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You Got Me Here … Now What?: Examining How University Social Media Influences Belonging Uncertainty Reduction in First-Year Students

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The transition to college is a critical period marked by excitement and uncertainty as first-year students navigate new social and academic environments. This study uses Walton and Cohen's concept of belonging uncertainty to examine how university-managed Instagram accounts influence belonging uncertainty among first-year students. Using qualitative focus groups, this study investigates how students interpret university social media content and how these interpretations shape perceptions of belonging. Findings indicate that authentic and student-generated content reduces uncertainty and fosters belonging, whereas overly curated institutional messaging can heighten feelings of exclusion. Implications are discussed for using Instagram as a digital intervention to support first-year transition and retention.

Keywords: belonging uncertainty, university social media, first-year college students, marginalized student populations

The transition from prospective student to enrolled undergraduate represents a critical unstable period in the collegiate experience. Although institutions invest significant resources in recruitment and pre-enrollment messaging designed to convey inclusion, opportunity, and community, many first-year students arrive on campus with lingering uncertainty about whether they truly belong (Walton & Cohen, 2007). These doubts often intensify during orientation and the early weeks of the semester, as students navigate unfamiliar social norms, establish peer connections, and interpret institutional cues about who fits within the campus community (Strayhorn, 2018).

For many students, social media serves as a primary channel through which these institutional cues are encountered (Jasso, 2021). Prior research has largely explored university-managed social media as a tool for marketing, recruitment, and information dissemination (Jasso, 2021; Krishnan & Sajilan, 2014; Thornton, 2017; Turner, 2017). Such scholars emphasize student-centered and platform-appropriate strategies such as Instagram to showcase campus life, academic programs, and events. These approaches often involve tailored messaging that builds connection, answers questions, and supports students' transition-related decision making. However, comparatively less attention seems to have been given to how university social media functions after enrollment, particularly during the first-year transition. As colleges increasingly encourage incoming students to follow their official social media accounts as a means of staying connected, the relational impact of this permits closer examination.

Research on belonging uncertainty suggests that early perceptions of social fit play a role in student persistence, engagement, and well-being (Strayhorn, 2018; Walton & Cohen, 2007). First-year students, especially those from historically marginalized backgrounds, may be particularly sensitive to signals that

suggest exclusion or misalignment with campus culture (Museus et al., 2017; Vaccaro & Newman, 2017). In this context, university-managed social media content has the potential to serve either as a source of reassurance or as an unintended contributor to uncertainty.

Despite this, the role of professionally managed university social media in addressing belonging uncertainty during the transition to college remains underexplored. Drawing on Walton and Cohen's framework of belonging uncertainty, this study examines how first-year students interpret and respond to university Instagram content during their transition to college. Using qualitative focus groups, this research explores which forms of Instagram content foster connection, relatability, and reassurance, and which may inadvertently reinforce feelings of exclusion. By centering students' lived experiences, this study highlights the potential of social media to function as a digital intervention supporting first-year transition and retention.

Literature Review

The first year of college is a critical time of transition for students, who often feel both excited and uncertain as they navigate their new academic and social environments (Myers, 2024). Social media has transformed how students engage with universities before and during their college experience. As students transition from high school to college, they often rely on social media and digital platforms to gather information, form connections, and lower their uncertainty about college (Doneddu & Ismagilova, 2018; Jasso, 2021; Krishnan & Sajilan, 2014; Thornton, 2017; Turner, 2017).

A plethora of literature focuses on social media's impact on the college admissions process (Casidy, 2013; Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011; Doneddu & Ismagilova, 2018; Jasso, 2021; Krishnan & Sajilan, 2014; Rutter et al., 2016; Thornton, 2017; Turner, 2017) but little research on the exact impact of social media on a student's first year in college. This literature review explores the ways in which social media influences uncertainty during the first year of college, particularly in the context of university-managed accounts, and highlights the existing gaps in literature that this research aims to address.

Social Media and Uncertainty Reduction in Higher Education

Doneddu and Ismagilova (2018) emphasized the significant role of social media in students' college selection processes, finding that young adults frequently rely on digital platforms for information and view social media as more credible and influential than traditional media sources such as websites, catalogs, and email campaigns. Research focuses on social media's impact on student decision making during the selection process (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011; Rutter et al., 2016), but comparatively less attention has been given to how social media impacts students' confidence and satisfaction after they have committed and started attending their chosen institution. This phase of the student experience is often characterized by heightened uncertainty as students evaluate their social and academic fit within a new environment, with research on belonging uncertainty suggesting that first-year students frequently interpret early experiences as signals about whether they truly belong at their institution (Hausmann et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2018; Walton & Cohen, 2007). These feelings can surface despite earlier social media engagement that played a key role in bringing them to the institution, and the feelings may influence how students perceive their overall belonging in the university community.

Institutions with a high number of social media followers on their official university and admissions accounts tend to perform better in student recruitment, as follower count can enhance credibility with

prospective students (Rutter et al., 2016; Shamsudin et al., 2019). This increased trust can contribute to greater confidence in a student's college choice. However, it's not just about the numbers. The quality of the content plays an equally important role. High-quality content that addresses specific student concerns helps reduce uncertainty and provides valuable information (Rutter et al., 2016). Once a student has made their decision, the ongoing engagement with university social media becomes essential. Rodriguez et al. (2012) noted that institutions that actively interact with followers by facilitating conversations and building community help reassure students that they have made the right choice, supporting them beyond recruitment and into their first year.

The Impact of University Branding on Student Decision Making

Another important aspect of reducing uncertainty through social media is the impact of branding on student decision making. Rutter et al. (2016) argued that a student's decision to attend a university is often seen as a lifelong commitment, as the institution's name becomes linked with their own professional and personal identity. Therefore, universities that maintain a strong, positive brand image on social media platforms are more likely to attract students who are confident in their decision. According to Casidy (2013), students' perceptions of a university's brand are directly tied to their satisfaction, loyalty, and communication behaviors post-enrollment. This finding demonstrates how branding, as communicated through social media, can contribute to long-term confidence in students' decisions and reduce their uncertainty about attending a specific institution.

Belonging Uncertainty

Belonging uncertainty, first introduced by Walton and Cohen (2007), serves as an important framework for this research. In Walton and Cohen's 2007 article "A Question of Belonging: Race, Social Fit, and Achievement," they defined belonging uncertainty as the state in which members of socially stigmatized groups are more uncertain about the quality of their social bonds and are thus more sensitive to social belonging issues. This theory is important for understanding the experiences of marginalized groups in academic settings, where individuals may question whether they truly belong. Cohen (2022) argued that we can all become vulnerable to doubts about our belonging at any given moment, depending on the situations we find ourselves in and how we interpret them. Although belonging concerns can arise for anyone depending on situational context and interpretation, belonging uncertainty is particularly pronounced among students from marginalized or stigmatized groups, who may be more sensitive to social cues regarding inclusion and acceptance within higher education environments (Cohen, 2022; Walton & Cohen, 2007).

Walton and Cohen (2007) argued that belonging uncertainty manifests as a broad-based hypothesis that "people like me do not belong here" (p. 83). This feeling can be experienced in a variety of environments, including schools, workplaces, or even casual social settings, making the impact of belonging uncertainty widespread and potentially detrimental across different domains of life (Cohen, 2022). The heightened sense of uncertainty can shrink an individual's "horizon of possibility," making them more inclined to interpret challenges as signals of incapability and reducing their willingness to engage in situations that pose a risk of failure (Cohen, 2022, para. 2).

In their study, Walton and Cohen (2007) conducted two experiments involving Black and White college students to examine how belonging uncertainty influences motivation and academic outcomes. In Experiment 1, they manipulated students' sense of belonging by asking participants to generate lists of

friends within their academic program. Black students experienced a decline in perceived belonging when asked to produce longer lists, suggesting that individuals from stigmatized groups may be more sensitive to cues that signal potential exclusion. In Experiment 2, the researchers implemented a social-belonging intervention designed to normalize feelings of uncertainty. Participants read testimonials from older students and reviewed survey data demonstrating that doubts about belonging are common during the transition to college but typically diminish over time. By reframing early challenges as temporary and normative rather than evidence of not belonging, the intervention significantly improved academic performance among Black students, highlighting the powerful role of belonging perceptions in fostering resilience and academic success. This finding demonstrates how structured messaging that normalizes uncertainty can influence belonging perceptions and helps explain how university social media may serve as a digital belonging intervention.

The concept of belonging uncertainty is beneficial to this research because it aligns with the broader discussion of uncertainty in the college experience and how to mitigate that uncertainty, especially for marginalized groups. The findings from Walton and Cohen's (2007) work suggest that targeted interventions, much like the digital content shared through social media, can help mitigate the effects of uncertainty, particularly for students who may feel out of place because of their social identity. Their research demonstrated that interventions that provide relatable narratives and normalize feelings of uncertainty can foster a sense of connection and belonging. Perhaps, by incorporating strategies like Walton and Cohen's intervention in digital content, universities can potentially reduce belonging uncertainty through online engagement, helping students feel more supported and confident in their new academic environments. Existing literature suggests that belonging is shaped through interpretation of environmental signals, identity representation, and social validation processes (Cohen, 2022; Museus et al., 2017; Strayhorn, 2018; Walton & Cohen, 2007). However, prior research has largely examined these mechanisms within physical campus environments or structured interventions rather than digital communication (Strayhorn, 2018; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Integrating belonging uncertainty theory with scholarship on university social media highlights a critical conceptual gap: University social media may function as an ongoing stream of social cues that students use to evaluate belonging during the transition to college (Walton & Cohen, 2007). This study extends belonging uncertainty theory into a digital context by examining how institutional messaging operates as a potential belonging intervention.

Belonging Uncertainty and College Retention

Belonging uncertainty can have profound implications for college retention (Cohen, 2022; Strayhorn, 2018). When students, especially those from marginalized groups, experience a lack of belonging, they are more likely to disengage from their academic and social activities, which can lead to lower retention rates (Walton & Cohen, 2007). This sense of disconnection often stems from awareness of social stigmas and negative stereotypes that make students feel out of place, leading to a psychological state where every negative experience is interpreted as evidence that they do not belong in the college setting (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

Present research has consistently shown that a strong sense of belonging is linked to higher levels of academic persistence and success (Garza et al., 2021; Gillen-O'Neel, 2021; Hausmann et al., 2007; Moallem, 2013; Museus et al., 2017; O'Keeffe, 2013; Peck, 2017; Pedler et al., 2021; Strayhorn, 2018; Takimoto et al., 2021). Students who perceive that they belong are more likely to participate in

class discussions, seek help from professors, and join extracurricular activities, all of which contribute to greater academic integration and persistence (Strayhorn, 2018). Conversely, those experiencing belonging uncertainty are less likely to take advantage of these opportunities, as they may interpret everyday challenges as confirmation that they are not suited for college life (Hausmann et al., 2007).

Marginalized students, including racial and ethnic minorities, first-generation students, and members of the LGBTQ+ community (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, plus other community members) are particularly vulnerable to belonging uncertainty as a result of their heightened awareness of social exclusion and discrimination in higher education and society (Vaccaro & Newman, 2017). For example, students of color may experience instances of microaggressions or feel underrepresented in their academic environment, leading to doubts about whether they are truly valued or accepted within their institution (Moore & Gilliard, 2008). These experiences can make it difficult for students to maintain the motivation and confidence needed to persist through academic challenges, thus increasing the risk of their withdrawing from the institution.

Interventions aimed at reducing belonging uncertainty have demonstrated significant positive effects on college retention. Walton and Cohen's (2011) social-belonging intervention normalized feelings of belonging uncertainty by framing them as a common part of the college transition and demonstrated improvements in academic outcomes for underrepresented students. Subsequent research has similarly linked belonging to academic success, engagement, and persistence (Garza et al., 2021; Gillen-O'Neel, 2021; Hausmann et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2018). By helping students reinterpret their experiences as normal, such interventions foster resilience and encourage persistence, even in the face of adversity.

Although belonging uncertainty has been shown to impact college retention and academic success, there is a significant gap in the research on how university social media can help mitigate these feelings for students, particularly during their first year of college. Most existing studies focus on traditional interventions, such as in-person programs and workshops that aim to improve belonging through peer support, mentorship, or counseling (Strayhorn, 2018; Walten & Cohen, 2011). However, the potential for digital engagement, especially through social media, to serve as a tool for reducing belonging uncertainty remains largely underexplored. This gap represents a critical area for investigation.

Integrating Belonging Uncertainty and Institutional Social Media

The findings of these studies suggest that social media has the potential to serve as a bridge between prospective and enrolled students. If universities keep up with their level of engagement and interaction post-enrollment, it is quite possible that they can continue to reduce uncertainty for students who are adjusting to their new environment.

Current literature on social media in higher education primarily addresses its role in recruitment, marketing, and providing general information (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011; Jasso, 2021; Rutter et al., 2016). Although these studies demonstrate that social media can be effective for connecting prospective students with universities, they do not adequately address how social media might alleviate students' uncertainty about belonging once they are on campus. As a result, there is limited understanding of the specific strategies or types of content that may help first-year students feel more integrated and confident in their new academic environment.

In this study, the term *university-managed social media* refers specifically to official social media accounts operated, curated, and maintained by the institution or its affiliated departments, rather than

student-run, informal, or peer-to-peer platforms. These accounts function as intentional channels of institutional communication, conveying messages about campus culture, values, resources, and student life through curated posts, graphics, and videos.

Coupled with the current understanding of how social media can be used successfully to create a sense of community and belonging during the college recruitment and decision process (Jacob & Agrawal, 2024; Thornton, 2017; Walton & Cohen, 2007), the theory of belonging uncertainty indicates that targeted social media content can successfully address feelings of uncertainty and increase retention of marginalized groups. This research aims to uncover how university-managed Instagram accounts can reduce uncertainty, particularly of marginalized students, during the critical transition period of the first year of college. By investigating which digital content most effectively addresses uncertainty, this research seeks to provide insights into how social media can be further beneficial as a means of fostering student retention and success. Addressing this gap will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of digital interventions in higher education, extending existing theories of belonging uncertainty to encompass the role of virtual platforms in shaping students' experiences. The framework of belonging uncertainty guides this research in addressing two key questions:

1. Does university social media play a role in reducing belonging uncertainty while attending a higher education institution?
2. What type of content is most effective in maintaining low levels of belonging uncertainty?

Methods

This study examines university-managed Instagram accounts as a specific form of university social media communication. Social media is discussed broadly in the literature review to reflect existing scholarship across multiple platforms, but data collection and analysis in this study is focused exclusively on Instagram. Instagram was selected because of its visual emphasis, widespread use among college-aged students, and prominence within institutional communication strategies at the study site (Jasso, 2021). Because belonging uncertainty theory emphasizes interpretation of social cues, Instagram's visual and narrative format may uniquely shape how students interpret signals of inclusion, representation, and authenticity compared with text-based platforms.

Research Design

This study employed qualitative focus groups to explore the role of university-managed Instagram accounts in reducing belonging uncertainty among first-year students. Focus groups were selected for this research as a result of their ability to encourage dynamic discussions and provide insights into students shared experiences and perceptions. Focus groups are particularly effective when examining shared understanding and collective interpretations of social experiences, as participants build upon one another's perspectives and reveal how group dynamics shape perceptions (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Morgan, 1997).

This approach allowed participants to reflect on their interactions with university social media and discuss the impact these interactions had on their sense of belonging and uncertainty during their first year of college. The semistructured format included questions designed to elicit emotional reactions, identity reflections, and interpretive evaluations of social media content. For example, participants were asked, "Can you recall a specific post that made you feel welcome or included?" and "Does this post make you feel connected to the university? Why or why not?" These questions were intentionally aligned with belonging uncertainty theory by encouraging students to describe how institutional cues influenced perceptions of

acceptance, representation, and social fit.

However, focus groups also present limitations, including the potential for social desirability bias, uneven participation among group members, and limited generalizability beyond the study sample. Despite these limitations, focus groups were appropriate for understanding how students made sense of their experience through conversation and shared discussion.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were primarily enrolled in communication classes at the researcher's institution and were recruited using the university's online research participation portal. Additionally, students were recruited through the institution's student-wide electronic newsletter. Students received the explanation that a study is being conducted to understand how university-managed Instagram accounts can help first-year students feel more connected and reduce feelings of uncertainty about belonging on campus. To ensure participant diversity and to adhere closely to the study's objectives, recruitment specifically targeted students from marginalized backgrounds, including Hispanic, Black, and LGBTQ+ identifying students, as these groups often experience heightened belonging uncertainty (Vaccaro & Newman, 2017; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Participants needed to be at least 18 years of age and enrolled in their first year of college at the institution. Students who were not in their first year; were younger than 18; or did not identify as Black, Hispanic, or LGBTQ+ were excluded from the study.

Participants received a pretest demographic survey prior to attending the focus group session. This survey was designed to confirm eligibility and gather essential demographic details such as race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation. Class credit was offered as an incentive if the participant was enrolled in a communication course. Participants were informed in advance that the focus group discussions would be audio and video recorded, and each student signed an informed consent and photo release form prior to participating.

Three focus groups were conducted, each comprising 5–10 students, with sessions held in an on-campus focus group room. A total of 24 students participated in the focus group, all of whom were in their first year of college at the institution. The students had the following racial demographics: 10 students identifying as Black, 10 as Hispanic, seven as White, three as Asian, and one as American Indian or Alaskan Native. Regarding sexual orientation, 12 participants identified as heterosexual, one as lesbian, three as bisexual, two as pansexual, two as queer, two preferred no specific labels, and two preferred not to disclose their sexual orientation.

Data Analysis

A qualitative thematic analysis was employed to analyze the focus group transcripts. This method involved identifying, analyzing, and reporting recurring themes within the data. The audio recordings from each session were transcribed using the captions function on the Voice Memos app on the researcher's iPhone. Following initial transcription, the researcher reviewed each transcript carefully to correct any inaccuracies resulting from automated captioning and removed filler words such as "uh" and "like" to enhance clarity. To maintain confidentiality, participants' names were removed and replaced with identifiers (e.g., "Participant 1," "Participant 2"). Additionally, names referenced by students during discussions were redacted for anonymity. Transcriptions were then analyzed by researchers thoroughly reading and identifying recurring themes and relevant significant statements, which were grouped into thematic categories. The

themes that emerged from this process informed the organization of the Findings section of this article and included patterns related to student engagement behaviors, identity representation, authenticity and relatability of content, and discrepancies between expectations and lived experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Before participation, students received an informed consent form outlining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and confidentiality measures. They were also informed of their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. Ethical approval was obtained from the university's institutional review board prior to data collection.

Procedure

Each focus group session began with an introduction, during which participants were reminded of the study's purpose, guidelines for respectful dialogue, and confidentiality agreements. Participants were also reminded that their involvement was voluntary and that they could choose not to answer any questions and could withdraw at any time without penalty. A semistructured focus group guide was followed across all sessions to ensure uniformity in the topics discussed. Questions were designed to facilitate open-ended discussion about students' experiences with the university's social media, perception of belonging, and the effectiveness of social media content in reducing uncertainty. Additionally, the researcher asked follow-up questions as appropriate, encouraging participants to clarify responses, expand upon ideas, or provide additional context to their statements.

The first few questions focused on how the participants were engaging at the time with the content posted by the university. Then participants viewed selected examples of graphics from university-managed Instagram accounts and gave their thoughts on each. Three static promotional graphics were intentionally selected from three of the university's official Instagram accounts to represent distinct categories of institution-produced social media content commonly encountered by first-year students. An academic success event graphic was selected for its visually engaging design intended to promote academic preparedness. A financial aid informational graphic was included because of its formal presentation and reliance on institutional branding elements such as the university's mascot. A student organization promotional graphic was chosen because it combined vibrant imagery with clear informational text. Additionally, participants were shown three video reels from three of the university's official Instagram accounts, encompassing varying tones, production styles, and levels of involvement. After viewing, participants were again encouraged to provide their thoughts and feedback.

Findings

The focus groups provided insight into how students interacted with university social media. Participants primarily engaged passively, typically "liking and scrolling" with minimal deeper interaction, rarely reposting or engaging with features such as Instagram stories. When seeking information, students preferred Google or the official university website rather than social media platforms.

A central theme across discussions was the limited effectiveness of the university's Instagram in fostering feelings of belonging, with most students reporting that they rarely felt included through university-managed accounts. Exceptions occurred at the beginning of the academic year and during finals week, when promotional posts about giveaways briefly increased feelings of connection. Participants also emphasized insufficient representation of diverse identities.

Students consistently highlighted limited visibility for Black, Hispanic, Asian, and LGBTQ+ communities. Participant 1 from Focus Group 2 perceived that engagement efforts primarily targeted first-year students, leaving upperclassmen to feel overlooked. Participant 5 from Focus Group 3 directly noted, “There’s definitely a lack of it [diversity].” Participants advocated for increased diversity, more relatable and trend-responsive content, and timely engagement with campus events. Authentic, student-generated content was consistently preferred over posts perceived as administratively driven.

Participants also described university social media as more engaging during their senior year of high school than after arriving on campus. Participant 4 from Focus Group 3 noted a decline in excitement post-enrollment, suggesting a disconnect between expectations shaped by social media and lived campus experiences. This discrepancy may represent a critical interpretive moment during the first-year transition, as students use environmental cues to assess whether people who share their beliefs are valued within the community (Strayhorn, 2018; Walton & Cohen, 2007). When institutional messaging establishes idealized expectations that are not reinforced after enrollment, students may interpret discrepancies as signals of exclusion rather than normal adjustment challenges, potentially heightening belonging uncertainty (Cohen, 2022; Walton & Cohen, 2007). These findings suggest that university-managed social media may not only shape initial perceptions of belonging but also influence how students interpret early campus experiences as confirming or challenging their sense of social fit.

Feedback on Graphics

Across the three focus groups, the student organization promotional graphic was identified as a favorite by 13 participants. Students praised the graphics’ vibrant design and clear presentation of information, noting that it felt inviting and visually accessible. However, participants criticized the graphic for insufficiently representing all student organizations within the category and for lacking visible diversity among the students depicted.

The academic success event graphic was selected as a favorite by 10 participants. Students responded positively to its clarity, color usage, and overall layout. Critiques centered on the use of imagery perceived as unrealistic or emotionally distant, leading participants to recommend incorporating photos from past events and increasing representation to enhance relatability.

The financial aid informational graphic received predominately negative feedback and was selected as a favorite by only two participants. Students described the graphic as overly cluttered, impersonal, and confusing. Participants specifically noted that the use of the university’s mascot detracted from the message’s clarity and seriousness. They recommended including images of students receiving assistance and providing more direct, visually simplified explanations of the event’s purpose.

Feedback on Instagram Reels

A student-centered reel with the theme of finals week was overwhelmingly favored, selected by 21 participants across all three focus groups. Participants reported that the reel resonated with them because of its relatability, humor, authenticity, and visible student involvement, noting that it effectively reflected current social media trends. Students highlighted the video’s short length and informal tone as particularly appealing. Other participants noted that the reel appeared to be student created, which contributed to perceptions of authenticity and relatability; one participant commented that it looked like “just a couple of friends” making content.

A campus athletics–themed reel was favored by four participants but received notable criticism. Students described the content as unclear and lacking genuine excitement, particularly because it relied heavily on symbolic institutional imagery rather than showcasing actual student-athletes or live athletic activity. Although few participants noted alignment between the imagery and athletics-related messaging, most characterized the reel as uncomfortable or "cringey" because of its lack of context and overreliance on the university mascot. Several first-year participants emphasized needing additional contextual cues to understand the purpose of the video. Participants also expressed discomfort with the use of artificial crowd noise paired with the visibly empty setting in the stadium, noting that these elements detracted from authenticity. Overall, students felt that the reel was more narrowly targeted toward existing fans rather than the broader first-year student population it was intended for.

A student interaction–based reel, which depicted a group of students driving around campus in a golf cart and offering spontaneous compliments to passersby before quickly driving away, was not selected as a favorite by any participants and received the most critical feedback. Students described the video as staged, performative, and uncomfortable. Although participants initially appreciated the intent behind positive peer interactions, they reported that the execution appeared inauthentic. Several students noted visible discomfort among individuals featured in the video, with one describing the interactions as "bordering on harassment." Concerns regarding limited representation were frequently raised, as participants noted the lack of racial, gender, and identity diversity. Additionally, students expressed unease with the empty campus setting and the possibility of being filmed without clear consent. Collectively, participants concluded that this type of content would likely heighten anxiety rather than foster feelings of belonging during their first year.

Discussion

The results from the focus groups demonstrated several themes surrounding student engagement and identity representation within the institution's social media platforms. Guided by Walton and Cohen's framework of belonging uncertainty, the themes identified in this study were interpreted as students' responses to social cues signaling inclusion, exclusion, authenticity, and institutional alignment. The findings therefore reflect not only content preferences but also deeper processes through which students interpret institutional messaging as reassurance or threat cues related to belonging.

An analysis revealed that participants predominantly interacted with university social media content passively, suggesting that although university social media effectively captures the initial attention of students, it may fall short in facilitating deeper connections or community building. Participants frequently attributed their minimal engagement to perceived lack of relevance, authenticity, or personal representation within the content itself. This passive engagement pattern indicates a gap between intent and audience reception, suggesting that although the university actively posts with the intent to foster community, students often perceive this content as impersonal or administrative rather than relational and student focused. Participants' descriptions suggest that when university content feels impersonal or disconnected from lived experiences, engagement becomes surface level rather than participatory. Passive scrolling may reflect not disengagement but a form of distance taking, where students remain observant without fully committing to interaction.

Identity and Representation

The theme of identity and representation consistently surfaced throughout each focus group.

Participants emphasized discrepancies between the university's digital presence and their lived campus experiences. The institution's social media content occasionally highlighted diversity or identity-specific events (e.g., posts related to Hispanic student organizations or LGBTQ+ inclusion), but many students described these portrayals as sporadic, superficial, or inconsistent. Participants specifically cited limited visibility for Black, Asian, and LGBTQ+ identities. One student explicitly noted, "There's definitely a lack of [diversity representation]" and described a perception of exclusion stemming from repetitive visuals showcasing predominately White students with similar characteristics. This depiction aligns with what Focus Group 2 participants mentioned; they specifically highlighted the underrepresentation of Black communities, expressing feelings of being overlooked as the semester progressed. Such sentiments underline a critical gap between the university's intent and students' perceptions of inclusivity and belonging. From a belonging uncertainty perspective, inconsistent representation may function as an ambiguous social signal, increasing students' vigilance toward cues that suggest exclusion or invisibility (Walton & Cohen, 2007). When students do not see identities like their own reflected consistently, they may interpret this absence as evidence that they are peripheral to the institution's community.

Additionally, discussions in Focus Group 1 highlighted that despite initial positive impressions online, on-campus experiences, such as confrontations with anti-LGBTQ+ protesters, often contradicted the welcoming digital narrative, complicating their sense of belonging. Participants expressed a preference for more authentic and continuous engagement that accurately reflects campus realities and diverse student identities, suggesting an ongoing need for more authentic and sustained representation beyond initial interactions or recruitment periods.

When students repeatedly encounter university social media content that does not visibly reflect or acknowledge their identities, their concerns about social acceptance and integration intensify (Walton & Cohen, 2007). This exacerbates existing doubts about whether they genuinely belong within the campus community, as their lived experiences and social identities are not being validated or mirrored through institutional content. Thus, sporadic or superficial representation not only fails to foster inclusion but actively heightens marginalized students' sensitivity to belonging uncertainty, reinforcing their fears of exclusion or isolation.

Authenticity and Relatability

Across all focus groups, participants expressed clear preferences for content featuring real, relatable individuals rather than overly curated or institutional graphics. For example, multiple participants indicated dissatisfaction with graphics such as the financial aid graphic featuring the university mascot, labeling it as "fake," "too busy," and "impersonal." By contrast, visuals showcasing genuine student interactions were highly favored because of their perceived authenticity and ability to create emotional resonance. In Focus Group 2, a participant expressed that university Instagram content would be significantly improved if it were "student-run" to ensure relevance to the student body. Furthermore, participants noted discomfort with the added artificial crowd noise in the athletic video, perceiving it as evidence of inauthenticity. This finding highlights a critical gap: University-driven content is perceived as administrative, lacking the genuine, student-oriented voice necessary for deeper engagement. Belonging uncertainty theory helps explain why authenticity emerged as central to student reactions. Authentic content provides clearer signals that reduce ambiguity about social norms and expectations, whereas overly curated or performative messaging introduces uncertainty about whether institutional representations reflect real student experience (Walton &

Cohen, 2007).

The perceived lack of authenticity in the university's social media content directly intensifies students' belonging uncertainty, as it creates ambiguity around whether their genuine experiences and identities align with university norms. According to Walton and Cohen (2007), students from socially stigmatized groups closely monitor social cues to assess their belonging and acceptance within new social environments. When institutional content feels impersonal or staged, students interpret this as a signal that their authentic selves may not be fully welcomed or valued on campus. Conversely, authentic, relatable content provides clear and reassuring social cues, communicating that diverse student experiences are recognized, valued, and celebrated by the university. Without consistent authenticity, social media may inadvertently heighten students' uncertainties about their place within the university, undermining institutional efforts to foster belonging and connection.

Expectations Versus Reality

A significant gap emerged between participants' expectations shaped by the university's social media content viewed prior to enrollment and the reality of campus experiences after arrival. Participant 4 from Focus Group 2 highlighted this discrepancy explicitly, noting a marked decrease in excitement from senior year in high school to arriving on campus. Participants echoed similar sentiments across the groups, describing the university's social media as "inviting" and "exciting" when they were prospective students, only to later find out that content became increasingly impersonal and generic after starting their first semester of college.

This disappointment is deeply connected to belonging uncertainty, as inflated expectations create a challenging contrast between anticipated and actual experiences, heightening anxiety and uncertainty about belonging and social acceptance. Such discrepancies may heighten belonging uncertainty by prompting students to reassess their social fit (Cohen, 2022; Strayhorn, 2018; Walton & Cohen, 2007). When institutional messaging establishes idealized expectations that are not reflected in lived experience, students may reinterpret discrepancies as personal misalignment rather than structural differences (Walton & Cohen, 2007).

Reducing this gap requires realistic portrayals of campus that prepare students for genuine experiences rather than idealized scenarios. Ensuring congruence between expectations created online and actual student experiences can significantly decrease uncertainty and foster genuine feelings of belonging.

Potential Explainations and Connections to Belonging Uncertainty

Students' reactions to content can be explained through belonging uncertainty theory. Authentic, inclusive, and clearly relatable content from university-managed social media accounts provides strong positive cues, reassuring students of their belonging and acceptance within the campus community (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Conversely, ambiguous, staged, or noninclusive content heightens uncertainty, intensifying students' fears about fitting in and being socially accepted (Cohen, 2022; Museus et al., 2017; Strayhorn, 2018; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Participants clearly expressed a desire to see themselves authentically represented in social media content; however, it is evident that the participants perceived that the university is not adequately responding to this need, reinforcing feelings of belonging uncertainty.

Negative reactions to perceived staged videos likely reflect deeper anxieties around performative acceptance. Students detect insincerity, heightening doubts about genuine social inclusion. The lack of diverse representation reinforces fears among marginalized students, who already face increased

uncertainty around acceptance in predominantly White or heteronormative environments. Similarly, discrepancies between social media portrayals and lived reality increase uncertainty by undermining trust in institutional messaging and expectations about authentic campus life.

Reserach Questions

The following section presents the findings in relation to the study's two research questions. Drawing from focus group data, these responses highlight how participants perceived university-managed Instagram content in relation to belonging uncertainty and identify the types of content they found most effective in reducing uncertainty during the transition to college.

R1: Does university social media play a role in reducing belonging uncertainty while attending a higher education institution?

Focus group findings indicate that university-managed Instagram accounts influence belonging uncertainty among first-year students, with effectiveness largely dependent on content authenticity, clarity, and inclusive representation. Participants described reduced uncertainty when content reflected relatable and diverse student experiences, whereas staged or exclusionary content heightened concerns about social acceptance. Therefore, the evidence strongly supports that university-managed Instagram accounts can effectively reduce belonging uncertainty, contingent upon authenticity, clarity, and inclusive representation.

R2: What type of content is most effective in maintaining low levels of belonging uncertainty?

Participants identified short, authentic, humorous, inclusive, and student-generated content as most effective in maintaining low levels of belonging uncertainty. Thus, the evidence strongly indicates that the most effective content reflects diverse identities and relatable student voices, experiences, and identities, offering relatable and reassuring social cues that substantially decrease belonging uncertainty.

Implications

These findings suggest important implications for higher education professionals responsible for managing university social media. Social media has often been regarded primarily as a promotional tool aimed at prospective students; this study highlights its substantial impact on the experiences of first-year students, particularly concerning their belonging uncertainty. Given the importance of belonging as a predictor of student success, retention, and overall well-being, it is critical for higher education professionals to thoughtfully assess and refine their social media practices to directly support student engagement and inclusion.

Prioritize Authenticity and Student Voices

A consistent and central theme from the study's findings was students' preference for authentic, relatable content reflecting student experiences rather than overly polished or institutionally driven portrayals. Higher education professionals must prioritize authenticity by involving current students directly in the content creation process. For instance, social media managers could create student-led content teams that regularly produce short-form videos or interactive posts reflecting everyday campus life. Additionally, social media accounts could feature student "takeovers," where diverse student voices can share their personal experiences and campus routines. By shifting content control toward students while maintaining professional oversight, social media platforms will better mirror genuine campus experiences, effectively reducing students' feelings of belonging uncertainty. Authentic portrayals reassure first-year students that

their own lived experiences align with college norms, making it easier for them to feel confident in their place within the university community.

Meaningful and Inclusive Representation

This study also highlights students' strong sensitivity to diverse and inclusive representation in university content. Marginalized students, including students of color, LGBTQ+ students, first-generation students, students with disabilities, and others who are historically underrepresented in higher education, are acutely attentive to visual and thematic cues regarding their belonging (Strayhorn, 2018). When university social media consistently fails to represent these identities explicitly and thoughtfully, it can unintentionally amplify marginalized students' belonging uncertainty, undermining their sense of community and inclusion.

Student affair professionals and social media managers must ensure that diverse identities are thoughtfully represented and not merely tokenized or superficially included. For example, rather than repeatedly featuring the same few students from minority groups, institutions can regularly showcase stories and experiences from a broad spectrum of students. Additionally, representation should be intersectional, intentionally highlighting the complexities and nuances of students' intersecting identities (e.g., Black LGBTQ+ students, disabled students of color). Providing training or workshops to content creators about inclusive representation and implicit bias can also significantly enhance their ability to create genuinely inclusive social media posts.

Aligning Expectations with Portrayals

Another important finding was the significant gap between student expectations and the reality of campus life experienced by students upon their arrival. Social media managers should therefore strive to create realistic portrayals of campus life to minimize students' unrealistic expectations and the disappointment that can arise when these expectations are not met. For example, rather than only showcasing major campus events or peak excitement moments, university social media can regularly highlight more typical daily experiences, routine academic settings, and quiet genuine student interactions.

Continuous Evaluation and Feedback

Institutions should engage in ongoing evaluation of their social media strategies to ensure that content continues to support student belonging and reducing uncertainty. Regularly soliciting feedback from diverse student populations through surveys, focus groups, or interactive platform features can provide valuable insight into how students interpret institutional messaging and representation. Additionally, social media professionals should pursue continuous professional development related to belonging uncertainty, inclusive communication practices, and culturally responsive digital engagement. Through sustained assessment and adaptation, institutions can align their social media practices more closely with students' evolving needs and perceptions of inclusion.

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