

Beyond the Classroom: Shaping Student Identity Online

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Introduction

Background

- Social media has become an integral part of student life, influencing how students communicate, share experiences, and form identities. It has the potential to function as an informal “third space” where students build community beyond the classroom. Oldenburg (1991) defines "third places" as informal, accessible spaces beyond home and work that foster community, belonging, and civic engagement. Baker-Eveleth et al. (2005) extend this idea to education, showing that online platforms can act as virtual third places, strengthening student collaboration, social networks, and engagement outside the classroom.

Research Gap

- Existing literature often emphasizes traditional forms of student engagement, such as campus events or formal communication channels. However, the role of social media in connecting students across cultures and supporting diverse student voices still remains underexamined. Additionally, it is unclear how universities are strategically using these platforms to foster inclusive environments.

Aim

- This study explores the role of social media in student identity formation and community building within higher education.** It pays special attention to how these platforms support inclusivity, engage international students, and facilitate more responsive communication between students and academic institutions.

Hypothesis

- Social media can enhance engagement and a sense of belonging among students, but its success depends on inclusive, student-centered content that reflects diverse experiences.

Approach

To explore how social media supports student engagement and inclusion, a survey was conducted targeting a diverse student group, with a focus on international students. The goal was to gather insights into usage patterns, content preferences, and students’ perceptions of themselves and others in their school community.

The approach included:

- A structured questionnaire included multiple-choice, Likert scale, and open-ended items.
- Sample question: How often do you engage with the university’s Instagram page?*
- Sample question: How well does social media help you stay informed about campus events and activities?*
- Data collected covered engagement frequency, sense of belonging, and perception of inclusivity.

Findings

The survey results reveal significant insights into the role of social media in enhancing student engagement, inclusivity, and community-building.

1.Student Engagement and Community Building:

- 91% of students follow their university’s official social media.
- Instagram is the most used platform (65.4%).
- 43.6% engage multiple times a week, especially with campus events (80.3%) and academic updates (61.8%).
- Social media plays a strong role in fostering campus engagement and a sense of community.

2. Representation and Inclusivity:

- Only 18.2% of students feel adequately represented on social media.
- There is a noticeable gap in inclusivity, especially for international and minority students.

3. Effectiveness in Resource Dissemination:

- 51.9% find social media “very effective” for accessing university updates and resources.
- Social media is particularly important for international students who face challenges accessing timely information.

4. Communication challenges

- Privacy concerns were significant, with 42.6% of participants expressing worry over privacy when engaging with university-related content.

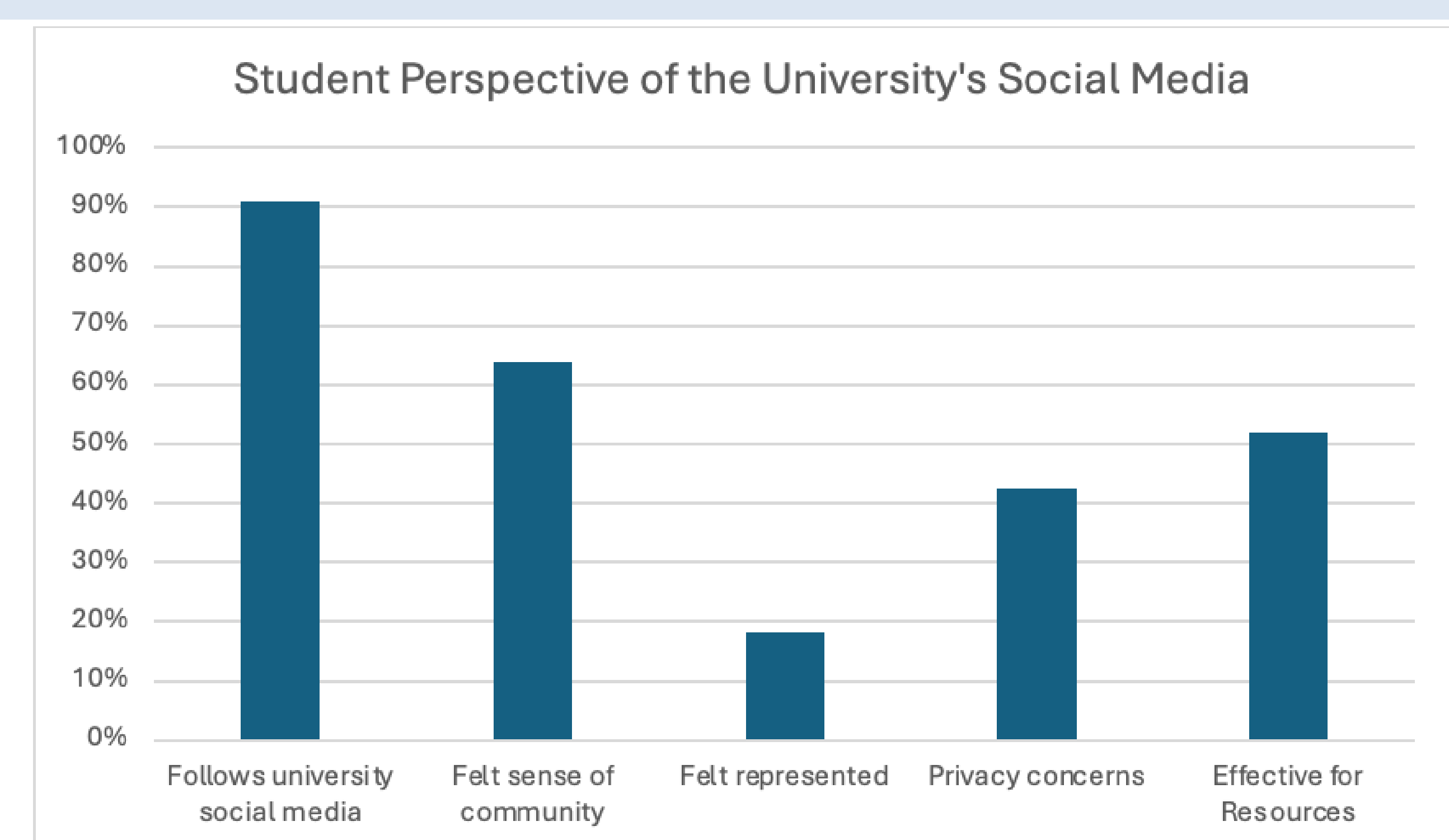


Fig. 1. Student Perspective of the University's Social Media

Conclusion

- Social media has become an important "third place" for students- informal spaces beyond the classroom where identity, community, and engagement are shaped.
- Universities must intentionally design content that truly represents and includes their diverse student body.
- Only by doing so can social media fully serve as a space where all students feel seen, supported, and connected.

Limitations:

- Sample size was limited to 78 respondents.
- Majority of participants were international graduate students, creating demographic bias.
- Findings may not reflect experiences of broader undergraduate or domestic student populations.

Recommendations:

- Promote Inclusivity:** Showcase student voices from all cultures and backgrounds.
- Boost Engagement:** Use polls, Q&As, live events, and student-created content.
- Share Resources:** Regularly post about academic, career, and mental health support.

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