



## Facebook use and academic performance among college students: A mixed-methods study with a multi-ethnic sample



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### ABSTRACT

This paper uses a mixed-methods approach to examine the relation between online academic disclosure and academic performance. A multi-ethnic sample of college students ( $N = 261$ ; male = 66; female = 195;  $M$  age  $\approx 22$  years) responded to open-ended questions about their Facebook use. Thematic analysis revealed that over 14% of the Facebook wall posts/status updates ( $N = 714$ ) contained academic themes; positive states were more frequent than negative and neutral states and students with lower GPAs expressed negative states more often. A path analysis suggested that academic performance may determine college students' Facebook use, rather than the reverse. Implications for student support services are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

Social media use has become common among young adults in college (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). Facebook, one of the more popular social media applications has over 1.26 billion users worldwide (Smith, 2014). It was originally limited to those with a university email (Yadav, 2006); although, it was subsequently opened up to anyone with an email address (Brenner, 2013), college students continue to be the majority of Facebook users (Dahlstrom, Grunwald, de Boer, & Vockley, 2011; Duggan & Smith, 2013; Smith & Caruso, 2010). In the U.S., 71% of Facebook users are college students (Duggan & Brenner, 2013).

There is now a solid body of work linking emerging adults' social media use and key transitional and psychosocial developmental tasks – including identity and intimacy (see Coyne, Padilla-Walker, & Howard, 2013; Michikyan & Subrahmanyam, 2012; Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012, for a review). Research to date has also revealed that college students' social media use is linked to their academic lives – including online academic disclosure (Deng & Tavares, 2013; Selwyn, 2009) and academic performance (Junco, 2012a) and engagement (Junco, 2012b; Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2010). Less clear is students' use of

social media as they negotiate academic activities and challenges and adjust to college. In this paper, we examined how a U.S.-sample of college students utilized their academic disclosure on Facebook to confer meaning to their academic activities (e.g., taking an exam), roles (e.g., as a student, peer), and responsibilities (e.g., studying for an exam), expectations (e.g., expect higher grades), and events (on- or off-campus) (Smith & Wertlieb, 2005), thus reconstructing their offline university experiences on social media.

Adopting a mixed methods approach, we conducted a qualitative and quantitative analysis of our participants' academic disclosure via their Facebook wall posts/status updates. Such an in-depth and nuanced examination of the students' Facebook activity will reveal the meanings and affective states of their online disclosure related to academic activities, roles, responsibilities, expectations, and events. Additionally, using participants' own words about their academic and college experience will inform our understanding of the issues students encounter during their transition and adjustment to college life and enable us to capture their "voice" or personal sense of navigating through these concerns. Furthermore, despite the increasing research in this area, no study to date has qualitatively documented online academic disclosure in a sample of college students in the U.S. nor studied the quantitative relation between such online disclosure and offline academic performance.

Extant research on the relation between U.S.-based college students' Facebook use and academics has been via survey studies (Junco, 2012a, 2012b; Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010; Pasek, More, & Hargittai, 2009; Paul, Baker, & Cochran, 2012) that have yielded contradictory results (e.g., Junco, 2012a; Kolek & Saunders, 2008;

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Pasek et al., 2009). They have used correlational (e.g., Ogedebe, Emmanuel, & Musa, 2012) and regression-based (e.g., Junco, 2012a) models to examine the relation between academic performance and Facebook use. Thus, an important empirical question is whether academic performance (as measured by self-reported grade-point-average, GPA) predicts Facebook use or whether Facebook use predicts academic performance. The present study will use path analysis to examine which of these two possible hypotheses is better supported.

### 1.1. The role of Facebook in college life

For many students, college is a time of transition, adjustment, and development. During this period, many young adults (aged 18–29) also called emerging adults, experience uncertainty and changes in their self-concept, relationships, social roles, work and education (Arnett, 2007). For instance, they may be faced with the task of developing a sense of a college student identity by exploring academic roles and responsibilities (Burke & Reitzes, 1991), making new friends or network of support, as well as adjusting to new lifestyles in order to meet the demands of college (Yazedjian & Toews, 2006; Yazedjian, Toews, Sevin, & Purswell, 2008). They rely on their social networks comprised of mentors, family members, friends, and peers to alleviate some of the newly-posed apprehensions and to succeed academically (see Syed, Azmitia, & Cooper, 2011, for a review). Research reveals that university experience may be complex and multifaceted, and pupils construct narratives of student identity, academic roles, expectations and responsibilities out of interactions within their social contexts (Yazedjian et al., 2008).

Facebook is an online social context, and young people's online networks include the people they know offline (Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008). Research has demonstrated that the affordances of Facebook – including posting on walls (commenting), uploading photos, and updating status (discussing one's thoughts and whereabouts) make it relatively easy for users to present and share an array of important life issues (Coyne et al., 2013; Michikyan & Subrahmanyam, 2012; Wilson et al., 2012). Aside from using social media for communication (Arnett & Schwab, 2013), young people use online contexts to address some of the key developmental issues that they face offline (Michikyan & Subrahmanyam, 2012; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008; Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011).

For instance, emerging adults report using social media such as MySpace and Facebook for self-presentation of different aspects of their identity (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008), and for emotional self-disclosure (Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012). For college students then, using online contexts to share their college experiences with friends (who may also be in college) may be an important activity. In fact, one study has shown that university students in the U.K. use wall posts (a Facebook feature) to exchange information about school work and share learning experiences, which often may involve disclosure of affective states regarding academically-related activities (Selwyn, 2009). Consequently, Selwyn suggested that academic disclosure on Facebook may facilitate emotional closeness (or intimacy) and help shape a sense of student identity. Taken together, findings concerning youth social media use imply that online presentation of a multifaceted self may parallel – although not necessarily mirror – many of the important life issues that young people experience offline as they transition into adulthood (Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011).

### 1.2. Facebook use and academic outcomes

In a content analysis study of students' Facebook wall posts that was conducted in the U.K., Selwyn (2009) found that 4% of the

68,169 of posts (analyzed over an 18-week period) included academic disclosure reflecting academically-related activities, and events. Interestingly, students' comments often illustrated their sense of academic incompetency and disengagement. At the same time, students' wall posts also displayed instances of moral support, and their overall college experience – including student role and identity exploration. Based on this pattern, the researcher noted that, "Facebook has become an important site for the informal, cultural learning of 'being' a student, with online interactions and experiences allowing roles to be learnt, values understood and identities shaped" (Selwyn, p. 171). From an examination of the posts in Selwyn (2009), it appears that students also disclosed various affective states related to their academic disclosure. To better understand students' construction of their academic experience on Facebook, Selwyn (2009) recommended that participants be asked to self-interpret their online academic activities, including their posts and comments. The present study incorporated this recommendation using a U.S.-based college sample, and also analyzed participants' wall posts/status updates for affective tones.

A related question is whether college students' Facebook use helps or hinders academic outcomes (Junco, 2012a, 2012b; Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010; Pasek et al., 2009) and research on this question has produced contradictory findings. Kirschner and Karpinski found that Facebook users reported lower GPAs and tended to spend less time on their studies compared with those who did not use Facebook. Conversely, Kolek and Saunders (2008) found no difference in overall GPA between Facebook users and non-users. Additionally, Junco (2012a) found a negative association between time spent on Facebook and grades. However, Pasek et al. found no link between Facebook use and grades. It is noteworthy that Pasek et al. used a single, dichotomous question as to whether or not participants used Facebook, and this may have limited their findings. In a subsequent study, Junco (2012b) found a negative relationship between academic engagement, and Facebook time and activities (i.e., posting photographs), yet there was also a positive association between academic engagement and online activities related to commenting on Facebook content and creating events on Facebook.

In sum, extant evidence is equivocal about the relation between social media use and academic outcomes and better understanding of the nature of this relationship has important implications for future research and interventions. In particular, when designing interventions to enhance student success and retention, it is important to know whether Facebook activities lead to changes in academic performance or whether changes in academic performance drive students to engage in Facebook activities. The present study will address this important issue.

### 1.3. The present study

Although research has shown a link between college students' social media use and academics, we need a better picture of their academic experiences on social media sites such as Facebook. As students negotiate their way through college, do they engage in online disclosure about their academic experiences? If they do, are these disclosures positive or negative in tone and are they reflective of the students' academic experiences? Even though Facebook use is associated with academic performance (e.g., Junco, 2012a), the direction of influence in this relationship remains an open question. To address these questions, the study adopted a mixed-methods approach; first, we qualitatively analyzed participants' Facebook wall posts/status updates for themes related to academically-related activities, roles, responsibilities, expectations, and events, as well as for various affective states. This approach also allowed us to test whether college students with lower GPAs shared more negative states or whether students with

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