

DISPLAY CASE



The Impact of Harvard Yard's Visual Culture on First Year Students' Sense of Belonging and Campus Identity
Summary of Findings and Recommendations

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Introduction

It has been established that sense of belonging is especially important for newcomers entering established spaces and those in late adolescence (Strayhorn 2018), which means that Universities are not just institutions of learning but also institutions where populations particularly positioned to frame and reframe their identities reside (Kaufman 2014). The visual culture of a campus is important in this process, especially for the first years who are navigating their new homes for the first time. At Harvard University, Harvard Yard—an area with trees, grass, dorms, and classrooms enclosed within historic gates—serves as the central location for first year residence and provides a unique opportunity for this subject of investigation, where we can examine how the visual culture of Harvard Yard impacts first year students in forming their sense of belonging at the college.

This subject is especially relevant at this particular point in time. In the Fall of 2020, Claudine Gay, Harvard's Edgerley Family Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and University President-elect, convened a Task Force on Visual Culture and Signage. In her announcement, she emphasized that the visual elements of campus should reflect the priorities of the institution, as well as foster each person's capacity to feel like they belong at Harvard's institution. In this study, I explore the interplay between Harvard Yard's visual elements, such as the John Harvard statue, and the first year student's sense of belonging, both in terms of belonging to the institution (campus identity) and belonging among their classmates (campus affinity). Through in-depth interviews with a diverse group of Harvard's freshmen, this study aims to shed light on the ways in which sense of belonging is shaped by the visual culture around them.

In addition to basic ways of supporting belonging formation such as the presence of infrastructure that allows for socialization (lawn chairs) and the visibility of fellow students (banners), the visual culture of the university also supports in more subtle ways. My findings reveal that first years cultivate their campus identity in alignment with the institution, but their campus affinity in opposition to it. The institution in this process is represented by the values projected through, not only the permanent built visuals, but also the tourists who come and take pictures of those visual elements and the students. Ultimately, this study provides valuable insights into the role of visual culture in shaping students' sense of belonging at Harvard, with potential implications for other institutions looking to create a more cohesive campus environment.

Background

For first year students, the degree to which they feel like they belong to their university, understood on an individual as well as a collective level, can impact their academic motivation and achievement (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen 2010), which means that universities that are interested in helping students be successful on their campuses should also be interested in how these students formulate that sense of belonging. This literature review examines how students form their sense of belonging within the university, both as individuals within the institution (campus identity) and among their fellow students (campus affinity), and the ways in which that process can be influenced by the physical elements of their environment.

Campus Belonging

Sense of belonging can be a very broad construct on the college campus, so for the sake of my study I will define it based on the combination of several previous works. Cheng (2004) defines sense of belonging as “feelings of being cared about, treated in a caring way, valued as an individual, and accepted as a part of the community.” Strayhorn’s (2018) definition is similar, but much more fleshed out, defining the term in this context as “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers).” These definitions express that students need to feel somewhat aligned with the institution and its values to feel as though they belong. This definition is limiting, however, in that it reduces belonging to something that is received by the institution and those associated with it as opposed to something that can be cultivated by oneself in opposition to the institution.

An example of the latter form comes from work that examines population groups of students that have been shown to struggle more with their sense of belonging, namely those who come from lower-class backgrounds or racial/ethnic minorities (Jonson et al. 2017). For example, Bettencourt (2019) found that, when examining class differences, students from working-class backgrounds attending public universities catering to the middle or upper classes actively created their belonging, as opposed to the more passive definitions proposed by Strayhorn (2010) and Cheng (2004). These students were more interested in challenging the cultures that pushed them aside than being victimized by them, and so belonging to them is viewed as something cultivated by the student in spite of the institution.

The student defines some part of the university's identity (in this case, wealthy or upper class) and then sees their place on the campus as a subversion of the university's established identity.

These combined understandings capture well how students' social interactions around campus will help them form a sense of belonging, but in order to more concretely apply it in reference to the impacts of visual culture, a combination of the definitions and more specification are necessary. First, for the purposes of this study I redefine a student's sense of belonging on campus as a process in which they are able to define their university's identity, which is constructed through a combination of outside opinions as well as the most salient visual elements of the institution, and recognize themselves occupying a place in reference to that. This includes both the perspectives of Strayhorn (2018) and Cheng (2004) as well as Bettencourt (2019), because it recognizes that a sense of belonging cultivated in subversion of the institution's identity is still a process which uses the institution as a reference. There are some aspects of belonging formed by the institution and absorbed by the students, and there are some formed by the students in opposition to the narratives of the institution.

Second, it is important to note that these definitions suggest that there are two distinct aspects that combine to create what we would generally label as a "sense of belonging". As Kauffman (2014) explains when describing student identity formation within the university setting, there exists a "personal identity" and a "social identity" that students strive to find congruence between. This also applies to the process of belonging, where one's general sense of belonging on campus is composed of both the degree of belonging that one feels with other members of the institution, which I will refer to as "campus affinity", and there is also the degree of belonging that one feels with the institution itself, which I will refer to as "campus identity."

The Narrative of Campus Spaces

Mulroony & Kelly (2020) support the understanding of space as a non-neutral actor in the formation of students' sense of belonging. In focus groups with students living on campus, they worked to identify elements of the university's physical infrastructure related to their belonging (or lack thereof). They conclude that the university's physical space does contribute to students' sense of belonging, but they reason that it is mainly through the "provision of informal learning and social spaces." Samura (2016) came to similar conclusions when examining how the residence halls on a college campus contributed to senses of belonging.

Her conclusion was that the main responsibility of the architecture and infrastructure concerned with student belonging was to facilitate better and more frequent student interactions. She also asserts that spaces for privacy and personalization are key for students in this process. While both of these studies are valuable in understanding more about how students interact within their physical campus, these rationales do not explain how the campus infrastructure itself plays a role in these students' sense of belonging. Rather than looking to the space to examine what messages they contained, their impact is summarized by simply providing students a place in which to meet one another, maintaining that those relationships are the core of students forming a sense of belonging.

Using the sense of belonging framework that I posed in the previous section, what's missing in the literature is an understanding of how these physical spaces play a role in shaping students' sense of belonging through their subtle messaging about the institution, its values, and type of people who are a part of the campus. Kuntz, Petrovic, & Ginocchio (2012) begin to chip away at this question, showing that the physical campus buildings can impact students in this way by examining the impact of academic building renovations on the ways faculty and students interact. Their work suggests that architecture styles can serve as a "silent teacher" of campus values and personal identity by shaping "our sense of who we are and what we do." This work focuses on classrooms and suggests that the involvement of the users when designing the space is critical to ensuring that it functions effectively. However, because this study addressed a situation in which students and faculty had experienced two versions of their space and were making comparisons about which they liked better or found more effective, it raises questions about what messages students receive in an environment they have no aesthetic control over, and which has been largely the same for many years.

Research to-date reflecting on students' sense of belonging on college campuses has mostly focused on how they derive it from interactions with one another and other members of their institutions (Strayhorn 2018) (Samura 2016) (Mulroony & Kelly 2020). Where physical space has been analyzed as a force of messaging that might be relevant to this process, it has been examined in light of how it influences the interactions between members of the university (Kuntz, Petrovic, & Ginocchio 2012), with little attention paid to the intermediary step—the internalized feelings and values—between the message sent by the space and the change in behavior it causes. My research seeks to build on the findings of these authors by studying that intermediary step—the construction of a sense of belonging through campus affinity and campus identity—using the freshman experience at Harvard within the Yard as a case study.

This setting, both physically and socially, is important for a few different reasons. First, because of the way Harvard housing is arranged, the only dorms in the Yard are those that house first year students. This means that the area enclosed by the gates is both part of the new “home” these first year students enter, but simultaneously unlike bedrooms or entryways which Samura (2016) would assert play a large part in this process because it’s not within student control for personalization. Second, because of the large number and diversity of people who apply to Harvard and the very low acceptance rate (Amponsah & Haidar 2023), many students come in knowing only a few people (if they know any at all) and having moved away from sometimes very distant homes, meaning that once they step foot in the Yard these belonging formation processes are taking place in similar ways for many students. Third, within the framework of belonging formation that I assembled previously, part of a student’s understanding of their university’s identity is shaped by how they are seen, which can come in the form of opinions from those outside the university, such as tourists. At Harvard, this aspect of belonging formation can be more easily studied, because more students are conscious of how their campus is perceived due to the large-scale recognition of the name and certain campus elements. Overall, this study will provide insights into how specific visual elements of Harvard Yard impact the sense of belonging for freshman students, and what “silent narratives” that physical space can exude.

I conducted 9 semi-structured interviews with undergraduate first years at Harvard College over Zoom. These freshmen were recruited via a combination of word of mouth and sign-ups distributed through email and various group chats to Harvard first years. Of the nine students interviewed there were seven women and two men. Two of the students described their homes as being within urban environments, while the other seven classified their neighborhoods as suburban. These students were also very racially diverse, identifying as White (1), Black (2), Black and Asian (2), Asian (2), or another under-represented minority identity (2). Five of the students self-reported that they were on over 50% financial aid, indicating socioeconomic diversity as well as racial diversity.

Notes On Methodology

With any kind of interview there is some degree of social desirability bias, but based on the culture of Harvard’s campus I believe that the individual interview method as opposed to a focus group interview yields more honest results. In my experience as a Harvard student, the culture of Harvard’s campus is one where students understand the importance of social issues and strive to align themselves with them, even when they may not be as reflective of their personal lived experience.

In a group interview a Harvard student is more likely to accept or even adopt the responses of the students they're being interviewed with, especially with a topic so subconscious or sensitive as the impact of visual culture on one's identity and sense of belonging. Thus, an individual interview is the best way to get a Harvard student's most unbiased experience. The individual interview method is also effective in this case because it highlights the significance of shared experiences or similar thoughts on visual elements, since they are being shared by students repeatedly in independent settings without being prompted by their peers.

During the interview these students were asked general questions about their experience in the Yard such as "when you think about your identity as a Harvard student, what visual aspects of the Yard most contribute to that identity?" as well as more direct questions relating to specific visual features. Using a slideshow, these students were shown 8 visual features of Harvard's Yard one at a time (the John Harvard Statue, the banners, the Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library, Johnston Gate, University Hall, Memorial Church, the Yard chairs, and the Yard's nature) and asked to describe how the element impacted their sense of belonging and identity as a Harvard student. Using a word bank, the students were asked to select up to three words about how the element they had been shown made them feel and invited to elaborate on their selections.

We can generalize from this case to other first years who have and will in the future occupy the Yard. Since that applies to every class of students at Harvard (except for the class of 2024), these results can be generalized to the entirety of Harvard's undergraduate population, particularly minority students. Each university's prominent visual elements are unique, which makes it difficult to generalize the particular findings across higher education more broadly, but similar themes can likely be seen at institutions with similar characteristics to Harvard: a popularly discussed campus, a large tourist presence, being within a city, etc.

Main Findings



01. Being Seen and Campus Tourism

define students and the sense of importance by public perception



02. The Statue and the Secret Campus

provides a site for play and uniting secrets without the interference of tourists



03. Nature and Emotions

defines the Yard and offers a reminder of students' identity outside of the university



04. Banners and Student Visibility

allow students to connect with one another, especially minority students



05. Gates and In/Exclusion

create a sense of place for Harvard within Cambridge and feelings of safety



06. Lawn Chairs and Community

facilitate community building opportunities as well as moments of solitude

For more information and student quotes, see the full report.

Conclusions

main takeaways from student discourse

Highlight 1

students form their campus identity in-line with the institution and its values, but affinity among themselves is cultivated in opposition to that institution.

Highlight 2

the identity-based observations students may make when forming a sense of belonging are less about seeing someone who is like them in some specific way demographically, and more about seeing fellow students they identify with either in some broad category or because they share a social network.

Highlight 3

while the physical campus environment contributes to belonging in more ways than just as convening places, that function still plays a substantial role in assisting students during this process of formation

These findings are exciting in furthering the degree to which we can understand how physical spaces influence students in forming their sense of belonging. Better understanding how these processes function can help universities build campuses that better serve first-year students in this pursuit, possibly reducing early dropouts, depression, and other negative side effects impacting students who feel isolated and out of place in the university setting.

Recommendations

based on conclusions and commentary from students

01. Diversify Nature

The most common request among students when asked how they would improve the visual culture of Harvard Yard is more diverse flora. Some ways this could be done include:

- Adding flowers around the bases of trees
- Giving students opportunities to take part in gardening efforts
- Planting more greenery that will survive the cold weather (i.e. evergreen trees and bushes)

02. Improve the Use of Banners

Students commented that they often don't notice the banners due both to their height and the lack of desirable content. Banners could be better utilized via:

- An increase in student features on the banners – these could be for cultural events or performances (such as Cultural Rhythms) or special recognitions (such as FGLI Visibility Week).

03. Increase Informal Infrastructure

Students love the lawn chairs because of how they distinguish themselves from the rest of Harvard's architecture and provide students with ways to socialize with each other. This effect could be expanded with:

- A fountain with large edges where students could work or sit
- A large sculpture that students are able to sit/stand on in various ways
- More colorful/modern places for students to socialize outside, especially when it gets cold

