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The use of social networks in institutional communication at university: a prospective pattern for enhancing the sense of belonging among students

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Considering that universities follow trends closely in worldwide digital innovation, this community case presents how organizational communication examined and implemented new ways of connecting people in digital environments. A new official Meta profile at the university that was created as part of an innovative communication plan at the department level was utilized for this purpose. The results of a 12-month trial revealed that social connections between people fit with digital connections. In this experimental design of organizational communication, the following two paths were followed: planning social experiences to stimulate student engagement and promoting these initiatives through social networks (i.e., Facebook and Instagram). To connect the students and instill the feeling of belonging to their institution, a specific design was also implemented to restructure the traditional approach to social media dialogue, considering that students, teachers, and academic staff are all part of the same community; instead of a conventional style based on informational language, a more conversational style was used, with the audience being involved as much as possible through questions, surveys, mentions, and collaborative posts to foster their sense of inclusion. As we managed the organization of an educational visit abroad for our students, they were invited to share their feelings, perceptions, and comments via social media with photographs and videos of this experience. This methodology, which focused on social activities linked to digital connections, proved to be a great opportunity for building a type of combined institutional storytelling, embedded in a natural sense of community. Moreover, this joint vision of the academic community, fulfilled by real-life events and not only stories displayed through social networks, is fundamental to creating a brand identity that fosters a sense of belonging.

KEYWORDS

students' engagement, social network, organizational communication, sense of belonging, university context

Introduction

The primal need of humans to connect with others as a pillar of social building and relationship-making (Maslow, 1943) has been progressively shifting in digital environments and likely in every aspect of contemporary life, not only revealing revolutionary changes from a technological perspective but also interpreting a significant transformation of the global system of communication (Hilbert, 2020).

Studies have explored this revolutionary fact from every perspective, underlining the difficulties in managing the rules of the game in a context influenced by both people and machines: in fact, digital communication has been manipulating all the communication systems, making us rethink new models for the semiotic approach that refers to the never-ending process of generating and interpreting messages (Guzman et al., 2023; Bankov, 2022). In this framework, the university world follows the transforming development of its educational mission, adapting new strategies to communicate in institutional contexts and exploring new methodologies to engage students' attention.

Previous studies have extensively investigated how the learners' perception of being part of a group is an important chance to boost students' motivation in educational environments—the motivation that can guarantee high performance and successful results (Baumeister, 1995; Wentzel and Wigfield, 1998).

Furthermore, the feeling of being involved in a community, in the sense of belonging to a unit of people who share the same values and are oriented toward achieving the same purpose, also means having the opportunity to develop a positive social identity valuable for psychological wellbeing (Gopalan et al., 2022).

Currently, although the potential benefits of social media platforms have been acknowledged, psychologists, educators, and policymakers constantly advise against digital binge use, as it is well-known how unsafe and out-of-control use of social networks could be among users, especially young people. It has been recognized that social networks often amplify a request for help by users (Alalwan, 2022), and not only a simple cause–effect relationship between social media and mental health distress among young adults is to be considered, but society must take into account a more complex situation that influences psychological disorders linked to digital tools' exploitation (Laczkovics et al., 2023).

This community case aimed to explore the contribution of a social network experiment in an Italian academic context at the department level to building positive relationships between peers and between organizations and students using an innovative way of communication. Considering coverage as a primary metric for the analysis of digital engagement achieved by the official departmental Meta profile, in terms of number of likes, views, numbers of shared contents, and tags, we can assume that this new type of approach in digital communication, based on an interactive posting style, encourages a positive dialogue between the institution and its audience, intermediated by a social media manager. Engaging through social media the community of students, and all people interested in staying updated about academic initiatives, announcements, and events organized by the department where they are attending programs or desire to do so is also potentially important to expand institutional accountability and progressively develop institutional brand identity.

Materials and methods

Experimental approach to the problem

After the pandemic, the rapid migration to online learning environments has been shown to disrupt traditional forms of peer interaction, which are vital for developing relationships and stimulating the learning process within the class, in both real-life and virtual contexts where, potentially, students can feel more comfortable using informal learning settings (Lu et al., 2024). Students have reported feelings of isolation when unable to engage in spontaneous social interactions, typically in the physical classroom. Similarly, a lack of communication could exacerbate feelings of disconnection from peers and institutions, decreasing students' motivation, especially when the digital environment is elected for any specific reason. As the principal social network platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, allow persons to meet and communicate with peers and share emotions and experiences, they can likely improve interactions among students and staff at the university, helping peers collaborate on academic projects or making students feel that they are supported by teachers; moreover, they can engage with their entire academic community.

Target population

In this framework, we focused on the experience of digital communication through social media conducted for 1 year within the Department of Psychology, Educational Science, and Human Movement of the University of Palermo (SPPEFF), which is the biggest university in southern Italy and one of the mega universities in Italy according to the number of students. In 2024, the Italian Institute for Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies (Censis) ranked the University of Palermo at the top level for communication and digital services, *ex aequo* with the University of Padova. In this context, there was an interest in conducting a 1-year trial to build new strategies for digital communication using social network platforms as tools to develop an innovative institutional communication approach, moving from traditional assets to a pioneering plan for a social engagement investigation under a sustainable vision by the SPPEFF Department. The experimental protocol to create a new social media identity was launched in October 2023, at the Department of Psychology, Educational Science, and Human Movement of the University of Palermo, and an official account was created using the Meta Business Suite, a solution that allows the management of contemporary accounts on Facebook and Instagram (Dipartimento speff). In line with the editorial view established, a social media manager was appointed to lead this experimental communication strategy.

Protocol

The number of posts to publish was planned in the number of 10 for each month, excluding to this count other types of posts that were non-original (shared, linked, and mentioned). This experimental social media trial lasted for 12 months, confidently extendable, as incorporated into action in a new communication plan opted in the SPPEFF Department. A total of 302 new posts were generated from

October 2023 to October 2024, elaborated as follows. New contents were mainly generated from the Meta account to publish on double sites (Facebook and Instagram): 120 posts as planned for the year, communicating to the academic audience general information about the university, sharing didactics and scientific insights giving advice on important initiatives at the departmental level; but the massive calculation of published contents to consider is to split in 20–25% from re-posting activities and external contents with tags of SPPEFF Department, and the remaining contents referring to specific content types, such as short videos, photo galleries, and reels, specially created for the Instagram platform and partially re-uploaded on Facebook, due to the specific audience features. These last-mentioned materials were set up in particular to promote special events and social activities such as the educational visit abroad organized on behalf of departmental students. Moreover, along with this constant sharing of news and updates from the official departmental profile, the overall design was to lead social initiatives to foster a sense of inclusion among students and to spread them through social networks. To do that, the Meta account was managed using a specific communication style, characterized by a conversational approach. In this view the final aim was to shape a community feeling within an online university environment, inviting people to react, show passion, and express their feelings in a digital context. Accordingly, in this original institutional approach following a non-conventional style, as agreed upon at the managerial level in the department, a visit abroad was planned to boost students' feelings of inclusion and to promote social life in foreign academic contexts.

Statistical analysis

The data have been exported directly from Meta Analytics. No deeper analysis has been carried out at this stage, considering the exploratory phase of the SPPEFF social media project and the lack of similar approaches already present in the literature. In the framework

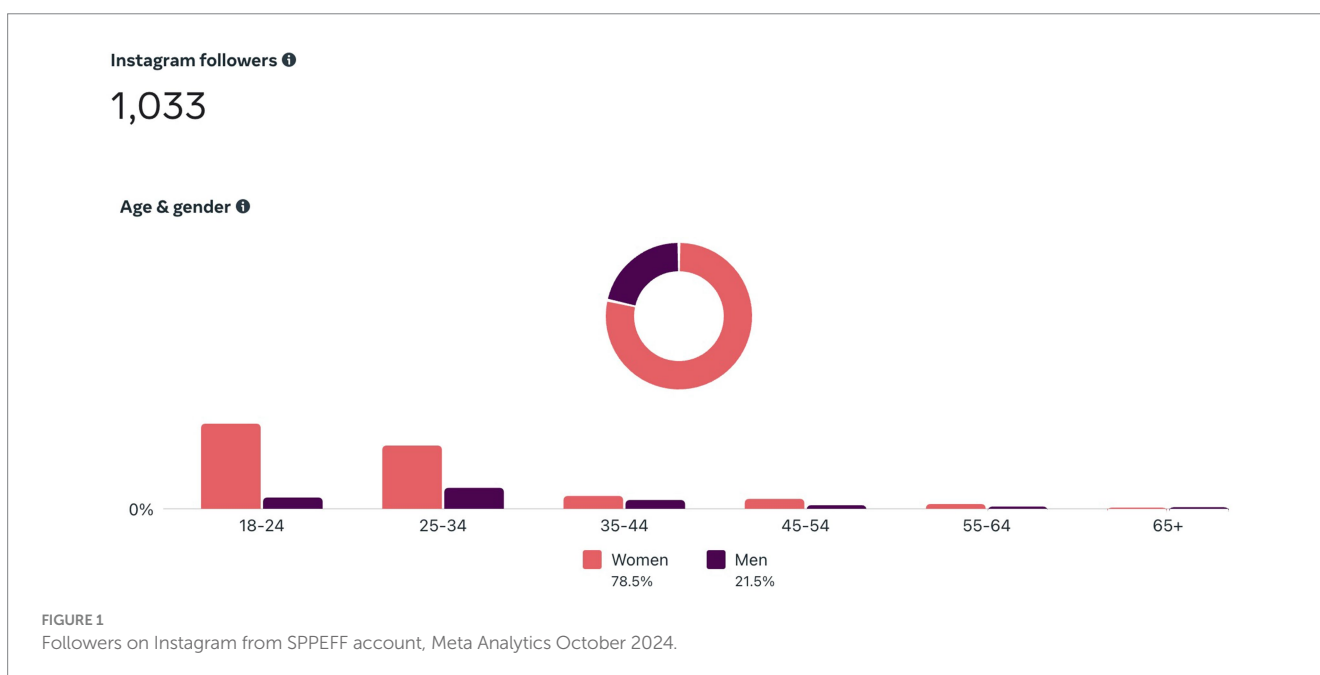
of the next development, following a sentiment analysis technique for exploring the general tone coming from the people who cross the departmental account, leaving their prints in comments more than instantaneous reactions, we aim to further detect at a textual stage how a sense of belonging can be expressed and which terms are most used to perform this concept.

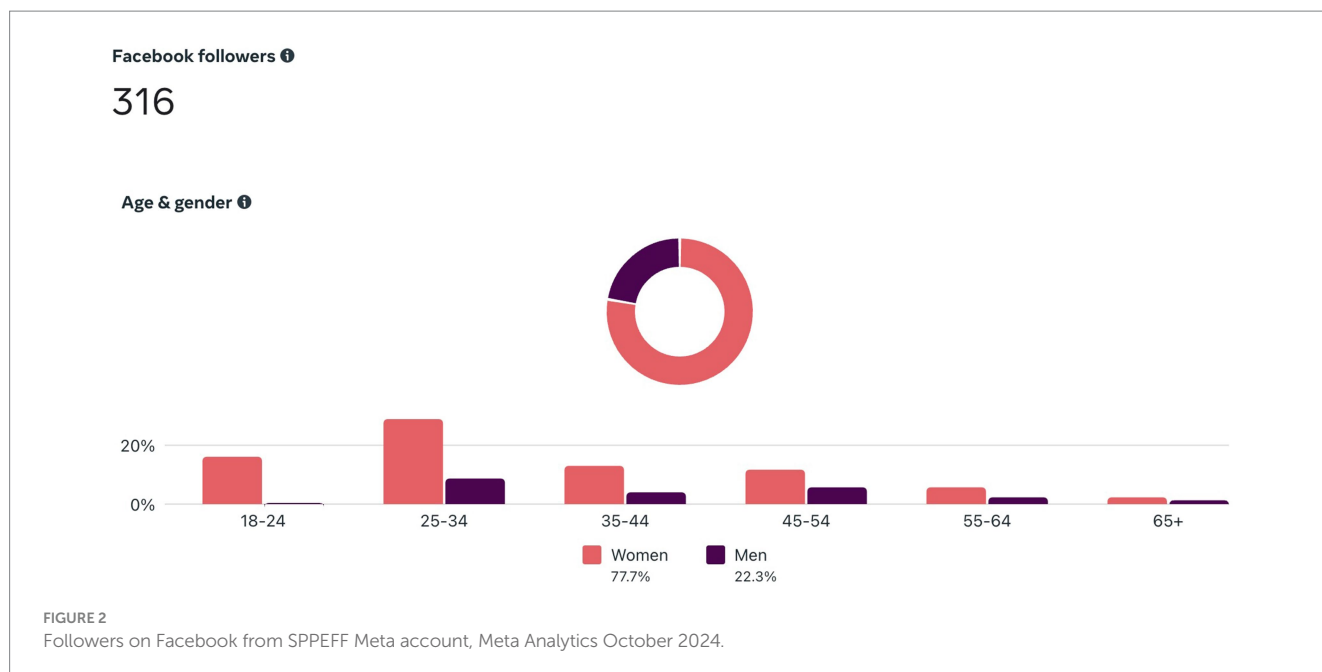
Results

As indicated by the statistics from Meta Business Insights, the departmental target group is mostly composed of people aged 18–25 years, and this evidence has also influenced the platform they most prefer: the audience around the age of 18 years is more present on Instagram (Figure 1), whereas the departmental audience tends to prefer Facebook as they get older (Figure 2), in line with a general trend across platforms' perceptions among young people (Alhabash and Ma, 2017). Moreover, we found that the departmental group was mostly female-oriented, as the statistics from Meta show for both platforms (Figures 1, 2). Analytics have registered 77.7% of women following the SPPEFF profile on Facebook and 78.5% of women following on Instagram, perfectly in line with the departmental trend that counts 80.00% of women enrolled in these courses: Psychology, Pedagogy, and Educational Sciences are core programs of the SPPEFF Department and, as it follows, mainly chosen by a female population of students.

Women are naturally voted to express feelings in an easier way than men, and this aspect has an obvious effect also on social media interactions: consequently, the target group identified is a better fit for social engagement purposes, and this kind of audience looks more suitable for enhancing relationships through communication tools.

Leading the idea to support social initiatives for making students included in academic life and improving positive feelings toward the institution has planned a community experience abroad, involving students in challenging opportunities for their academic life:





organizing for them to travel to visit a foreign university seemed to be a promising activity to enhance the sense of inclusion, belonging, and community between students and academic staff. This opportunity, handled by a departmental delegation, allowed a group of students attending departmental courses to participate in an international welcoming week at Coimbra University in September 2023, as well as many collaborative activities to build a sense of belonging to the academic environment.

During the visit, students from the University of Palermo showed their appreciation for the educational experience and expressed this feeling of gratitude through their social media accounts, creating reels, posts, and videos about the visit to the University of Coimbra and sharing what they learned in terms of personal growth and professional achievement.

From this perspective, this community case shows the contribution of the departmental Meta Business account to increasing a sense of inclusion and belonging, allowing students to feel cared for and pleased to share emotions and experiences with peers, teachers, and academic staff. As we can see from the graphic elaborated by the Meta statistics in relation to account performance in September 2024 (Figure 3), the month in which the departmental delegation managed and promoted educational visits abroad via social media was rated unequivocally in a positive way (326.9% in comparison with the previous month of August), as the initiative stimulated many digital rumors. Additionally, the content interactions shown during September on Instagram and Facebook by the academic audience were mostly concentrated on the days of the visit, as displayed in Figures 4, 5.

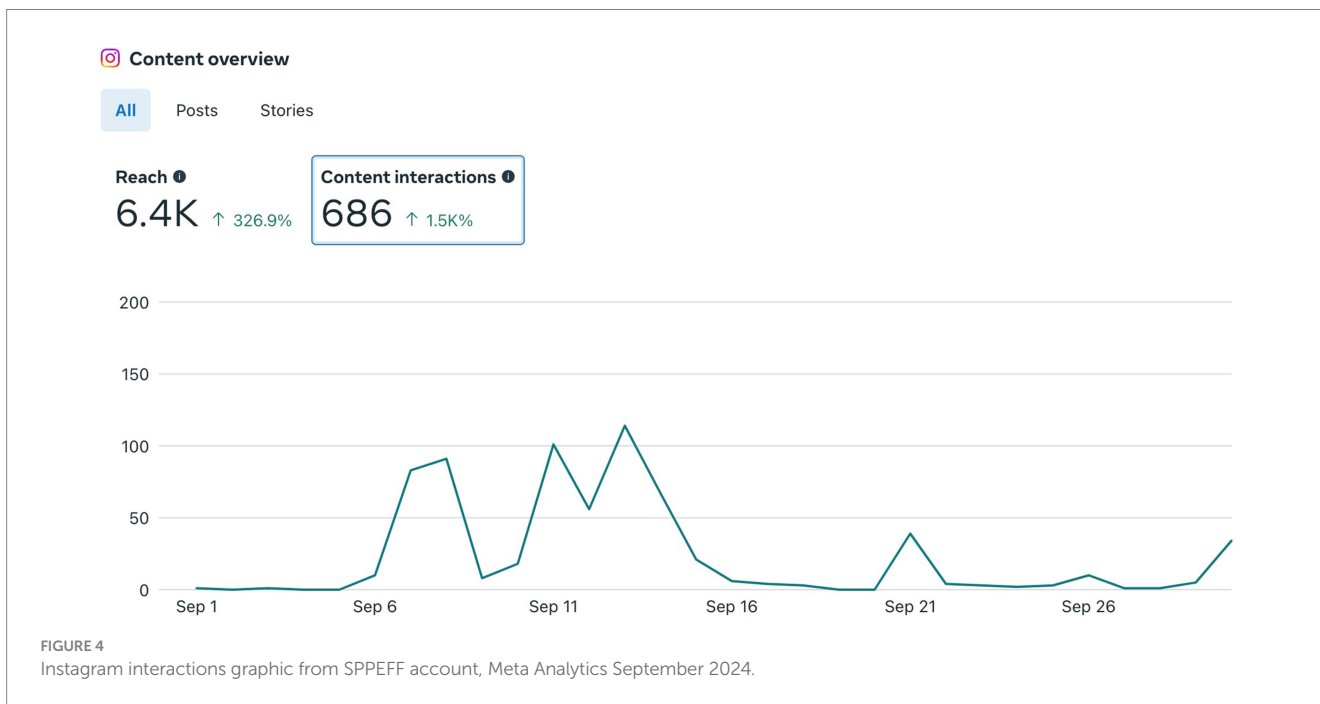
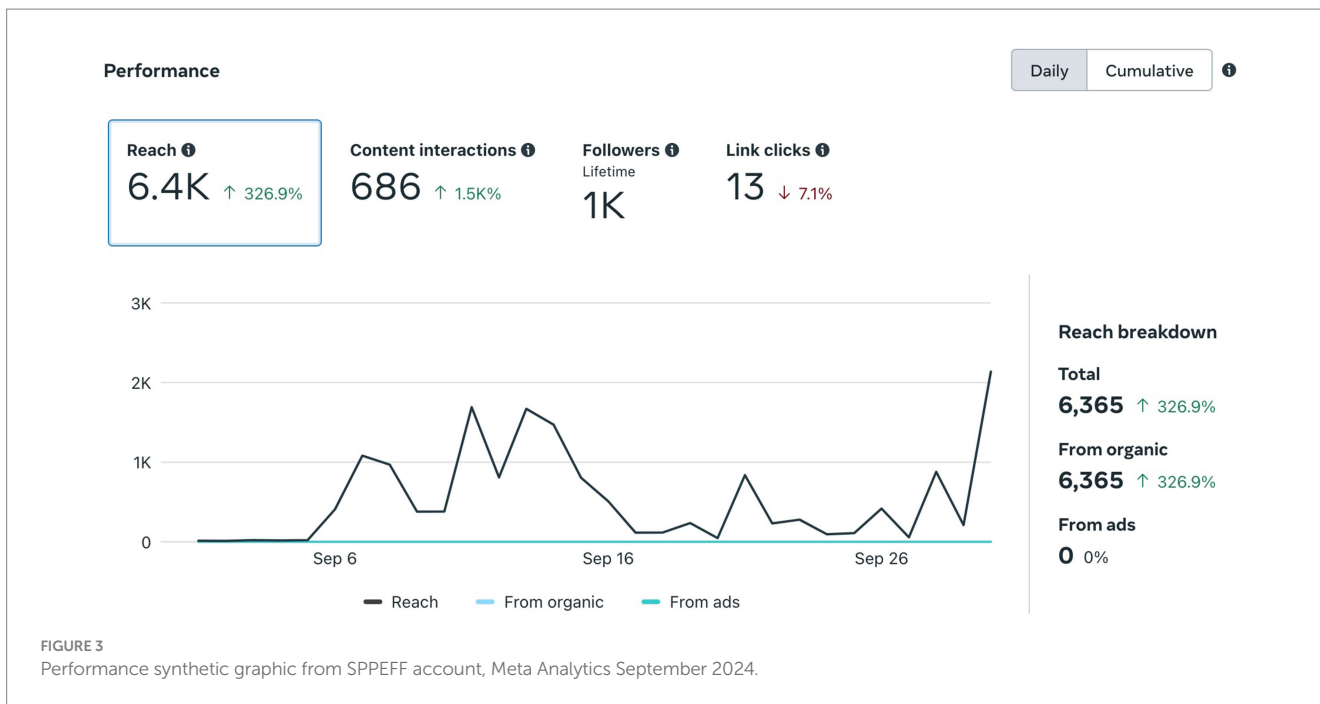
Discussion

While empirical studies have demonstrated varying effects of social media on students' feeling of connectedness in an academic context, the improvement of organizational communication language on social

networks based on a more unconventional style is still underused (Yalalem et al., 2023; Alshuaibi et al., 2018). A recent study conducted at 70 principal universities in Europe, the United States, and Latin America has demonstrated that institutions generally choose an "informational" versus a "conversational" communication approach, which means that they mostly prefer to share informative posts on social media, opting for a monological interactivity strategy in their digital institutional communication and moving quite slowly toward an innovative style that integrates mixed communication resources to promote engaging content for their audience. These results also include the most extensive use of ex-positive announcements, such as texts and figures (pictures, graphics, etc.), instead of interactive tools, such as videos, surveys, and tests. With the rise of social media as a pervasive communication tool in academic environments, its effect on students' sense of belonging within institutions warrants a comprehensive exploration (Capriotti et al., 2024).

In our case, during the experimental year of digital communication, the official departmental account presented 142 posts on Facebook and 158 posts on Instagram. Observing the coverage metrics of these outputs, we discovered that students who attended pedagogical and educational programs displayed a convincing attitude toward sharing their feelings and reactions on social networks, which seems to influence students' attitudes toward participating in interactive communication systems. Statistics from the Meta Business profile, made of likes, views, comments, and other digital reactions, presented these students as more likely to express connections through social media and, consequently, opened to playing a strategic role in building an organizational identity starting from a digital one (Dutton et al., 1994; Lupton et al., 2022; Robles-Carrillo, 2024).

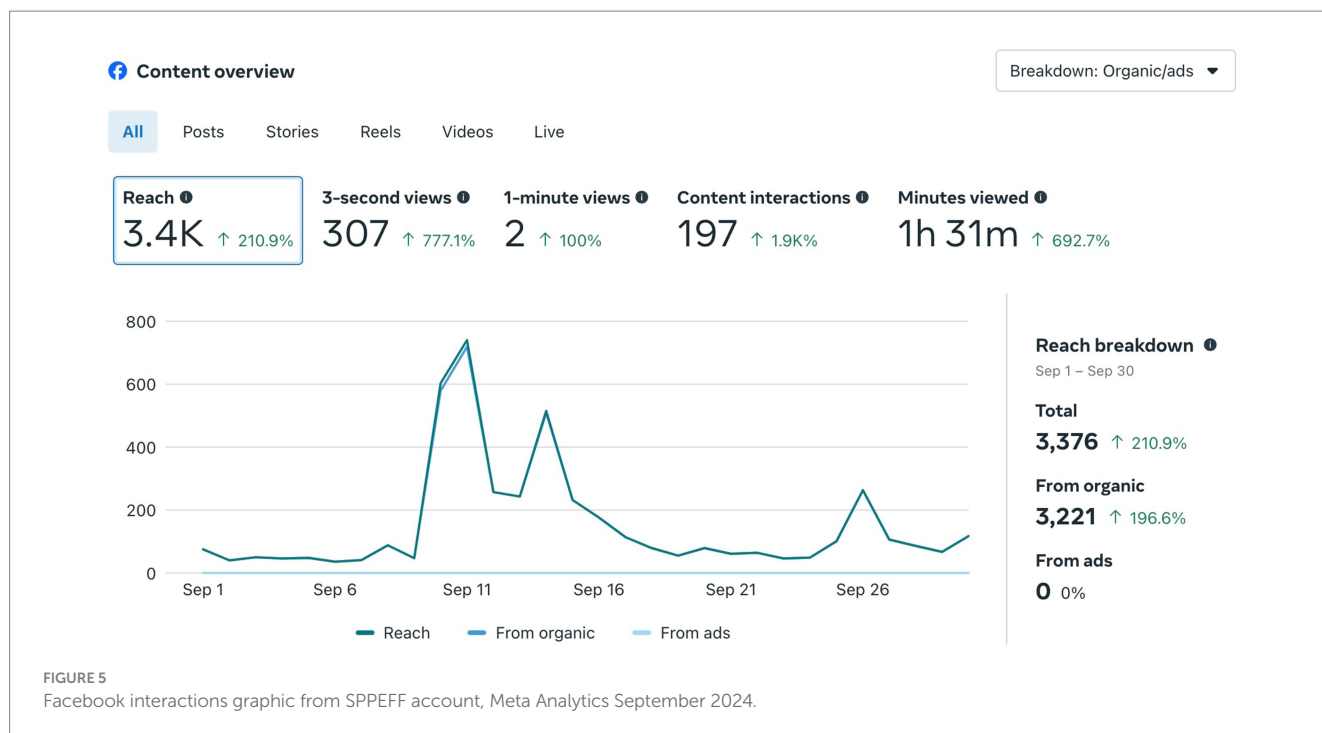
In addition to this kind of spontaneous evidence, the SPPEFF departmental official account led to some customized actions to induce reactions in students and stimulate their sense of community, while investigating new paths to create relations in the digital space. In fact, arranging an educational visit for students coming from the



same department, enabling them to spend time at a foreign university, and inviting them to share insights when abroad about the journey via social media turned out to be an exciting way to produce collaborative storytelling for institutional profiles. What we found most interesting is that enhancing relationships from initiatives in the presence and, in the meantime, talking about them on social networks, highlighting moments to remember, tagging places, mentioning people, and asking to collaborate in posting not only makes others familiar with departmental life but also helps the management plan new actions tailored to involve a larger range of the public.

Although interactions via social networks are still prevented from being accepted as real life, in the last decades humans have explored new paths to connect with each other and found new shapes for interactions not only between people but also between humans and machines as a global society in never-ending transformation (Latour, 2017).

Causing a kind of thrilling atmosphere among people involved in this academic community for the experimental SPPEFF project working on this bilateral approach—social activities for real life and social advertising for digital life—has not only affected relevant improvements in terms of friendship among students who shared the



same experience of the visit but also generated a proactive process in discovering new settings of feasible engagement within the learning context (Kuh, 2001).

At this point, it is not ideal to address all types of reactions shown on social media by our audience as a result of an engagement feeling and demonstration of a collaborative attitude; while researchers are still debating what engagement is and are questioning whether it is possible to give a clear and scientific definition based on social network metrics (Lund, 2019; Rogers, 2018), what is quite accepted is the fact that this sort of individual involvement is related to personal will and refers to how people perceive themselves as sympathetic to something or someone (Smith and Gallicano, 2015; Cai et al., 2023). Social interactions on social media are not enough to explain what engagement is, specifically for millennials, who are naturally comfortable developing digital relations, regardless of specific situations (Lupton et al., 2022); moreover, recent studies have highlighted the emerging question that young generations are also modifying how they learn as digital natives pushing teachers and trainers to rethink traditional educational methods (Davidson and Goldberg, 2009; Fructuoso, 2015).

Students who find relief primarily in online interactions, while feeling disconnected from their physical academic environment, may notice how it is possible to combine different ways of interacting with peers, academic staff, and teachers and decide how to reach their audience depending on the situation and mood. The interplay between these dynamics emphasizes the need for educational institutions to foster environments in which both online and offline connections are nurtured as top devices to promote general wellbeing (Kirby et al., 2022; Murphy et al., 2020; Wheele et al., 2024).

In this view, the communication unit of the department planned an educational visit for students and invited them to share their experience through social media, with pictures and videos mentioning

the department's official account every time. Accordingly, the institutional profile gained visibility during travels abroad and received many new requests from followers. This is how we managed to combine our mission to spread social initiatives and obtain general attention in the digital community.

Moreover, the department had the chance to instill a sense of belonging in its students, and we could observe this achievement along the following steps: When students came back from the visit, they created some reels to share their opinions about this educational experience abroad, and what they stressed were thoughts and emotions expressing gratitude to the institution for allowing them to enrich their academic path in such a powerful way. It follows that the feeling of being cared for, included, and engaged in a community is what we can call a student's sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2024).

The quality of interactions displayed through social media and what people can see within this digital context may guide others in how to connect and join the departmental community, contributing to shaping what is called corporate identity in a naturally embedded way with students' perceptions of belonging. As positive feedback from peers and supportive communication demonstrated by the department can improve the sense of acceptance and reliability, institutions should not undervalue the significant key role of digital institutional communication in contemporary organizational management (Dragseth, 2020). Social media management demands an authentic and reliable "brand voice," in line with the university context, to fit a specific target audience. However, establishing and maintaining this voice over time can be challenging. Handling comments and leveraging content according to coherence, clarity, and alignment with brand values are essential for building a corporate identity in trust and loyalty. Social media managers are also called upon to brand their

identity, and it happens that their branding is increasingly used to gain public attention and embody organizational identity (Bossio et al., 2020; Jacobson, 2020).

This project presents a few limitations we would love to mention here. Starting from the relatively small sample of people/followers we observed, up to the quantity and quality of contents addressed for this first year of explorations with the departmental project implementation: as we understand, activities such as messaging, commenting on public walls, and openly discussing on social networks are actions more likely to succeed between persons knowing each other's, and it comes easier to spend words in online environments as time passes and users become familiar, we expect to be able to manage a strategic investigation based on topic modeling in a linguistic perspective in the future.

Finally, this explorative research synthesizes current scientific findings on the topic while proposing practical strategies aimed at enhancing students' sense of belonging through the thoughtful integration of social media into academic life. Future research should continue to explore these relationships to develop effective interventions that support student wellbeing in an increasingly digital academic landscape.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the study involving human data in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent was not required, for either participation in the study or for the publication of potentially/indirectly identifying information, in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The social media data was accessed and analyzed in accordance with the platform's terms of use and all relevant institutional/national regulations.

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MG: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. FP: Project administration, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – review & editing. AV: Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – review & editing. PT: Project administration, Visualization, Writing – review & editing, Validation. AB: Validation, Resources, Visualization, Project administration, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Software, Conceptualization.

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