



“Where I Feel I Matter” Photovoice Narratives of Identity and Inclusion on a South African Campus

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BACKGROUND

- Campus spaces are not neutral; they shape identity, belonging, and well-being.
- University environments communicate inclusion, exclusion, recognition, and power.
- Place-based experiences remain underexplored in identity research, especially in Global South contexts.
- Photovoice provides a participatory way for students to document and narrate lived campus experiences.

AIM

To explore how South African university students experience identity, belonging, and well-being through campus places and spaces using photovoice.

METHODS

-  21 students
-  Photovoice fieldwork
-  Individual + group dialogue sessions
-  Final photo exhibition
-  Thematic + inductive content analysis
-  Participatory and social constructivist approach

THREE THEMES



Spaces for Constructing a Sense of Self and Becoming

- Identity, heritage, faith, academic growth, and personal journeys
“The mountains hold a significant cultural importance for the Basotho people... I got my identity when I got here.”
“This building defines my journey.”



Spaces for Making Connections, Mattering, and Belonging

- Inclusion, friendship, support, and exclusion
“Belonging means I can breathe.”
“Meeting weirdos like yourself makes all the difference.”

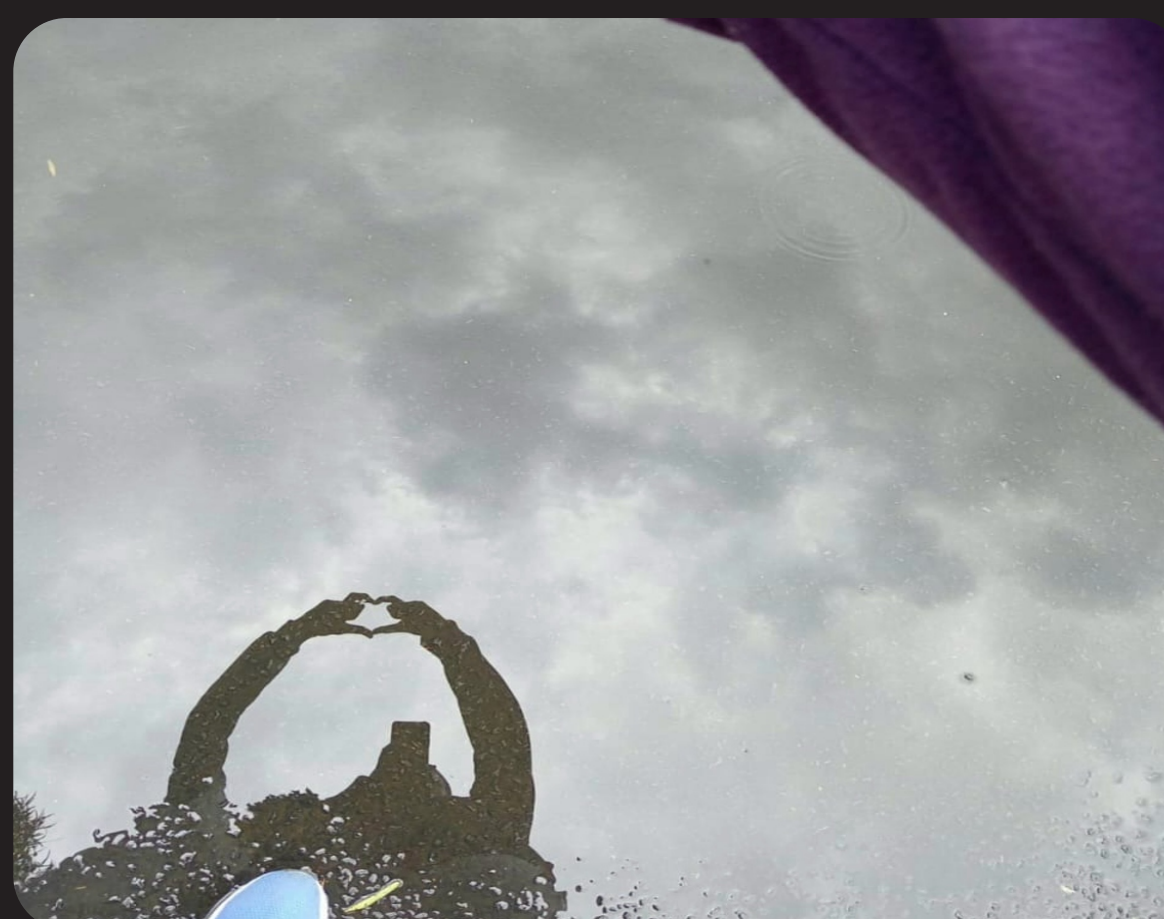


Spaces for a Balanced Student Life

- Nature, reflection, creativity, self-care, and safety
“Being surrounded by nature helps me clear my mind, reduce stress, and boost my mood.”
“When I'm here, it's like I declutter.”

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

- Campus spaces functioned as symbolic landscapes of identity, belonging, and well-being.
- Students experienced spaces as both affirming and exclusionary.
- Nature and informal spaces supported emotional restoration and coping.
- Belonging emerged through connection, visibility, recognition, and shared experience.
- Photovoice empowered students to critically reflect on and communicate their lived realities.



“Campus Identity”

“My grandmother from my mother's side started telling me stories about what it looks like... The mountains hold a significant cultural importance for the Basotho people as a whole. As I'm also part of the Basotho people, I got my identity when I got here. My cultural identity as a person embracing the heritage, the culture, and the stories that come with the mountains.”

“Creating Spaces for Diverse Cultures”

“This is the Nazareth Baptist Church, found here on our campus next to the main gate. And this is where you usually attend church events. We usually go there to pray, everything that has to do with our church. We do it there because this is the space for us...”

“Behind These Walls are Fees and Forms—Things That Make My Chest Tighten”

“Every time I walk past this building, it gives me so much anxiety because this is where the fees and forms are... Nothing good ever comes from this building for me... I chose black and white because I wanted to highlight that it gives me so much anxiety... It brings me a lot of heart palpitations.”

“This Heart Reflects the Relationships That Ground My Growth”

“The heart is not just a gesture. It quietly holds my journey as a student and as a person. It shows the love I give and the love I receive from those who walk with me. In this reflection, I see how my identity is shaped and supported. These hands carry my story and the presence of someone else. They remind me that I do not grow alone. I grow through the relationships that help me become who I am.”

“The Journey of Growth from Humble Beginnings to Full of Potential”

“The pawn symbolizes my belief that success is not about where I begin, but about my resilience, perseverance, and willingness to evolve. Just like a pawn that can transform into a queen with determination... The journey mirrors my own, starting from a modest position but with the capacity to grow into something powerful and impactful.”

MAIN TAKE-AWAY

“Campus spaces are never just physical places – they become emotional, relational, and symbolic landscapes where students negotiate who they are, where they belong, and how they flourish.”

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