

The effect of social engagement on sense of community: A study of LSE Postgraduate students in 2020/21

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Project description

This LSE Changemakers research project seeks to evaluate the sense of community among the postgraduate international students at LSE during 2020/2021. The ongoing pandemic has disrupted most of the in-person social and academic activities. We are studying the impact of this disruption on students' sense of community. Additionally, we will also analyse the effects of participating in virtual social engagement events on the student's sense of community. Specifically, using the scale of Sense of Community in University Online Courses (SSC-UOC) we will be examining its impact on membership, influence, and fulfilment of needs. Our survey also includes a social activities section to determine what social events students participated in, whether they would recommend these events to others and their general perception of the events arranged by LSE in 2020/21.

Background

Researchers who have attempted to compare international and domestic students' levels of engagement, have found that international students are less engaged or fall behind their domestic counterparts (Van Horne et al, 2018). International students prefer activities which feature interactions with other students (Korobova and Starobin, 2015) and international students who participate in on-campus social organizations (such as professional, recreational activities or student groups) benefitted from increased social support which enhanced their sense of belonging (Wekullo, 2019). However, due to the pandemic, universities were expected to stop face-to-face teaching and in-person activities during the autumn term on the 9th of December (Tinsley, 2020). Therefore, students were physically separated from the school, its staff, and other students. As distance learners, students were more exposed to experiences of isolation and alienation (Phirangee and Malec, 2017).

Therefore, focusing specifically on the 2021/2020 cohort of international postgraduate students, we are exploring how engagement in social activities impacted the sense of community among students during the pandemic. McMillan and Chavis (1986) define psychological sense of community (PSC) as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together". McMillan and Chavis developed a widely accepted theoretical model of sense of community which is composed of four elements: Membership, Influence, Fulfilment of needs and shared emotional connection. The scale of Sense of Community in University Online Courses (SSC-UOC) factorial structure replicates McMillan and Chavis model of sense of community, upon the basis of which this scale was developed (Balboni et al, 2018). We adapted this scale to form our own to measure the sense of community at LSE. The three dimensions used in the SSC-UOC correspond partially to the McMillan and Chavis (1986) model. The first factor, membership concerns the student's feeling of belonging, emotional safety and the extent to

which members identify themselves as part of the community and share a sense of personal relationship with the other members of the online course (Balboni et al, 2018). Shared emotional connection, (positive contact between members, opportunities to share experiences and a sense of investment by members in the community as a whole) converges within the SSC-UOC membership factor. The second factor, influence, concerns issues of power in which members exert influence on community activities and are influenced by the community. The third factor, fulfilment of needs, concerns a student's feeling that their personal learning needs have been satisfied by the community activities and is demonstrated by the shared values within the community (Balboni et al, 2018).

Methodology and Results

When reviewing the SSC-UOC Scale we realized that not all items within the sub-scales were relevant to our study. With the guidance of our supervisor, we adapted the scale to suit our requirements. Namely we edited the language to account for social activities and deleted the questions that did not contribute to the study. To ensure that reliability was maintained Cronbach Alpha test was conducted and the resulting values were acceptable for all 3 sub-scales (Membership = 0.719, Influence = 0.751, Fulfilment of Needs = 0.710). Apart from the scale, the survey also included questions regarding perception of adequate number of events, reported participation in social activities and the like.

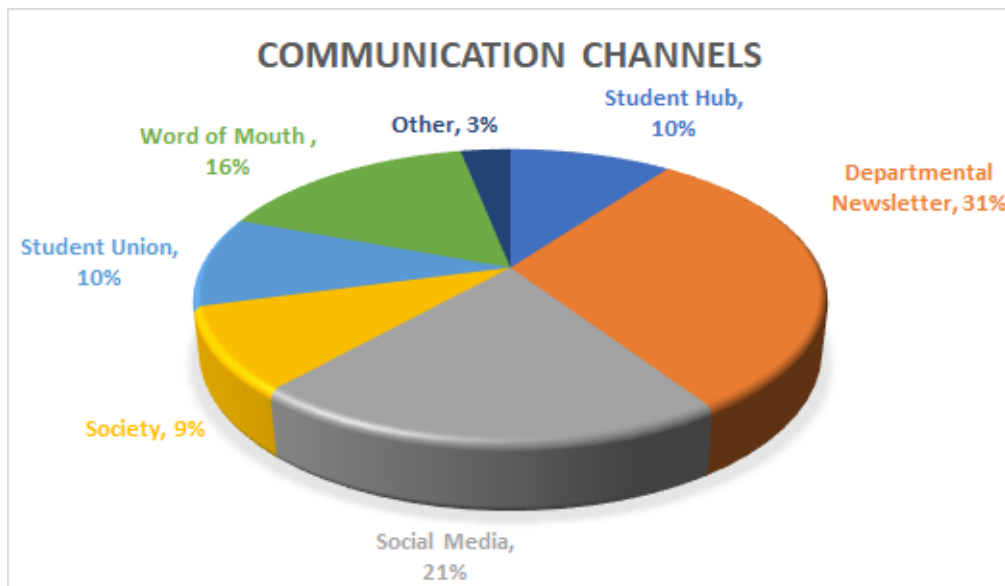
| Hypotheses | Description | Variables |
|---------------|---|---|
| Hypothesis 1 | Students who participated in in-person activities will have a higher SoC | Dependent: Sense of Community (W)* Independent: In-person Control: International Student, Currently in London, Age, Perception, |
| Hypothesis 2a | Students who have prior networks in London will have a higher Soc. | Dependent: Sense of Community (W)* Independent: London Network Control : Age, In-person, International Student , Currently in London |
| Hypothesis 2b | International students who moved to London have a higher SoC than those who stayed in their home countries. | Dependent: Sense of Community (W)* Independent: Currently in London Control: Age, London Network, In-person, International Student |
| Hypothesis 3a | The perception of an adequate number of social activities being conducted will lead to higher SOC | Dependent: Sense of Community (W)* Independent: Perception Control: Age, LSE Net, International Student |

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|----------------------|---|--|
| Hypothesis 3b | The students who participate in a higher number of social activities will have a higher SOC. | Dependent: Sense of Community (W)* Independent: Participation Control: Age, Perception, International Student |
|----------------------|---|--|

*Membership = 50, Influence = 18, Fulfilment of Needs = 32

Data was collected from 65 Postgraduate students. First it was cleaned using Excel, then Regression analysis was run using SPSS. Most hypotheses showed insignificant results except Hypothesis 3b. The results showed that **A one unit increase in Participation is associated with a 0.495 beta increase in the Weighted Sense of Community, holding all else constant (Age, Perception, International Student), significant at the 1% level.**

An additional analysis of communication channels revealed that there was a minor association between departmental newsletter and reported participation, it was also the most recalled method of communication.



Recommendations

- The overarching finding from our study was the link between participation and sense of community (SOC). The greater the number of events a student attends, the more likely they are to experience a better SOC.
- The Departmental newsletter is the most effective communication channel. Students attend and remember events publicized in the departmental newsletter the most. We found a minor association between the department newsletter and students' reported participation.
- Some of the most highly recommended events were when Covid restrictions were eased and included in-person events including the 'Lucky Dip Adventures' and pub quizzes at the Three Tuns. Our results show that students really value opportunities for in-person interaction.

Long-term recommendations (the return to normal)

- Social events such as online yoga, career insight guest talks or academic talks such as the Book Club, which involve listening to 'one way' communication can be successfully transferred online which may allow students greater flexibility. Whereas social events that involve direct interaction between participants tend to be better experienced in person.
- The 'Lucky Dip Adventures' (which involved meeting five other students and going on a planned day trip in London), were highly recommended and successful at enabling students to make social connections. Although these trips were designed with the pandemic regulations in mind, we suggest that these should be continued in the future during the return to normal.
- Students do enjoy social events that involve listening to a speaker and gaining knowledge, not just events that involve pure social interaction.
- Common interest groups like society events were frequently highly recommended to other student's society events should be promoted more as students who share similar interests may be more likely to become friends.

References

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