind, the researchers chose students of differing university status.

Three participants were studying at a top-ranking state university while the other two were studying at a low-level private university. They had differing years of experience with their universities. One individual in each group chose to study in the same university for higher education. The sample of this study, although not statistically, may represent typical identities

of students at Ph.D. level in Iran; students at top and lower-in-rank universities with either precedented or unprecedented contact with their universities. All participants shared the same experience of graduating and studying in the discussed education system. The participants were between the ages of 26 to 34 with varying teaching experiences. One of the participants (Participant C) had almost one year of teaching experience although others were more experienced (Table 1).

**Table 1. Demographic Information of the Participants**

Participants	Age	Experience with their universities	University status	Teaching experience
A	26	8 years	high	3
B	28	2 years	high	4
C	33	2 years	high	1
D	34	4 years	low	10
E	30	2 years	low	5

## Instruments

### *Student-University Identification Questionnaire*

The first instrument of this study was used to choose the potential sample of students for the following interviews. The questionnaire, adopted from Mael and Ashforth (1992), is a six-item 5-point Likert type scale, ranging from '1' strongly disagree to '5' strongly agree. The reliability and validity of the scale were reported to be acceptable (with Cronbach's alpha of .83, Mael & Ashforth, 1992). The questionnaire was developed drawing on SIT (Mael & Ashforth, 1992), which has been widely used in several studies on SUI (e.g., Balaji et al., 2016; Fazli-Salehi et al., 2019).

In this questionnaire, the higher the students' scores, the stronger their SUI would be assumed. Participants' scores were calculated based on the total average of ratings ranging from 1 to 5. Normality of data was checked. The data were supplemented by the respondents' answers to the final open-ended questions asking about their relationship with their universities. Positive answers were regarded as indicating high SUI. It took 10 minutes of their time to complete the questionnaire. Among 36 respondents, five candidates were selected based on their scores (average score: '5', with positive answers to the final questions) and agreement of participation. The questionnaire data only provided a descriptive summary of the participants to retrieve the sample.

It should also be noted that although low SUI students (those whose average scores on the SUI questionnaire was near the lowest point, i.e., '1') could possibly better inform the barriers of SUI, the researchers exclude this group to have a congruous sample. Moreover, the main reason behind choosing high SUI participants was to have informative participants who could provide ample information regarding what facilitated their SUI (i.e., antecedents), and how SUI affected their performance (i.e., consequences). Obviously, students with low SUI could not illuminate what they have not experienced and inform the study regarding the antecedents and consequences of SUI. Additionally, as high SUI students have gone through potential difficulties

on their way to building strong identification with their universities, they could better enlighten the barriers of SUI.

### ***Semi-Structured Phone Interviews***

Since face-to-face interviews were not possible because of COVID-19 pandemic, this study used phone interviews to collect qualitative data. Semi-structured interviews are the most suitable instruments in carrying out an IPA (Smith, 2004) as they facilitate exploratory investigations. That said, semi-structured phone interviews were used in this study. The interview items were constructed by the researchers and further inspected through checklists by two content experts and a university professor majoring in Applied Linguistics for the sake of content validity. Following the principles of phenomenological interviews (Smith et al., 2009), interviewers first gained background information about the students. Further, they engaged in a dialogue whereby subsequent questions were modified in light of the students' answers.

### **Procedure**

First, the online version of the questionnaire along with a brief description of the study was sent to a Telegram (a social networking application) group in which TEFL Ph.D. candidates shared academic information with each other. Among 36 volunteers who completed the questionnaire, those who met the requirements and agreed for interviews were invited to have phone interviews. Prior to being interviewed, the respondents were informed that their answers will only be used for the study and remain confidential. Permissions were also obtained to digitally record and then transcribe the interviews. All interviews were conducted over phone calls from July to August 2021. A second session for further clarification was arranged when needed. Despite being allowed to use either English or Persian, the interviewees preferred to use English.

Semi-structured phone interviews were conducted, audio-recorded, and transcribed. The students were required to answer the questions based on their experiences of and attitudes towards the university they were studying at the time. The duration of the interviews ranged between 30 and 60 minutes for each session covering a range of questions centered on SUI. Following Lofland and Lofland's (1999) suggestion, memos were generated immediately after each interview.

### **Data Analysis**

For selecting the sample, quantitative data from questionnaires were used. Thirty-six students completed the questionnaire. Finally, five female Ph.D. candidates with high SUI consented to take part in the study for phone interviews.

After selecting the participants, analysis of qualitative data was performed in several steps. In this analysis, the four suggested stages of IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2003) were closely observed. Firstly, the emerging themes capturing the essence of the respondents' experiences were identified. Then, in a search for patterns and connections, the themes were clustered together to generate master themes. Thirdly, an iterative analysis of other transcripts was conducted to modify the obtained set of master themes. Lastly, a table of themes was attained through a blend

of abstraction and interpretation of the researchers with reference to the extracted verbatims (See Table 2 under the Findings section). The interviews were carried out by one researcher and, as a validity check (Groenewald, 2004), the other researcher made sure that the essence of the interviews has been captured precisely by checking the transcripts. By analyzing the interview data, this study identified antecedents, consequences, and barriers to identification that TEFL Ph.D. candidates faced.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Findings

To examine the data, the researchers categorized the themes and subthemes under 3 categories: (1) antecedents; (2) consequences; and (3) barriers of SUI. To demonstrate each (sub)theme, an account of the analysis supplemented with extracts from the transcribed interviews is given. Table 2 gives a summary of themes and subthemes.

**Table 2. Themes and Subthemes of Students' Interviews**

<b>Antecedents</b>	Faculty Prestige <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The quality of interaction between academics and students</li> <li>• Professors' area of specialty</li> <li>• The educational history of the faculty</li> </ul> University Prestige <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• International reputation</li> <li>• Image</li> </ul>
<b>Consequences</b>	Behavioral <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive word-of-mouth</li> <li>• Further engagement</li> </ul> Affective
<b>Barriers</b>	Online Classes Educational System

### *Antecedents*

#### **Faculty Prestige**

Concerning the antecedents of SUI, respondents were asked to explain how their senses of being a virtual TEFL Ph.D. student of "X" university emerged. The analysis showed that central to this perception was the perspective that their university faculties maintained a high standard of academic excellence in some aspects. It seemed that, for Ph.D. students, university reputation played a less significant role. Instead, various aspects of particular faculties of focus were given much more weight. Almost all participants referred to the superiority of their universities by mentioning one or more points specific to their university faculties. This included, as shown in Table 2, friendly interaction between academics and students, providing specific area of specialty, and the educational history of the faculty. Extract (1) explains the faculty prestige theme:



(1) #...But the reason I did the same (chose the same university) for doing a Ph.D. was different. Now all the professors knew me very well and I found them caring and accessible. Professor X, for example, was constantly motivating me to further my studies. Whenever I reached out for help, he was always there for me during my MA and BA. As I know the professors, I mostly see eye-to-eye about common classroom issues. That I could build rapport with them is what makes me happy about this university. (A)

To Participant A, her past experience with professors encouraged her to develop rapport and consequently a stronger sense of attachment to the university. She referred to characteristics, such as being helpful, 'caring', 'accessible', and 'motivating' to describe the positive interactions she had with the professors in previous programs. This points to the situatedness feature of the doctorate within prior experiences.

Similarly, Participants B and C mentioned professors' areas of specialty as the main reason for their SUI, shown in Extracts (2-3).

(2) #The first thing that came to my mind when I wanted to choose a university for Ph.D. program was its faculty members. I tracked the research interest and published works of each of them. Then, I decided to select University X. This university is well-known in the area of Y.... It also happened to be my area of interest.... I had gained enough expertise and enthusiasm to continue this branch of research and I wanted to do it where professors manifested a quality mastery of the subject. (B)

(3) #I did it because of Professor X. He is working on the subject matter of my interest and academia knows him as a high-profile figure in Z by his publications. (C)

As can be observed in Extracts (2) and (3), the issues of knowledgeable and popularity mattered to students. Both participants used adjectives, such as 'well-known' and 'high-profile', to refer to the desirability of the universities and professors' mastery of the subfields. Moreover, discussing faculty theme, participants particularly referred to individual members in the faculty of their universities when they complimented the history, achievements, and peculiarities of the university. In other words, talking about the accomplishments of their universities, individuals, such as Participant C, did not bring up issues of development and structure of the institutions rather they put forth the name, and specialty area of faculty members, and more specifically, how the members have glowed up with their impressive research publications in their area of specialty.

As for the last subtheme, the educational history of the faculty, Participant E argued that the faculty of her university had 'achieved lots of awards', actively participated in several 'national and international communities', and had 'some connections with universities abroad'. She explained that she valued her particular university because the faculty 'left a good name to remember' and she recognized the university by faculty's contributions to the field.

### **University Prestige**

Respondents, to a lesser extent, also mentioned university prestige as another antecedent of SUI. They pointed out international reputation and distinguished image from competitors as factors constituting the university prestige. Extract (4) illustrates the issue:

(4) #Even internationally, it is respected...having today's online advancements, online environments made it more accessible to have webinars and workshops... I am pleased that my university holds the largest number of such events annually. Because they invite many prominent scholars in different field, and nobody says no to them. I suppose post-doc opportunities would be easy targets. (B)

Participant B argued that 'post-doc opportunities' were possible for her because the university had international recognition. She also referred to the effects of Internet-based advancement that facilitated having academic events at international levels. She further argued that her university invited 'many prominent scholars in different fields' to participate in such events as keynote speakers, and because of the university reputation the scholars agreed to take part in those "webinars and workshops". That was what made holding 'the largest number of such events' possible for the university.

In Excerpt (5) Participant C referred to the university image as another antecedent:

(5) #Our university is the Y rank among the universities in Iran. Many aspects distinguish it from other universities, like some top journals that carry the title of this university. (C)

Participant C felt proud of her university because she believed that there were several features that made this university distinguishable. In this excerpt she referred to two of them, namely its ranking, and several 'top journals' sponsored by this specific university. Another participant (Participant E) also argued that graduating from her university, she would be 'a Ph.D. graduate from X university' who would have a great chance of future employment. She mentioned that it was because people thought 'highly of this university'.

## **Consequences**

### **Behavioral**

Scrutinizing the data, the researchers came up with two major themes under which consequences could be organized, namely affective and behavioral. Affective consequences indicated how students felt and conceptualized SUI, while behavioral consequences had direct association with individuals' behaviors. SUI appeared to have two behavioral consequences. First, the primacy of SUI in further engagement with university was identified as the main subtheme in behavioral category. Students acknowledged that they would be willing to cooperate as teaching- or research-assistants in their university. Participant A explained in Excerpt (6) that:

(6) #I perceive my destiny as interweaved with the university. I assume that after graduation, hopefully, I will work here as an assistant professor. (A)

The sense of attachment to university and its subsequent outcome on the students' imagined future can be observed in Excerpt (6). Participant A made a reference to the university by the word 'here' to show her desire to be a future professor at X university, not elsewhere. Similarly, Participant E mentioned that 'I feel cozy working with my university professors'. She further explained that this was 'the path through which I can mutually benefit the university and myself'. To enhance the research productivity of university was one of her future visions. Her references to the 'path' and 'mutually benefit' represented her attempts to align her identity with her future actions.

Other behavioral consequences were categorized under positive word of mouth subcategory. This subtheme was identified in the accounts of two of the participants, such as disseminating a positive word of mouth about the university, suggesting it to new candidates in social media, posting stimulating materials on social network sites, and following university channels on Instagram and Telegram (two social networking applications). These aspects were more related to the virtual nature of their experiences. For instance, one of the participants mentioned in Excerpt (7) that:

(7) #...I am an active Instagram user. Recently, my followers asked about my opinion about X university. I shared some posts naming all its advantages and tagged university pages. (C)

As can be seen in Excerpt (7), online classes opened the door to increased awareness of social media sites and groups. Not only do the individuals claimed to follow their university pages on the social media, but they also asserted that they would support their university by sharing positive words about it.

### **Affective**

Participants' commitment to university was manifested affectively in all cases as well. For those who had experiences of studying for Bachelor's or Master's degrees, their experiences associated with education in the same universities led to positive feelings such as loyalty and familiarity. Excerpt (8) can clarify the point:

8) #X university is more of a home to me, considering my history with it. It is like I feel responsible to its related issues... I just like the atmosphere of my university. Its beautiful campus makes me feel comfortable. As I was a student here before, I am familiar with different parts of the university like the back of my hand. (A)

For participant A, her sense of belonging to university was reflected in her feelings of responsibility to university issues. Her situated experience, familiarity with the environment, made her view her university as 'home' and feel 'comfortable'.

### **Barriers**

#### **Online Classes**

Interviewees provided insights into what factors could be counted as barriers into SUI in their experiences. The researchers classified these challenges into two themes. First, barriers geared toward difficulties with online classes. To respondents, a limited representation that did not fit their different roles was counted as a stumbling block of SUI. Participant B expressed her dissatisfaction with such issue in Excerpt (9):

(9) #I cannot even recall my classmates' first names! They don't know me either! We never talk about ourselves. We only have time to talk for maybe 10 minutes about course subjects. It is like we are robots in online classes. (B)

Her reference to 'robots in online classes' and 'talk about ourselves' indicated that she needed more intimacy and recognition by her classmates. More generally, her complaint could

be implied as a demand to get a wider connection with other Ph.D. students in the same university, and to be identified as a university community. Furthermore, she implicitly highlighted the teacher-centered approaches by university professors that deprived them from a voice in virtual classes by mentioning that they had 'maybe 10 minutes' of the class time.

### **Educational System**

The second theme of barriers, educational system, underscored the gap between education and practice. One of the students argued that what they received at university as teacher education program was not fulfilling and that made them distance themselves from the university. She explained in Excerpt (10):

*10) #As a Ph.D. student of university X, it is expected that we become proficient English teachers. I keep asking myself after all these years of studying at university: am I a qualified English teacher? I don't think so... I wish they could prepare us for being a real English teacher. All these books and materials do not help in practice. (E)*

The participant referred to 'As a Ph.D. student of university X' to underscore what is required to be an acceptable X university student. The mismatch between the aims of the university as an institute for teacher education and the ending results of it prevented Participant E to identify more strongly with her university. She had a sense of incapability as an English teacher, and she considered the university responsible for this problem. More importantly, she expressed her dissatisfaction with the materials which were ineffective in helping teachers in TEFL classrooms.

### **Discussion**

The data analysis identified several antecedents, consequences, and barriers for the SUI of Ph.D. TEFL candidates in virtual classes. The findings revealed that university faculties, having distinctive characteristics, act as the main antecedent of SUI. Every individual's account of their university experiences pinpointed the role that the faculty of language in their universities played in their identification. This means that the perceptions of faculty stand at the center of determining SUI in Ph.D. candidates' perspectives. This factor has been ignored in previous research on SUI that considered the specificities of faculties under the umbrella terms of university prestige or brand knowledge (Balaji et al., 2016; Fazli-Salehi et al., 2019). Such overlook can be justified by the differences in the samples recruited in different studies. It seems that faculty issues gain more attention for Ph.D. candidates. Networking, the relationships between students and their supervisors, peers, and scholars, constitute doctoral students' identity (McAlpine, 2012).

Such justification accounts for and is exemplified by the contrary findings of Hawass (2020). Hawass (2020) indicated that student-professor interaction was not significantly correlated with SUI. The sample of Hawass' study was comprised of undergraduate students. Undergraduates might not demand professors' guidance beyond their teaching and rarely for term projects, while Ph.D. candidates require technical and specialized feedback on research projects. Needless to say, affinity, cognizance, and strategy in professor-student relationships

affect the quality of learning experience (Kaufmann & Buckner, 2019; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2020) which directly or indirectly influences students' perception of university and consequently their levels of identification (Medina-Craven et al., 2020). Those who had prior experiences with the same university pinpointed that their past experiences helped in building rapport with professors, a component also included in McAlpine's (2012) model of doctoral students' identity. The identity-trajectory model underscores that the academic is situated within personal experiences. Past experiences influence present experience of the doctoral programs, and how students develop their identities (McAlpine, 2012).

Moreover, in line with earlier studies (Balaji et al., 2016; Fazli-Salehi et al., 2019; Hawass, 2020; Schlesinger et al., 2017), university prestige also appeared to have a role in students' identification with their universities in the present study. For Ph.D. candidates the recognition of university at national and international levels, which was exemplified through academic events, was found to be strongly associated with their SUI. Intriguingly, this factor did not appear in the accounts of low-rank university students. It seems logical that university brand is more related to top universities whose students feel distinctiveness more tangibly. That might be why universities are advised to brandification and declaration of their achievements (Balaji et al., 2016; Wilkins & Huisman, 2013; Yao et al., 2019).

Further, the consequences reported in this study were more or less similar to those found in several non-virtual studies, such as further engagement and positive feelings (e.g., Balaji et al., 2016; Trullas et al., 2018). However, they happened to be more specific to Ph.D. candidates in the case of this study. For instance, participants clearly stated that they would plan to conduct more scholarly research projects and contribute as university professors in future. As students identified with their universities, they tried to imagine their future merged with their universities. McAlpine (2012) rightly pointed, prior experiences, in general, and especially university experiences in this study, influence the students' investment in the doctoral programs and their imagined futures.

Concerning the barriers of SUI, the participants pointed out two main barriers. The interviewees argued that there were contextual limits to the information that they could provide about themselves in online classes. This is justifiable considering that people categorize others depending upon the first context they encounter. Provided that this context offers limited information, a person may happen not to be classified under a potential category that people have never noticed (Dennen & Burner, 2017). Dennen and Burner (2017) exemplify the issue through explicating the case of a student who initially identifies a person as a classmate. Not having a fuller picture of the setting, the student would never detect other aspects of the person's identity and continues classifying him under the same initial category of the classmate (Dennen & Burner, 2017). Moreover, considering the teacher-centered approaches prevalent in Iran (Eslamdoost et al., 2020), the students would not be given a proper voice to depict their identities. This point is reinforced by the last subtheme of barriers, educational system.

The last subtheme, educational system, refers to the inadequacies of teacher education programs in Iran. A sense of belonging to a supportive learning community would result in successful and fitting identities (Ashforth et al., 2008). In this regard, appropriate direction and professional support from universities and professors are required to ease professional development in students as potential English teachers. In absence of institutional assistance and

mentoring, students encountered difficulties building their identities (Li, 2021; McAlpine, 2012) and stronger senses of SUI. Additionally, as in Hemmati and Mahdie (2020), the sociocultural constraints of the context were manifested in barriers to university identification. However, they were mainly reflected in students' perceived lack of competence in functioning as an English teacher. They mentioned that the content of textbooks and teaching materials were not helpful. Apparently, to some of the participants, a shortage of mastery over TEFL kept them to truly and proudly accept themselves as TEFL Ph.D. candidates of a university. In other words, nurturing a strong student-university identity was entangled with relating to an image of a competent teacher for TEFL Ph.D. candidates. As the term "TEFL university student" is self-explanatory, reifying oneself as a member of the TEFL university student community embeds in itself a realization of both being an English teacher and a university student. Therefore, it is sensible that feeling incompetence in TEFL is followed by a weaker sense of SUI.

The present study shed light on how SUIs were occasioned in a context where ideological and political impediments have long affected students' English learning. Participants of the current study voiced their concerns over their lack of language teaching competence, stemming from the improper policies of language teaching (Eslamdoost et al., 2020; Mirhosseini & Khodakarami, 2015). Indeed, the perceived image of a TEFL Ph.D. candidate with flawless knowledge and skill over TEFL hampered their way towards growing stronger SUIs and identifying as a confident representative of a university as TEFL students. However, similar to Hemmati and Mahdie (2020), despite several problems, students' identification with their universities was still worthwhile to them. This premise is based on evidence that strong SUI can result in positive effects, such as positive word-of-mouth, that benefit students and the university alike. Several students admitted that they would be willing to serve as teaching assistants or research assistants at their university, which means that being part of the university community was important to them.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In this study, the researchers carried out a phenomenological study by scrutinizing how Ph.D. candidates make sense of their individual selves in virtual university classes. The findings revealed their various ways of identifying with a university, the subsequent consequences of identification, and lastly the obstacles preventing Ph.D. candidates to develop SUI.

This study contributed to a conceptualization of the complex process of identity construction of TEFL Ph.D. candidates as university students in virtual classes. It elucidated that striving for a proper representation of various aspects of their identities, the students believed that online environments restraint their identification, and they might need to work harder to be recognized as virtual students of a university. This urges a need to, firstly, see constructions of identity as essentially evolving, reactional, and dialogical as students need space to negotiate and depict their identities (Li, 2021; McAlpine, 2012). Second, providing room for forging connections is deemed necessary for online students. However, interaction alone is not sufficient (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2020). Students need to feel a sense of belonging to their classes, subject matter, instructors, and fellow classmates. Therefore, universities are advised to allow such opportunities for interaction and connection to alleviate these problems. To do so, holding

discussion groups to ask the students' opinions about decisions made in the universities can be helpful. A distinctive aspect of this study is its disclosure of the nuances that SUI creates at the Ph.D. level. Although high levels of SUI resulted in affinity and responsibility similar to other studies, for Ph.D. candidates, consequences as well as antecedents revolved around more academic conceptions. The values of research bases, academic events, professorate opportunities, etc. were more prominent in this study. Given the global competitive pressure among universities to attract more applicants (Balaji et al., 2016; Fazli-Salehi et al., 2019; Medina-Craven et al., 2020) in general and the desire for greater research proliferation in particular, this study has noteworthy implications for universities. In other words, not only does university identification have the common stated consequential benefits for universities, but it also implies more significance to universities holding Ph.D. programs given the potential for high SUI students to engage in and enhance academic productivity of the university.

The current research also hopes to have implications for researchers seeking to perceive the full implications of identification. A new dimension of identity, SUI, was introduced to the field of TEFL aspiring to open doors to profound understanding of identity. Identification is generally a multifaceted process. The development of student social identity, in this case, SUI especially, is affected by a multitude of factors. This study with TEFL Ph.D. candidates illuminated the prominence of academic aspects of SUI. Similar studies with TEFL students at other levels, such as undergraduates, may provide insight into the development of SUI at other levels, as well as provide a framework for reaching a comprehensive understanding of the development of SUI. Moreover, this study found that perceived lack of competence in TEFL acts as a barrier to SUI. To alleviate this problem, further research needs to identify what is lacking in teacher education university programs and what initiatives are required to improve TEFL students' professional development and help them become confident English teachers.

This study suggests that SUI in higher education is relatively less investigated, yet significant, concept with important consequences for universities. More specifically, it posits that different individuals can experience a variety of feelings, thinking, and acting, and there might be interplay between them. As such, this area warrants further investigation to include the role of individual differences such as age, social status, and gender to understand how these factors may mediate or shape SUI. Additionally, this study with a slight number of participants restricts generalizability. Further research could account for this limitation. Finally, the findings of the present study revealed some differences between students studying at universities with differing status. This can also be the topic of future studies aspiring to expose and remedy the barriers of SUI.

## REFERENCES

- Abdelmaaboud, A. K., Peña, A. I. P., & Mahrous, A. A. (2021). The influence of student-university identification on student's advocacy intentions: The role of student satisfaction and student trust. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 31(2), 1-23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2020.1768613>

- Ashforth, B. E., Harrison, S. H., & Corley, K. G. (2008). Identification in organizations: An examination of four fundamental questions. *Journal of Management*, (34)3, 325–374. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206308316059>
- Ashley, L. H. (2018). *Making 'the ask' to internal stakeholders: The influence of organizational identification on university faculty and staff giving*. [Master's thesis, Western Kentucky University]. <https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/theses/3061>
- Balaji, M. S., Roy, S. K., & Sadeque, S. (2016). Antecedents and consequences of university brand identification. *Journal of Business Research*, 69(8), 3023–3032. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.01.017>
- Chatham-Carpenter, A. (2017). The future online: Instructional communication scholars taking the lead. *Communication Education*, 66(4), 492–494. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2017.1349916>
- Cutri, R. M., & Mena, J. (2020). A critical reconceptualization of faculty readiness for online teaching. *Distance Education*, 41(3), 361–380. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2020.1763167>
- Dennen, V. P., & Burner, K. J. (2017). Identity, context collapse, and Facebook use in higher education: Putting presence and privacy at odds. *Distance Education*, 38(2), 173–192. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2017.1322453>
- Duesterhaus, A., & Duesterhaus, M. (2014). Attributes of successful university brands in the USA. *Journal of Brand Strategy*, 3(2), 169–183.
- Eslamdoost, S., King, K. A., & Tajeddin, Z. (2020). Professional identity conflict and (re) construction among English teachers in Iran. *Journal of Language, Identity and Education*, 19(5), 327–341. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2019.1676157>
- Fazli-Salehi, R., Esfidani, M. R., Torres, I. M., & Zúñiga, M. A. (2019). Antecedents of students' identification with university brands: A study on public universities in Iran. *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, 31(4), 830–854. <https://doi.org/10.1108/APJML-07-2018-0242>
- Gill, M. J. (2020). How can I study who you are? Methodological approaches to identity work research. In A. Brown (Ed.) *The Oxford handbook of identities in organizations* (pp. 295 – 310). Oxford University Press.
- Groenewald, T. (2004). A phenomenological research design illustrated. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 3(1), 42–55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690400300104>
- Hawass, H. H. (2020). The antecedents of student-university identification: an investigation into the Egyptian higher education sector. *Middle East Journal of Management*, 7(1), 17–40. <https://doi.org/10.1504/MEJM.2020.10026904>
- Hemmati, R., & Mahdie, A. (2020). Iranian PhD students' experiences of their learning environment and scholarly condition: A grounded theory study. *Studies in Higher Education*, 45(1), 187–208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1576164>
- Henkel, M. (2005). Academic identity and autonomy in a changing policy environment. *Higher Education*, 49(1), 155–176. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-004-2919-1>
- Hogg, M. A. (2016). Social identity theory. In S. McKeown, R. Haji, & N. Ferguson (Eds.), *Understanding peace and conflict through social identity theory: Contemporary*



- global perspectives* (pp. 3–17). Springer International Publishing. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-29869-6\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-29869-6_1)
- Kaufmann, R., & Buckner, M. M. (2019). Revisiting “power in the classroom”: Exploring online learning and motivation to study course content. *Interactive Learning Environments*, 27(3), 402–409. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2018.1481104>
- Kaufmann, R., & Vallade, J. I. (2020). Exploring connections in the online learning environment: student perceptions of rapport, climate, and loneliness. *Interactive Learning Environments*, 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2020.1749670>
- Klimanova, L. (2020). The phenomenology of experiencing oneself online: Critical dimensions of identity and language use in virtual spaces. In M. R. Freiermuth, N. Zarrinabadi (Eds.), *Technology and the psychology of second language learners and users, new language learning and teaching environments* (pp. 279-308). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-34212-8\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-34212-8_11)
- Kumar, R. (2018). *Research methodology: A step-by-step guide for beginners*. Sage Publications.
- Li, Y. (2021). “I had so many conflicts in my mind”: Navigating the doctoral journey across languages and cultures. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2021.1972804>
- Lofland, J., & Lofland, L. H. (1999). Data logging in observation: Fieldnotes. In A. Bryman & R. G. Burgess (Eds.), *Qualitative research* (pp. 3-12). Sage.
- Mael, F., & Ashforth, B. E. (1992). Alumni and their alma mater: A partial test of the reformulated model of organizational identification. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 13(2), 103–123. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.4030130202>
- McAlpine, L. (2012). Identity-trajectories: Doctoral journeys from past to present to future. *Australian Universities' Review*, 54(1), 38-46.
- McAlpine, L. (2017). Building on success? Future challenges for doctoral education globally. *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education*, 8(2), 66–77. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SGPE-D-17-00035>
- Medina-Craven, M. N., Davis, S. E., Sexton, S. M., & Cooper, D. (2020). Connecting with new business students: The role of socialization and core self-evaluations in university identification. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1758653>
- Mirhosseini, S. A., & Khodakarami, S. (2015). A glimpse of contrasting de jure–De facto ELT policies in Iran. In C. Kennedy (Ed.), *Language teaching in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (pp. 23–34). British Council.
- Mirhosseini, S. A., Shirazizadeh, M., & Pakizehdal, H. (2022). Bridging language education and “New Literacy Studies”: Reinvigorating courses of general English at an Iranian university. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 47(3), 469-485. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2020.1791713>
- Norton, B., & De Costa, P. I. (2018). Research tasks on identity in language learning and teaching. *Language Teaching*, 51(1), 90-112. <https://doi:10.1017/S0261444817000325>

- Rashidi, N., & Najafi, R. (2010). The representation of culture in Iran Language Institute advanced level textbooks. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 1(5), 624–631. <https://doi.org/10.4304/jltr.1.5.624-631>
- Reedy, A. K. (2019). Rethinking online learning design to enhance the experiences of indigenous higher education students. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 35(6), 132–149. <https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.5561>
- Salimi, E. A., & Abedi, H. (2022). Dual identity or identity duel: EFL context duality force on identity aspects formation through learners' self-reflection. *Journal of Language and Education*, 8(1), 130-147. <https://doi.org/10.17323/jle.2022.11303>
- Salimi, E. A., & Banitalebi, Z. (2023). EFL teachers' organizational identity in online communities: The case of Iran. *The Journal of Asia TEFL*, 20(1), 89-105. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18823/asiatefl.2023.20.1.6.89>
- Schlesinger, W., Cervera, A., & Pérez-Cabañero, C. (2017). Sticking with your university: The importance of satisfaction, trust, image, and shared values. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(12), 2178–2194. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1136613>
- Smith, J. A. (2004). Reflecting on the development of interpretative phenomenological analysis and its contribution to qualitative research in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 1(1), 39–54.
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method, and research*. Sage.
- Smith, J. A., & Osborn, M. (2003). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (pp. 51–80). Sage.
- Stephenson, A. L., & Yerger, D. B. (2014). Does brand identification transform alumni into university advocates? *International Review on Public and Nonprofit Marketing*, 11(3), 243–262. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12208-014-0119-y>
- Tajfel, H. (1978). Social categorization, social identity and social comparison. In H. Tajfel (Ed.), *Differentiation between social groups: Studies in the social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 61–76). Academic Press.
- Trullas, I., Simo, P., Fusalba, O. R., Fito, A., & Sallan, J. M. (2018). Student-perceived organizational support and perceived employability in the marketing of higher education. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 28(2), 266–281. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2018.1488334>
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wilkins, S., Butt, M. M., Kratochvil, D., & Balakrishnan, M. S. (2016). The effects of social identification and organizational identification on student commitment, achievement and satisfaction in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(12), 2232–2252. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1034258>
- Wilkins, S., & Huisman, J. (2013). The components of student–university identification and their impacts on the behavioural intentions of prospective students. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 35(6), 586–598. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2013.844672>

- Wilson, J. M., Boyer O'Leary, M., Metiu, A., & Jett, Q. R. (2008). Perceived proximity in virtual work: Explaining the paradox of far-but-close. *Organization Studies*, 29(7), 979-1002. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840607083105>
- Yao, Q., Martin, M. C., Yang, H. Y., & Robson, S. (2019). Does diversity hurt students' feeling of oneness? A study of the relationships among social trust, university internal brand identification, and brand citizenship behaviors on diversifying university campuses. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 29(2), 209-229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2019.1638482>