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# It's harder than just saying hi: exploring the formation and sustainability of social bonds among first-year university students

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## ABSTRACT

Forming and sustaining social connections is integral to university students' sense of belonging and well-being, yet many face challenges in building meaningful relationships. This study explored these challenges through 20 semi-structured interviews with recent first year students. Using thematic analysis, five key themes emerged: (1) Barriers in forming social connections, (2) Strategies used to connect with other students, (3) Sustaining social bonds, (4) Personality traits impact the cultivation of social networks, and (5) University support to aid social interaction. While participants acknowledged the importance of social connectedness, some expressed indifference or deprioritized forming relationships, citing academic pressures, personal preferences, or limited opportunities for meaningful interaction. Barriers such as pre-existing social groups, cultural and language differences, and hybrid learning environments compounded these challenges. Universities should consider tailoring support programs to better align with students' evolving preferences and the realities of hybrid educational contexts.

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Undergraduate students; social connectedness; university adjustment; post-pandemic education; hybrid learning

## Introduction

Studying at higher education institutions exposes both domestic and international undergraduate students to various challenges (Arjanggih & Kusumaningsih, 2016). While some adapt well to their new environment, others struggle to adjust (Suyu-Tattao, 2016). For those who relocate to undertake their studies, this may mean a separation from familiar support networks, necessitating a reconfiguration of longstanding relationships (Thomas et al., 2020). Even if remaining in their hometown, first year students may need to develop new social networks if their existing friends go to different institutions or commence employment (Suyu-Tattao, 2016). The initial months can therefore provoke a mix of emotions, with some students reconsidering their choice of degree or university, or whether they should persevere with their tertiary studies at all, particularly if their experiences fall short of expectations (Christie et al., 2006; Miles & Leinster, 2007).

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Making social connections enables first-year students to build a bridge with their peers, which can relieve feelings of homesickness and foster a sense of belonging within the university community. These connections also provide essential emotional support, encourage collaborative learning, and contribute to the development of a peer support system, which can enhance students' academic performance and personal growth (Jorgenson et al., 2018). However, students frequently report problems in creating a social network (Awang et al., 2014; Hunt & Burns, 2017) resulting in difficulties integrating into the university environment (MacLeod et al., 2019). This can lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation, ultimately impacting their overall well-being and academic success. A study by Wahed and Hassan (2017) found that an estimated 40% of students left university due to inadequate social relationships on campus and associated mental health concerns.

Social connectedness can be broadly defined as a state of feeling close or connected to another person (Jorgenson et al., 2018). A high degree of social connectedness is associated not only with a range of positive health outcomes (Wickramaratne et al., 2022) but is also important for positive educational experiences (MacLeod et al., 2019). Individuals who feel a stronger sense of connection with others tend to experience less anxiety and depression, possess higher self-esteem, show greater empathy, and demonstrate more trust and cooperation and, as a consequence, others are more trusting and cooperative with them (Friedlander et al., 2007; Jorgenson et al., 2018; Martino et al., 2017). Higher levels of social connectedness help to maintain a work/life balance and promote student adjustment (Jorgenson et al., 2018).

Social connectedness among university students is a multidimensional construct including cognitive, emotional, and behavioural aspects. Cognitively, it involves students' perceptions of the quality of their relationships with peers and academic staff, and perceived levels of support. Emotionally, it reflects feelings of acceptance, inclusion, belonging, and a sense of being valued and enjoying university life. Behaviourally, it manifests through active participation and engagement in both academic and extracurricular activities (Maunder, 2018). The need to make connections with others may be anxiety-provoking for new students, yet making initial social contacts is central to them feeling part of university life (Maunder, 2018). Studies undertaken in the United States by Moller et al. (2003) and Lee et al. (2002) found that students who have higher social connectedness tend to perform with a lower level of stress.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced universities to introduce measures which affected how students interacted and socialized with each other (Elmer et al., 2020); for example, social distancing measures meant that universities switched many lectures to an online format (Hoss et al., 2021). Online teaching may impact the extent to which students can make strong social connections with other students, with implications for their well-being (Dotson et al., 2022; Farris et al., 2021; Hall & Zygmunt, 2021; Halliburton et al., 2021). A study conducted in the United States found that the pandemic significantly disrupted students' social connections, limiting their access to emotional support and contributing to feelings of exclusion, isolation, and a lack of companionship (Regan et al., 2022). Similar experiences were reported by college students in other studies, who described feelings of loneliness and disconnection from family and peers (Tasso et al., 2021), reduced social interactions (Madrigal &

Blevins, 2022), and lower levels of satisfaction in their relationships with friends and family (Lukács, 2021). Dotson et al. (2022) found that university students generally reported diminished social contact even once COVID-19 no longer had such a significant impact on their lives; for example, social clubs had moved to online meetings, and there were few opportunities for offline participation.

While the adoption of online teaching has persisted, at least in part, at many institutions, there has been increasing implementation of hybrid models of teaching and learning, where a mix of on-campus and online formats are involved within the same programme of study. Consequently, previous research undertaken in the early stages of the pandemic (Dotson et al., 2022; Farris et al., 2021; Hall & Zygmunt, 2021; Halliburton et al., 2021). may not fully reflect the most recent social contexts in which students operate.

The current study was an exploratory qualitative study comprising the first stage of a multi-phase research project investigating the impact of social connectedness on first year undergraduate students' adjustment to university and psychosocial wellbeing. The aim of the present study was to examine how social connections are formed among university students in today's academic settings in New Zealand and to identify any challenges that students face in creating sustainable social networks, to inform a subsequent quantitative study. In particular, we sought to inform the selection of appropriate survey measures for the quantitative phase of our research, and to gain insights that would assist in the development of open-ended questions to identify any social or cultural challenges that may not be captured by existing instruments.

## Methods

### *Recruitment strategy and participants*

Recruitment was conducted using printed flyers on university noticeboards and electronic notices shared on student social media pages and online platforms. This approach allowed us to reach students across multiple campuses efficiently and cost-effectively, especially in a post-pandemic hybrid learning context where many students rely on online channels for information.

The inclusion criteria specified undergraduate students who had completed their first year at university within the last 6–9 months, which ensured participants could provide accurate and reflective insights into their experiences. In total, thirty individuals expressed their willingness to participate in an interview. However, due to factors such as a lack of follow-up response after the initial contact and ineligibility based on our criteria, we conducted interviews with 20 participants, at which stage data saturation was reached as no new insights were obtained in the final interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Notably, two participants were international students in Master's and PhD programs. Despite these advanced study levels, their recent first-year university experiences were deemed valuable to investigate the relevance of the research aims to the broader student population, prompting inclusion in the study and the subsequent analysis of their interviews.

The sample of 16 female and 4 male participants ranged in age from 18 to 28 years (see Table 1) and comprised 15 domestic and 5 international students. The gender imbalance reflects the self-selection nature of the sample, with higher rates of female participation

**Table 1.** Participant demographics.

ID	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Major	Personal Status	Work Status
1	Amy	19	Female	Chinese	Business	Domestic	Part-time
2	June	19	Female	European/Māori	Paramedicine	Domestic	Part-time
3	Cindy	22	Female	Mexican	Health science	Domestic	Part-time
4	Emma	19	Female	Middle Eastern	Science	Domestic	Not working
5	Tom	28	Male	Nepalese	Engineering	International	Part-time
6	Maggie	26	Female	Chinese	Oral health	International	Part-time
7	Amanda	19	Female	Indian	Physiotherapy	Domestic	Part-time
8	Jack	21	Male	Indian	Business	International	Part-time
9	Lily	21	Female	New Zealander/ Israeli.	Psychology	Domestic	Casual
10	Sarah	20	Female	Malaysian/ European	Psychology	Domestic	Part-time
11	Bob	28	Male	Chinese	Cyber security & Digital forensics	International	Part-time
12	Chloe	20	Female	NZ European	Business	Domestic	Casual
13	Ella	19	Female	NZ European	Visual Arts	Domestic	Casual
14	Zoe	19	Female	Chinese	Laws & Commerce	Domestic	Part-time
15	Grace	22	Female	Thai	Commerce	International	Part-time
16	Sophia	24	Female	Samoan	Art	Domestic	Not working
17	Madison	19	Male	NZ European	Engineering & Science	Domestic	Part-time
18	Ruby	19	Female	Indian	Science & Commerce	Domestic	Part-time
19	Lucy	19	Female	NZ European	Psychology & Development Studies	Domestic	Part-time
20	Olivia	18	Female	NZ European	Psychology	Domestic	Not working

commonly reported in social research (Porter & Whitcomb, 2005). This may be due to a greater willingness among women to engage with topics involving social and emotional reflection. All participants were full-time students but most were also engaged in part-time paid employment alongside their studies.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (approval number 22/374).

## Interviews

The data for this study were gathered between December 2022 and June 2023. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to explore how undergraduate students establish social connections during their first year at university and any barriers experienced in establishing a social network. Several student associations representing different ethnic groups were consulted with a request for feedback on the interview questions including the cultural appropriateness of the items.

Prior to commencement of the interview, participants were provided with a participant information sheet to ensure they fully understood the research objectives and interview procedure. The interviews were conducted online using platforms such as Zoom, Teams, or Voov Meeting, with durations ranging from 20 to 50 minutes (average duration: 32 minutes). All interviews were audio recorded for later transcribing. Verbal consent was acquired and recorded separately from the interview recordings, to maintain confidentiality of participants' data.

During the interview, participants were asked to share their experiences of adapting to university life and how they developed and sustained social relationships throughout their first year at university. The researcher wrote brief notes during the interviews as reminders to follow-up on specific points and to clarify or explore further participants' statements.

### ***Positionality and reliability***

As is common in qualitative research, the positionality of the primary researcher can shape data collection and interpretation. The primary author (YL) is an international PhD student who initially came to New Zealand to undertake her Bachelor of Health Science degree and consequently she has personal experience of navigating cultural and social transitions within the New Zealand university system. This background provided both sensitivity to participants' experiences and the potential for interpretive bias. To overcome this, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study and engaged in regular debriefing sessions with an experienced co-author (WW) with the aim of challenging assumptions and reaching consensus on theme development. When differing opinions arose during the theme identification process, the raw interview data were revisited and, through in-depth discussions, a consensus was reached on the final themes. This collaborative approach not only minimized individual bias and enhanced the reliability of the findings but also provided multiple perspectives on the data.

### ***Data analysis***

As the aim of the study was to gain an understanding of how students build social connections and their adjustment experiences within the current tertiary environment, a qualitative descriptive design was used which is particularly suited to research questions that seek direct descriptions of individual experiences and events (Doyle et al., 2020). Thematic analysis was used to discern patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To protect the identities of participants, pseudonyms were assigned.

Braun and Clarke's approach is a widely adopted framework in qualitative research, known for its flexibility and systematic nature. In our study, we began with the familiarization phase, where the primary researcher (YL) thoroughly read and re-read the interview transcripts to immerse herself in the data. Then, during the coding stage, meaningful segments of the data were identified and labelled with descriptive codes. These codes were later grouped to form potential themes. As we moved through the process, we continuously reviewed and refined these themes to ensure they accurately represented the data. This iterative process helped uncover both explicit and implicit patterns related to how students build social connections and adjust to the tertiary environment.

NVivo software (version 14) was used for data analysis and management, and to document the evolution of the coding process.

## **Results**

To provide some context for our findings, we report that most participants maintained at least some previous connections with friends from high school and former co-workers.

**Table 2.** Summary of themes, codes, and example quotes.

Theme	Code	Example Quote
Barriers in forming social connections	Being part of the ingroup	"They kind of already have a group of people they knew."
	Opportunities for spontaneous social interaction	"At least I knew I wasn't the only one struggling—everyone had the same issue with the lack of communication in lectures . . . and I felt helpless to change that."
	Making meaningful social relationships	"There were lots of us, and we could talk to anyone, but it never felt like we were really close."
	Language and cultural barriers	"I believe that if I speak fluent English, it can help me to prepare expand and create more social connections. . . . So, English can only prepare me well for that."
	Lack of opportunities to interact with people who share similar interests	"The people I met were quite young, mostly 18 to 19-year-old undergraduates, and we hardly had any common topics to talk about."
Strategies used to connect with other students	Using naturally occurring opportunities	"Sometimes we have meals together at university, or we discuss assignments and papers."
Sustaining social bonds	Sustaining social relationships	"You're all doing different majors and stuff. And you've all got different timetables."
Personality traits impact the cultivation of social networks	Individual characteristics	"It's mainly because of my personality—I'm not the most outgoing person. I see myself as more of a traditional IT guy who prefers spending time alone, working on computers."
	Lack of personal motivation	"There were probably times that I was, could have made a bit more of an effort."
University support to aid social integration	Overlooked available strategy	"I don't know about any specific support or events that university has."

Some of these friends attended the same university as the participants but were not necessarily enrolled in the same majors or had different schedules. Over half of the participants indicated that they perceived themselves as having a similar number of friends to others, while some estimated they had fewer friends. Additionally, participants reported varied on-campus attendance patterns, which were influenced by factors such as course difficulty, availability of recorded lectures and online resources, and proximity to campus, highlighting the multifaceted reasons behind whether students decided to attend on-campus where opportunities for social interactions might be more widely available. The initial coding process yielded 18 codes which were distilled into five main themes representing ten codes. A summary of these results can be found in [Table 2](#).

### **Theme 1: barriers in forming social connections**

One of the challenges faced by students in forming social connections was that some of the other students already had a network of friends and it could be difficult to integrate into these groups, making the student feel like an outsider:

Sometimes [you] start up a conversation and then you get to know the person but most of the time they have already their close friend groups, which obviously, you know, they don't really need any more friends. Cindy, 22)

Several participants highlighted that the initial few months at university were conducted entirely online due to COVID-19 lockdowns. This limited their opportunities for spontaneous social interaction and left them feeling disconnected from their peers. Even though

the university provided online courses where students could communicate, very few found these provided opportunities for socializing.

During the first semester last year, we didn't have many in-person classes, so it was quite hard. I didn't really make any friends because everything was online. (June, 19)

At least I knew I wasn't the only one struggling—everyone had the same issue with the lack of communication in lectures . . . Yeah, we would go into those breakout rooms, and it was quite hard because we were all still new to everything and felt like strangers. It seemed like no one was really engaging, and we were just waiting for the breakout rooms to end. (Sarah, 20)

The shift to in-person classes in students' second semester allowed for more natural interactions, helping them to build more meaningful relationships and to feel more connected.

. . .as soon as we finished online, we moved on in person. And it was like, completely different. (Ruby, 19)

When there were no restrictions on attending campus due to COVID-19, participants described meeting new people through various means such as mutual friends, classmates, shared interests in clubs, and university residence halls. Nevertheless, they generally described these new connections as simply acquaintances rather than close friends; this was a common experience among participants, where interactions in academic settings did not necessarily translate into deeper, more meaningful friendships. Instead, these interactions often remained superficial, lacking the emotional depth or sustained engagement needed to form genuine bonds:

. . . but I think they were more just like, study friends. (Amy, 19)

And yeah, I feel like we're all kind of in the same boat. None of us were really making like meaningful friends. Just like random people and lectures and tutorials and stuff. So yeah. (Emma, 19)

You meet them in class, and they sit with you. And that's about it. Like nothing grown out of the classroom as friendship. (Jack, 21)

Participants reported that differences in language and culture presented social challenges. Some international students mentioned feeling uncomfortable due to the different linguistic and cultural environments, similarly, domestic students from specific cultural backgrounds also faced difficulties:

Sometimes you got to pretend to fit in to even talk to people. That makes you feel very uncomfortable. (Jack, 21)

I usually feel more comfortable speaking to Pacific Islanders. On our campus there were hardly any Pacific Islanders. (Sophia, 24)

Moreover, a domestic student who hails from an international background shared their confusion in social settings. Although they immigrated at a young age, they were raised in a different culture. This background has led to a sense of not being fully integrated into either their culture of origin or New Zealand's culture. This cultural gap poses additional complexity in forming social connections with others:

It is definitely a challenge, obviously. Because when you don't know how people have grown up, it just creates a barrier. Because when you want to really connect with someone, you kind of have similarities with them. (Amanda, 19)

Finding opportunities to connect with individuals who had similar interests could also be difficult. Older students noted that due to the age gap, they had little in common with younger classmates and faced different academic and personal challenges, therefore preferring to socialize with people who had similar life experiences:

In the language school, the people I met were quite young, mostly 18 to 19-year-old undergraduates, and we hardly had any common topics to talk about. (Bob, 28)

### ***Theme 2: strategies used to connect with other students***

In general, participants did not employ any specific strategy to expand or cultivate their social connections; instead, they preferred to embrace naturally occurring opportunities to form social bonds. Being open to others was a common strategy for connecting with fellow students. One shared:

Just being a little more open, or trying to keep in touch with people more, just putting in more effort. (Lily, 21)

Some participants emphasized the importance of initiating conversations for building relationships:

Just talking to people is key, which is hard because sometimes you sit next to a stranger in a lecture hall. (June, 19)

Participants reported using social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to maintain and develop social connections. Additionally, some participants noted that actively participating in various activities was another method they utilized to expand their social connections:

Through [student accommodation] halls was the main way I met friends. So, the majority was from halls, and a handful through mutuals from hall friends and their friends. (Zoe, 19)

You get in groups of four and do challenges [group activities]. Introducing yourself and being put in a group with other people is how I made friends there. (Ruby, 19)

Joining groups focused around similar interests or beliefs was also used to establish social connections and was seen as a way of potentially forming deeper relationships:

Joining the Christian group was impactful. There weren't many people, but anyone I met was great. (Sophia, 24)

### ***Theme 3: sustaining social bonds***

Differing timetables and majors restricted participants' availability to stay in touch with their previous social network, posing obstacles to maintaining existing relationships. In relation to new friendships at university, participants pointed out that the problem lies not in initiating social connections but in sustaining them:

Getting someone's contact details is not the hard part. The difficulty is in maintaining the relationship, wondering if they will message back or respond to your messages, I guess. I don't struggle to be like, hey, do you want my Instagram or this is my number, message me if you need any help. It is more like what happens after that. It's about whether they actually message you or respond when you message them. That was harder. (Sarah, 20)

Forming deeper connections was particularly difficult when friendships were limited to class settings. Despite students taking the same classes, this didn't necessarily lead to close-knit relationships:

It is tough because you meet people in class, but then you might never see them again. It's like they vanish after that class. (Amanda, 19)

#### ***Theme 4: personality traits impact the cultivation of social networks***

Due to personality characteristics, some participants believed that establishing social connections at university was not vital for them, preferring to enjoy time alone. Others mentioned their introverted nature or social anxiety as reasons for not actively making friends:

For me, it was fine because I don't usually go out much. (Maggie, 26)

Making a connection online is not really my thing. (Jack, 21)

So when I was in the [university accommodation] hall, and there's like lots of new people there that was probably the most difficult thing because just like getting to know new people is a bit difficult. (Madison, 19)

Most participants, however, expressed dissatisfaction with aspects of their social networks and a desire for more interaction with their peers. Some participants acknowledged that they could have put more effort into making social connections:

I feel like I could have tried harder. . . . I could have tried harder to socialize. (Amy, 19)

Um, I think I definitely could have made more friends or like, talk to more people. Because I definitely did just stick with my [student accommodation] floor. (Lucy, 19)

Despite the lack of social engagement, most participants denied feeling lonely or experiencing stress directly linked to the quality or quantity of their social interactions. Instead, they attributed any feelings of stress to academic and financial challenges. They noted that these pressures often left them with neither the time nor the inclination to actively establish social relationships:

Stress definitely a lot of stress because of schoolwork, but then also other factors outside of school, quite a lot of stuff going on during that time, so I didn't really care much about my social relationships. (Sophia, 24)

Um, I'd say I definitely, I guess felt stress when exams are coming up and studying. In terms of being lonely, I'd say not too much. Maybe when I first moved, like the first few days when you don't know people . . . (Zoe, 19)

### **Theme 5: university support to aid social integration**

Participants were asked about their awareness of programs offered by the university to aid their integration into university life. Most participants acknowledged having heard of this type of support but had never participated in such programs or events or did not know how to do so. Furthermore, some participants expressed being completely unaware of the existence of these programs designed to assist them with establishing social connections:

I actually don't. I know there are clubs and stuff but I'm not really sure I don't really know much about [them]. (Lily, 21)

Not that I know of. But I think I guess it's the clubs. (Zoe, 19)

Others acknowledged being aware of the availability of university clubs but expressed a lack of interest in attending or engaging with them:

I guess I'm not looking for more connections/friends. (Chloe, 20)

I didn't think I needed it. (Grace, 22)

## **Discussion**

The aim of this study was to explore how first year university students formed and maintained social connections within the context of the current tertiary environment. Our findings reveal an interplay between social dynamics, the broader educational context, and individual characteristics which significantly impact students' ability to form and sustain their social ties.

The transition to university life often disrupts established contacts, necessitating the formation of new connections under circumstances that may not always be conducive to developing meaningful relationships (Oswald & Clark, 2003). Participants in this study frequently expressed dissatisfaction with their social networks, citing limited opportunities to engage with peers as a primary challenge. For example, even when they were present on campus, participants reported that interactions in lectures and tutorials were often surface-level and did not extend beyond the classroom. These findings are consistent with research by Maunder (2018) which highlights that formal university settings can restrict opportunities for spontaneous social engagement.

While participants seldom reported using intentional strategies to expand their social networks, they emphasized the importance of naturally occurring opportunities to connect. For example, some described forming relationships through shared activities in student accommodation or group assignments. However, these connections often remained superficial, lacking the depth required to establish meaningful relationships. Although this finding aligns with research suggesting that shared interests and activities can facilitate social bonding (Slaten et al., 2016), the current study highlights that such interactions may not always lead to sustained or close relationships. This observation is consistent with studies that have identified the limitations of context-dependent relationships in fostering deeper social ties (Buote et al., 2007; Wilcox et al., 2005). In the current study, students expressed a preference for connecting with peers who share similar life experiences and preferences. This desire for common ground has been shown in other

research, where shared characteristics, such as similarities in terms of attitudes, beliefs, values, and backgrounds, facilitate the formation of cohesive social networks (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018).

The ongoing use of hybrid learning globally highlights the need to better understand how digital interactions shape students' social connections. Compared to face-to-face interactions, digital spaces often lack spontaneity and non-verbal cues, which can limit emotional connection and diminish a sense of social presence (Osler & Zahavi, 2023). In the current study, although some students used social media to stay in touch, few described these tools as supporting deep or lasting relationships. Prior research has identified both advantages and disadvantages associated with hybrid teaching models. Reported benefits include increased flexibility, reduced travel time, and improved accessibility (Fabian et al., 2024; Nyman et al., 2024). However, hybrid learning has also been linked to reduced peer interaction, a weakened sense of classroom community, and negative effects on emotional well-being (Regan et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2024). The results of the present study align with these concerns, as participants described experiences of social disconnection and a lack of spontaneous interaction commonly associated with hybrid learning environments.

Individual characteristics, such as introversion and a preference for solitude, played a part in shaping participants' motivation to form and sustain social connections. Some students described themselves as hesitant to initiate interactions due to their personality traits or a focus on academic or financial priorities, which aligns with prior studies emphasizing the role of individual differences in social integration (Jorgenson et al., 2018; Perl & Trickett, 1988). Yet prior studies emphasize the importance of social integration for student well-being (Jusri & Lechner, 2024; McLean et al., 2023). The apparent lack of interest in forming social bonds among students suggests a possible shift in priorities, where personal and academic demands outweigh the perceived value of social connections.

For international students and domestic students from minority cultural backgrounds, cultural and linguistic barriers further complicated the process of building relationships. Participants spoke of feeling disconnected or out of place, even in diverse educational settings, due to unfamiliar social norms or a sense of cultural mismatch. This resonates with findings by Zhang and Brunton (2007) who identified similar challenges faced by culturally diverse student populations.

Even when social relationships are initiated, maintaining them poses a significant challenge. Participants in this study reported that differing schedules and course structures often disrupted the continuity needed to sustain relationships. For example, classmates who met during one semester might not be encountered again in subsequent courses, leading to the loss of potential friendships. Prior studies also reveal that, while forming relationships may be feasible, sustaining them requires ongoing effort and mutual availability, which can be challenging in a university setting (Buote et al., 2007). Although some current systematic reviews have explored the development of social relationships among college students, e.g. Maymon and Hall (2021) and Morris (2020), these studies have primarily focused on the various forms of peer support available on campus, with limited attention to the specific challenges of sustaining such relationships. This gap in the literature underscores the need for further investigation into the dynamics of maintaining social connections in a university setting.

Our participants reported a lack of engagement with university-led social programs, often citing either a lack of awareness of them or a perception that such initiatives were irrelevant to their needs. While universities generally offer a variety of programs to support social integration, the findings suggest these efforts may not fully reach or resonate with their intended audience. This highlights the importance of tailoring initiatives to the diverse needs of the student population, ensuring that they are inclusive, accessible, and well-communicated. For example, smaller, interest-based gatherings or culturally specific events may be more effective in fostering a sense of belonging among students from varied backgrounds.

Although the study included two postgraduate students, their responses reflected challenges and experiences that were closely aligned with those of undergraduate participants. Their accounts of adjustment to the university setting, challenges in connecting with peers, and navigating hybrid learning were consistent with the broader themes identified across the sample and other studies (Dotson et al., 2022; Farris et al., 2021; Hall & Zygmunt, 2021; Halliburton et al., 2021). This suggests that the findings have relevance beyond first year undergraduate students and that future research should include those at every stage of their academic journey.

COVID-19 was not generally a prominent focus of participant narratives but it is worth noting that the pandemic has added complexities to social interactions in university settings. Although students have largely returned to campus, hybrid learning models and online lectures continue to reduce opportunities for informal, face-to-face interactions that are essential for relationship building (Fruehwirth et al., 2021). Participants did not identify COVID-related restrictions as a primary barrier, suggesting that its influence may be diminishing as students adapt to the evolving educational landscape. However, the persistence of hybrid learning underscores the need for universities to develop strategies that facilitate both online and in-person social interactions.

In summary, this study highlights the multifaceted challenges students face in forming and sustaining social connections at university. These challenges are shaped by structural factors, such as limited opportunities for informal interactions, individual characteristics, and cultural or linguistic barriers. Although university programs exist to support social integration, their effectiveness is often limited by low participation and insufficient alignment with student needs. Addressing these issues requires universities to reassess and adapt their approaches to fostering social connections, particularly in an era where hybrid learning models are likely to persist.

## **Strengths and limitations**

This study included a diverse sample of both domestic and international students from a variety of academic disciplines, thereby enhancing the depth and relevance of the insights gathered. Nevertheless, although we achieved data saturation, the relatively small sample size of 20 participants means that the data might not have fully captured the diversity of experiences among university students. Reliance on flyers and social media posts may have limited the reach of the study advertising, impacting on participation by some student groups. For example, the age range of participants, from 18 to 28, excludes the perspectives of mature students. Mature students, often defined as those aged 30 and above, are likely to encounter distinct challenges in socializing due to potentially differing life stages,

responsibilities, and social environments. They may have family obligations or professional commitments that influence their social interactions and integration into university life, aspects not captured in this study. In addition, the sample had a gender imbalance, with 80% of participants identifying as female, which may have limited the representation of male students' perspectives.

While online interviews enabled participation from some students who might not have been able to engage otherwise, they can also limit the development of rapport and reduce the depth of responses compared to face-to-face interviews. Moreover, due to the limited sample, we were unable to deeply explore the nuances within subgroups, such as the unique social connection experiences of students from specific cultural backgrounds or academic majors. This lack of in-depth exploration might have left some important aspects of the research uncovered, highlighting the need for larger-scale studies in the future.

The lack of participation by Māori students represents a significant limitation, given New Zealand's cultural context. Māori students' experiences and approaches to social connection could provide critical insights into cultural influences on socialization in New Zealand university settings, an area our study could not explore due to the sample composition. Recent research suggests that formal and informal designated spaces for Māori students within the university setting are important to support Māori identity; these spaces also provide an opportunity for students to connect with each other (Ormond & Reynolds, 2025).

Although this study reported on key demographic variables, the analysis did not explicitly explore their influence on student experiences. For instance, being an older, female international student may compound the challenges of social integration due to cultural distance, language proficiency, and generational disconnect. Future studies should adopt an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1989) to examine how overlapping social categories such as gender, age, ethnicity, and resident status jointly shape students' access to social networks and feelings of belonging.

## Conclusion

This study has explored the intricate process by which first-year university students form social connections in today's hybrid learning environments. Understanding and addressing the social aspects of university life is essential for student well-being, retention, and the cultivation of a supportive, inclusive academic environment. The findings highlight the need for universities to offer more tailored opportunities for meaningful social interaction, such as interest-based groups, peer mentoring, and culturally responsive events. Future research should prioritize diverse sampling, including mature, Māori, and male students, to ensure a broader range of voices is heard. Longitudinal and mixed-method studies are recommended to evaluate the impact of targeted interventions on student adjustment and belonging over time.

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