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*People, Partnerships and Pedagogies*

## Let me confess ... Can a social media page support a sense of belonging?

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This research paper explores the ability of social media platforms, specifically Facebook pages such as UTS Confessions to influence student belonging – by providing opportunities for students to engage in the university community and build a sense of belonging. This study considers the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on both university and online experiences and highlights the importance of university intervention in online platforms to enhance student support and engagement. By examining relevant literature and conducting interviews with students, alumni, and staff, the study provides insights and recommendations for how universities can interact with Facebook pages to help foster a sense of belonging.

Keywords: belonging, online, social media

### Introduction

This paper assesses the significance social media has on the student experience, feelings of student belonging and university reputation. A significant body of work exists to identify why belonging is important and how it impacts student engagement, retention and academic performance, and the types of belonging students might experience and interventions to improve feelings or perceptions of belonging. However, there is little exploration of the impact of social media spaces on student belonging. Social media is a broad term and could include direct connections, being part of social media groups or connection to social media pages. This study focuses on the impact of social media pages – specifically, those that allow students to rant or vent about their university experiences. Therefore, this paper aims to fill the gap in the literature and answer the research question “can and how could a social media page create a sense of belonging amongst a university community?” This paper originates from a 10 week undergraduate student research project completed in 2021.

### Literature

The literature review focuses on three main areas: the concept of belonging, online communities, and the impact of COVID-19 on student belonging.

The concept of belonging encompasses an individual's sense of connection to a community, place, and social networks. Environmental and cultural contexts significantly influence one's sense of belonging. Belonging at university can be experienced at various levels, such as within a degree, faculty, club, or social network. Establishing a sense of belonging early in a student's university journey is crucial for their well-being and long-term success. Students from cultural minorities and lower socio-economic backgrounds face additional challenges in developing a sense of belonging, requiring universities to adopt more empathetic approaches and provide comprehensive support networks.

It is widely accepted that belonging is an important factor in supporting the transition of students to university – emerging from (Kift, 2009) and explored in a multitude of studies since. For example, Krause & Armitage (2014) explored the relationship between student belonging and retention. Their study concluded that a sense of belonging developed within the first year of study is positively correlated to their intention to persevere their studies further. Gopalan et al. (2022) reported that the COVID-19 pandemic adversely impacted the social isolation, anxiety and depression of U.S. college students – impacting their feeling of belonging to their institution.

Allen et al. (2021) propose an integrative framework for belonging in higher education – the components are competencies (skills to connect), opportunities (to connect to belong), perceptions (or feelings of their experience) and motivations (the desire to connect).

Online communities, including social media pages and groups, play a vital role in fostering belonging by providing an opportunity to connect. Such communities offer safety, a sense of identification, personal

investment, and a common symbol system (Rosen et al., 2011). Users' sense of belonging influences their desire to remain in the community, making it crucial for community maintenance. Developing engagement habits with online communities further reinforces the sense of belonging (Liu et al., 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted student belonging, with online learning environments unable to replicate the critical facets of physical delivery (Mooney & Becker, 2021). Students from cultural and gender minority groups have experienced increased feelings of isolation and loneliness, affecting their sense of belonging.

## Methodology

A mixed method approach was used to explore the research question – combining qualitative and quantitative aspects with 3 stages. Firstly, a statistical and content analysis of university-related online communities was conducted. Secondly, qualitative interviews were conducted by the student researcher. Finally an online survey to gather data on the key themes identified in the interviews was conducted. Ethics approval was obtained through a student project ethics process. Survey data was collected anonymously, and all interview data was de-identified. This short paper focuses on the findings of the interviews conducted at Stage 2.

## Interviews

30-minute interviews with students, alumni and staff were conducted. Potential participants were identified through the 'top fans' badging for the UTS Confessions page. The interviews were conducted over Zoom and were semi-structured in nature.

## Results

The content analysis across 30 universities indicated that university-affiliated, but not controlled, Facebook pages are common on social media, with the types of posts covering:

- rants about university life, classes and/or tutors
- users seeking relationship advice, life advice
- memes
- mentions of lockdown and COVID-19 (the data was collected during 2021)

UTS Confessions is a page with over 28,000 followers and publishes at least 30 posts a month submitted anonymously by students. It attracts comments from current students, former students, students from other institutions and a range of staff (professional, academic, full time and casual).

The results of the interviews are presented in accordance with the themes of belonging at university and the consideration of university intervention in UTS Confessions.

## Belonging at university and the impact of social media spaces

### *Students:*

When asked if they felt as though they belonged when at university, a 2<sup>nd</sup>-year international student replied, "I did not feel like I can belong there." (Caccamo, 2021, pers. comm., 20 September). This lack of belonging to the Institution was resultant of the lack of face-to-face interaction with other students and staff members, meaning that the participant was unable to make friends or seek out support from the community, leaving them with feelings of isolation, particularly as an international student that may not have a wide social network within Australia. This was starkly contrasted with their sense of belonging to the UTS Confessions page, the participant felt as though they had a strong sense of belonging amongst the community as it became a space to seek "emotional support" from UTS staff and students (Caccamo, 2021, pers. comm., 20 September). The participant referred to the sense of commonality when discussing student struggles at university, stating that the current climate considering COVID-19 and lockdown has been "hard for all of us" (Caccamo, 2021, pers. comm., 20 September) – a shared experience created belonging.

Conversely, one domestic undergraduate student shared their negative experience at their previous university and compared it to the positive feeling of belonging they have at UTS, commenting on the importance of social interactions. The UTS Confessions page provided them with the social interaction that was lacking in other areas during COVID-19, "It made me feel like I belong in a time where I can't be at uni" (Caccamo, 2021, pers. comm., 26 September).

#### *University Alumni:*

Interviews with alumni showcased a reflective opinion on both the UTS Confessions page and their pre-COVID-19 university experiences. When discussing their time at university both interviewees shared that they felt a strong sense of belonging toward the university with particular mention to their specific degrees and university cohorts, this can be summarised in the following excerpt, “In undergrad you’re all relatively the same age, you want to do the same things, there’s more camaraderie amongst each other.” (Caccamo, 2021, pers. comm., 28 September). When discussing the sense of belonging present within the UTS Confessions page, an interesting insight provided by one of the participants (who has been a part of the group for 2 years) suggested that the sense of community had in fact ‘slipped’ over the past few months due to a change in nature of posts. They had observed a recent shift toward more negatively associated content being uploaded as opposed to what they enjoy seeing which typically involves university related gossip.

#### *University staff:*

When asked about the sense of belonging and community present within the UTS Confessions Page, the two staff members (one professional, one academic) interviewed offered similar insights, suggesting the strong sense of student belonging within the page had been fostered by a sense of emotional support and togetherness. The Confessions page has indeed provided a space for students to come together, offering an unfiltered “student voice and student community.” (Caccamo, 2021, pers. comm., 16 September).

“The confessions that have very little to do with academic aspects of belonging to UTS and they had to do more about emotional aspects.” (Caccamo, 2021, pers. comm., 24 September).

The evidence from these interviews demonstrate the power of spaces outside of the Institution’s control to create feelings of belonging and connection. A review of top contributors to the page (those who comment and provide advice frequently) shows a mix of current students, students in leadership spaces amongst student organisations as well as those long graduated. This provides evidence that such spaces create longer lasting feelings of belonging and connection – past graduation.

### **University intervention in social media spaces**

Universities are protective of their brand and reputation so that they can continue to hold the public’s trust. A question exists as to whether institutions should intervene or comment officially on posts made in spaces outside of the Institution’s control. This could be seen as impinging on student academic freedoms and censorship. Conversely, commercial brands often engage with social media users in posts related to their business to build a stronger consumer-brand relationship (Hudson et al., 2016). Currently, staff (professional, academic, permanent and casual) of UTS respond to questions in a personal capacity from their personal social media accounts. Questions were asked to interviewees to gauge their opinions on intervention, what this intervention may look like and whether it would positively or negatively impact the culture of the UTS Confessions Page.

All participants were asked whether the university should begin to monitor the UTS Confessions Page. Many were hesitant to offer a direct answer, instead, they responded by offering arguments both for and against.

“If the university would officially pay close attention then there would not be much social factor.”  
(Caccamo, 2021, pers. comm., 26 September)  
Student perspective

“I think it takes away from the opportunity for people to fully vent.” (Caccamo, 2021, pers. comm., 28 September)  
Alumni perspective

“I believe that having the actual institution in a more visible way interacting wouldn't necessarily mean that there is a good interaction I think we have to be careful there.” (Caccamo, 2021, pers. comm., 24 September)  
Staff perspective

It is understood that staff within Institutional leadership teams and marketing/communications teams monitor the posts for complaints about particular subjects or issues so that action may be taken behind the scenes to proactively manage an issue or situation (White, 2021, pers. Comm., 15 August). However, no official comments are ever left on posts by UTS.

Interestingly, when asked if the university should do more to address issues and concerns raised on the page, the answer from all participants was “yes”.

“If they take accountability into what’s happening with students and mental health and problems that have been happening. If they do pay closer attention I think that would help others in the future.” (Caccamo, 2021, pers. comm., 26 September).

Student perspective

“This will do a lot more to help than like the student feedback surveys.” (Caccamo, 2021, pers. comm., 28 September).

Alumni perspective

“But I think I’d be wrong saying that people are at least reading it and trying to get a sense and probably for the same reason as I am trying to understand and take that evidence and kind of go where is the need at the moment and where is the, you know, what can we reasonably do?”

(Caccamo, 2021, pers. comm., 16 September)

Staff perspective

## Conclusion

Linking back to the Allen et al., (2021) integrative framework for belonging, the interviews present evidence that social media page such as UTS Confessions can impact on belonging by influencing the **opportunities** to belong and student perceptions of belonging. Such social media pages provide students with the opportunity to belong in several ways. First, by submitting a post for anonymous publication, the student is engaging with the community to seek support, assistance, information or share their experiences. Second, by interacting with a post by reacting and/or commenting/replying – students are engaging with the community and supporting the belonging of others (by providing feedback or validating their concerns) and reinforcing their own belonging. This finding is important because it provides an opportunity for students to engage in belonging that is not reliant on attending activities, social events or classes at a particular time and facilitates belonging in an asynchronous matter. The interview data identified similar themes of belonging within the UTS Confessions pages and how the page both hindered and fostered student belonging at university during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A social media page also influences student **perceptions** of belonging by demonstrating to students that their experiences and feedback matter to the institution. As mentioned in interviews, participants appreciated a level of interaction/intervention by university staff so long as it does not impede the ‘unfiltered’ student voice present within these pages. Posts by students can act as another mechanism for institutions to receive feedback on the student experience and, most importantly, make improvements (with care taken to investigate claims and allegations made on the page before approaching relevant faculties, academics, or services).

The next step for this paper is to analyse the survey data that was also collected and potentially run a follow-up survey in current times, now that more classes are being taught on-campus. However, returning to on-campus classes may not automatically improve students’ feeling of belonging to their program, cohort, faculty or institution. With anecdotal rates of low attendance for on-campus classes where a recording is available – there is an indication that with greater flexibility of where learning occurs, when it occurs, and whether synchronous or asynchronous will result in a need for institutions to adjust the mechanisms and programs used to support belonging.

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