RESEARCH ARTICLE

SOCIAL - NETWORKING SITE (SNSs) USE AND POPULARITY ACROSS THE UNDERGRADUATE YEARS: SOCIALIZATION VIA SNSs APPROACHING GRADUATION

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine socialization via Social Network Site (SNS) use in university undergraduate students as they approach graduation. It provides a description of undergraduate students' SNS socialization from a mixed-methods approach. The main research questions include: (1) Is there a significant relationship between percent of undergraduate program completed and minutes of SNS use? and (2) What are the differences in the uses and perceptions of SNSs as students approach the end of their undergraduate programs? Student academic information (i.e., years of undergraduate program completed) was used to determine how progress across undergraduate years is linked to SNS use (i.e., minutes/day on SNSs) in a cross-sectional design. Data (*n* = 356) have been collected online from a survey-hosting website from multiple universities in Africa. The results show that as a student's undergraduate program nears completion, SNS use increases as well, controlling for other variables.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, SNSs have become extremely popular among university students, especially with the creation of Facebook®. SNSs could potentially act as a support network that can positively influence students' development, as evidenced in the face-to- face socialization literature of college students. Information presented can provide practical information to guide university staff, parents, and students in understanding how to use SNSs to increase healthy peer interaction, which is associated with a variety of positive developmental outcomes (e.g., learning, cognition, emotional support) and college engagement and retention. Socialization has been defined as "…the process by which persons acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that make them more or less effective members of their society" (Brim, 1966). The transmitters of social knowledge are socialization agents, which are for students primarily parents, media, peers, and educational institutions (Churchill and Moschis, 1979; McLeod and O'Keefe, 2007), and most recently the Internet (e.g., SNSs; Wellman, Quan Haase, Witte, and Hampton, 2001). SNSs have continued to increase in use and account for 12% of time spent online in 2010 (comScore, 2011). Facebook® is the leading SNS with Twitter® and MySpace® following in popularity.

Fifty-six percent of US Internet users have a Facebook® account, and 49.4 billion minutes were spent on Facebook® in 2011 (comScore). With the large amount of time dedicated to SNS use, especially by college students, it is understandable that SNS research is growing rapidly, focusing primarily on how college students use these sites. The face-to-face socialization literature suggests that, in general, it increases over the college years (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; Weidman, 1989). Changes in Facebook® use (i.e., socialization via SNSs) across college years have demonstrated that new university students are interested in meeting as many people as possible, and the desire lessens over time as social networks stabilize (Kalpidou, Costin and Morris, 2011; Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield, 2008). Additionally, as academic schedules became more demanding (i.e., nearing graduation), Facebook® became an efficient way to keep track of friends. Interestingly, the number of Facebook® friends was negatively associated with emotional and academic adjustment among first-year students, but positively related to social adjustment and attachment to the institution among older students. The role of social integration continues to be central to student retention (Tinto, 1975). Berger and Braxton (1998) state, "Social integration positively predicts subsequent institutional commitment, which in turn positively predicts students' intent to return" (p. 110).

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Table 1. Hierarchical Multiple Regression of Percent of Undergraduate Program Completed on Total Minutes of Social Networking Site Use Daily (N = 356)

Step	Variable	β	sr_i	sr^2_i	t	R^2	ΔR^2	F
1	Age	.02	.02	.04%	.42	.18	.18	11.37***
	Sex	-.08	-.07	.49%	-1.65			
	Ethnicity	-.13	-.13	1.69%	-2.81			
	Major	-.01	-.01	.01%	-.30			
	Country	.13	.12	1.44%	2.68			
	Paid Work	.04	.04	.16%	.95			
	ECAs	-.06	-.06	.36%	-1.29			
	Internet	.32	.32	10.24%	7.10***			
2	Percent	.18	.15	2.25%	3.31**	.20	.02	11.57***

Note. **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$. ECAs = Extracurricular Activities. Internet is minutes of Internet use per day. Percent is percent of undergraduate program completed.

This is important to consider as socialization via SNSs continues to support and supplant face-to-face socialization in college. Recent studies suggest that SNSs have the capacity to help create small communities within large institutions that make students more comfortable, engaged, connected, and persistent in finishing college (Read, 2004). Research has found that 84% of students who spend more than six hours per week on SNSs interact daily with close friends at their institution compared to only 69% who spend an hour or less on SNSs (Higher Education Research Institute, 2007). Overall, students using SNSs are more socially involved on campus via clubs, organizations, and other groups. These students are generally more satisfied with their social lives, as seen in the face-to-face socialization literature, which leads to a higher retention rate.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data (*n* = 356) have been collected online from a survey-hosting website from multiple universities in Africa. Data collection was ongoing until December of 2018, and occurred primarily through e-mail invitation to complete a web-based survey. Recruitment e- mails were sent directly to instructors at various universities. Each recruitment e-mail included a web link to an online survey that was to be forwarded to the students in their programs. The survey consists of five sections: Section 1 contains demographic/general questions; Academic information is provided in Section 2 (e.g., GPA); Section 3 asks about computer and Internet use (e.g., minutes/day on the computer and Internet); The fourth section is specific to SNS use (e.g., minutes/day of SNS use); Finally, Section 5 solicits open-ended student reflections on SNS use. Validity evidence was provided by having two faculty and student reviewers examine the survey for several criteria (Fowler, 2002). Based on their comments, it was revised prior to administration. Quantitative data were used to analyze the first research question using multiple regression – the relationship between percent of undergraduate program completed and SNS use. For the second research question, open-response items were analyzed using Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA; Caudle, 2004). QDA involves two major sub-processes: (1) data reduction and pattern identification, and (2) producing objective analytic conclusions and communicating them. Data for each open-response item were reduced to the major themes, patterns were identified, and conclusions were drawn. The authors conducted the data reduction process separately, and convened to compare their individual results. Major themes identified by the authors were reported.

RESULTS

Demographics. There were 356 participants with 189 (49.4%) from East African universities (e.g., Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania,

etc.) and the remaining participants were from other parts of Africa (*n* = 167; 50.6%; e.g., Nigeria, South Africa, etc.). The mean age was 22.34 (*SD* = 4.46), and 102 (28.7%) were male and 254 were female (71.3%). Participants on average completed 56.24% (*SD* = 31.67) of their undergraduate programs. Additionally, the sample reported spending approximately 242.02 (*SD* = 129.44) minutes/day on the Internet (i.e., just over 3 hours/day). All students reported using SNSs, with Facebook® being the most popular (*n* = 309; 86.7%). The average minutes/day of SNS use was 148.67 (*SD* = 133.14; i.e., over 2 hours/day. The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between percent of undergraduate program completed and minutes/day using SNSs. A Hierarchical Multiple Regression was used because this method allows for the investigation of how much variance is explained by a particular variable, while controlling for other variables entered in the model (Allison, 1999; Keith, 2006). The dependent variable was minutes/day of SNS use. The covariates, which included age, sex, ethnicity, major, country, ECAs, paid work, and minutes/day of Internet use were entered into the model first. Percent of undergraduate program completed was added second. Percent completed was used because some undergraduate programs in European countries last three years. After Step 1 (i.e., only the covariates), R^2 was significant, indicating that the covariates significantly predicted minutes/day using SNS (R^2 = .18, F (8, 347) = 11.37, $p < .001$). At Step 2, there was a significant increment in R^2, indicating that percent of undergraduate program completed was a significant additional predictor of minutes/day using SNS (ΔR^2 = .02, F (9,446) = 11.57, $p < .001$). Together the predictors accounted for 20.4% of the variance. Two predictors (i.e., minutes/day using the Internet [$p < .001$] and percent of undergraduate program completed [$p = .001$]) were significant after applying the Bonferroni correction ($\alpha = .05/9 = .006$). The significant and positive relationship between percent of undergraduate program completed and minutes/day of SNS use indicates that as a student's undergraduate program nears completion, SNS use increases as well, controlling for other variables (see Table 1 above).

QDA: The second purpose of this study was to investigate the differences in the uses and perceptions of SNSs as students approach the end of their undergraduate programs. Comparisons were made based on how many years participants successfully completed in their undergraduate programs grouped as beginning (i.e., 0 to 1 years), middle (i.e., 2 years), and end (i.e., 3 to 4 years). One-hundred ninety-six (47.1%) were beginning college; 100 (24%) completed year 2; 120 (28.8%) were at the end of their undergraduate programs. Use and perceptions were analyzed with the following items on the survey: (1) How do

you mainly use your SNS account? Do you think that using your SNS(s) has had an impact on you in University? and (3) If you believe that your SNS(s) HAS had an impact (i.e., positive and/or negative), please explain how.

Question 1. Students new to their undergraduate programs tend to use SNSs in a more passive way (e.g., looking at posted pictures), while students later in their undergraduate program tended towards more socially interactive uses (e.g., maintaining/building a career network). SNS activities highly endorsed by university students at the beginning of undergraduate schooling included: (1) looking at friend's photographs, (2) posting photos, (3) seeing/following what others are doing, and (4) joining interest groups. Other SNS activities were more popular among college students finishing their undergraduate studies: (1) sending bulletins or group messages, (2) maintaining a social network, (3) making plans with friends, (4) flirting, (5) and building/working/maintaining a career network.

Questions 2 and 3: Differences in perception of SNS use between early undergraduates and later undergraduates were also observed. In all groups, more than half indicated that SNS use had an impact on them in college. Major themes again demonstrated the above trend that undergraduates later in their collegiate careers indicated more socially interactive purposes with regards to impact compared to beginning undergraduates. The groups differed in that the later undergraduates tended to have a more positive view of SNSs, with a greater percentage indicating that SNSs are good for connections and/or communication. Early undergraduates were more likely to characterize SNS as distracting and/or time-consuming.

DISCUSSION

This study examined socialization via SNS use in university undergraduate students as they approach graduation. Results showed that there was a significant and positive relationship between percent of undergraduate program completed and minutes/day of SNS use. As a student's undergraduate program nears completion, SNS use increases. Qualitatively, this was supported by common themes indicating that newer undergraduates use SNSs in a more passive way compared to undergraduates finishing their studies, who used SNSs in more socially interactive ways. As undergraduates progressed through college, a greater percentage indicated that SNSs were a good connection and/or communication tool. This supports the face-to-face socialization literature that socialization increases across the college years (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Weidman, 1989); however, the current findings are not congruent with some more recent studies on socialization via SNSs in university (i.e., new university students are interested in meeting as many people as possible, with decreased interest as social networks stabilize). One explanation is that academic schedules tend to become more demanding as graduation approaches, and SNSs becoming more valuable as an efficient way to communicate with friends.

Conclusion

Although it is difficult to make conclusions about individual change based on cross-sectional data, and causal inference is limited, the results suggest a trend of using SNSs for more interactive purposes as students approach graduation. Perhaps students that were less engaged dropped out of college before the study was conducted, although more students in the current sample stated that they were not involved in ECAs, which is

indicative of engagement and attachment to the university. Overall, as socialization via SNSs becomes pervasive on college campuses, this mode of socialization can be crucial for student retention. This is noteworthy for university administrators, parents, and students in that using SNSs may be just as important as face-to-face social interaction, which has been shown to increase student satisfaction with their social lives leading to higher retention a.

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