# Factors involved in associations between Facebook use and college adjustment: Social competence, perceived usefulness, and use patterns

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

Although previous research has investigated widespread use of social media, especially Facebook, by youth attending college, the conditions under which these media foster adjustment to college remain unclear. This study tested a model illuminating pathways linking social competence to college adjustment via students' perceptions about the usefulness of Facebook and ways in which they used the medium. Self-report survey data from 321 college students ($M$ age = 20.09; 58% female; 84% Caucasian) attending a major Midwestern university supported the proposed model, indicating that higher social competence could foster or impede college adjustment, depending upon how it was related to beliefs about the usefulness of different Facebook functions and how these perceptions, in turn, were associated with patterns of Facebook use. Findings underscore the importance of considering connections among personal attributes, perception of media effectiveness, and media behaviors in assessing the implications of social media for users' psychosocial well-being.

## 1. Introduction

Going to college has become a normative experience among young people in the United States. Enrollment in post-secondary institutions has doubled over the past 40 years among individuals age 18–24 (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, Table 224). As increasing numbers of young people attend college, a college degree has become a more important factor in obtaining employment and high earnings (U.S. Department of Labor, 2014), but not everyone who starts college completes a degree. Students drop out for academic reasons, but an under-recognized factor that contributes substantially to persistence and graduation is successful social adjustment to college (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Tinto, 1975, 1993), which requires assembling and maintaining a supportive social network (Buote et al., 2007; Swenson, Nordstrom, & Hiester, 2008). Students must figure out how to maintain pre-college relationships despite the physical separation that occurs with the move to a residential college, and they must forge new, supportive relationships with college associates.

Social networking sites (SNSs) have the potential to facilitate social relationships, especially now that the vast majority of college students are frequent SNS users (Junco, 2012; Smith &

Caruso, 2010). Yet, information remains limited on the specifics of how young people use SNSs to negotiate their college experiences and on factors that contribute to their usage. This study considers how students' perceptions of the usefulness of Facebook, the leading SNS among youth (Duggan & Brenner, 2013), mediates associations between levels of social competence and patterns of Facebook use, and how such usage is associated with young people's college adjustment.

### 1.1. Social networking sites and college adjustment

Successful college adjustment requires strong peer support. Remaining connected with off-campus or pre-college associates and forming new relationships in college are both crucial to students' adaptation (Buote et al., 2007; Swenson et al., 2008). Whereas off-campus or pre-college friends are important sources of emotional support (Ranney & Troop-Gordon, 2012; Swenson et al., 2008), social ties established on campus help students become socially integrated, thus less likely to drop out of the institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Tinto, 1975, 1993). For example, having an on-campus best friend who shares common interests is associated with better social adjustment in college and a higher level of attachment to the institution (Swenson et al., 2008).

For college youth today, SNSs have become a common tool for relationship management (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011;

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Yang, Brown, & Braun, 2014). Ellison, Wohn, Khan, and Fewins-Bliss (2012) propose that SNSs may help college students avoid drastic disruption of their existing networks and establish a sense of belonging in college by facilitating communication with old friends and access to new people. The social affordance of SNSs allows users to display requests for emotional or informational support to a large audience. Empirical studies support Ellison et al.'s (2012) argument. General usage of SNSs has been linked to the accrual of social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008), and using the sites for social interactions in particular is associated with better socio-emotional adjustment to college (Yang & Brown, 2013). Using Facebook to engage in collaborative academic activities is related to more bonding social capital, and having more college friends on Facebook is associated with better social adjustment to college (Gray, Vitak, Easton, & Ellison, 2013). Some research, however, provides counter-evidence, showing that the amount of Facebook use predicts decreases in subjective well-being (Kross et al., 2013) and makes users feel that other people are living a better life (Chou & Edge, 2012). The inconsistent findings prompt the question: For what types of students and which types of social relationships is the use of SNSs adaptive?

Social competence, broadly defined as "effectiveness in social interaction" (Rose-Krasnor, 1997, p.111), may be a crucial factor in understanding SNS use and college adjustment. Personal attributes related to social competence (such as social anxiety, shyness, or extraversion) not only have important implications for college adaptation (Mounts, Valentiner, Anderson, & Boswell, 2006; Nordstrom, Swenson-Goguen, & Hiester, 2014; Parade, Leerkes, & Blankson, 2010) but also moderate the relationship between Internet or technology use and psychosocial well-being (Desjarlais & Willoughby, 2010; Kraut et al., 2002). Although social competence is an important factor in outcomes associated with the use of social media, its impact is contingent on users' attitudes about the usefulness of these media and their specific ways of usage.

### 1.2. Perceived usefulness and online communication partners

Perceived usefulness of a medium has been postulated as a central element in technology use (Davis, 1989, 1993). It has been identified as a mediator between attributes related to social competence and media use. For example, socially anxious adolescents have a stronger belief than non-socially anxious adolescents in the effectiveness of online communication; the belief contributes to a higher frequency, rate, and intensity of online communication (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007c). Introverted adolescents are motivated to chat online because they think the platform facilitates self-expression, and this social compensation motive enhances the level of online self-disclosure and frequency of online communication (Peter, Valkenburg, & Schouten, 2005).

Despite the contribution of previous research, there are two limitations. In most cases, studies focus on a single aspect of people's social media use or their assessment of media's usefulness (but see Jin, 2013 for an exception). A more comprehensive approach could reveal different ways in which college students find SNSs useful and indicate how these perceptions shape specific uses students make of SNSs. Second, scholars frequently assess media use in terms of amount or frequency. While overall media use has important implications for users' well-being (e.g., Ellison et al., 2007; Kross et al., 2013), nuanced information is missing if this is the only variable considered. In the case of SNSs, the targets of online social activities must be considered. A major factor in college students' social adjustment is building and maintaining a supportive social network. Seeking new relationships and maintaining existing social ties are ongoing concerns for these young people,

highlighting the importance of the targets of their interactions in studies of their use of social media.

Facebook allows individuals to keep tabs on and communicate with associates who are no longer seen regularly (e.g., high school friends not at their college) and learn more about attitudes and interests of peers they encounter on campus. It also can foster connections to strangers whom they may never meet face to face but who share a student's background or interests. Interactions with different online communication partners are associated with different psychosocial outcomes. Whereas online communication with existing friends enhances relationship quality and a sense of closeness with friends (Blais, Craig, Pepler, & Connolly, 2008; Cummings, Lee, & Kraut, 2006; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007b), interaction with strangers in cyberspace is related to lower life satisfaction (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007a). Those who become friends with strangers on an SNS are especially inclined to feel that other people have better lives (Chou & Edge, 2012).

### 1.3. Current study and hypotheses

Expanding upon past research, the current study first identified different dimensions of Facebook usefulness in facilitating social activities, such as seeking information about peers, communicating with friends, pursuing new relationships, and gaming with others. Although previous studies have suggested that college students are motivated to use Facebook for these reasons (e.g., Sheldon, 2008; Yang & Brown, 2013), no research has clearly confirmed which dimensions of usefulness are commonly perceived by young people; thus our hypothesized model does not specify the usefulness dimensions.

Next, we tested a model composed of four sets of variables: social competence, perceived Facebook usefulness, patterns of Facebook use (amount of time and three groups of communication partners students can easily encounter on Facebook), and college adjustment (see Fig. 1). Social competence is hypothesized to be positively associated with college adjustment (H1), but studies evaluating young people's technology use suggest that this relationship may be mediated by the specific ways in which students use Facebook, which, in turn, should be contingent on students' perceptions of Facebook's usefulness for various activities or objectives.

Without a preconceived notion of the key dimensions of perceived usefulness of Facebook, it is difficult to formulate hypotheses about associations between perceived usefulness dimensions and other components of the model. Therefore, we formulated research questions about the nature of associations between social competence and dimensions of Facebook usefulness (RQ1) and, with one exception, between these dimensions and patterns of Facebook use (RQ2a to RQ2c). As for the exception, general consensus that perceived usefulness is a positive correlate of technology use (Davis, 1993; Peter et al., 2005; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007c) prompted us to hypothesize that all perceived usefulness dimensions would be positively related to the amount of time spent using Facebook (H2).

Although Facebook use involving interaction with peers is positively associated with social adjustment to college, directly and indirectly (Gray et al., 2013; Yang & Brown, 2013), evidence has been equivocal about the effects of overall intensity and time of Facebook use on users' adjustment or psychosocial outcomes (e.g., compare the following research: Ellison et al., 2007; Kalpidou, Costin, & Morris, 2011; Kross et al., 2013). To ensure that we do not miss important dimensions of Facebook use, our model includes both a general measure (amount of time spent using Facebook) and assessments of efforts to communicate with three groups of people: on-campus associates, off-campus associates, and strangers. This approach of including both general and specific measures is common in Facebook research (e.g., Junco, 2012). We propose a research question regarding the relationship between amount of