

# ***Transitions in social media use and social media use for transition: A survey study of the shift from high school to college***

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## **Abstract**

High school and college students are known to be heavy users of social media. Much of their use is focused on peer social interactions and entertainment, but social media is also a potential platform for informal networked learning. In this study, we examine how college students used social media to learn about and prepare for college, how they use it in the university context, and how their social media use has changed as they mature and transition from one educational setting to another. Undergraduate students at a large public research university completed an online survey about their social media uses and perceptions. In terms of using social media to support the high school to college transition, preliminary findings show that for many students social media provided a valuable source of information about colleges, and in particular helped them plan and begin to build their social and activity networks in their new setting. Once at college, social media continued to help provide connections, serving as a source of information about campus events and supporting social connections. Social media was less frequently used as a means of networking with instructors.

Many students noted that their use of social media had changed in meaningful ways as they transitioned to college. These students indicated that their networks were now different, that their attitudes and uses had matured, and that they were better able to use their social media networks as a platform for awareness and change. Whether they perceived meaningful changes in their use of social media across the transition, most participants alluded to a desire to minimize drama, social comparison, and other ill effects of social media.

As data analysis continues, we will be exploring differences across platforms and relationships in college-related social media use based on intensity of use and sense of belonging. The study has implications for how institutions offer and support the development of social media networks among prospective and current students and provides insight into mindsets that can support or inhibit greater use of social media as a platform for informal networked learning as youth transition from high school to college and eventually on to careers.

## **Keywords**

College, high school, informal learning, social media, social networking, transitions

## **Research Context**

Most American teenagers have access to smartphones (Anderson & Jiang, 2018) and phone ownership and social media account acquisition are likely to co-occur so long as parents are agreeable (Dennen, Rutledge, et al., 2019) and even sometimes if they are not. Prior studies have found that high school students use social media to explore college and careers (Bagdy et al., 2018; Dennen et al., 2021; Rutledge et al., 2019) and universities have similarly recognized the importance of social media in student recruitment (Le et al., 2018; Peruta & Shields, 2018; Shields & Peruta, 2018). Social media use remains high among the college age population, too (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). However, for some students use in the college context is wrought with concerns of privacy (Shane-Simpson et al., 2018) and context collapse (Dennen & Burner, 2017).

Institutional approaches to social media differ between the high school and college contexts. In high schools, social media is an often unwelcome interloper. Schools attempt to monitor and curtail use (Shade & Singh, 2016) in order to distance themselves from perils such as the commonplace drama (Dennen et al., 2018; Marwick & boyd, 2014) and more troublesome phenomenon like cyberbullying. Teachers monitor student use

from afar, but do not engage with students on popular social networking sites (Dennen et al., 2020). In higher education settings, student social media use is rarely monitored unless students are acting on behalf of the institution. Still, whether forbidden or ignored, social media exists as a platform where networked learning may occur.

For high school students, social media provides informal access to college campuses and students, allowing individuals to explore future directions. Once on a college campus, social media allows students to network with each other as well as campus offices and organizations. The potential for informal networked learning in this context is great, but is it realized? The purpose of this study is to explore how college students used social media to support their transition to college in terms of learning about colleges, planning their futures, and developing connections and accessing information on campus. Additionally, this study explores how college students perceive the development of their social media use over time, as they make this educational transition and mature.

## Research Questions

This study uses an online survey to examine how youth use and perceive social media, focusing on how social media may support social and information networking needs during the transition from high school to college as well as changes in use as they make this transition. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How did college students use social media to explore and prepare for college?
2. How are college students using social media for networked learning in the university setting?
3. In what ways do college students believe their social media use has changed from high school to college?

## Method

Participants were recruited from a research study pool at a large public research university in the United States. The study pool connects students in participating classes to studies seeking participants, and students are given participation credit in their courses. Participation was voluntary, and students could opt to complete other studies or alternate assignments in their class. This study was approved by the institution's ethics board, and all participants provided consent. To qualify for participation individuals had to be 18 or older and enrolled as undergraduate students.

Data collection occurred across three weeks in November and December 2021 using an online survey. The survey was developed by the researchers and based on findings from earlier studies conducted at the high school (Dennen et al., 2020; Dennen et al., 2021; Rutledge et al., 2019) and college (Dennen, Bagdy, et al., 2019; Dennen & Burner, 2017) level. Question blocks included in this analysis focused on demographics, social media platform use, social media activity levels, and social media activities related to college transition and college life. Data analysis for this project is currently ongoing. In this paper, we report frequency distributions from the closed items and initial thematic findings from one open item.

## Preliminary Findings

There were 159 participants in the study, representing majors from across the university. The average age of participants was 20.5. The average age reported for obtaining first social media account was 12.5 years with a range from 8 to 19 years. Instagram was most reported as the first account platform (52.8%), followed by Facebook (35.6%). Only one participant reported having no social media accounts prior to university, and at the time of the study 90% of the sample reported using social media for at least an hour a day

### Social Media in the College Context (Research Questions 1 & 2)

Participants report that they were most likely to use social media to learn about extracurricular activities (89.6%) and social activities (87.2%) as they transitioned to the university setting. Social media was also helpful for social purposes, such as connecting with roommates (72.8%) and to a lesser extent future classmates (67.3%). Less frequent but still common uses of social media were learning about dorm life (65.6%) and majors (63.5%). When engaged in peer-oriented social network building activities, participants reported the highest degree of active participation (e.g., posting, commenting, and sharing), whereas when seeking information about opportunities and activities available at a university they were likely to be passive (e.g., search and read activities only). Once at university, social media networks were deemed useful for finding campus event information (88.61%) and connecting to classmates (86.0%). This form of networked connection also helped participants develop a sense of belonging at the university (71.52%). Not surprisingly, social media was less

likely to be deemed useful for connecting to instructors (34.2%), but it was considered a good source of information for class topics (60.8%).

### **Transitions in Use (Research Question 3)**

To explore transitions in use, participants were first asked if they felt their social media use had changed in a meaningful way between high school and college; 60.3% indicated that it had. Additionally, most reported that their network size increased during college (65.2%), and they were twice as likely to report increased network size if they perceived a change in social media use since high school.

#### *No Meaningful Change*

Participants who reported no meaningful change in their social media use since high school tended to describe their social media use as primarily focused on maintaining social relationships and entertainment, often on a limited scale. In other words, they shared relatively little and mostly sought information about people they know, as indicated by these responses:

I only use social media to stay and see what people that I have met over the years are doing or the people that I do not talk to anymore. I have a small circle but with a lot of friends, I get curious about what people are doing, who they are dating, and what kind of job they have.

My social media use has not changed in a meaningful way because I still use it the same way I did when I was in high school. I post infrequently and I mostly just use it to see what others are doing with their life. I use it to stay up to date on celebrities and their lives as well as certain brands that I shop at or enjoy. I would not say social media is meaningful in any way, it is just a distraction for when I am bored and don't want to do other things.

A common theme was social media as a platform for comparison, which was deemed unhealthy as described by these two participants:

I still use social media in the same way in which I did in high school. I don't view it as a positive thing, because I want to use social media in a more positive way. If I had a choice I would be more active on social media, because I think it is a great to meet people. However, social media can be a toxic place so I try to limit the way in which I use it. High school was a time where I compared myself to other people a lot. So I had to stop using it as much as I did in high school.

My social media used to be used mainly for trying to compare myself to my peers at my school and to see what they were up to so that I can try to keep up with trends and just know all of the drama and friendship groups in high school. I think that I used social media in more of a negative way back in high school, but now I use social media more for just update purposes.

Note that in these responses, participants who said their use has not had a meaningful change nonetheless allude to change. Others also noted changes in tools (e.g., TikTok's rapid rise to prominence) and friend networks.

#### *Meaningful Change*

Three main themes were apparent among the participants who felt their use had changed in meaningful ways: change in network size and scope, maturation, and awareness. Changes in network size and scope were reported in both directions. For example, one participant shared how useful social media was for developing a new network and acclimating during the pandemic:

Social media ... allowed me to know what events were going on on campus and meet people that had similar interests to me.

Another, who narrowed her network in college, stated:

I rarely ever post now ... I could really care less if I get any likes at all and if people unfollow me. It has been really freeing in a way to relinquish the care and control that social media had on me.

This last example also connects to the theme of maturation. Other participants commented that they now "try to express myself more authentically" and have "come to be more confident in what I post." They shared about

being more purposeful when they share online, often prompted by image-conscious extracurricular groups. They are also thinking about how social media use might support their future careers (e.g., “I now use it to look for future career options or extracurricular clubs”) having been introduced to platforms like LinkedIn through classes. Finally, some participants shared how they have used social media to “voice my opinion and raise awareness for causes that are important” and “lead change in my community.”

### Future analysis

The survey instrument for this study also includes closed and open questions about specific platform use and perceptions as well as adapted versions of two validated scales. The first is Ellison’s (2007) Facebook intensity scale adapted for general social media use and the second is the Simple School Belong Scale (Whiting et al., 2017), adjusted for a higher education context. Next steps in analysis include exploring differences across platforms and relationships in college-related social media use based on intensity of use and sense of belonging. We hope that these findings will contribute to the need for interdisciplinary research on social media use in educational settings (Greenhow et al., 2019) by focusing on activities and intentions outside the classroom.

## Discussion and Implications

These preliminary findings suggest that social media serves a variety of functions for college students, with differences based on personal beliefs about social media and preferences related to network size. It also suggests that at the same time that institutions shift from monitoring and forbidding social media use, youth are learning to be more intentional and thoughtful in their use. In a large and diverse college community, it would be difficult to control use, and there are many benefits of having platforms to develop networks outside the classroom in support of various social and extracurricular pursuits. To this end, even students who did not feel that social media was useful for learning about, transitioning to, and thriving in college may have benefitted from social media networking through peers who shared and brokered information and connections found on social media. Additionally, based on prior experiences researching teen social media users, we believe it possible that some participants narrowly equated social media with peer and friendship networks and that deeper probing in an interview context might have yielded examples of how social media helped them with everyday life information seeking and network development and maintenance at college. This study has implications for how institutions offer and support the development of social media networks among prospective and current students, and provides insight into mindsets that can support or inhibit greater use of social media as a platform for informal networked learning as youth transition from high school to college and eventually on to careers.

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