

**DIGITAL COMMUNICATION AND BELONGING:  
HOW FIRST-YEAR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS NAVIGATE ONLINE  
AND OFFLINE SOCIAL INTEGRATION****Aldianto<sup>1</sup>, Christopher James Kausch II<sup>2</sup>**<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Education and Teacher Training, Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel  
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email: aldian041988@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

The rapid digitalization of higher education has transformed how first-year university students form social connections and construct a sense of belonging. This research explores how Indonesian and American first-year students navigate belonging, authenticity, and identity through online and offline communication. Drawing on Theory of Student Integration, Social Information Processing Theory, and Social Identity Theory, the research investigates how digital and physical spaces intersect to shape students' adaptation to university life. Using a qualitative exploratory design, fifteen first-year students, eight from a mid-sized university in Surabaya, Indonesia, and seven from Rochester, United States, participated in semi-structured interviews and online ethnographic observations. Thematic analysis revealed three key findings. First, digital communication serves as a social bridge, reducing anxiety and facilitating early peer connections, yet emotional depth arises mainly through face-to-face interactions. Second, students experience an authenticity paradox, as online engagement enables inclusion but also creates performance pressure and emotional fatigue. Third, digital spaces support identity negotiation and linguistic creativity, particularly through translanguaging and cultural adaptation. These findings suggest that belonging is a hybrid communicative process, co-constructed through both mediated and embodied interactions. The study concludes that universities should implement hybrid community-building programs and communication literacy initiatives to foster authentic, inclusive belonging in the digital age.

**Keywords:** *Digital communication, belonging, authenticity, identity, first-year students, hybrid interaction*

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## INTRODUCTION

Beginning at university is a huge change. It requires students to adjust socially and intellectually as they seek a sense of belonging. Research shows this period includes social uncertainty, identity shifts, and emotional vulnerability (Baker & Siryk, 1984; Lizzio, 2006). indicate that this is the time of social confusion, identity change and emotional instability (Baker & Siryk, 1984; Lizzio, 2006). The Theory of Student Integration by Tinto (1993) underlines that students remain when they are intellectually and socially assimilated. Another argument by Astin (1999) is that engagement and retention depend on the peer and institutional connections. The sense of acceptance and appreciation results in motivation, perseverance, success, and wellbeing (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Strayhorn, 2012; Kahu, 2013). Communication is critical particularly among the first-year students who are in need of belongingness and coping with the uncertainties which are early (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). There is a combination of online and offline interaction between the students. They rely on social media, messaging applications, and learning groups to stay connected outside of the college (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). According to the Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) Theory by Walther (1996), when motivated and given time, an online communication can turn out to be a meaningful, emotionally rich relationship. Studies indicate that online communication enhances academic collaboration, student relationships and emotive support among students (Hrastinski, 2009; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010). Social interaction, developing identity, and participating through online space might be safer in particular with the students facing language issues, cultural issues, and adjustment difficulties (DeAndrea et al., 2012). Language blending also allows students to feel freer and part of the multilingual society in Indonesia (García & Wei, 2014; Aldianto, Kausch II, & Safriani, 2025).

The relationships of the students are influenced by the online environment. According to Social Presence Theory (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976), being online is more difficult to experience a sense of connection due to the lack of nonverbal communication, which may cause misunderstanding or poor relationships. Studies indicate that learners who overuse online communication can be lonely, emotionally exhausted, or have FOMO (Dhir et al., 2018; Tang et al., 2023). Study by Bowen, Gordon, & Chojnacki (2017) shows that technology-mediated advocacy can provide motivation for collective action, but only if social media pages are organized intentionally and maintained consistently. According to Goffman (1959), students tend to control their image online in order to have the approval of other students. Being online all the time can cause a lot of students to be torn between being themselves and showing off their performance to the audience (Boyd, 2014; Lee & Kim, 2023). Although digital communication may assist students to feel part of the group, it also may complicate it and turn relationships into mere surface interaction.

Recent research indicates that digital and face-to-face communication determine the sense of belonging among students in higher education. Another

study by Kahu, Ashley, & Picton (2022) has demonstrated that belonging entails familiarity, relationship, and academic engagement that are determined by communication. The researchers discovered that first-year students belonged even less to online learning in the pandemic despite having access to it (Tang et al., 2023). As For Folabit, Jita & Jita (2025) discovered, technology in post-secondary education can either benefit or detract the wellbeing and sense of belonging of students based on its inclusivity and emotional requirements. According to Xu et al. (2024), post-traditional students feel like they belong when they receive high support among instructors and peers through interactions on the Internet. A study by Gilsbach (2025) demonstrated that digital communication could aid in quicker connection of freshmen, particularly in combination with in-person communication. Although there is an extensive literature on digital communication and belonging, the numerous studies have not focused on the role of everyday communication in digital and hybrid environments in determining belonging among diverse groups of people. Previous studies indicate a persistent challenge in contemporary higher education: while digital platforms facilitate students' connectivity and opportunities for self-expression, they may simultaneously complicate the development of close interpersonal relationships and stable identity formation. Building on this issue, the present study aims to examine how first-year university students navigate both digital and offline communication environments to establish social connections and a sense of belonging, to identify the key challenges they face in sustaining authentic interpersonal relationships across digital and physical contexts, and to analyze the influence of digital communication on students' identity expression and their integration into campus culture.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This qualitative research is on the development of students in their first year as they acquire a sense of belonging, on and offline. This approach will record the actual experiences and views of students (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study utilizes both interpretivism and constructivist methods in order to determine the way social situations are interpreted by students and how they develop their identities when they join the university.

This research was conducted in two mid-sized universities of Rochester, USA, and Surabaya, Indonesia. Such schools were selected because of their different social settings. Middle size universities give students an opportunity to participate in large and small groups. Also, smaller campuses could lack social diversity, and large campuses might feel anonymity. Mid-sized schools assist the first-year students to create friendships, academic relationships, and community both online and face-to-face.

The study involved eight participants who are students at the Indonesian university and seven students who are students at the American university making 15 first-year undergraduates in total. The scholars chose the participants who had various genders, academic courses, and languages. Students spent the first semester

offline (through class discussions and student groups) and online (WhatsApp, Instagram, Discord, Snapchat and university forums). This data was used to determine the sample size because no new themes and ideas were discovered during the interviews. This figure produced a wide, heterogeneous information to a qualitative study to look at actual experience and sense making.

A variety of procedures were employed by the researchers to obtain a heterogeneous sample of participants. They were inviting us to use university mailing lists, got suggested by first year courses teachers and contacted informal peer networks and student organizations. Students who were interested in the study approached the researcher directly after getting to know about the study. This strategy assisted in the incorporation of students who had various social backgrounds.

The interviews were carried out face-to-face and over video with semi-structured interviews, which were conducted in-depth with the participation of researchers to allow gathering more information. The interviews were conducted in ranges of forty-five to sixty minutes. The experiences of participants were shared, and the researchers inquired about such issues as identity, belonging, and communication. In a bid to provide additional context, the approved digital materials which included screenshots or descriptions of group chats were also provided by the participants. Transcription was done verbatim and all interviews recorded.

The data were analyzed by the researchers with the help of the six-step thematic process of Braun & Clarke (2006) familiarization, coding, theme development, review, naming, and reporting. This method demonstrated the way students felt belonging, authentic, and connected socially online and offline. NVivo software was used in the arrangement and coding of the data.

The research ethics committee of the university provided approval of the study prior to the collection of data. The participants were enlightened on the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw whenever they wished, and that their information would be kept confidential. The reports were modified to conceal the names of all participants, and any digital resources were anonymized to ensure the confidentiality of the participants.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **RESULTS**

The research discovered that first-year university students coped with belonging and identity by means of digital and face-to-face interaction in a complex manner. Interviews, online observations and campus notes revealed that digital communication assists students to build relationships but may also cause emotional distance.

**Digital Communication as a Social Bridge**

The majority of the participants perceived digital communication, particularly WhatsApp, Snapchat, and Instagram as a relevant mode of communication in the initial years of university. Ten of the fifteen respondents, comprising mostly of Indonesians, affirmed that class group chats lowered their initial nervousness and enabled them to organize better academically before they met face to face.

*"Before we met in person, we already talked a lot in our class WhatsApp group. It made me feel comfortable when we finally met" (Student I, female, 18, Indonesia).* American participants reported similar experiences, emphasizing how digital platforms helped them negotiate unfamiliar social norms and begin peer relationships:

*"Joining the Snapchat community before classes started made it easier to ask questions and feel part of the community. I felt less nervous meeting everyone in person" (Student K, male, 19, USA).*

The short positive replies, emojis, and memes that students use in both nations demonstrate their friendliness and ensure that the conversation flows. The students who took part in online group projects or reminded peers to get acquainted were observed to make acquaintances more easily in the real world at on-campus events. It implies that online communication can be useful in initiating social bonds, whereas face-to-face communication can be used to establish more profound emotional relationships.

**Authenticity, Fatigue, and Emotional Distance**

Even though digital platforms are available, most respondents claimed that they were fatigued and stressed because of spending so much time online. Indonesian students frequently spoke of how they felt pressure to answer fast in group chat, and they said that the discussions never ended.

*"If I don't respond, my friends will believe I'm ignoring them. I often say sorry when I reply to it late" (Student F, male, 18, Indonesia).*

American students also said they felt overwhelmed by the number of messages.

*"The amount of the text is so overwhelming sometimes. It feels like you have to be 'on' all the time. It's better if I turn on the DND mode" (Student L, female, 18, United States).*

Participants also talked about managing how they appear online by showing a carefully chosen version of themselves and often hiding their vulnerability:

*"Sometimes I post cheerful photos even when I'm not okay. I don't want people to think I'm lonely or sad" (Student D, female, 19, Indonesia).*

Many students also felt that online communication lacked emotional nuance, which made it hard to understand tone or intention:

*"I can't tell if someone is joking or serious in chat. For example, 'y' or "iya" have different tones from 'iyaaa'. The word 'iyaaa' sounds more exciting than the others. And when we talk in person, I can feel their real emotion through their expression and gesture" (Student E, male, 18, Indonesia).*

*"Sometimes it's hard to read tone or intention online. Face-to-face makes it easier to understand how someone really feels" (Student M, male, 19, USA).*

These instances indicate that as much as digital platforms aid students in connecting, they may also render emotional distance and stress in cases where students use them excessively or when students cannot be themselves.

### ***Identity Negotiation and Cultural Adaptation***

Digital spaces also provided students with a platform where they could discover their identities and express their cultures. The members of both nations discussed the utilization of mixed languages, humor, and cultural references to demonstrate the sense of belonging and establish relationships.

*"In chat, we use English, Bahasa, and even Javanese slang, sometimes a WhatsApp sticker written from Javanese or Bahasa's meme too. It helps me share my culture and get to know others. It shows our background and makes the group more relaxed" (Student A, female, 18, Indonesia).*

*"I often use memes or slang in our group chats. Also, it is faster to type like tbh, wyd, or omw" (Student N, female, 19, USA).*

However, some participants said that relying only on online interaction made it harder to understand unspoken cultural norms:

*"Online, I can't always sense tone or politeness level. Meeting face-to-face helps me understand others' culture better" (Student G, male, 19, Indonesia).*

American students also mentioned that humor and cultural references were sometimes misunderstood online:

*"Sometimes jokes or slang don't translate well. I feel more comfortable understanding peers when we meet in person" (Student J, male, 18, USA).*

All in all the findings indicate that students experienced the most sense of belonging when they used a mix of digital and face to face communication. This strategy provided them with authentic emotional attachment as well as convenient access to other people.

## **DISCUSSION**

As shown in this paper, digital communication is not merely a medium of connection but also a space where emotion, identity and cultural values are created. Results indicate that the online attributes and offline social norms are involved in the process through which students go about developing a sense of belonging. According to the Social Information Processing Theory (Walther, 1996), relationships occurred between the United States and Indonesian students as they reduced their uncertainty by maintaining contact with each other through the internet. However, the results also show that intimacy was established under various circumstances differently. Although online communications made people know each other better, the in-person meetings played an essential role in developing emotional qualities. This is in line with the model proposed by Kahu et al. (2022), who claim that a combination of familiarity, relationships, and academic

engagement is the key to sustained inclusion. The cultural comparison or comparison between this study and other studies is one of its key contributions. The Indonesian student with collectivist background tends to consider a fast response and being online as a form of commitment and concern to the group. In case of a reply late, one can be perceived as being neglectful. Conversely, students with more individualistic culture (the United States) define the digital exhaustion as the limits it imposes on individuals and its ability to affect them emotionally. This variation demonstrates how cultural anticipations regarding availability, responsibility and self-expression influence the use of communication technology by students.

The results are also based on the work of Goffman (1959) who stated in his *Presentation of Self* that the management of image on the Internet is more severe in the context of hybrid university. Learners make a continuous emotional investment to appear socially tied and tend to conceal their vulnerability to be able to blend. This confirms Tang et al. (2023) and Folabit et al. (2025) who opine that technology may be detrimental to wellbeing at times when emotional demands are excessive. The research also indicates that such pressures differ by cultures with collectivist environments exerting more demands on visibility and responsiveness. Mixed languages, memes and culture-specific humor used on the Internet demonstrate that online space is comparatively a safe place where students can express themselves and remind them of their identities. Nevertheless, the researchers also conclude that face-to-face communication has not become irrelevant. Face-to-face meetings play an important role in comprehending politeness, humor and emotions, especially during cross-cultural situations. It confirms the opinion expressed by Thomas & Herbert (2024) that, despite living in a digital world, it is necessary to be physically present to feel like belonging. The paper proposes a new term of hybrid communicative belonging, a combination of digital and face-to-face communication that is culturally and identities based. The findings indicate that there is no good or bad digital communication. Its influence is hinged on balance, authenticity and the degree of fit concerning cultural values. The results give the recommendation that universities ought to develop first-year programs that incorporate on-campus and online education. Students can be kept engaged and prevent the emotional burnout with the aid of peer mentoring, hybrid orientations, and explicit digital communication policies. After studying digital skills, intercultural communication, and emotional control during the first year, students can become more comfortable in different learning conditions.

## CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that it is not only one or the other but digital and face-to-face communication that enables first-year students to feel that they belong. Digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and learning forums assist students during their first year at university to connect, reduce stress, and discover their identities. However, face-to-face communication is the most valuable one in terms of establishing long-term trust, authenticity, and cultural awareness. Another fact

mentioned in the study is an authentic paradox: online spaces are associated with creativity and inclusiveness, and at the same time, they can lead to emotional exhaustion and the need to always project a specific image.

This paper reveals the impact of online and offline experience on the sense of belonging and it will aid us to understand communication and inclusion better. It considers communication technology as an enhancing and restrictive factor in higher education, and it represents the actual experiences of students in the digital visibility and communication. The findings indicate that digital platforms should not only be regarded as tools in schools. They ought to, instead, establish virtual and in-person learning environments to establish closer relationships, mental health support, and cultural awareness.

Although this study has merits, it has some limitations due to the small qualitative sample used in this study which consisted of only two mid-size universities and thus findings may not be applicable everywhere. Extended-term or mixed-method studies would be suitable in future research to observe how the concept of belonging varies over time and in various forms of schools, and how power, disability, and language differences influence inclusion. With digital communication becoming a norm in academic life, the perception of belonging as an ongoing process that involves online and offline engagement can contribute to developing more inclusive, emotionally well, and connected university communities.

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