

SACAD: John Heinrichs Scholarly and Creative Activity Days

Volume 2023

Article 13

4-17-2023

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Recommended Citation

Moy, Magdalene; Hicks, Sydney; and Reilley, Danielle (2023) "Social Belonging Perceptions Across FHSU Students," *SACAD: John Heinrichs Scholarly and Creative Activity Days*: Vol. 2023, Article 13.

DOI: 10.58809/BFMG9270

Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/sacad/vol2023/iss2023/13>

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Perceptions of Belonging Across FHSU Students

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FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY
TEACHING INNOVATION
& LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES

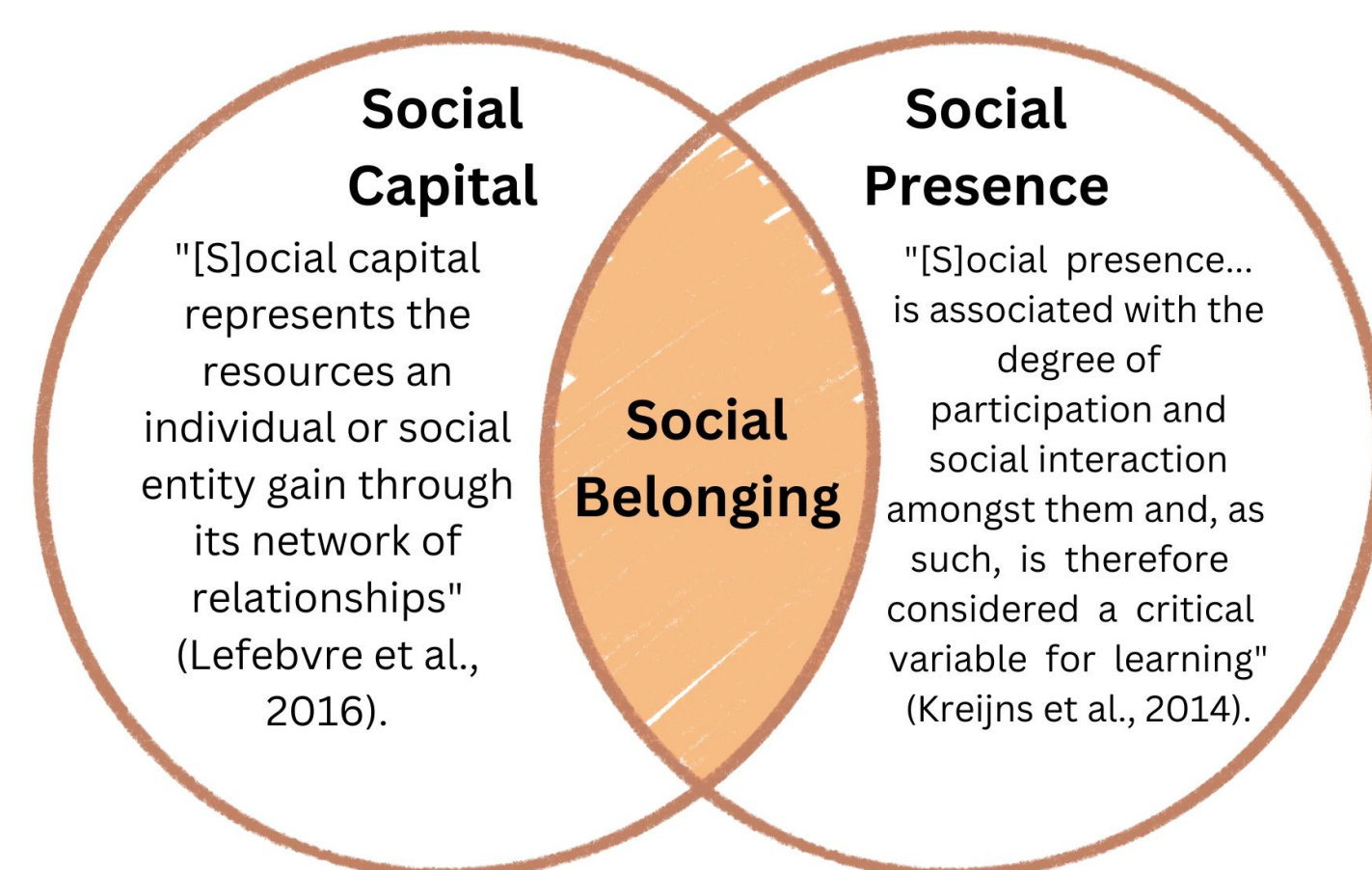
Abstract

Social belonging is a critical aspect of student success and well-being in higher education. Research on social belonging has thus far primarily focused on traditional, on campus students in higher education; however, higher education institutions have seen an increased number of online students post pandemic (D'Agostino, 2022). Fort Hays State University (FHSU) has likewise seen a growing number of online students, with 3,807 on campus students compared to 6,604 online students for the 2021-2022 school year. Data from the 2021 NISS Diagnostic Analysis resulted in the following executive summary, "Improve outcomes for online students by better understanding the specific obstacles they are facing and by targeting supports in response". To address the growing need to understand the unique perspectives of FHSU's online students and to contribute to the overall FHSU student success the Teaching Innovations and Learning Technologies (TILT) department designed a mixed methods research project with the intention to build a faculty facing workshop that is data driven by FHSU students. A design-based research approach was taken to support the project's lofty goals. An initial analysis of past data was conducted using 2021 NSSE survey data, 2021 NISS Diagnostic Analysis and Playbook, and the FHSU's 2021 Post-Pandemic survey data. This data was used to construct the theoretical framework of social belonging for this project, which includes social capital and social presence. Next, a sequential mixed methods approach was deployed using a qualitative survey followed by qualitative, semi-structured interviews. This poster will report on the project's design, theoretical framework, and preliminary findings.

Introduction

Social belonging is a critical factor in promoting student success and retention in higher education (Bentrim & Henning, 2022). The degree to which students feel connected and valued by their academic community can influence their academic achievement, satisfaction, and overall well-being. The theoretical framework for this sequential mixed methods research project draws on the concept of social belonging, with a specific focus on social capital (Lefebvre et al., 2016) and social presence (Kreijns et al., 2014). Figure 1 displays the theoretical framework for this study.

Figure 1
Social Belonging Theoretical Framework



Social capital refers to the resources and connections students have within their academic networks, such as faculty, peers, and staff, which can be mobilized to achieve academic goals and address collective challenges (Lefebvre et al., 2016). We frame social presence from the Community of Inquiry framework, where social presence refers to the degree to which students feel present, connected, and engaged with others in their academic context (Kreijns et al., 2014). The intersection of both social capital and social presence is where we situate social belonging.

The purpose of this sequential mixed methods research project is to investigate the role of social capital and social presence in promoting social belonging among FHSU students. The study utilized a two-phase sequential mixed methods approach, starting with a quantitative survey deployed to online and on campus students through the Tiger 2 Tiger platform. The second phase involved follow-up interviews with a subset of students to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and perspectives related to social belonging.

The findings from this study may have practical implications for higher education institutions interested in fostering social belonging and enhancing students' academic success and overall well-being. Our findings will be included in the development and design of a faculty facing FHSU Student Experience Workshop currently being developed by TILT. By understanding the role of social capital and social presence in promoting social belonging among students, FHSU can develop targeted interventions and support services to help students feel connected and valued within our community. Overall, this study aims to contribute to the existing literature on social belonging in higher education and provide actionable recommendations for promoting student success and retention.

Research Methods

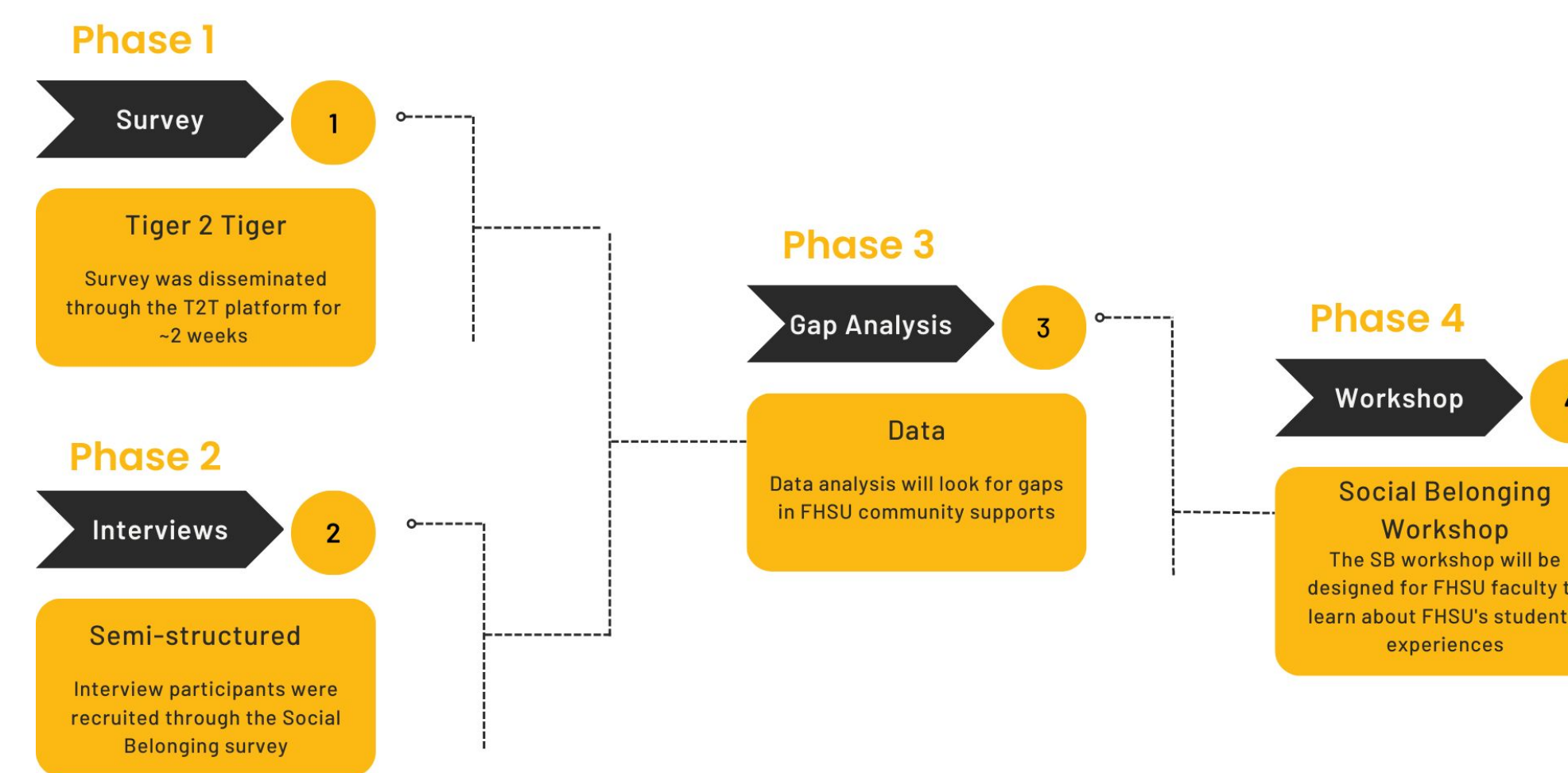
This study was designed as a sequential mixed methods research project (Cameron, 2009), which involves collecting and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data in two distinct phases.

Phase 1: The first phase involved administering a quantitative survey to FHSU online and on campus students to measure their levels of social capital, social presence, and social belonging at FHSU. The survey data is being analyzed using descriptive statistics to examine the relationships between the social capital, social presence, and social belonging constructs.

Phase 2: The second phase involved semi-structured interviews with a subset of students who participated in the survey to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and perspectives related to social belonging. The interview data is being analyzed using an a priori codebook to identify common themes and patterns related to social capital, social presence, and social belonging.

Once the data has been analyzed phase 3 and 4 will commence. Phase 3 consists of a gap analysis using the data collected from phases 1 and 2 to elucidate gaps in FHSU's institutional and community resources. Phase 4 will occur in tandem with phase 3 and consists of the data-driven development of a faculty facing "FHSU Student Experience Workshop" aimed to facilitate FHSU faculty to encourage the sense of belonging with their students.

Figure 2
The four phases of the Social Belonging Project



Preliminary Findings

Here we present our preliminary findings from our qualitative interviews using our social belonging theoretical framework (Figure 1). Figure 3 presents a packed code cloud demonstrating the most and least observed codes based on size and Table 1 displays our codes and examples from the interview data. The preliminary findings suggest that academic engagement and social engagement are the most significant qualitative codes associated with social belonging among FHSU students. The interviews revealed that students who feel a sense of belonging are more likely to seek engagement for their academic work, academically related extracurricular activities, and interact with peers and faculty members regarding academics. This finding highlights the importance of creating a supportive and inclusive online network that fosters student engagement with academically related clubs and opportunities.

Within the social capital construct, the relational capital subcode was the most frequently observed, indicating that students' relationships with peers, faculty, and staff play a critical role in promoting social belonging. The interviews revealed that students who have strong relationships with their academic community feel more connected and valued, which, in turn, leads to a greater sense of social belonging. Surprisingly, analysis of the interviews also revealed the need for online students to initiate many of their interactions with the FHSU community. This finding suggests that FHSU should prioritize making more opportunities to invite and engage FHSU online students.

Lastly, open communication was the most commonly coded construct within social presence. This suggests that students who are given opportunities to have open conversations within their courses, with peers, faculty, and staff, feel a sense of social presence in our FHSU community. This finding highlights the importance of creating safe and inclusive spaces for students to express themselves and connect with others. Overall, the preliminary findings of this study suggest that social engagement, academic engagement, relational constructs, and open communication are critical factors in promoting social belonging among students at FHSU.

Figure 3
Packed Code Cloud



Table 1
Codes with examples

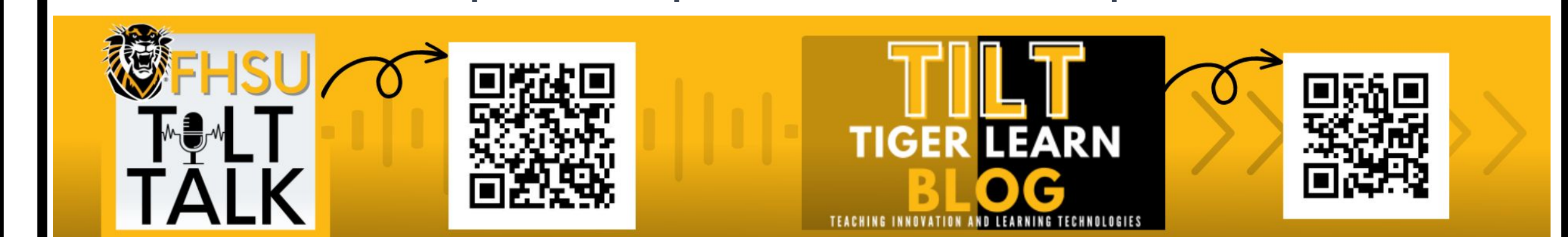
| Code | Examples |
|------------------|--|
| Social Presence | "When I'm not on the computer and working, there's a sense in me personally feeling like I'm drifting away from my studies. And I've thought if I was on campus, I wouldn't have that feeling because it's reinforced through the environment that you're constantly in, immersed in. You see students walking, you see maybe your professors. [Online students] don't have that component, so you feel less connected." |
| Social Capital | "I would say networking first. Like, just because eventually everybody will graduate from there, hopefully. And in the job market, it's good to connect with people or to know more people. Maybe for students who attend classes, they will connect like a sense of purpose, belonging." |
| Social Belonging | "I wanted to belong and that's why I've initiated, or not initiated, but I've taken on what was in I was invited to participate in" "I was saying that when you have, group projects and you have to communicate with the people, you have more sense of belonging because now you are interacting with people." |

Next Steps

Teaching Innovation and Learning Technologies is working on creating a workshop about social belonging called The Student Experience Workshop. It will aim to explore the concepts of purpose, growth mindset, and belonging in higher education. The workshop will be broken down into three subcategories: social belonging, social capital, and social presence, and will challenge faculty members to reflect on the current courses, student engagement and will take part in meaningful conversations about moving forward. The workshop will incorporate data and student interviews to reflect the content and provide a comprehensive understanding of how different types of students approach their coursework and involvement. It will place a special emphasis on underrepresented and online students. Ultimately, the goal of the workshop is to promote a sense of community and inclusivity on campus, in courses, and empower faculty members to play an active role in enhancing the student experience.



In addition, TILT will be continuing the social belonging conversation in our FHSU TILT Talk podcast series and within blog posts on the Tiger Learn Blog. These projects will all be developed and posted the middle part of 2023.



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Acknowledgments

We want to thank Dr. Carol Patrick and the Data Analysis Lab who have supported us in our analysis. A special thanks to all the FHSU students, both online and on campus, who took the time to share their thoughts and experiences with us.