Identity Work on Social Network Sites: Disadvantaged Students' College Transition Processes

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ABSTRACT

Prior research suggests that some social media practices can play a role in shaping students' adjustment to college; however, the specific mechanisms by which social media can support the *identity work* associated with successful transitions to college are not well understood. This paper investigates how social media experiences and interactions can support college-focused identity construction for low-income, first-generation college students. Drawing on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 31 emergent adults from disadvantaged backgrounds in the United States, we identify social media affordances that support the process of identity work during a critical transition period. Findings indicate that social media platforms support provisional identity work, but disadvantaged college students lack access to mentor-like figures that could be accessible through social media. We also find barriers to sharing information online that may extend to other life transitions in multiple life contexts and review the design implications of our findings.

Author Keywords

Social media; social network sites; emergent adults; transition; identity work; college; Facebook.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION

Getting a college diploma has never been more important for socioeconomic well-being; in 2014, compared to their high school-educated counterparts, Millennial college graduates ages 25 to 32 who were working full time earned about $17,500 more annually, were more likely to be employed (89% vs. 82%), and were significantly less likely to be unemployed (3.2% vs. 12.2%) [1]. U.S. college enrollment among first generation students (those who are

the first in their family to go to college) and low-income students (which we define as disadvantaged college students in this paper) continues to increase at a rapid rate [2]. And yet, the likelihood for successfully *attaining* a college diploma for these students remains grim: 76% of low-income students fail to attain a Bachelor's degree within six years, and 89% of low-income, first generation students fail to complete a Bachelor's degree within six years [34]. Research also shows that among first-generation, low-income students who drop out of college, nearly two thirds do so after their first year [17] – so this period is especially critical. Surprisingly, higher dropout rates for low-income students exist even when students have the academic skills and material resources necessary to be a successful and effective student [39]. Extending the work of Markus and Nurius [30] on self-concept to this context, we can consider the possibility that students struggle because they fail to establish future self-images, or "possible selves," regarding their identity as college students. Students who claim school-focused future self-images are more likely to do well in school because they personalize goals, connect current behavior to future states, and find meaning in their current situation [11]. Thus, a successful first-year transition in which students identify themselves as college students – and take actions consistent with that understanding – is critical for successfully navigating the college experience.

Social media platforms provide users with the ability to express identity-related information, which can have implications for how we perceive ourselves [20, 45] and how we feel about ourselves [41]. Both the expression of one's own identity and exposure to others' identity-related self-presentational messages suggest that social media can be a supportive platform for individuals going through a life change by providing an outlet for engaging in adaptation behavior, which consists of two components: identity exploration (*identity play*) and identity reaffirmation (*identity work*) [24].

In this study, we examine how college students from disadvantaged backgrounds use social media during their first year of college and before getting to campus, with a particular focus on issues of identity transition. Extensive research has documented identity management practices on social media, yet little is known about the extent to which disadvantaged college students engage in constructing, trying out, and adopting provisional identities in these

spaces, especially around the college transition process. Furthermore, previous studies with a focus on how traditional college students utilize social media [12] may not capture the experiences of students from low-income backgrounds and minority youth, who may need more academic and social support to stay in college and obtain a degree than their more affluent peers [40].

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 31 first-year college students from low-income households about their first-year experience, social media use, and utilization of the Internet for college-going and college-related information. We discuss our findings using an "affordance" lens in order to ensure the relevance of our insights to other social media platforms beyond the ones used by students at the time of data collection, and to avoid technologically deterministic assumptions of "impact" [42]. Three categories of affordances facilitate students' identity work on social media. First, association of ties, persistence of information, and visibility allow college students to learn how to be college students by discovering roles and expectations. Second, a reduced cues environment and asynchronous communication channels can enable students to engage in "selective self-presentation," or the ability to edit and construct a school-focused college identity online, based on how they want to be perceived [45]. Third, the increased accessibility of existing network ties enhances college students' access to relevant social support for reaffirming working identity.

RELATED RESEARCH
To set the stage for our analysis, we first share an overview of identity construction, which draws from Ibarra's conceptualization of identity work, play, and provisional selves [24]. Then, we review the current state of research in the field concerning identity work and its relationship to social media.

Transitioning into New Identity Roles
According to Goffman [19], identities are constructed and negotiated in social interaction by the identity cues we intentionally "give" and unintentionally "give off." People make identity claims by presenting a version of self that signals how they wish to be viewed by others and how they perceive themselves. Goffman [19] claims that adherence to role-related expectations facilitates the passage through one's role-enacting environment, resulting in the internalization of corresponding identities [19, 32]. Socialization scholars extend these theories by investigating the notion that people continue to construct and negotiate identities as they gain opportunities to elaborate on and illustrate provisionally claimed identities with experiences.

A successful transition to college relies partly on students forming an authentic, college-centered identity. The experience of establishing a college-centered identity is positively associated with a sense of fit [10, 35] and empowerment [21], which reinforces students' engagement with their academic experience, persistence in the face of adversity, and realization of their potential [9, 10, 39]. Fortifying a school-focused identity requires provisionally connecting "the beliefs, understandings, relationships, representations, and activities that are part of the educational experience to students' lives" [38]. This identity transformation is especially challenging for the population we are studying, who often have fewer role models and examples in their immediate households and lived environments [17, 39].

This study investigates the process of role-enactment at a time of transition, a period when individuals who are "in between" roles improve their understanding of the new role and refine their self-image in that role [46]. We use role transition theory and related research to understand how college students may engage in the process of new role enactment during transition to college [24, 43]. We also consider the process of adaptation, which involves three basic tasks important for adjusting to new roles and rehearsing "provisional selves:" role model observation, experimentation with self-image, and identity self-evaluation based on feedback [24].

In the organizational sphere, scholars conceptualize identity work as people's engagement in forming, repairing, maintaining, and strengthening or revising their identities to preserve existing identities and/or externally ascribed self-concepts [37, 39]. Identity play, as a complementary notion to identity work, is defined as people's engagement in provisional but active trials of possible future selves [24]. Ibarra [24] addresses the playful aspect of identity work and presents a framework for understanding how people go through processes of identity development whereby the individual begins to take on the identity, attitudes, and relationships of the next role – in this case that of college student – before he or she has actually attained it. This framework considers the process by which people reconstruct their identities – for instance, as they move from identifying as a high school to independent college student.

In order to assume a new identity role, people experiencing life changes need to overcome transition hurdles by engaging in adaptation behavior, which includes 1) observing role models and identifying elements they want to emulate; 2) experimenting with provisional selves by imitating self-presentation style and distinct traits they aspire to; and 3) evaluating which provisional selves to adopt. This process requires one to reflect upon his or her provisional selves internally as well as externally by receiving social feedback [24]. We expect that young people may engage in those processes using social media because these sites enable them to see others' self-presentational messages, play with self-presentation and identity cues, and receive social feedback in the form of comments and 'likes' from their network.

College Students and the Internet
As of 2014, 87% of 18 to 29-year-olds in the U.S. use Facebook and 53% of young adults use the second most

popular social media site, Instagram [14]. Research on digital inequality demonstrates that although a majority of adolescents use social media, how they use these platforms varies based on demographic factors such as gender, race, and socio-economic background [23, 27, 28]. Specific uses of the site may be related to students' academic performance. Analyzing usage of Facebook and its relationship to student GPA, Junco found that using the site to share links and to check on friends was positively associated with GPA while chatting and posting status updates were negatively associated [26]. In another study, Junco [27] found that African American students were less likely to use the site to check on friends and tag photos, activities that may help with social integration into college and, as other work indicates, academic achievement. This study also identified a relationship between parental educational level and specific Facebook activities, such that those with less educated parents were less likely to use the site for active communication with peers, such as chatting and RSVPing to events, potentially limiting their ability to benefit from their use [27]. College students report that they use Facebook as one of their primary communication sources [36], but these findings suggest that disadvantaged college students may not make use of the platform's affordances to build a social support system which could assist with social adjustment to college.

Identity Work on Social Media
Social network sites (SNSs) feature a unique set of affordances that facilitate the display of identity information via the profile and other features [16]. Such affordances have the potential to affect identity by reshaping how individuals view themselves and others. The affordances of SNSs related to identity processes include selective self-presentation and asynchronicity [15]. Selective self-presentation, the act of emphasizing or deemphasizing identity cues, allows individuals to curate a desired impression [45]. Asynchronicity permits individuals to take their time constructing a profile or messages on social media and gives users the opportunity to focus on their self-presentational messages without interfering with conversational flow [45].

The social and technical context of social media can also pose constraints for emergent adults' identity work: online environments often include networked contexts in which social groups are collapsed, audiences are impossible to accurately identify, and anything posted online could be taken out of context [7, 8].

Haimson et al. [22] explore social media as a space to do identity work around gender transitions. They found that people undergoing gender transition found inspiration, understanding, and an audience for experimentation from close friends and from strangers, but not from acquaintances. Similar to how Haimson et al. explore social media's role in identity work while undergoing gender transition, we examine social media affordances that can

support the transition from a high school student to a college student. We pose the following research questions:

RQ1: Does using SNSs to observe role models influence disadvantaged college students' identity transition processes and, if so, how?

RQ2: In what ways does enacting and reaffirming their provisional college identities via SNSs influence disadvantaged students' identity transition processes?

RQ3: What are the barriers to sharing college-related information online that could limit the opportunities presented by social media for engaging in identity work?

METHODS

Participants
To recruit participants, a sample of first year students at a large public Midwestern research university was selected by the registrar based on students' household income data. To qualify, participants needed to be from families with a combined income of less than $50,000, which is below the national household median income [13]. Out of 6500 enrolled first year students, 9.7% (630 students) met our criteria. Of this group, 400 were randomly selected to receive an email from the registrar inviting them to participate in the study and to take a brief online screener survey. The screener survey, used to select interview participants, collected information about demographics and social media use.

Our final dataset included 33 students – 12 men, 21 women. 18 participants identified as Students of Color and 15 participants identified as white. All of the participants had completed their first year of undergraduate education. Twenty-five participants were first generation college students. 22 students declared a major in the engineering, science, or technology fields; the remaining students majored in humanities, political science, business, or were undecided. The sample was split evenly between in and out of state students.

Procedure
We conducted semi-structured interviews with first year college students to learn about their transition experiences and their use of social media to gain college-related information (from the time they were a senior in high school until the end of their first year in college). Interviews were conducted between July 2014 and September 2014 and ranged from 45 to 90 minutes. We conducted interviews until we reached saturation. Twenty-five participants were interviewed using video conferencing software; all others were interviewed in person. We compensated each participant $25 for their time.

Each interview began with warm-up questions that asked participants about their hometown, their summer plans, and how they thought their first year went. The interview protocol also covered their social media usage, their pre-college transition experiences, and their campus transition.

Additionally, the interviewer asked participants about their social network site use, their social media posting practices, and how they searched for information online. For the latter, we asked participants how they attained college-going information (information needed to make a decision about which institution to enroll in) and college-related information (information about academic, social, and professional aspects of college they would need to ease their transition to the college environment).

After the interview, we asked participants to log into Facebook and to talk about interactions on their page that related to college (e.g., visual artifacts of college life, postings about campus events or class experiences). As they did so, we asked participants to identify instances where they communicated with others about college or shared college-related information.

Data Analysis

The first author inductively coded the transcripts for emerging themes [31] using Atlas.ti. After identifying the relevance of information-seeking about college, social media practices, and social support received through social media, a meta-matrix was developed to compare examples across participants [33]. When we revisited and organized the emergent themes from the interview data into the meta-matrix, we focused on understanding how the themes found in the data could support the process of adaptation found in the socialization literature. In the section that follows, M (male) and F (female) denote participants' gender and FG signifies first-generation students.

RESULTS

Learning How to Be College Students on Social Media

Our first research question asked how disadvantaged college students used social media to observe role models and to identify roles and characteristics that they wanted to emulate. We found that participants turned to social media to connect with mentor-like figures who gave them advice about how to succeed in college. Another way that participants learned about characteristics they wanted to emulate as college students was to learn not from one specific individual, but from the aggregate collection of content produced by multiple people in their networks.

We asked participants how they learned about college before they arrived on campus. Some participants reported interacting with older college students on social media about whether they liked college, what classes they took, and what they planned to major in. Participants learned from more senior students' posts about what they would experience in the near future. For example, as a high school senior, P15 (F) reported getting a feel for college culture through pictures or comments older students posted on social media:

> So, during [my senior year of high school], I did follow a lot of people that went to my high school, because some of them did graduate. They

> would tweet about how they felt about school or how it was so different and all this other stuff. ...And I would read some of their tweets to get a feel for it ... [On] Instagram, people post a lot of pictures in college, so there's all these pictures.

The composition of participants' friends network affected the extent to which they could easily access college-going information via social media. We observed differences in how participants used social media to gain college-related information based on whether they had an older sibling or relative who had gone to college. P10 (F) used Facebook Messenger to connect with her brother's friends in college:

> My brother put me in contact with a few people that I sent messages to on Facebook just because it's really easy to find people on Facebook if you just know their full name. So I did that, but other than that I didn't really – [I: So what kind of things did you ask the folks that your brother put you in contact with?] I asked them general questions, like how they like the school. Maybe what the classes were like, and what their favorite and least favorite thing about the school was.

In contrast, P21 (F, FG), a first-generation college student without siblings that attended college, said social media did not provide the kind of information she wanted to see:

> We [my friend and I] would say, 'College is like [a] strange fantasy land we don't know much about.' For whatever reason, we noticed that on social media, college students who we followed wouldn't open up about their experiences. We didn't really receive that much insight into their experiences.

For college-related information during their first year of college, participants followed people or Facebook groups to keep up-to-date on information they would need to survive in college as well as to pursue professional interests (learn about strategies for the MCAT, a national standardized test for medical school applicants, or the LSAT, a national standardized test for law school applicants). P3 (F, FG) noted how she liked using social network sites because they enabled her to "look and see what [her friends] are up to" and to use Facebook and Twitter "for advice about college—not necessarily the acceptance, but how to survive on a college diet, how to survive in a college dorm, how to not kill your roommate when you want to…" The extent to which participants actively used social media for seeking college-related information varied: some participants followed people they knew on social media and merely observed their posts, whereas others actively asked questions and sought advice on how to be a college student. For instance, P3 (F, FG) noted that she was mostly a lurker, while P15 (F) told us that she actively engaged on social media and relied on Twitter to share and find quality college-related information:

I tweet about my exams a lot, when I'm studying for exams…I want to tweet, 'Hey, guys. Studying for an exam.' And get right back to it. [laughter] So, I do tweet about that stuff…When I have advice about a class or I'm missing a class in my schedule, I'd tweet that, and the upper classmen actually respond and tell me about classes or what kind of professors, or to go to ratemyprofessors.com. They do tell you that stuff. I think that's really helpful.

Through Twitter, P15 (F) also communicated with older college students for information about things like good study spots during finals. Similarly, participants with a specific career in mind described using social media to connect with people who shared their interests. For instance, P15 followed people at her school who were also pre-med on Twitter in order to monitor what they were talking about and doing. Similar to P15 (F), P29 (M, FG) discussed how he paid attention to posts on Facebook about classes, scholarships, or a professional development program that piqued his interest.

Fourteen of our participants described how SNSs and other social media functioned as a source of college-going and college-related information – either by observing the content other users posted on the site or by facilitating one-on-one direct messaging with weak ties and/or strong ties who were inaccessible (or less accessible) offline. In the next section, we discuss how students enacted provisional selves as college students during their first year in college.

Enacting and Reaffirming Provisional College Identities Online

Our second research question asked how the affordances of social media allowed individuals to enact and reaffirm their reconstructed working identity. When we compared first-generation and traditional college students in our sample with regard to how they enacted provisional selves via their social media practices, we did not see major differences with the exception of P11 (F, FG). P11, who strongly identified as a first-generation college student, used social media to give advice to younger students at her high school and others in her network, who she knew would be going through similar experiences. She tweeted about which professors she liked, why she liked a certain class, and other memorable college-related experiences that she thought might be useful. As a first-generation college student, she hoped that younger first-generation students would benefit from her social media posts.

At the beginning of their first year, students who did not express strong identification as first-generation college students, such as P9 (F, FG), reported following university groups and 'liking' their posts to indicate her interests. P5 (F, FG) shared new experiences she had with friends such as a casual get-togethers, fun dinners, or traveling photos. When asked what impression P15 (F) thought she presented to her audience on social media, she mentioned being

motivated to show the more playful and positive aspects of her college identity:

I think [the audience] would think that I really like sports, and I really like joking. Like when people try to take stuff really serious on Twitter, I'm really... I try to make it a joke. I don't want people to be all sad. And I really care about... I tweet about my future a lot and my family. So, I think they'll know that I really look at the future.

Our analysis suggested that participants turned to social media to get social reaffirmation and/or social support by receiving feedback on the provisional college selves that they presented. For instance, when P18 (F) passed a difficult college class, she posted about it on Facebook, and received 31 'likes' from her peers and family members. P14 (F) implied that she was motivated to change her profile picture and cover photo of her Facebook page to a promotional poster for a student organization in order to receive positive feedback in the forms of 'likes' and comments on Facebook. Similarly, P14 (F) said her motivation for changing her profile picture was a desire to reflect her feminist identity for a feminist group event and to gain positive reaffirmation from her friends and family:

[I: Who were the groups of people that were responding to you?] Mostly people from my [feminist organization] group. I just feel like a lot of the friends that I made at the University really identify as feminists, so I think that they were all excited about it. And my family members loved it, too.

During finals, P29 (M, FG) told us that college students, including himself, posted motivational messages about surviving finals on social media:

I know a lot of my other friends, when finals will be coming or something, they will post these statuses, kind of like motivational messages, and I love reading them because it's like the stuff that I post too, but it also motivates me, like, 'I can do this, finals are just a part of college, you can get through it.'

These forms of encouragement may have helped participants maintain and affirm new provisional identities under stressful or challenging conditions.

Other participants noted that seeing posts about classmates' success on social media motivated them to maintain their provisional college identities. For instance, P29 (M, FG) explained how seeing his friend get an internship made him happy and motivated:

It kind of makes me proud and happy to see that other people are doing stuff too and not just me. It makes me think, 'At one point, I'll be doing that too.' Not necessarily in that field, but I will be doing big things like that, like internships and

> *new jobs. It motivates me and makes me happy at the same time.*

We observed participants comparing their college experiences with their peers through social media, which encouraged them to maintain a provisional college identity.

Barriers to Sharing Online

Our last research question asked about barriers to sharing college-related information online, which could limit the opportunities presented by social media for reconstructing identity work. Although participants used social media for gaining a perspective on what it was like to be a college student, they were careful not to disclose too much information due to the visibility of their social media content and the norms of sharing information on social media platforms. Students were sensitive about sharing information for the following reasons: perceived fear of judgment, perceived norms around sharing information on social media, privacy concerns, inefficiency, and a perceived lack of intimacy.

Perceived Fear of Judgment

For our participants, one of the barriers to posting college-related information on social media was the perceived judgment from one's social network. For instance, P7 (M, FG) assessed what to post based on responses he expected to receive from family members and friends on social media, an outcome of the "context collapse" often associated with sites such as Facebook [47]. He described how he refrained from posting anything personal or negative about college on social media in order to avoid responses from unintended audience members:

> *I really try to keep anything super personal off [social media]... Because it seems like college, everybody thinks that they know more about college than what you do ... So you post something like, 'Oh man these classes are really killing me!' or 'Oh man why do I have to do this?' ... Then all of a sudden you get these 20-some odd comments about, 'Oh, well, [P7], you need to be doing this because this or this or this' and 'it's good for your future...'*

Similarly, P31 (F, FG) expressed concerns about being perceived as one-dimensional and too focused on college if she posted a lot of content about college. P21 (F, FG) reported manufacturing an exciting social media presence that did not fully capture all dimensions of her college experience:

> *I like to take pictures of the high points of my week or the fun things I'm doing, and only share those and not share the six hours I spent in the library or how I just took a five-hour nap. No one cares about those mundane things... Nobody wants to follow a boring person... I just think [positive self-presentation] makes for more interesting social media presence and I also*

> *think it ... maybe enhances your conversations once you finally see those people face-to-face."*

P21 (F, FG) refrained from posting some questions publicly to social media because she didn't want to appear unknowledgeable:

> *I mean, you don't really want to publicize [that] I'm not capable of figuring out where to find the best cup of coffee. You don't really want to create that persona about yourself on social media.*

According to Gershon, prospective employees create corporate-friendly social media profiles, but their efforts are hindered by a lack of flexible self-presentation, especially when there are multiple sets of audiences to address and when they manage self-presentation across multiple SNS platforms [48]. Not only were participants concerned about how they would be perceived by their social group, they were also concerned about the risk of getting judged by future employers. P22 (M, FG) mentioned his concern for not showcasing something that could be detrimental to his goals and his ability to realize his desired future self. He described how he deleted his Twitter account, because he did not like what his fraternity friends were posting:

> *I deleted Twitter. It's just out of control, not mine, other people's ... I know some of the pictures people have been posting and, I'm sorry, like your future employer will see these pictures. Or maybe your McDonald's employer will not see these pictures, but they don't care. But if you're planning on going to law school, or if you're planning on going into law enforcement ... it makes me think that's probably not a good decision, or posting about smoking weed or mollies. These things are illegal, and, if you want to do them, I don't care. That's your business. But posting about doing illegal substances on Facebook or on Twitter – like, come on!*

Perceived Social Norms on Social Media

Participants expressed concerns about not violating the perceived social norms on Facebook by asking for college advice publicly on social media. P31 (F, FG) told us that she was highly conscious about the fact that not everyone would appreciate her asking for college advice:

> *It's just that asking for college advice wouldn't help the people in my social network necessarily, so it is kind of just a courtesy thing. I don't scroll through my note and news feed and see something that is not relevant to me. So I think people are now just like, "Okay, if I don't want to see that, I'm not going to make someone else see that."*

When the interviewer asked her if it would be a bad thing to ask questions about college, her response noted how the

collective social norm on Facebook prohibited people from seeking college-related information publicly:

> *Facebook is not really the place to do it. If people do ... We have something like college workshops and college seminars, and college night, all these things. People are pretty much familiar with it and then if they have a question, they'll seek you personally. It's not really a public forum or.... There are so many other places to do it publicly that it's more acceptable, but Facebook is more just a social, like, "Here's my private, personal life." You don't really... If there's a place to do it else that's more professional, you're going to do it there.*

Privacy Concerns

Because social media content will persist over time and users could not predict who would see their posts in the future, 20 of our participants reported being extremely careful about what they posted, and one participant refrained from posting anything publicly altogether. P3 (F, FG) commented on the persistence of content as one primary reason for only posting appropriate materials. Thus, she defined appropriateness based on the test of time:

> *I feel like [social media content] will never disappear on Facebook, and I feel as though most people are always evolving their perspectives. So, I don't really feel the need to constantly post something that can change in days or months, a year.*

P5 (F, FG) suggested that she considered searchability and visibility of her identity online when sharing identity information using social media:

> *In the world we're in now, your face-page really can be someone's first impression of you. ... I guess I try to filter the things that I post through 'how much would I respect another person if they were posting this?'*

When P22 (M, FG) was applying to colleges, he considered tweeting the university's Twitter account questions about college, as encouraged by the college. However, knowing that all of his friends would see his questions stopped him from posting a tweet to the school's Twitter account publicly because details about his college application process were not "appropriate for [his] friends to know." High school seniors, who contacted college students for advice, also expressed concerns around privacy. High school seniors from P31's (F, FG) school only contacted her by Facebook Messenger or by texting to learn about her life away from home and at the university.

Inefficiency and a Lack of Intimacy of the Public Channel

P31 (F, FG), for one, said that she didn't seek information from older college students through social media because it was inefficient and impersonal.

> *Texting's just easier than opening up the app to contact someone. And I feel it's more personal through text versus just a quick Facebook wall post or something*

P25 (M, FG) also preferred texting to public posts because of privacy and because "I always carry my phone with me everywhere." However, in terms of contacting people, some participants, such as P10 (F), reported finding it easier to do so through social media.

Opportunities for Sharing Information

The way participants used Facebook Groups also suggested that this feature removed some of the barriers to sharing information publicly. P6 (F) talked about how Facebook groups allowed users to broadcast information to many individuals with shared interests, without having to know them personally. For instance, P6 (F) joined the Facebook group for the university's honors society, where people asked for advice on what classes to take. P28 (M, FG) joined a group for students interested in the STEM field, where he found out about a summer STEM program at another university.

Participants mentioned that the Facebook Page for the university's incoming class of first year students was beneficial. For P5 (F, FG), a Facebook group for her graduating class allowed her to connect with classmates before the beginning of school by finding out about shared interests:

> *That's how we all have started talking, and we ended up going on a trip together to Chicago to see a show at the beginning of school because we all started talking about it. So it just depends. Sometimes I'll make new friends over those Facebook groups, but for the most part, I'm interacting with people that I know or people that I have some sort of connection to.*

We find that participants are highly conscious about what image they present on social media. The social norm around posting only positive, interesting aspects of their lives generated a polished version of college life, which, unless participants had a connection that purposefully used social media to help incoming students or were a part of incoming first year students' Facebook group, acted as a barrier for social media to be an efficient channel for doing identity work. Norms against posting negative or overly candid content may have inhibited expressions of a wider repertoire of possible selves – expressions that could act as a bridge between the current state and one's desired self.

DISCUSSION

Identity Work and Transitioning on Social Media

Disadvantaged college students used social media platforms to explore, enact, and affirm provisional identities as they transitioned into college. First, disadvantaged college students used social media to observe older students' identity work, which was made visible via social media

postings. Additionally, they made use of social media's efficient access to association of ties and posed questions to older students that acted as mentors. This helped to demystify the transition process, as disadvantaged college students gained information about specific academic and social challenges they might face in college. In learning how to be college students provisionally, we found that older siblings or relatives played a significant role in breaking structural barriers by being a resource for the often unstated "rules of the game" regarding how to be an effective student [29]. The literature on student retention focuses on whether parents have college experience or not, but we found that older siblings or relatives may be just as important for helping students navigate the process. In fact, we found that social media can amplify these benefits by providing access to older siblings' networks.

Second, disadvantaged college students enacted provisional college selves as they re-aligned role expectations. Students began to claim new roles as college students by posting college-related pictures and status updates. On social media and other online contexts, students constructed positive and school-focused college identities. Only P5 (F, FG) and P21 (F, FG), who described their first-generation status as salient to their identity, took the initiative to demystify aspects of college life for others as they constructed their college identity on social media.

Lastly, access to a diverse association of ties on social media afforded college students the ability to gain social support in the forms of 'likes' and comments, which helped forge and expand their present working identity. Students showcased interests important to their college identity – such as passing a test or getting an internship – and received positive feedback from family, friends from their hometown, and friends from college. Relationships with classmates and college groups are important for creating a context for students to determine expectations about what their identities as students ought to and will be [18]. Our findings indicate that students used social media to look at one another's identity work and motivated one another to excel in their newfound identity in difficult times. Similar to Ibarra's work, we found that adaptation to new roles depends not only on looking the part but also external validation from peer groups [24].

Our analysis suggests that these social media affordances could help college students engage in identity work because these affordances resonate with social and psychological processes researchers have previously identified as instrumental in constructing or modifying identities during transition [25]. According to Baumeister and colleagues [5], the mechanisms underlying the role of social interaction in altering possible selves are information and support, identification, and social validation and comparison. We found that students' engagement on social media correspond to core identity tasks Ibarra claims are instrumental for role changes [25]. For instance, seeking out

information about various aspects of college life was instrumental in helping students establish provisional identities. Presenting and sharing college-related selves may help buffer newer, more provisional possibilities from the rules of and obligations that govern more established identities. Lastly, students reaffirmed college identity after they gained social support from social ties, which is one of the mechanisms underlying the role of social interaction in adopting possible selves.

Our findings on students' transitional identity work complement recent research exploring how social media can support life-changing events. For instance, our study extends work by Haimson et al. [22], which investigated how online self-presentation opportunities can enable transgender people to reinvent their personal style. Both Haimson et al.'s and our findings suggest that identity search, exploration, and advice-seeking behavior, which resulted in ideas for possible and ideal future selves, need to be supported better by online tools. Haimson et al. found that the complexities of self-presentation online during identity change would benefit from design that better supports a public aspect of change management, where users can constantly reassess and negotiate self in relation to others. They also called for a private, collaborative social system with more control over privacy. Ibarra [24] found that junior level professionals try out and adopt provisional selves when they move into a more senior role within a corporate setting. Our work may extend Ibarra's work in that we look at how social media can supplement face-to-face channels in supporting new employees' identity work by connecting them to older and more experienced students [24]. Our work may also complement existing work on supporting fatherhood on social media sites [3]. Ammari and Schoenebeck [3] found that fathers, whose roles are steadily changing, experience judgment and stigma online. They suggested that fathers would benefit from an anonymous platform that allowed them to comfortably communicate with one another [3].

Our analysis posits that social media platforms support identity work for disadvantaged college students in transition; however, there are barriers to sharing aspects of college life that may constrain them from benefiting fully from all that the platforms afford. With the hope that these insights may facilitate the creation of useful socio-technical interventions, the next section proposes design conditions for supporting identity work on social media during a transition period. Although our design approaches address the needs of first-generation and low-income college students, we believe they will also be useful for other users who may be undergoing identity transitions as well as the general population of first year college students.

Design Approaches for Supporting Identity Work during a Transition Period

Increase Visibility of Mentors
Our analysis demonstrates that college students can engage in external identity work, but the extent to which they utilize social media for identity play, or exploring possible self-images that they could adopt [24], is limited. The transition from possible selves to adapting a new role occurs when individuals 1) observe role models and identify elements they want to emulate; 2) experiment with provisional selves by imitating self-presentation style and distinct traits they aspire to; and 3) evaluate which provisional selves to adopt [24].

In order to rework identities in practice, social network sites, particularly ones that serve as the primary SNS platform within a student group, could explore designs that enable incoming first year college students to find mentor-like students to help them find personalized information about college life as well as enable first-generation college students in the same cohort to compare and discuss experiences. In this instance, we suggest enhancing the visibility and association of ties afforded by primary SNSs like Facebook in order to enable incoming first-generation college students, who have no mentor-like figures in their network, to search for and find students who are already acting as mentors. For instance, primary SNSs could increase the visibility of mentor-like figures by adding a search engine option to filter for potential mentors and making these results more visible, which capitalizes on friend-of-friend connections on the site. Our data suggest that participants who happened to have people in their social network who could advise them about college benefited from being better prepared, academically and socially. However, those without siblings, friends, or older high schoolmates they could ask about college (such as P2, P15, P18, P21, and P23) failed to gain new information about the college environment using social media.

Reduce Perceived Risk of Judgment
One potential benefit of social media for college-related identity work is the information-sharing potential of these platforms. For instance, incoming first-year college students might see others post about everyday experiences in college, thus demystifying the process. Or, as has been shown in other work on adult samples [44], incoming first-year college students could use sites like Facebook to post questions about college and receive answers from a diverse set of ties. However, social norms around posting behavior (such as an emphasis on positive experiences) limit these opportunities. We suggest that although perceived risk of judgment is not restricted to first-generation and low income college students, they may be more negatively affected because they cannot compensate for these missed opportunities via other channels. Their higher SES and non-first generation counterparts are likely to have access to other sources of informal knowledge associated with college success, but first-generation and low-income college students' opportunities for accessing these forms of informal knowledge are limited. Due to the perceived risk of judgment for seemingly not "getting it" or for violating social norms against posting mundane or negative content, students may be less likely to do so. Similarly, students are unlikely to turn to SNSs to address challenges they may face in college, such as difficult classes or living independently for the first time, for fear of being judged.

Our analysis demonstrates that some college students, given the right resources within the network, already engage in question asking. However, they do this privately, and students excluded from seeing these exchanges are unlikely to benefit from this information. Thus, one possible socio-technical intervention is the introduction of campus-specific SNSs, where people can share answers with others from similar backgrounds; these may be especially helpful for incoming first-generation college students. In order to reduce the perceived risk of judgment, we recommend reducing the audience groups students have to consider by using SNSs specifically focused on campus life, such as the SpartanConnect tool created at Michigan State University [12]. Such student-centered social media could allow students to 1) post privately and/or anonymously or 2) make posted content visible to others in their network only if they have matching interests or characteristics.

Another recommendation from our findings is that post-secondary institutions might explore introducing anonymous user platforms, which would minimize online reputation concerns [49] and potentially allow for more candid exchanges of questions and answers. SNS could allow users to identify themselves as planning to attend a particular college and to make their college-related posts public to other users who also plan to attend that college. We suggest that disadvantaged college students stand to benefit from private, interest-based groups on social media, such as Facebook groups for incoming first year students, where students would be able to post without fear of judgment from others, especially people in their social network. In these groups, students who identify with certain identity characteristics (e.g., first-generation, pre-med, or a graduating class) would be able to find content posted by people in their school network.

Increase Awareness of Social Benefit to Sharing
Incoming college students would also benefit from increased exposure to non-idealized, realistic portraits of college life. However, perceived norms held by current college students that favor interesting, college-related illustrations that cast their life in a positive light could prevent incoming college students from gaining access to less idealized college-related information from a broad range of individuals in their social network. One way that social media can address this constraint may be to plan and implement social media interventions, as suggested by scholars like Reynol Junco, who envisions "an attempt by student affairs professionals to implement something that

will lead to desired positive student outcomes" [50]. Our findings empirically strengthen Junco's call for social media interventions, for the current social media ethos lacks a culture of sharing informal knowledge relevant to student success. According to Junco, student affairs members can proactively serve as role models on social media and share content that could help first-generation and/or low-income college students gain informal knowledge. Future work could explore audience receptiveness to social media interventions enacted by student affairs staff. Junco proposes using tools within Facebook or Hootsuite to measure the effectiveness of measures taken to promote informal learning [50].

Our study has some limitations. In reading through our findings, readers should be aware of the fact that we spoke with underrepresented college students from disadvantaged backgrounds at one institution. Our method was designed to surface relevant themes and was not intended to produce generalizable results. We would expect to find different patterns of how students from disadvantaged backgrounds engage in identity work at non-residential institutions like community colleges or teaching-focused institutions, where students are more likely to live at home or off-campus. For students in these institutions, social media participation might serve a different function. Similarly, the institution in this study had substantial support resources to ease students' first year transitions. Students at institutions with fewer resources may have different experiences and use social media to different ends. Thus, more research is needed to understand first year college transitions for students at other institutions, such as those that have fewer resources for first year students or whose students live off campus during their first year, as community college students often do. Future work in this area should also carry out a similar study with non first-generation or low-income first-year college students in order to identify how specific challenges apply to specific groups.

CONCLUSION

Our analysis explored how disadvantaged first-year college students experienced becoming a college student and how they used social network sites "in between" two liminal identity roles: transitioning from adolescents living with family members at home into independent college students at the beginning of the emerging adulthood phase [4]. Qualitative data collected from 31 first-year college students in transition reveal that social media affordances have the capacity to support adaptation to a new role and its environment through three basic practices: 1) learning how to be college students by discovering roles and expectations due to association of ties and visibility, 2) editing and constructing a provisional college identity online, by presenting unique identity cues specific to their reconstructed role as a college student, and 3) gaining access to geographically far social ties. Although social and technical barriers exist, first-generation and/or low-income first year college students can use social media to support

transition to college by gathering information that could shape aspects of their college identity.

Helping marginalized students attain their post-secondary goals is crucial. This study extends the literature by providing empirical support for how college students use SNSs as a liminal space to conduct identity work during an important life transition from high school to college. We found that, although limitations exist, SNSs could support emerging adults by providing a resource to imagine, construct, and strengthen college-relevant identities. Certain social media activities could enrich emerging adults' ability to engage in successful transitions. As a result, social media should be considered as one of many factors that contribute to young peoples' ability to successfully embrace their college-focused identities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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