



Full length article

Understanding social media and identity work in young people transitioning to university



Lisa Thomas ^{a,*}, Pam Briggs ^a, Andrew Hart ^b, Finola Kerrigan ^b

^a PaCT Lab, Psychology Department, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 8ST, UK

^b Department of Marketing, Birmingham Business School, University House, Birmingham, B15 2TT, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 March 2017

Received in revised form

13 August 2017

Accepted 14 August 2017

Available online 14 August 2017

Keywords:

Social media

Transition

University

Identity

Students

ABSTRACT

Social media (SM) are a core component of young people's lives and have been researched in relation to relationship building and maintenance. While SM are known to be useful in supporting life transitions for young people, we know little about the specific use patterns or activities associated with social adjustment during the specific transition to university. We explore the use of social media during the student transition to university in relation to theories of social comparison and community building and describe a three stage process which accounts for this transition. Participants move through the stages of affirmation, assimilation and integration similar to other life transitions, but in doing so, we reveal the importance of the intersection between offline and online activities and highlight the benefits and limitations of SM use in this transitional period.

© 2017 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Adolescents rely upon social media (SM) as a core component of their social lives (Boyd, 2014; Yang & Brown, 2013) and will typically use SM to build new peer affiliations, manage existing relationships and stay informed about social activities within their network (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). It is not surprising, then, that young people can find SM especially useful when moving from home to a new university environment. These 'emerging adults' experience marked change at this time, and use online services to bridge these kinds of life transitions (Orzech, Moncur, Durrant, & Trujillo-Pisanty, 2016). University students have demonstrated that they use SM when searching for new relationships or maintaining existing friendships (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011; Lampe et al., 2006; Pempek et al., 2009) and SM resources are particularly important for first year students seeking to build new relationships and establish a sense of community at college (DeAndrea, Ellison, LaRose, Steinfield, & Fiore, 2012). Yet, little is known about how specific use patterns or activities are associated with social adjustment to university; how students use SM and digital communication to

establish new communities, as well as maintain existing ones; how students balance their online and offline identities during this process; and finally the possible drawbacks of SM use during these transitional periods. This study addresses these questions.

This empirical paper reports on a study of first year undergraduate students in the UK in relation to their use of SM when transitioning from home to university in order to understand the role played by SM in their transition. We contribute to this discussion by identifying similarities between our work and the theoretical stages identified in previous work exploring when people cross borders or cultures, as in the example of expatriates living abroad (Mao & Shen, 2015), and literature on people coping with acculturation. The paper is structured as follows: we describe related work in terms of SM use in young adults, with a particular emphasis on the literature on social comparison and identity-management within SM, and a review of research surrounding the role of SM in community building and the much smaller literature on SM use when making the transition to university. We then outline and justify our own study, which uses novel methodology to capture and interpret SM use during times of transition.

2. Related work

There has been a rapidly growing body of research which seeks to understand young people's use of SM technologies and their

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: lisa.thomas@northumbria.ac.uk (L. Thomas), p.briggs@northumbria.ac.uk (P. Briggs), f.kerrigan@bham.ac.uk (F. Kerrigan).

participation in online communities (Boyd, 2007; Schoenebeck, Ellison, Blackwell, Bayer, & Falk, 2016). Many of these studies have focused on patterns of Facebook use in large part because it is the most widely used of the social networks in a Western context, but we should note at the outset, that SM use evolves quickly across different platforms and that, while Facebook remains popular, other sites such as Instagram, WhatsApp and Pinterest are seeing an increase in their user base (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015).

Young people typically use SM to maintain and regain social connections and for 'identity work' that includes the sharing and tagging of photographs, the creation of 'status updates' and associated forms of social approbation such as 'liking' posts (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Pempek et al., 2009; Sosik & Bazarova, 2014; Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008). Such exchanges can help to bind a community together, but can also induce various forms of social anxiety. This is particularly true for young people who seek social approval to reinforce their own sense of self, and who can sometimes be negatively affected by the social comparison processes that accompany SM exchange (Feinstein et al., 2013). These two elements: social comparison and community building are explored further, below.

2.1. Social comparison

The social comparison processes invited by SM are well recognised. For example, selfies are common currency on many SM sites, but selfie posting is also associated with certain social pressures such as the need to post positive 'fun' selfies and to try to gain sufficient 'likes' or risk damaging self-esteem (Pounders, Kowalczyk, & Stowers, 2016). Such comparison processes are far more likely to take place when the other members of a SM community are similar to the self, whether by age, sex, or other dimensions of identity (Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2006; 2010). Young people spend many hours viewing the posts of similar others (Pempek et al., 2009) and inevitably are drawn into the process of social comparison (Johnson & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014). This process, first described by Festinger (1954), involves two possible acts: people can either compare themselves unfavourably to others – making an *upward comparison* (Gibbons & Gerrard, 1989; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997) said to form part of the drive to self-improvement (Collins, 1996), or they can compare themselves favourably to others, making *downward comparisons* that can be used to restore threatened self-esteem (Wills, 1981) and create positive affect (Gibbons & Gerrard, 1989). These upward and downward comparisons are part of self-presentation (Marder, Joinson, Shankar, & Houghton, 2016). They affect the creation of a desired self (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) and inform personal choices about how to 'look good' (Wang, Hinsberger, & Kraut, 2016).

Goffman (1959) has influenced our understanding of the ways that people might use self-presentation to claim membership of a group or community. Goffman argues that, during periods of transition, the 'performers' withdraw until they have established new social norms and rules of interaction. In SM terms, this withdrawal can take the form of self-censoring or editing elements of the digital persona in order to avoid projecting an undesired image to a new online audience (Lang & Barton, 2015; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). When this fails, or when SM users are tasked to 'perform' to multiple and diverse audiences simultaneously, then we talk about this in terms of 'context collapse' (Marwick & Boyd, 2010).

While self-presentation in the presence of multiple audiences can have positive effects (Leonardi, 2014), context collapse can have negative implications since users find it difficult to meet the expectations of multiple audiences simultaneously (Xie & Kang, 2015). For example, Lang and Barton (2015) report that 84% of

users have experienced being tagged in undesirable photos and subsequently taken defensive action. According to Marwick and Boyd (2010: 122), this creates "a lowest-common denominator effect, as individuals only post things they believe their broadest group of acquaintances will find non-offensive." Furthermore, recent research has found that users self-censor and edit their offline behaviour in fear that content will be communicated online causing self-presentational predicaments (Marder et al., 2016). Kerrigan and Hart (2016) illustrated the importance of a temporal approach to understanding performance on SM, as older online selves may be seen as incompatible with new lifestyle or career developments, and users have not yet developed practices for dealing with past selves.

2.2. Community building

Ackerman et al. (2004) discussed the ways that an effective ICT infrastructure can be used to bridge relationships within communities, providing the kind of 'social capital' platform that "enables joint activities and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Ackerman et al., 2004). SM systems can support the development of social capital and community cohesion (Malinen, 2015) while online social networking can also promote psychological well-being (Ellison et al., 2007; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001).

When we explore the creation of new communities, or focus upon communities in transition, then we can see that SM also has a role in both creating and enhancing community relationships. Across a wide range of contexts, including disenfranchised youth in rural Sweden (Svensson, 2015) or new mothers in Canada (Valtchanov, Parry, Glover, & Mulcahy, 2014), SM has been shown to both mobilise and unite individuals. For new students wishing to make an adjustment to university, SM offers a way to support the transition from adolescence to adulthood and presents individuals with the opportunity to tentatively build new relationships 'at a safe distance' (Ferguson et al., 2016). Many students relocate when starting university, and so become physically removed from their close friends and family. They are then faced with the task of maintaining existing connections whilst being surrounded by thousands of unknown contacts (Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007) from whom they need to forge new intimate bonds. Thus, both relationship maintenance and establishment have been found to be crucial to successful adjustment during the transition to university (Buote et al., 2007; Swenson, Nordstrom, & Hiester, 2008) and, to a certain extent, SM can support both (Ferguson et al., 2016), although it has been argued that Facebook is more effective in the maintenance as opposed to the creation of new student relationships (Lampe et al., 2006). Ellison et al. (2007) argued that students use Facebook primarily for keeping in touch with high school acquaintances and classmates, although in a later survey of undergraduates, Ellison et al. (2011) identified three SM strategies: 1) initiating strategies, which allow for building connections with strangers that have never been met offline; 2) maintaining strategies, used to maintain existing relationships with close friends/ties; and 3) social information seeking, to find out information with newly connected acquaintances. In Ferguson et al.'s (2016) small-scale study, the use of Facebook to support social cohesion and academic communication in a small group of student nurses was clear, but the challenges of SM use in relation to building and supporting a new professional identity were also outlined.

2.3. SM and the transition to university

These two processes of social comparison and community building are important when we consider how young people make the transition to university, although we find more limited and

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/4937451>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/4937451>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)