

Examining Factors that Impact UBC Students' Social Connections on Campus

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Examining Factors that Impact UBC Students' Social Connections on Campus

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Executive Summary

The present study desired to answer: How do environmental factors, participation in activities, and online interactions lead to feelings of shyness and social connectedness, and relate to overall well-being in UBC students? In this study, data was collected from 74 students via a questionnaire that was distributed through three different conditions (Nest, The Friendship Bench, and Online). Moderate negative correlations were found between social connectedness and shyness, and between shyness and psychological well-being. Moderate positive correlations were found between shyness and the location that the questionnaire was filled out. Mean shyness scores were also found to be higher in the Online condition than for the other two conditions. Additional findings in this study found that how often people refrain from making new friends was correlated with shyness, social connectedness, psychological well-being and where the questionnaire was completed. All correlations were statistically significant. 47% of students reported that clubs are the most helpful for them when making new friends. 86% said that school obligations are the largest obstacle that they face when trying to meet with friends, but 42% reported that feeling shy and/or anxious in social situations is also a large obstacle that they face.

Methods

Researchers ran a correlational study and collected data by distributing a questionnaire to students that were present in the Nest and at The Friendship Bench, and reached out to students Online. The questionnaire was created by the researchers of this study. The researchers created two scales- The Online Interactions Scale and The Social Connectedness Scale. These scales were designed to gain insight on how students use social media as a means of social interaction, and to get a stronger sense of how connected students feel to UBC. The questionnaire also included questions from two scales used in Psychology. These scales were the McCroskey Shyness Scale and Ryff Scale of Psychological Well-Being. The researchers chose to distribute the questionnaires in three different settings to see if levels of shyness, feelings of social connectedness, and psychological well-being differed depending on the condition. The Nest was the “busy” condition, The Friendship Bench was the “quiet” condition, and Online was the “personal” condition. These three conditions have been ranked on a scale of least private to most private, with the Nest being the least private and Online having the greatest privacy. The Friendship Bench was chosen to be our quiet, semi-private location, in hopes to generate greater awareness of the purpose and significance of the bench, which is to remind students to talk about mental health with others to reduce the stigma around mental illness, and to encourage support networks (Welcome to The Friendship Bench, 2016). Each condition employed the same incentivization tactic of informing participants that upon completion of the questionnaire they would have the opportunity to be entered into a draw to win one of two, twenty-five-dollar Food Services Gift Cards.

Previous research has looked at how social anxiety influences how teens communicate with others and the relationship between social anxiety and the use of socially interactive technologies (Pierce, 2009). However, there have not been studies looking specifically at how shyness, a less severe personality characteristic, can influence online interaction and social connections. Research done on social anxiety and teen interactive technology use has found positive relationships between social anxiety and online communication, and between low levels of social anxiety and forming friendships (Pierce, 2009). Unlike this present study, Pierce (2009) did not look at shyness and feelings of social connectedness and its relationship to students’ interactions on campus. Other previous research has looked at how undergraduates use various forms of technology to improve social connections (Palmer, Boniek, Turner, & Lovell, 2014), but has not focused specifically on how social connectedness is tied to psychological well-being. In this study, the researchers hypothesized that students that feel less socially connected on campus are more likely to score higher on shyness measures and lower on psychological well-being measures. They also hypothesized that Mean shyness will be higher for the Online condition than for the Nest and The Friendship Bench conditions.

Total Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 74 UBC Vancouver students from various faculties and year levels. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 43 with the average age being 21.8 years. The sample consisted of 34 (46%) males and 39 (53%) females, and one person did not specify their gender.

Measures

The same questionnaire was used for all conditions. The questionnaire consisted of twenty-four questions and was designed to take five minutes to complete. The beginning section of the questionnaire consisted of demographic questions (age, gender, year level, undergraduate or graduate, area of study, and number of years living in Vancouver). The body of the

questionnaire consisted of scales and questions created by the researchers, and questions from other psychological scales. The first set of questions were made by the researchers and the scale was titled “Social Connectedness”. This scale included questions asking students about their feelings towards UBC and how connected they feel to the institution itself, and to the people within the institution. The next set of questions asked students how many friends and acquaintances they have at UBC and outside of UBC. Students then checked off all the obstacles that they face when trying to get together with friends and stated how often they refrain from making new friends. The next set of questions came from the Ryff Scale of Psychological Well-Being and gathered information on how students feel about their relationships with others. The questions following were single and multiple answer questions that asked how much time students have for social activities per week and where they prefer to have social interactions on campus. There were then questions that came from the McCroskey Shyness scale that asked students how talkative they are in class and whether other students consider them to be shy. The last scale of the questionnaire was the Online Interactions scale that was designed by the researchers and asked students about their social media use. Two single answer questions came at the end of the questionnaire and these were designed to gain insight on what students find most helpful when making social connections and what methods they would advise other students to use. The items in this questionnaire were assessed by five and six-point likert scales, single and multiple answer questions, and single line questions.

Condition 1: Data Collection at the Nest

Participants

Forty-five students consisting of 25 (56%) females and 19 (42%) males with a mean age of 22.11 years from the University of British Columbia. Note that one of the participants did not specify their gender, which is why they were excluded from the female and male participant calculations.

Procedure

The researchers conducted data collection on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays during the month of March, and alternated between the Nest and the Friendship Bench during these days. Data collection in the Nest occurred on the first floor, just outside of Qoola. Participants were first given a consent form to read over, prior to filling out the questionnaire. During data collection one researcher held a poster that read, “Fill out a short questionnaire for a chance to win a \$25 Food Services Gift Card!” The poster was designed to attract students to participate. Those that were willing to participate read over the consent form and proceeded to complete the questionnaire. Upon completion, a slip of paper was handed to the participant for them to write their name and phone number on, which would then be folded up and put into a box for the gift card draw that was conducted at the end of March, after data collection was complete.

Condition 2: Data Collection at The Friendship Bench

Participants

Nine students consisting of 4 (44%) females and 5 (56%) males with a mean age of 23.77 years from the University of British Columbia.

Procedure

Data collection occurred beside The Friendship Bench when the weather permitted (non-rainy days to control for possible weather confounds), on the three days that were previously mentioned, during the month of March. Methods of recruiting (poster) and incentivizing participants (entered in gift card draw) to complete the questionnaire was the same as in the preceding condition.

Condition 3: Data Collection Online

Participants

Twenty students consisting of 10 (50%) females and 10 (50%) males with a mean age of 20.35 years from the University of British Columbia.

Procedure

Researchers first created an online version of the paper-questionnaire that was used in the previous two conditions, on the survey software website titled “Qualtrics”. Researchers posted the Questionnaire in two Facebook groups- The “UBC Class of 2018” group and the “UBC Textbooks Sale” group. The questionnaire was also posted on the “UBC Mental Health Network” page by a Kaleidoscope employee that the researchers’ client was affiliated with. When posting the questionnaires in the two Facebook groups and on the UBC Mental Health Network page, a copy of the consent form that the researchers created was attached along with a written description about the purpose for conducting this study. Students that completed the questionnaire were also provided with the option of leaving their phone number at the bottom of the page to be entered into the draw to win one of the two twenty-five-dollar Food Services Gift Cards.

Results

The results found support for hypotheses 1 and 2. Hypothesis 1 stated that students that feel less socially connected on campus are more likely to score higher on shyness measures and lower on psychological well-being measures. Moderate negative correlations were found between social connectedness and shyness, $r_s(74) = -.33, p < .001$, and between shyness and psychological well-being, $r_s(74) = -.39, p < .001$, that are statistically significant. Hypothesis 2 posited that mean shyness would be higher for the Online condition than the Nest and The Friendship Bench conditions. A moderate positive correlation was found between shyness and the location (condition) that the questionnaire was filled out, $r_s(74) = .30, p < .001$, that is statistically significant. The results after Comparing Means revealed that the mean shyness score of participants that completed the questionnaire Online ($M = 16.20, SD = 4.82$) was higher than the mean shyness score at the Nest ($M = 12.98, SD = 4.00$) and The Friendship Bench ($M = 13.78, SD = 5.12$).

Additional Results

There were additional significant results that were found in this study. When students were asked how often they refrain from making new friends, results displayed relationships with shyness, psychological well-being, social connectedness, and the condition in which the questionnaire was filled out. There was a large positive correlation between how often students refrain from making new friends and shyness levels, $r_s(74) = 0.70, p < .001$; A moderate negative correlation between how often students refrain from making new friends and their levels of social connectedness, $r_s(74) = -.37, p < .001$; A moderate negative correlation between how often students refrain from making new friends and psychological well-being, $r_s(74) = -.46, p < .001$; A moderate positive correlation between how often students refrain from making new friends and the location (condition) the participants filled out the questionnaire, $r_s(74) = 0.36, p < .001$, with people who participated in the online questionnaire scoring higher in the likelihood to refrain from making new friends. All the above findings are statistically significant. In regards to the obstacles that students face when meeting with friends, 86% (64/74) of the students believed that school obligations are the primary obstacle that they face when trying to make and meet friends. 42% (31/74) of the students stated that feeling shy and anxious in social situations is the

second largest obstacle that they face. 47% (35/74) said that they found clubs to be the most helpful when making new friends at UBC.

Discussion

The researchers conducted this study to answer the question: How do environmental factors, participation in activities, and online interaction lead to feelings of shyness and social connectedness, and impact overall well-being in UBC students? Although this study had a correlational design and did not allow for causal claims, the hypotheses that the researchers tested are clearly supported by the results of the study. Prior to running statistics on SPSS, researchers first input all paper and online data into one mass Excel file. The McCroskey Shyness Scale and Ryff Scale of Psychological Well-Being were discovered by the researchers when reading previous research papers on related topics. The two papers that led to the researcher's decision to use these scales are listed in the References section of this report. 'Social connectedness' was defined as the degree that students' feel connected to, and secure with, their friends on campus and to UBC. 'School obligations' was defined as exams, homework and/or projects that restrict students' time for social interactions. There were no significant relationships found in regards to the age, gender, and program of study of the participants. The demographic questions at the beginning of the questionnaire were present for the purpose of controlling for confounding variables.

Implications

The first hypothesis can be explained bi-directionally. One possible explanation for why students who feel less socially connected on campus scored higher on shyness measures and lower on psychological well-being measures is that people who feel less socially connected to the UBC community are more likely to feel shy and in turn, have lower psychological well-being. It is also possible that people who are shy find it more difficult to make friends at UBC. For the second hypothesis, the first possible explanation for why mean shyness scores were higher for the Online condition than the other two conditions could be that people who use Online methods of interaction are in fact more shy and less socially connected. Another possible explanation could be that people who completed the Online questionnaire were more likely to respond more truthfully given that they completed the questionnaire in the most private condition. Lastly, this finding could point to a possible limitation in methods. Participants could have had more time to fill out the Online questionnaire in comparison to the other two conditions where the participants may have rushed to complete it. Therefore, results found in the Online questionnaire may be a more accurate representation of students' true levels of shyness and feelings of social connectedness. Palmer et al., (2014) looked at which types of technology undergraduates use and how it influences their social connections, whereas this present study was able to fill in a gap by the looking at how students that interact Online may score higher on shyness measures, and how this relates to social connectedness and psychological well-being.

Limitations

The first limitation of this study is the lack of control over the weather and temperature. This made it difficult to evenly divide data-collection time amongst conditions, which resulted in a significant difference between the number of participants in the Nest (45) and The Friendship Bench (9). Due to the amount of rain and cold temperatures in the month of March, data collection days at The Friendship Bench were limited. Also, for the Online condition, there was no way to control for the days that data was collected since this condition did not include any researcher-participant face-to-face interaction. Another limitation with this study is the possible Hawthorne effect, meaning that the behaviour of participants in the Nest and The Friendship

Bench conditions may have been influenced by the researcher's presence while completing the questionnaire, as opposed to the Online participants who were not in the presence of the researchers. With that said, although the researchers labelled the Online condition as the most private, it is possible that the participants filled out the questionnaire in the presence of others who may have influenced their responses. To improve this present study, in the future, it would be paramount to examine the relationship between environment, shyness and social connectedness in more controlled settings. It would be valuable for an experimental study to be conducted to investigate causal factors on what impacts students' levels of shyness, connectedness and psychological well-being in terms of Online interaction. This present research has opened the door for less serious, but equally important, personality characteristics such as shyness, to be examined in greater depth than it ever has been before. This study and its findings will encourage curiosity in the topic of how shyness can impact the various factors that may influence the social connections that students form.

Recommendations for Client

The results of this study are beneficial due to Naomi's interest in understanding how to improve social connectedness amongst UBC students. First, we recommended that students be provided with the option of receiving a participation grade for online participation rather than solely in-class participation. This will allow shyer students to engage in the course without feeling uncomfortable when doing so. We also suggest that the Wellness Centre provides students with an online forum or chat-room for students to communicate and discuss their mental health situations with a Wellness Centre worker, or with other students, with the option of being anonymous. This will allow students to open-up without being identified if they don't want to be, and without having to discuss their mental health face-to-face. Another way to get the topic of mental health to be a more talked about subject is to place a sign next to The Friendship Bench with a description about what the bench represents, and why it is there. This would give students a better understanding of the significance of the bench, and encourage students to seek help if they are struggling with their mental health. Due to Clubs being the most popular response for a helpful method of making connections on campus, we also suggest having club information available on its own tab on the UBC website where students can learn about clubs at any time they are interested in doing so. Workshops should also be held throughout the year with the purpose of educating students about how to deal with common mental health struggles, and should focus on teaching students how to gain the confidence required to feel comfortable interacting on campus and in class. Lastly, we recommend that UBC host a Mental Health Awareness Day as an informative way to educate students and to spread the message about the importance of mental health. Pamphlets can be handed out on this day with information regarding mental health, and information on The Friendship Bench. These recommendations are beneficial to students at UBC as they will help improve feelings of social connectedness and psychological well-being in shyer students on campus. These students will have the opportunity to flourish at UBC in ways that feel the most comfortable to them, and will give students resources that will allow them to succeed in their academic pursuits, as well as in their social interactions and relationships.

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Appendix B

Participants were provided with the consent form to read over prior to deciding whether or not they would like to participate. Participants were not required to sign anything- if they approved, they proceeded to the questionnaire.

Consent Form

We are conducting a study that is looking at factors that impact UBC students' social connections on campus. We are interested in getting students' feedback on what helps them and hinders them when making friends, and what they think would be helpful resources to support their friendship-making pursuits.

There is a short questionnaire that we have for you to fill out. The answers that you provide to these questions will in no way be connected to any of your personal information. If, at any point you feel uncomfortable with any of the questions that we are asking, or if you no longer want to participate, you may stop at any time.

If you so choose, you may enter a draw for a chance to win a \$25 Food Services Gift Card.

Thank you for your time and consideration!

You may contact us at kiana.maeda@alumni.ubc.ca if you have any questions!

Best,

Kiana Maeda, Davis Duan, Shayan Askarpour

Below is a copy of the questionnaire that the researchers designed and was used in all three conditions in the study. The formatting for the Online questionnaire was much the same, and the contents of the questionnaire were identical.

Examining Factors that Impact UBC Students' Social Connections on Campus

You may have noticed that there is a yellow bench located East of the Irving K. Barber building. This yellow bench is called **The Friendship Bench**. Friendships are critical to our well-being. The Friendship Bench is an initiative that encourages students to connect, have conversations about mental health, and to provide students each other with support networks.

Our goal is to get some feedback from you about your experiences on campus when making social connections, and to take your feedback and put it to action!

Age: _____ **Gender:** _____ **Program of Study:** _____ **Year of study** _____

Undergraduate or Graduate: _____ **Do you live in Vancouver?(Y/N)** _____

If yes, how many years have you lived in Vancouver for? _____

Please circle the value that represents how much you agree or disagree with the following statements.

1= Strongly Disagree 2= Disagree 3= Somewhat Disagree 4= Somewhat Agree 5= Agree 6= Strongly Agree

I feel like I belong at UBC 1 2 3 4 5 6

I find it difficult to make friends at UBC 1 2 3 4 5 6

I feel connected to my peers at UBC 1 2 3 4 5 6

Please circle a numerical value.

How many close friends do you have at UBC? 0-2 3-5 5-10 10 -15 15+

How many acquaintances do you have at UBC? 0-2 3-5 5-10 10 -15 15+

How many close friends you do have outside of UBC? 0-2 3-5 5-10 10 -15 15+

Please check all that apply to you for the following question. What obstacles do you face when trying to get together with friends?

School obligations (too much homework, studying for exams, working on projects etc.) ____

Transportation (bus delays, skytrain maintenance, not having a car to drive etc.) ____

Feeling shy in social situations ____

Feeling anxious in social situations ____

I have never faced any obstacles when trying to get together with friends ____

Other (please specify) _____

Please circle the option that best represents you. How often do you refrain from trying to make new friends because you are afraid to approach others?

1) never

2) rarely

3) sometimes

4) often

5) always

Please circle the answer that shows how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

1= Strongly Disagree 2= Disagree 3= Somewhat Disagree 4= Somewhat Agree 5= Agree 6= Strongly Agree

I find it hard to maintain relationships 1 2 3 4 5 6

I often feel lonely because I have few close friends with whom to share my concerns 1 2 3 4 5 6

I have not experienced many warm and trusting relationships with others 1 2 3 4 5 6

In general, I feel confident and positive about myself my friendships 1 2 3 4 5 6

Please put a check in the space to indicate your answer to the following question.

How many hours per week do you have for social activities? (spending time with friends, going to parties, volunteering, playing sports, etc.)

- 1-5 hours per week ____
 6-10 hours per week ____
 11-15 hours per week ____
 15+ hours per week ____

Please check all that apply to you for the following question.

Where do you prefer having social interactions on campus?

- In class ____
 Inside/outside the nest ____
 At a quiet place on campus ____
 At frat parties ____
 Through clubs and volunteering ____
 In residence ____
 I do not like having social interactions on campus, I prefer interacting online ____
 Other (please specify) _____

For the following set of questions please circle the value that best represents you.

1= Strongly Disagree 2= Disagree 3= Neutral 4= Agree 5= Strongly Agree

- I tend to be very quiet in class 1 2 3 4 5
 I talk more in a small group (3-6) than others do 1 2 3 4 5
 I am a very talkative person 1 2 3 4 5
 Other people think I am shy 1 2 3 4 5
 Most people talk more than I do 1 2 3 4 5

For the following questions please circle the value that is most accurate.

1= never 2= rarely 3= sometimes 4= often 5= always

- On average, how often do you use social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)? 1 2 3 4 5
 How often do you spend text messaging friends? 1 2 3 4 5
 How often do you meet new people on social media? 1 2 3 4 5
 How often do you prefer interacting over social media rather than face to face? 1 2 3 4 5

Please answer the following questions in one sentence.

What activities have been the most helpful for you when making new friends at UBC? (being part of school clubs, playing sports, partying, volunteering, etc.)

What advice would you give someone that is trying to make new friends at UBC?

Thank you for your time! :)

Appendix C

Below are some graphs that represent findings of this study.

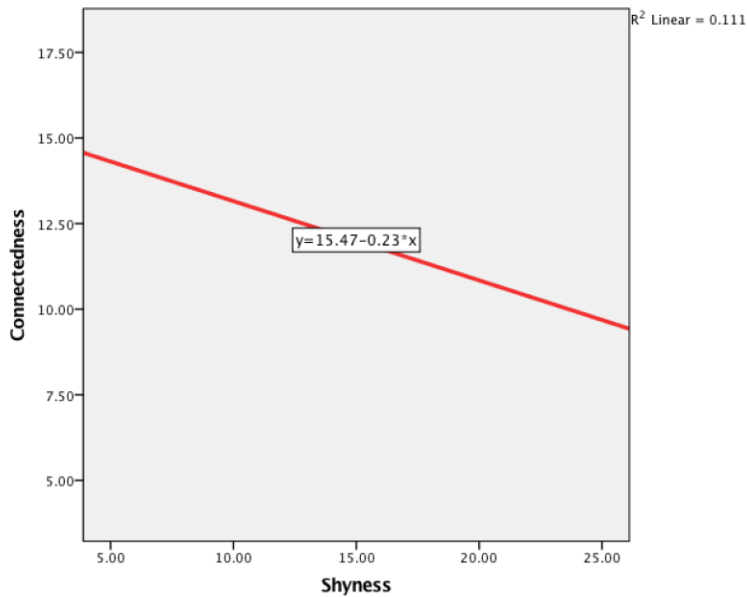


Fig. 1. Line graph that represents the moderate negative correlation between social connectedness and shyness levels. This graph is a visual depiction representing the findings of Hypothesis 1.

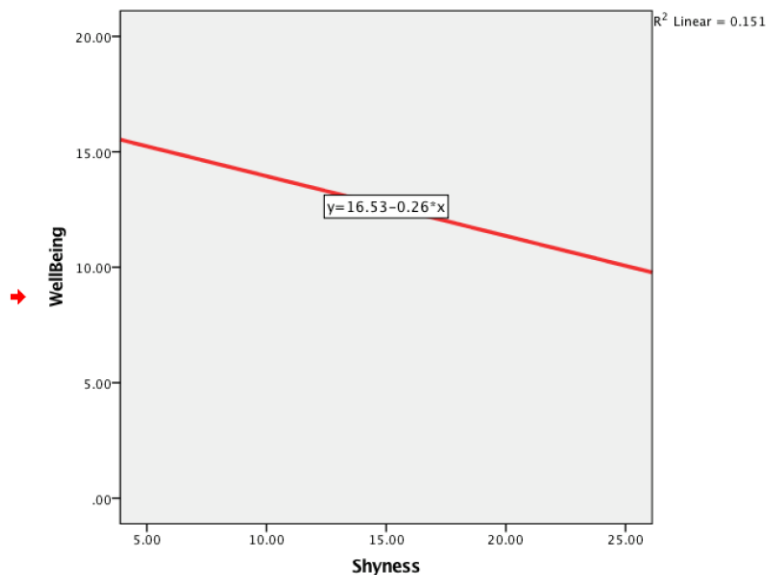


Fig. 2. Line graph that represents the moderate negative relationship between psychological well-being and shyness. This graph is a visual depiction representing the findings of Hypothesis 1.

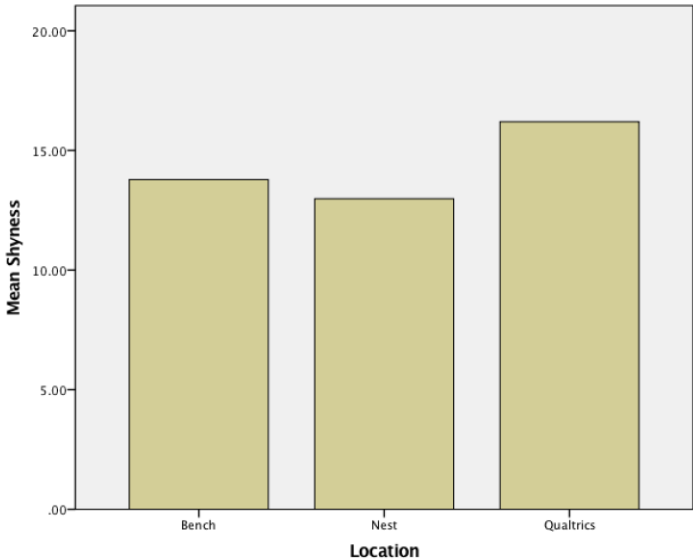


Fig. 3. Bar graph that represents the Mean shyness levels at each of the three conditions. This graph is a visual depiction representing some of the findings of Hypothesis 2.

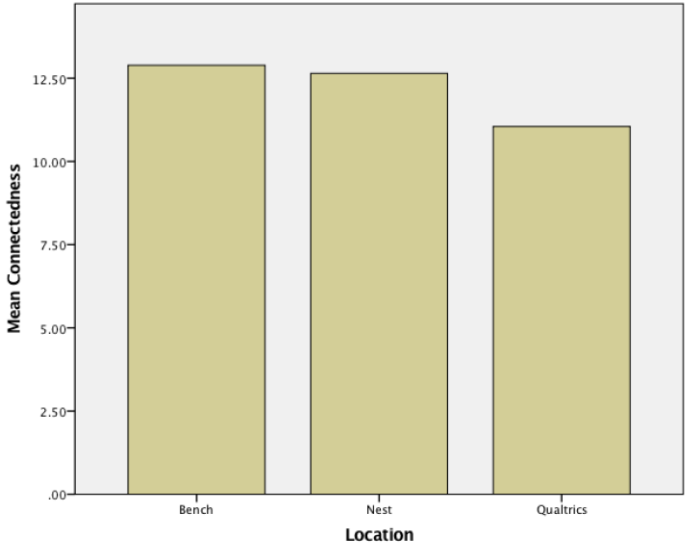


Fig. 4. Bar graph that represents Mean social connectedness levels at each of the three conditions. This graph is a visual depiction that represents some of the variables that our research question is asking to be answered.

The poster that was used in the Nest and The Friendship Bench conditions to encourage students to participate.

