American Teenagers' Use of Social Media to Learn about College: A Literature Review

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Social media can serve as useful learning tools for teenagers. The term social media first emerged in tandem with Tim O'Reilly's declaration of Web 2.0 as a participatory web (Hogan & Melville, 2015). Now, a wide range of online activities with multiple contributors are considered as social media, ranging "from collaborative encyclopedias such as Wikipedia, to social network sites (SNSs) Facebook and Twitter, photo-sharing sites Instagram, and social news site Reddit" (Hogan & Melville, 2015, p. 421). As social media is pervasive in today's teenage life, there are concerns regarding the harmful impacts of social media on teens. However, we, educational technologists, need to proactively find ways to use social media to improve learning and prevent any possible side effects. To fully utilize the new educational opportunities afforded by social media, we should examine the roles of social media in education, as well as the benefits and challenges it presents (Greenhow et al., 2019a, b).

Recent studies found that one of the most common informal learning behaviors among teens on social media is future/college planning (Bagdy et al., 2018; Rutledge et al., 2019). The researchers found that teens use social media to seek out college information by following the institutional accounts of potential colleges as well as by connecting with college students. Given the lack of research on adolescent learning with social media (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016), it is important to synthesize the research to date and figure out the path for the future study.

Thus, this review aims to (a) synthesize the literature on teenagers' use of social media to learn about college and (b) to offer educational practitioners and researchers suggestions for supporting college-bound teenagers. The research questions of the study include:
1. What are some features of previous literature exploring the topic?
2. What social media affordances do teens use to learn about college?
3. What are some obstacles teenagers face while learning about college on social media?

Method

Search and Selection Procedures

I searched the databases ERIC ProQuest, ScienceDirect, and Education Full Text from August 27th to October 7th in 2020 to find the literature. The second search was conducted on August 6th in 2021 to ensure that the recently published studies are included. I consulted with a school librarian to find databases and search terms. The search terms used were (teen OR adolescent OR youth OR "high school student") AND ("college access") AND (online OR internet OR "social media" OR "social network"). I limited the results to be peer reviewed scholarly journals and be written in English. I did not use any specific limit in publication year, considering that social media is a relatively recent phenomenon.

The search yielded a total of 641 articles from the databases. After removing 12 duplicates, I first reviewed the articles' titles based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria,

resulting in 386 articles for further review. The abstract review yielded a total of 96 articles. After reviewing the full text of the articles, I found five that were eligible. Additionally, I looked through the reference lists in the selected articles to find relevant literature. I also utilized Google Scholar's "relevant articles" and "cited by" features to find more recent relevant publications. These searches yielded three more articles, bringing the total to eight.

Selection Criteria

I included the literature examining both teenagers and their learning about college through social media. Only empirical studies published in peer-reviewed journals written in English were considered as eligible literature. I excluded the literature on the use of information and communication technologies in general without providing any data regarding social media. In addition, I excluded the research on college students' social media use for college adjustment. I also excluded studies whose participants' demographic information was not provided in detail. As a result, a total of eight articles met the criteria for inclusion in the literature review.

Results

RQ 1: Study Characteristics

For the eight reviewed studies, I identified some of their key features, including participants, theoretical framework, social media sites examined, and data collected (Table 1).

Table 1
Features of the Literature Reviewed

Study	Framework	Methods, Data Collection, and Sample	Social Media Sites
Brown et al. (2016)	Information literacy	Qualitative Interviews Students from six high schools in Michigan (N = 68)	Not specified; Online in general
Ellison et al., (2014)	Social capital	Qualitative Interviews Students from three high schools in Michigan (N = 43)	Not specified
Marciano (2015)	New media literacy	Qualitative Interviews, focus groups Black and Latina first-gen college applicants from a single high school in New York (N = 10)	Facebook
Marciano (2017)	New media literacy	Qualitative Interviews, focus groups 12th grade Black and Latina first-gen college applicants from a single high school in New York (N = 10)	Not specified
Greenhow & Burton (2011)	Social capital	Mixed methods	Not specified

		Survey: Students from low-income families who were recruited from three urban high schools in the upper Midwest (N = 607) Interviews: Participants selected from those surveyed (N = 11)	
Greenhow & Robelia (2009)	New literacies	Qualitative Interviews, talk-alouds, content analysis of MySpace profiles High school students from low-income families in the upper Midwest (N = 11)	MySpace
Wohn et al. (2013)	Social capital	Quantitative Survey High school students (N = 789) Compared first-gen and non first-gen students	Facebook
Rutledge et al. (2019)	Not specified	Qualitative Survey and activities: High school students from a single high school in Florida (N = 48) Interviews: High school students from the same school (N = 37), Administrators and teachers from the same school (N = 18)	Not specified

Note. First-gen = First-generation

Participants of the Studies

All eight studies reviewed used a sample consisting of high school students. Five studies considered participants' first-generation status by purposefully including them in the samples (Brown et al., 2016; Ellison et al., 2014; Marciano, 2015, 2017; Wohn et al. 2013). Notably, Wohn et al. (2013) compared first-generation students and non first-generation students in terms of social capital and college aspirations. All of the studies except for Rutledge et al. (2019) stated that they included students from low-income households. Regarding the locations of the participating schools, four of the studies sampled participants only from urban high schools (Marciano, 2015, 2017; Greenhow & Burton, 2011; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009); other three studies had participants both from urban and rural areas (Brown et al., 2016; Ellison et al., 2014; Wohn et al., 2013). Marciano (2015, 2017) and Rutledge et al. (2019) recruited students from a single high school in New York and a single high school in Florida, respectively.

Theoretical Frameworks

Three of the reviewed studies adopted the social capital framework to situate their research. Social capital refers to the ability of individuals to access and deploy resources in their social network (Wohn et al., 2013). Ellison et al. (2014) examined teens' online and offline experiences associated with two different forms of social capital: bridging and bonding. They discussed how teens' experiences related to these two types of social capital reshaped their future aspirations. Greenhow and Burton (2011) emphasized the significant role of social capital in

education and psychological well-being. They examined how social media use of high school students from low-income families related to their social capital. Wohn et al. (2013) examined how social capital accrued through parents, peers, and Facebook Friends can affect teens' college application efficacy and expectation of college success.

Four of the reviewed studies adopted the literacy perspective. While they used different terms like information literacy, new literacy, and new media literacy, they all focused on teens' communication practices on social media. Brown et al. (2016) investigated teens' college information seeking practices online to understand what skills and strategies they use to access information about college and how they analyze and evaluate the information found online. Greenhow and Robelia (2009) emphasized the importance of online communication, especially for low-income students, because it allows them to interact with peers based on their specific interests rather than geography. They looked at how teens from low-income families use MySpace from the perspective of new literacy. Marciano (2015, 2017) explored the new media literacy practices of Black and Latina/o youth attending urban public high school.

Research Designs

One study used only quantitative data. Wohn et al. (2013) used questionnaires to inquire about their college aspirations and different types of social capital they had (i.e., demographic, structural, immediate network, extended network). They conducted hierarchical linear regression analyses to identify the added variance due to the inclusion of the four social capital factors.

Six research only relied on qualitative data. Brown et al. (2016) conducted in-depth interviews to examine teens' online practices to learn about college. Ellison et al. (2014) also employed in-depth interviews to investigate how teens' online and offline experiences shaped their understandings of possible life paths. Marciano (2015, 2017) used interviews and focus-group interviews. They adopted a social participatory youth co-researcher approach, in which the researcher recruited focal participants, and the focal participants invited peer participants to the study and performed interviews as coresearchers. Greenhow and Robelia (2009) conducted qualitative case studies to explore teens' novel practices on MySpace by using interviews, talk-alouds, and content analysis of MySpace profiles. Rutledge et al. (2019) used a multilevel exploratory case study. They taught social media lessons to 48 high school students in the first study year and 37 students in the second. Data were collected through survey, audio-records of the lessons, field notes, activity worksheets, and interviews. They also interviewed 17 faculty members and administrators.

One study used both quantitative and qualitative data. Greenhow and Burton (2011) first conducted a survey with high school students from low-income families and used multiple regression analyses to see how intensity of their use of social media could predict their social capital. They selected 11 participants from those surveyed and carried out semi-structured interviews in order to complement the survey data.

Social Media Sites

Two of the studies indicated their focus on teens' use of Facebook (Marciano, 2015; Wohn et al., 2013), and one on MySpace (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009). The other five studies looked at teens' overall use of social media rather than specific social media platforms. Several sites, including Twitter, Xbox, and YouTube, were mentioned by the research participants and were covered in those publications.

RQ 2: Social Media Affordances to Learn About College

The reviewed studies show that teens use social media in various ways to learn about college. I identified the five social media affordances teens use: vicarious experience, information seeking, identity development, emotional sharing, and schoolwork support.

Vicarious Experience

Many of the reviewed literature suggest the promising role of social media in exposing teens to a broader range of people. For instance, Brown et al. (2016) found that teens were monitoring social media profiles of college students at their "dream schools," which informed them about college life and functioned as a motivator. Furthermore, they revealed that teens on social media would inadvertently encounter college-related information from their peers and family members in college. Seeing their college lives shared on social media helped teens make school decisions and inspired them to research more about college.

Information Seeking

Wohn et al. (2013) revealed that having Facebook friends who could give college information and advice was a positive predictor for the first-generation students' expectations about college success. Ellison et al. (2014) reported that a teen who was a member of a special interest Facebook group discussed attending college out of state with the group members. Greenhow and Burton (2011) described a teen encountering a college student going to her interested school on MySpace. The teen exploited the opportunity by inquiring how to get into the school and their personal opinions about the school. Rutledge et al. (2019) also noted that teens networked with college students they encountered on the college's Facebook page and messaged them to ask about school information. Greenhow and Robelia (2009) suggested that first-generation students got advice on their college application by contacting their former classmates. Similarly, Brown et al. (2016) reported that teens used social media to ask college-related questions to their peers and cousins with college experience.

The advanced technological features facilitated disadvantaged teens' information seeking. For example, Marciano (2015) described a teen from an immigrant household who could not afford college tours. Thanks to a friend's suggestion, the teen was able to take a virtual tour through YouTube videos and Facebook pages, which the teen found very beneficial. Moreover, Rutledge et al. (2019) reported that teens were following the colleges' official Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter accounts, where they read the posts and comments and interact with college students. The reviewed studies have also reported teens using the tag and hashtag features to learn about college (Brown et al., 2016; Marciano, 2015). Brown et al. (2016), for example, found that teens utilize hashtags to locate the social media posts about a university's marching band and Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

Identity Development

Some of the reviewed studies show that teens used social media to share their college aspirations and achievements. According to Brown et al. (2016), some teens updated their Facebook status to share their college plans. Friends and family members showed interest in their college application process and gave them encouragement to keep going. Some students posted their admission letters on social media. Similarly, Greenhow and Burton (2011) reported that teens shared their educational plans on MySpace profiles. Sharing their college aspirations and

attainment on social media enabled teens to build and maintain college-going identities and recognize peers who had similar plans. The social support they received reinforced such identity.

Emotional Sharing

Social media became a place where teens vented their stress about college planning. Greenhow and Robelia (2009) found that when teens expressed their concerns about college planning, their former classmates, now in college, gave emotional support by leaving supportive comments on their MySpace accounts.

Schoolwork Support

Marciano (2015, 2017) highlight how teens utilize social media to help one another meet academic requirements for college readiness. They found that teens discussed schoolwork through text messages and Facebook posts. Greenhow and Robelia (2009) and Rutledge et al. (2019) also suggest how teens use social media to support schoolwork, by asking questions about deadlines, organizing study groups, exchanging educational materials, and collaborating on homework. Furthermore, Marciano (2015) described that a teen posted her poem on Facebook that could be possibly used for her college application essay. She tagged a well-known literacy organization in her post, and one of the organization's mentors gave critical feedback on her writing. The teen purposely utilized the tag function to attract the organization's attention and was successful in gaining comments to improve her work.

RQ 3: Obstacles Teens Face While Learning About College on Social Media

Despite the advantages of social media identified above, the reviewed studies have also noted some obstacles that teenagers could face while using social media to learn about college. In this section, four major challenges will be discussed.

Difficulties with Applying Broad Information to Their Specific Contexts

Brown et al. (2016) revealed that while teens reported being able to identify and access college information online, they struggled to evaluate and apply the information to their specific needs. The participants described a large amount of information on the web as overwhelming due to its lack of meaningful context. The researchers thus emphasize the importance of knowledgeable translators who can help them understand the information found online. The term "knowledgeable translator" is defined as "social contacts that students access(ed), via online and offline channels, in order to make sense of generic information and apply it to their specific informational need" (Brown et al., 2016, p.110). The researchers also discovered that a few participants considered social media as an unreliable source of information and preferred authoritative sources such as guidance counselors. However, at the same time, social media may help teens make sense of complex information. For instance, some participants described how a guidance counselor at their school curated information for a Facebook group by filtering information relevant to students. The counselor also answered students' questions about online information and directed them to additional resources. Teens also reached out to peers and family members who were current undergraduates or college graduates, to contextualize information about college. In sum, while teens may have difficulty interpreting information obtained on social media, it could also be a place for them to find knowledgeable translators.

Potential Negative Influences of Social Media

Wohn et al. (2013) revealed in their quantitative research that teens' frequent use of Facebook was negatively related to their expectations of college success. This result implies that not all activities on social media might be beneficial for teens' college aspirations. Moreover, Wohn et al.'s (2013) found that for non-first generation students, the number of Facebook friends were negatively related to their college application efficacy. For first-generation students, the emotional support from Facebook friends was a negative predictor for their college application efficacy. Though the study does not provide further evidence to clarify such relationships, the findings indicate that Facebook friends and their emotional support might have negative impact on college application efficacy.

The Nature of Social Media Platforms That May Limit Network Expansions

Social media platform's distinctive features could affect teens' learning about college. For instance, Ellison et al. (2014) found that on Facebook, teens tend to friend their schoolmates and family members rather than reshaping their networks. The participants mentioned the "normative pressure to indiscriminately friend schoolmates" (p. 526) on Facebook. Such a norm had teens have little control over their friending decisions and thus kept them from being exposed to various worldviews or novel information.

However, the same culture on Facebook where teens network with their existing relationships appears to be beneficial in terms of getting social help. Specifically, Marciano (2015, 2017) found that when teens post questions about school assignments on Facebook, they were able to get quick, multiple answers from their peers enrolled in the same classes. Greenhow and Robelia (2009) and Greenhow and Burton (2011) also found similar results on MySpace, where teens asked for help with their school tasks and received needed help.

Discussion

RQ 1: Study Characteristics and Suggestions for Future Research

All the reviewed studies recruited high school students as participants, and the majority of them considered the participants' socioeconomic backgrounds. They used literacy and social capital as their primary frameworks to explore the topic. Empirical studies based on a broader range of theoretical frameworks may help us to see teens' social media use from diverse angles and thus enrich the research conversation on this topic. Potential frameworks that could be employed include communities of practice, self-efficacy, affinity spaces, cultural historical activity theory, and self-regulated learning theory (Greenhow et al., 2019b). In terms of research methods, one study only used quantitative data to identify the connections between variables, whilst six only used qualitative data. One study employed both quantitative and qualitative data. Recent social media research has begun to be more methodologically varied, by adopting, for example, big data techniques and social network analysis (Greenhow et al., 2019b). Future researchers could investigate such opportunities and utilize different methods to achieve their research goals. When it comes to social media sites, three studies were primarily focused on Facebook and MySpace while others did not identify any specific platforms and instead looked at teens' social media use in general. Though either approach could be used depending on research goals, focusing on specific tools may allow us a more nuanced understanding of different tools (Orben, 2020).

RQ 2: Suggestions for Leveraging Social Media Affordances

The current review identified five social media affordances that can be used to learn about college, indicating that we can use them to better help college-bound teenagers. First, we can support students' technical access to social media by reducing the regulation on the use of phones and social media during the school day. Blocking social media sites at school may separate teens from potentially valuable college information (Brown et al., 2016; Marciano, 2015). According to Enriquez (2011), undocumented immigrant Latinx students found weak ties with other undocumented students to be more useful than teachers, counselors, and school officers in meeting their unique information needs. Teens can possibly use social media to connect with potential weak ties who may provide information tailored to their own situations that they may not be able to obtain at school.

Second, we could integrate social media into curricular activities to benefit from its learning affordances (as suggested by Marciano, 2015). Previous scholars have emphasized the importance and benefits of bridging formal and informal learning contexts with the use of social media attributes (Greenhow & Askari, 2017; Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). For example, we could encourage students to share classroom artifacts via social media by tagging experts and peers to receive help with their work. This way, we can utilize the social media affordances to support schoolwork and have our students associate social media as a learning tool.

Third, we should also help teens improve new media literacy skills to fully exploit the benefits of social media (Brown et al., 2016; Marciano, 2015). New media literacies include traditional literacy such as reading and writing, research skills, technical skills, critical analysis skills, but more importantly, "social skills developed through collaboration and networking" (Jenkins et al., 2009, p. 29). The new media literacy will be crucial in finding credible online resources and making more informed college-related decisions.

Fourth, we could design and develop an intervention for teens' college preparation by using social media affordances. Though many teens use social media on a daily basis, they might not be fully aware of its affordances to help their college-going process. We could let them know the availability of institutions' social media accounts and potential uses of social media to reach out to people attending their dream schools. We could also teach skills to find specific information about colleges using their appropriate hashtags. Such endeavors may involve design-based research aimed at developing an intervention to improve teens' informal learning about college using social media (Greenhow et al., 2019b).

RQ 3: Suggestions for Overcoming Potential Obstacles

Despite all the merits of social media mentioned earlier, this review also highlighted some obstacles teens experience while learning about college through social media. Based on them, I give specific suggestions for practitioners and future researchers. First, educators should provide teens with knowledgeable translators who can help teens make sense of information found online and apply it to their specific needs. Educators themselves could serve as translators for teens at school or district levels. In addition to face-to-face assistance, we could also consider utilizing social media. For instance, school guidance counselors could create a Facebook group page or an Instagram account where they provide college-related information tailored to their students as suggested by Brown et al. (2016). Considering that disadvantaged students are less likely to seek help from guidance counselors (Holland, 2015), using social media as a means to communicate college information could be a possible strategy for making college information more accessible to a larger student population.

Second, researchers should examine how specific social media activities have different impacts on teens' college aspirations. Wohn et al. (2013) found a negative association between teens' frequent use of Facebook and their college aspirations. The frequency indicator may not be sufficient to draw upon to explore how social media usage impacts teens. It is important to stop using the blanket term "social media use" and instead focus on specific social media practices. Future studies should examine what types of social media activities are associated with teens' college aspirations and with their actual college access.

Third, future studies could investigate the impacts of social media friends. The reviewed studies suggested mixed results regarding how social media friends and their emotional support affect teens' college aspirations, which implies the complicated nature of peer influence. Other previous studies have examined how peers on social media can possibly affect teenagers through fear of missing out (Marengo et al., 2021), peer comparison (Chua & Chang, 2016), and drama (Dennen et al., 2018; Rutledge et al., 2019). Such complex phenomena could complicate how social media friends influence teens in terms of their college aspirations.

Fourth, researchers should examine different social media platforms' distinctive features and their impacts on teens' learning about college. This review suggests that a social media norm could be a double-edged sword depending on how teens use it. Future research might look into teens' learning practices on various social media sites, as well as their potential advantages and drawbacks. For instance, Dennen et al. (2020) explored the role of six prominent social sites in a high school environment (i.e., Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Pinterest). Alhabash and Ma (2017) investigated college students' use of different platforms and nine distinct motivations. Similar to them, we could examine how teens learn about college through various social media platforms and further explore best practices for each platform.

Conclusions

This study reviewed the eight literature investigating teens' use of social media to learn about college. Theoretically, current studies on this topic have been primarily situated in literacy theory and social capital theory. Methodologically, the current studies leaned more toward the qualitative approach. The review suggests five social media affordances in learning about college: vicarious experience, information seeking, identity development, emotional sharing, and schoolwork support. On the other hand, there were some potential barriers teens may encounter when learning about college on social media. First, they were having difficulty understanding generic information obtained online. Second, some social media activities may be detrimental to teens' college aspirations. Third, the norms of social media sites may impede teens from learning about college. This research has implications for how to use social media affordances to better help college-bound teens in their college learning.

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