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# University, social media, and student engagement: the challenge of “trust” in organizational communication. A voice from European university researchers to foster inclusion in higher education

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## KEYWORDS

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## Background

Since educational institutions have reported higher performances in terms of both students and organizational wellbeing, contemporary academic life has been increasingly boosting communication in multiple ways (Leonardi et al., 2013; Alshuaibi et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2024). Moreover, the interplay between higher educational context and student engagement seems to promote the connection with positive attitudes, which are required to facilitate the learning process and critical thinking development (Alalwan, 2022; Galindo-Domínguez et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2023).

Following the comprehensive view painted in a recent study conducted by Pawar (2024), who addressed the most relevant areas for marketing in higher education using social media, we want to chiefly draw attention to the crucial role of organizational management in student engagement through the implementation of digital methodologies. While academics are committed to customizing a consensus about a set of values, practices, and ideas to enhance the organization's identity and the university branding to spread their accountability worldwide (Chowdhury et al., 2023; Pawar, 2024), researchers should invest in communication studies for promoting student involvement and sense of belonging in learning environments (Alalwan, 2022; Dhanesh et al., 2022; Fabris et al., 2023).

This means to dare, experimenting with new strategies for didactics implementation in the perspective of a stable and effective set of innovative technologies, digital tools, and social media networks, integrated into institutional practices, to foster user engagement and encourage the general audience empowerment with greater interaction in virtual scenarios and digital spaces (Guillory and Sundar, 2014; Taylor and Kent, 2014; Gopika and Rekha, 2023; Young et al., 2020; Capriotti et al., 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted traditional methodologies, and digital communication has become strategic not only to keep alive a worthy public image but also to hold people involved in a community, seeking to provide feelings of safety and consideration: Despite distances and prohibitions, social media have ensured individuals to communicate with families, friends, and peers (Cho et al., 2023). Nowadays, more than half of the global population uses social media, and it happens not just to experience them: People tend to use networks to connect with others as a social need (Brandtzæg and Heim, 2009): Nevertheless, while institutions need to equip themselves properly with the ambition to produce impactful digital storytelling of “what they are” through “what we see,” educators and institutional managers have the responsibility to enhance new embedded canals to educate and train students, from schools to universities, exploiting the timeless power of social media platforms (Sanz-Labrador et al., 2021).

In addition to this functional aspect, suppose now the priority for social media platforms is to attract and keep their audience involved and entertained: following this view, institutions sharing content through social media have the same purpose to entertain and engage their communities as partners for building a shared public identity (Ihlen et al., 2011; Dhanesh et al., 2022).

The more people feel they are part of an institution, the more the management can count on them and have the chance to influence new trends. From this perspective, we want to focus on universities, leading the idea that digital community development, interactions between academics and staff through social media, and student engagement promotion are deeply linked and can significantly contribute to improving the sense of a collaborative community in learning contexts (Ansari and Khan, 2020; Lu et al., 2024).

Along with a general agreement on the beneficial effects brought on students by feelings related to a sense of community and inclusion (Allen et al., 2021) and their capacity to lessen disparities and ethnic matters among students during their academic experiences (Gopalan and Brady, 2020), researchers are still debating the most effective way to generate engagement among users and how to measure it (Smith and Gallicano, 2015).

As researchers detecting digital environments within universities, we cannot ignore the relevant key role raised by emotional wellbeing in academic performance and student living: educators have the responsibility to turn the impact of social media's use on everyday life into an innovative path to promote health among students, aiming at a sustainable educational evolution and exploring new tactics to succeed in human progress (Kent and Taylor, 2021; Li, 2022).

## Innovating digital solutions for social inclusion

At Palermo University, one of the biggest universities in Italy, we are seeking to investigate students' feelings while managing an institutional official account on social networks: our research team has launched an investigation among students that includes heading, for a scheduled period, a

meta business account (Facebook and Instagram) owned by the Department of Psychology, Educational Sciences, and Human Movement (SPPEFF). In line with an experimental approach to the organizational communication plan led by this department, the objective of our research is to measure the feeling of inclusion before and after a period of social network account management.

Organizing and sharing content from an institutional account (SPPEFF Department) of an important institution such as the University of Palermo can be challenging and exciting for students, even if perceived as a task of responsibility. We are committed to involving, within an experimental educational design, persons attending programs from this department, engaging them in the natural process of building the digital identity for our institution under a collaborative view: we understand this could reveal an explosive power in terms of concern and interest. Nevertheless, we are aware that this digital enterprise needs special attention on policy aspects related to privacy and informatics risks; moreover, this experimental editorial plan should be validated and supported by a team of experts based on well-structured rules, scientific rigor, timing, and scope.

The literature has reported some municipalities in Italy that have already experimented with citizen-based management activities for a while, in the framework of specific engagement objectives, and the results were encouraging (Ducci et al., 2019).

The SPPEFF department training offer is characterized by themes referring to psychology, pedagogy, and other person-centered specific educational courses related to the development of knowledge and skills to deal with people throughout the lifespan, from children to adults.

We are confident that digital innovation initiatives led by a research unit in a social media laboratory, where human relationships, care, and trust are considered strategic for developing a fruitful collaboration, will improve not only people's autonomy and academic self-efficacy in students attending the program but also an overall sense of community and inclusivity (Montgomery, 2018; Aldossari, 2023; Alshuaibi et al., 2018; Ansari and Khan, 2020).

Strengthening an innovative institutional communication approach that is student-based, fully immersed in the learning environment, and grounded in loyalty and reliability as the roots of a long-lasting social pact looks to be a sustainable way to progress in organizational communication, influencing an ideal cultural evolution (Whittaker and Montgomery, 2014).

## Author contributions

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

Conceptualization, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – review & editing, Methodology.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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