Serious social media: On the use of social media for improving students' adjustment to college

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ABSTRACT

A considerable body of research indicates that social support plays an integral role in determining students' successful adjustment to college. Unlike previous research that has evaluated face-to-face support interventions that occur during students' first semester at college, the current study reports on a student-centered social media site designed to enhance students' perceptions of social support prior to their arrival on campus. Results indicated that site usage increased students' perceptions that they would have a diverse social support network during their first semester at college, even when controlling for other potent predictors. The importance of social support perceptions for college adjustment is detailed and the ramifications of the social media intervention are discussed.

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Newer forms of social media differ from older, traditional broadcast media in that they enable peer-to-peer messages, as opposed to unidirectional transmission of one-to-many media content. In doing so, these tools may have the potential to reshape communication patterns among their users by enabling online communication and lowering the barriers to face-to-face interaction. This paper reports on a social media intervention intended to increase connections among incoming college students with the goal of augmenting their feelings of connectedness to the university, increasing perceptions of preparedness and efficacy regarding their future success at college, and providing a peer-driven forum for students to ask and answer questions. A social capital framework was employed to explain the ways in which this technological intervention might affect user perceptions and, potentially, their adjustment to college.

One strand of research investigating the social capital implications of new media has focused on social network site use among college students, investigating sites such as Facebook which are open to the general Internet community (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). Social media are being adopted in other contexts as well, such as internal corporate social network sites (DiMicco, Geyer, Dugan, Brownholtz, & Millen, 2009; DiMicco et al., 2008). These closed sites enable individuals to cultivate self-presentational messages geared towards a particular context or audience and thus avoid the "multiple audience problem" that occurs when multiple aspects of one's social circle are present with little ability to segment messages (Leary, 1995; Marwick & boyd, 2010). Examples include well known "professional" social media such as LinkedIn and nascent efforts to harness social media for health communication (Elliot,

2010). This study examines whether a targeted social media site can affect the intellectual and social lives of students transitioning from high school to college.

The features of social media that facilitate rewarding and efficacious communication have been discussed and documented across a variety of research contexts. One such context examines how communication technology can be used to improve education and the adjustment to college. A considerable amount of research emphasizes the importance of self-perceptions for students' adjustment to college (e.g., Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001). In particular, students who believe that they have social resources available on campus more successfully handle the transition to college (Brissette, Scheier, & Carver, 2002). Accordingly, the website that was created for the present research was designed to facilitate the development of a support network during students' first year of college, prior to their arrival on campus. Site sponsors hoped to create a closed online community that would provide students with access to other students, staff, faculty, and informational resources.

In the following sections, we first provide a review of the social media research that guided the development of the online community site. This review discusses research that highlights the importance of influencing students' self-beliefs prior to arrival on campus. The manuscript then describes the site's features, the context of its deployment, and the methods used in the study. Results and a discussion of the implications of the study conclude the paper.

1. Literature review

1.1. Social media and college adjustment

Over the years, many university programs have been conducted to help establish social support networks once students arrive on

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campus. Several of these programs have focused on developing peer-led support groups (for a review see Mattanah et al., 2010). The emergence of social media has created opportunities to establish peer-support networks prior to students arriving on campus in ways that may not have been previously possible without the affordances of new media. Indeed, social media websites are being developed by universities to increase connections among graduate students, faculty, and staff across distributed campuses (Kaya, 2010). Social network sites are perhaps the most prominent example of such media.

Social network sites have received considerable attention from researchers and the general public alike due to the increasingly large userbase for sites like Facebook. Research on Facebook, in particular, has shown that students may reap social benefits from using the site. Ellison et al. (2007) found associations between Facebook usage and various forms of social capital. Social capital broadly refers to social resources that people accrue through their relationships with others. In particular, Ellison et al. (2007) found a strong association between Facebook usage and bridging social capital, which is typically associated with an expansive network of weak ties. Social network sites are thought to facilitate more extensive social networks due to the reduction of costs (e.g., time, effort) for developing and maintaining relationships (see Donath & boyd, 2004). As such, having students connect with one another on a social media site prior to their arrival on campus may help students enter college with a more expansive social network than they otherwise might have had, contributing to bridging social capital.

In addition to helping establish and maintain interpersonal connections, researchers have argued that social media sites like Facebook have the ability to guide students entering an unfamiliar social environment. Selwyn (2007) argues 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 learned, values understood and identities shaped" (p. 18). Likewise, Yu, Tian, Vogel, and Kwok (2010) suggest that social network sites offer a unique opportunity to promote socialization to the college environment. They argue that social network sites can help students learn about their peers and college which, in turn, can create satisfaction and affiliation with the University. Students' sense of belonging – whether they feel included in their college community – has a documented relationship with college adjustment. For instance, student perceptions of belonging have been positively associated with feelings of social acceptance and academic competence (e.g., Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Consequently, social network sites may function to improve the transition to college by helping students socialize to their new environment and establish a sense of connection with their institution. Research by Haythornthwaite and Kazmer (2002) supports the notion that social media can be utilized to develop student-to-student and student-to-instructor connections.

Given the potential for social network sites to socialize students on campus, whether the normative behavior being expressed on such sites promotes positive student expectations is expected to play a role in how this socialization unfolds. Research on social network sites does not unequivocally conclude that increased usage of social media will result in positive outcomes (e.g., LaRose, Kim, & Peng, 2010). For instance, college and high school students often use Facebook to post pictures of excessive drinking behavior (Kolek & Saunders, 2008). Establishing a counter-narrative that highlights healthier and more constructive examples of student behavior may assist student adjustment.

In addition to the benefits that may be obtained through social network sites, other forms of communication technology have been shown to help students in educational settings. In particular, web logs (blogs) have been utilized for a variety of educational purposes. Blogs – defined here as online personal journals – are used to fulfill many interpersonal goals such as maintaining ties with family and friends (Stefanone & Jang, 2008). Blogs in education typically differ from mainstream blogs in that they are less visible to the masses and are written for a specific

community (Blau, Mor, & Neuthal, 2009). Researchers have argued that, although they are potentially confined in their scope, blogs can be used in academia to connect students, foster social support, and promote self-expression (Deng & Yuen, 2011). It is possible that a limited community of bloggers who share some common bond (e.g., first-year students) could enhance the benefits attributed to blogging in general. For instance, Baker and Moore (2008) contend: "Blogging may function as a safe space where people seek out others for mutual feedback and support, fostering a sense of security and help" (p. 748).

Having the ability to seek out help and express feelings and concerns has been shown to play a role in students' adjustment to college. Research by Srivastava, Tamir, McGonigal, John, and Gross (2009) indicates that among students entering college, emotional suppression was associated with less social support, less felt closeness to others, and less satisfaction with one's social network. As such, affording students – prior to entering college – the opportunity to express their concerns and seek out feedback in a closed network composed of similar others may enhance perceptions of social support. Likewise, self-disclosing on blogs may help students integrate into the college environment and expand their network of weak ties (Ko & Kuo, 2009). The ability to engender positive experiences and constructive self-beliefs in students prior to college may significantly influence their adjustment to college life.

1.2. Self-beliefs and college adjustment

Theory on self-beliefs can help explain how social media may affect students' perceptions of college life and, in turn, their adjustment to college. Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1989) details how internal cognitions and environmental factors work in conjunction to alter self-beliefs. Self-beliefs are central determinants of human affect and behavior. For instance, greater self-efficacy has been associated with setting higher goals, having greater motivation to achieve goals, and coping better with stress during taxing times (for a review see Bandura, 1989). Germane to the current study, self-beliefs can be influenced by one's social environment.

Through social observation and interaction, people are able to acquire a variety of important information from others that can be used to direct their own behavior and beliefs. Before the advancement of communication technology, such observation was more likely to be restricted to one's immediate social environment. However, new media currently enable the mass dissemination of messages, reduce the constraints of geographical dispersion, and facilitate the record-ability of communication (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). Social network sites exemplify such media. Bandura (2001) specifically emphasizes the importance of electronic media in the process of socialization:

Because the symbolic environment occupies a major part of people's everyday lives, much of the social construction of reality and shaping of public consciousness occurs through electronic acculturation. At the societal level, the electronic modes of influence are transforming how social systems operate and serving as a major vehicle for sociopolitical change. The study of acculturation in the present electronic age must be broadened to include electronic acculturation (p. 271).

Reducing uncertainty about college and shaping positive expectancies through social media can go a long way in facilitating a healthy transition to college.

Indeed, a considerable amount of research has been dedicated to examining how the psychological disposition of students affects their adjustment to college. One line of research, in particular, examines the association between optimistic beliefs and student success. In general, positive expectancies for the future can have beneficial effects for social adjustment during stressful life events (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 2001). Meta-analytic findings support this assertion and offer insight into why such associations exist. Across 50 studies, optimistic