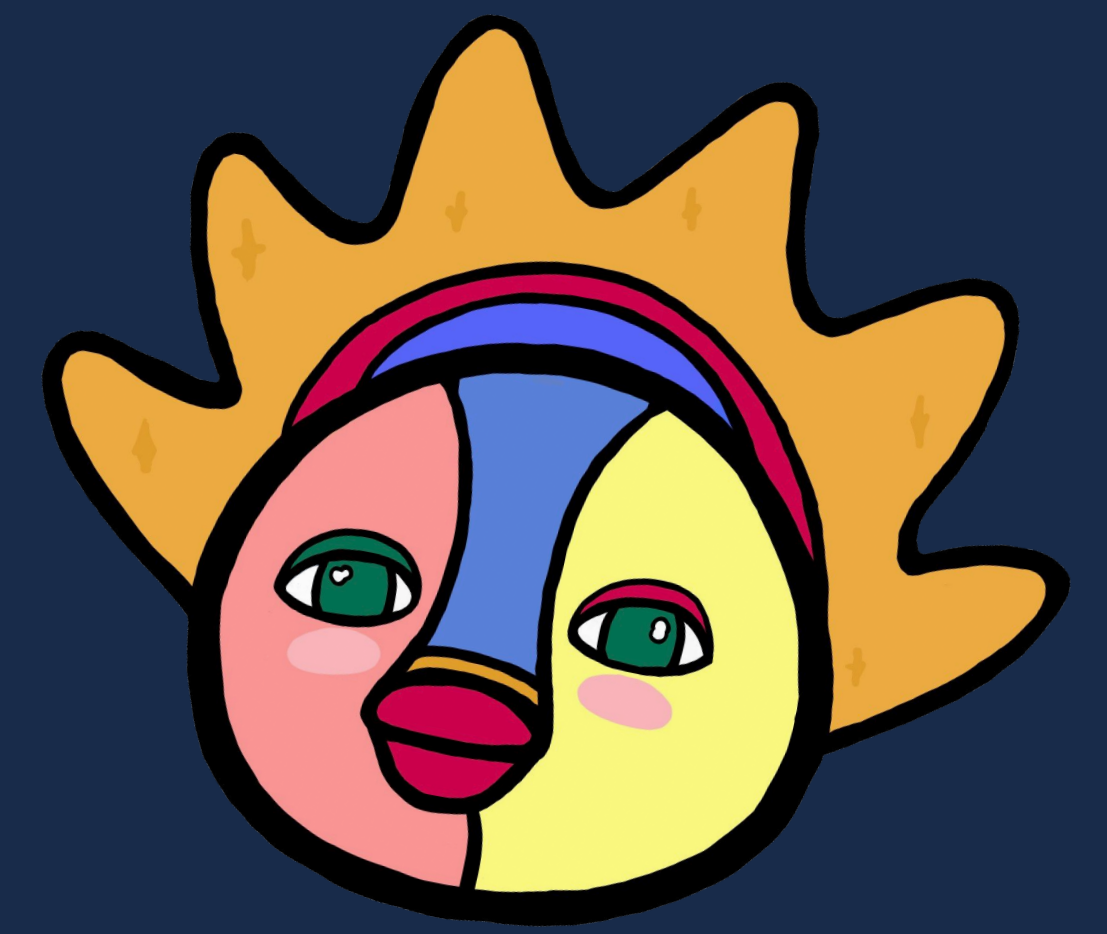


# Association Between Perceived Sense of Community and Mental Well-being among UCSD Undergraduate Students

Salwa Aqeel, Maria Garcia-Estreyer, Maleeha Ghazi, and Zainab Hussain  
UC San Diego Herbert Wertheim School of Public Health and Human Longevity Science



## Objective

To determine the impact of **perceived sense of community** on **mental well-being** and **quality of life** for undergraduate students at the University of California, San Diego.

## Background

- Approximately **12% and 7-9%** of college students suffer from anxiety and depressive disorders, respectively.<sup>1</sup>
- College students face a distinct set of obstacles including pressure around **academic performance** and **post-graduation plans**.<sup>2</sup>
- College students' exposures to stresses and their impacts are associated with an **increased probability** of mental health diagnoses.<sup>3</sup>
- The level of **connectivity** students feel to their environment is a powerful predictor of their overall health, lack of which correlates to feelings of **loneliness**.<sup>4</sup>
- Higher **perceived quality of social support** resulted in lower rates of depression and anxiety, and had an **overall association to better mental health**.<sup>5</sup>
- UCSD students are generally familiar with the term "**UC Socially Dead**," due to the school's rigorous academic reputation.

*"It's totally possible to get lost [on] this campus and to fall into isolation. Unlike many other campuses, finding a sense of community here can take longer and be more challenging."*

-Anonymous

## Methods

- **Cross-sectional study** was distributed to UC San Diego undergraduate students aged 18 and older between April 25th and May 11th, 2023.
- A **22-item, anonymous online survey** with multiple choice and open-ended questions.
- Our survey was advertised through word-of-mouth and **social media platforms**, i.e. Reddit, Snapchat, Instagram.
- **Exposure variable:** Perceived Sense of Community, including items from the *School Connectedness Scale*<sup>6</sup>.
- **Outcome variables:** Mental Well-Being and Overall Quality Of Life (QOL).
- **Linear regression and Paired Samples T-Test** were conducted using SPSS.
  - Paired Samples T-Test compares respondents' **self perception** against respondents' **perceptions of their peers** (UCSD undergraduate students as a whole).

## Results

Respondents (n=109, 97.3%) believe UCSD fits the "UC Socially Dead" stereotype for the following reasons:

**Lack of social life**  
Difficulty in making friends

Commuter challenges  
Campus environment  
Academic focus  
Introverted student population  
Limited party scene  
Social opportunities  
Lack of school spirit & events  
Individual effort

**Table 1.** Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N=112)

Race	n (%)
White	51 (45.5%)
Asian	40 (35.7%)
Black or African American	4 (3.6%)
American Indian or Alaska Native	2 (1.8%)
Multiracial	14 (12.5%)
Other	1 (0.89%)
Ethnicity	
Hispanic or Latinx	28 (25%)
Age	
18-20	41 (36.6%)
21-23	61 (54.5%)
24+	10 (8.9%)
Gender	
Female	78 (69.6%)
Male	29 (25.9%)
Non-binary	5 (4.5%)
Class-Level	
Freshman (0-44.9 units)	4 (3.6%)
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On-Campus	35 (31.3%)
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- **62.1%** of respondents agree that UCSD fits the "UC Socially Dead" stereotype.
- **92.0%** of respondents agree that having a **strong sense of community** at UCSD is important for their **mental well-being**.
- **33.0%** agree, **32.1%** disagree, and **34.8%** don't know whether CAPS is a useful resource for UCSD undergraduate students.

**Table 2.** Paired Samples T-Test Results Comparing Self versus Peer Perception of Exposure and Outcome Variable Measures

Variables Tested <sup>a</sup>	Total n	Test statistic	Two-sided P-value
Satisfaction with campus-related social activities and relationships (SAR)	103	-3.277	0.001*
Mental well-being	103	-5.504	<0.001*
Quality of life	101	-5.325	<0.001*

Note: \* = p-value < 0.05 (α = 0.05 level)  
<sup>a</sup> Measured by Likert Scale

- There is a **statistically significant** mean difference between self-perception and peer-perception for all variables measured (Table 2).
- Self perception and peer perception are **positively correlated** for all variables measured (r=.349;.370;.354, respectively) (Table 2).
- On average, self perceptions range from **1/3-1/2 higher** than peer perceptions, with **mental well-being** having the **largest mean difference** of the three variables ( $\mu_1 - \mu_2 = -0.49$ ; 95% CI [-0.66, -0.31]) (Table 2).

**Table 3.** Linear Regression Models between Different Exposure and Outcome Variable Measures

Variables Tested <sup>a</sup>	Slope <sup>c</sup>	Intercept	Two-sided P-value
1) Individual satisfaction with campus-related social activities and relationships	0.404	1.769	<0.001*
2) Mental well-being			
1) School Connectedness Scale <sup>b</sup>	0.659	0.942	<0.001*
2) Individual quality of life			

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- Individual satisfaction with campus-related social activities and relationships (SAR) is **statistically significant** in predicting mental well-being (Table 3).
- The altered *School Connectedness Scale* is **statistically significant** in predicting quality of life among UCSD undergraduate students (Table 3).
- Respective scatter plots indicate **positive relationships** between variables tested (Table 3).

## Conclusion

- UCSD undergraduate students **think differently** about their **own campus-related SAR**, mental well-being, and QOL compared to that of their **peers'**.
  - UCSD students' overall peer perceptions of mental well-being as **lower** than their own may be attributed to the "UC Socially Dead" stereotype.
- A low sense of on-campus community is associated with a **decrease** in mental well-being and can ultimately have negative implications on **academic achievement**.
- Enhancing the **sense of community** and **social support** within college environments can **improve** students' overall **quality of life** and **mental health outcomes**.

## Policy Implications

- **Expansion of Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS)** to provide **more counseling appointments** and **increase the ratio of counselors to students**, and advertise its availability.
  - Currently, **44%** of students complained about the **long wait time to meet with CAPS counselors**.<sup>7</sup>
  - Pre-pandemic, students experienced **two to three-week waitlists to seek care** from specialized support.<sup>8</sup>



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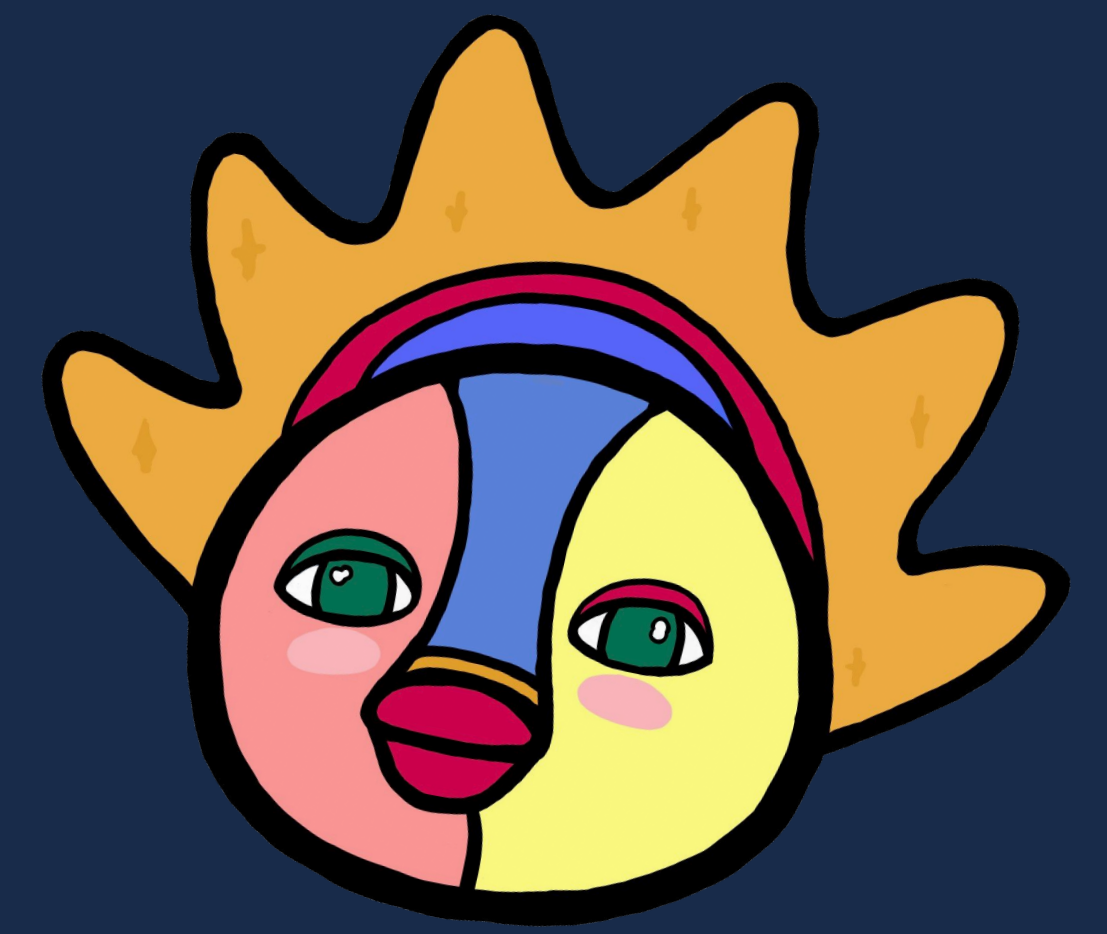
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