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Role of Social Media in Addressing Educational Inequality: A Critical Examination of Marginalized Teens' Social Media Usage

Daeun Jung (iD)
Instructional Systems & Learning
Technologies, Florida State University

Correspondence:
Daeun Jung
Instructional Systems & Learning
Technologies, Florida State University
Email: dejung918[at] gmail.com

Abstract

Although digital technology is valorized for its promises in empowering individual learners and democratize educational opportunities, such hopeful imaginaries need to be critically revisited. What is the role of social media in addressing educational inequality? This study aims to unravel the question by examining the role of social media in the college choice system of potential first-generation college students. The study adopts a multiple case study approach, engaging with eleven high school seniors, whose parents did not complete a four-year college/university. Two interviews and a week of social media diary data were collected. The themes revealed the teens' contradictory views toward the role of social media in their college choice system: (a) abundant but insufficient information, (b) helpful but not impactful for college choice, and (c) inspiring but distressing experiences. The contradictions uncover the important role of in-person support system and resources embedded in marginalized teens' college choice system, underscoring the pre-existing inequalities in their social contexts. Based on the results, I critically discuss the role of social media in addressing educational inequality, particularly the optimism around digital informal learning, and provide suggestions for formal schooling to enhance marginalized teens' college access.

Keywords: educational inequality, social media, teens, college access, post-secondary education

Introduction

The ubiquity of digital technology in our daily lives has fostered optimism for better education. Self-directed learning has become mundane practices, challenging the boundaries of formal education (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). Digital technology's participatory culture enables individuals to engage as digital citizens, empowering them in the community (Jenkins et al., 2009). A wide range of information is accessible online, facilitating personalized learning. Conversely, critical narratives raise concerns about the techno-utopian thinking, emphasizing how digital technology usage is intertwined with socio-political contexts, potentially (re)producing inequality (e.g., Rahm, 2023; Selwyn, 2015).

This study examines the role of social media in teens' college choice system. Existing literature suggests that potential first-generation students leverage social media to aid in their college choices. They connect with educational institutions (Brown et al., 2016, 2022; Rutledge et al., 2019), seek information from college students (Brown et al., 2022; Brown & Ellison, 2021; Greenhow & Burton, 2011), and support each other's college access (Brown et al., 2022; Marciano, 2015, 2017). However, some findings point out the drawbacks of social media, including vague information and the impact of social media norms discouraging individuals from openly seeking college-related information in public forums (Brown & Ellison, 2021).

Within the hopeful discourse around digital technology in education, we need to revisit the promising assumptions about the digital technology and critically examine how it is actually used in realities (Selwyn, 2015). The purpose of this study is to unravel the role of social media in potential first-generation students' college choice system. The research question is:

> How do potential first-generation college students perceive the role of social media in their college choice system?

Methods

Participants

To recruit participants, I used multiple channels. In the Summer of 2023, I contacted my local acquaintances, universities' college readiness program directors, and local schools' guidance counselors to distribute the study information. I also hung the flyers to the local businesses. When the K-12 school reopens for fall semester, two faculty members helped with distributing the study information to local school principals. Among the teenagers who signed up for study participation, I contacted eligible teenagers who are 1) 12th graders, 2) potential first-generation college students whose parents did not complete a four-year college/university degree, and 3) social media users for college exploration. They were informed of the study information, and their parent or legal guardian signed a consent form for their participation in the study.

As a result, eleven high school seniors at five high schools in a Southeastern state participated in the study. Participants were all 16 or 17 years old, with seven females and four males. They identified themselves as Asian ($n = 2$), Black ($n = 6$), Hispanic ($n = 2$), and White ($n = 1$). Participants who completed the entire study procedures received a $50 Amazon gift card as an incentive.

Data Collection

Data were collected from late June to late September 2023 through two semi-structured interviews and social media diaries of the participants. The interviews were conducted on Zoom, and the diary entries were submitted through Qualtrics online survey tool. The first interview lasted about 30 minutes, inquiring about their college choice and their general social media usage. Subsequently, the participants submitted diaries for seven days, in which they reported: a) their daily social media usage; b) what they thought and involved in about college; c) screenshots of the social media posts related to college they encountered and/or purposefully sought and their thoughts related to the content. The second interview lasted about 90 minutes, delving more into their diary entries and their college choice support system. The second interview protocol included questions directly asking about participants' perceptions about the role of social media ("what do you think about the role of social media in your college access?" "What aspects of social media are the most helpful?" "What aspects of social media have limitations?"). The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim through Otter.AI, which I reviewed for accuracy. The interview transcripts and the diaries' textual data served as the source for data analysis.

Data Analysis

Drawing on the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022), I conducted a thematic analysis. I first familiarized myself with the dataset by iteratively reading the data and writing participant summary notes. The initial coding was done inductively. Two undergraduate research assistants and I independently engaged in open coding for six participants' data. We discussed our coding results through six weekly meetings. This process allowed me to enrich my understanding of the data and narrow down the focus of the investigation to teenagers' perceptions of the social media's role in their college choice system. Subsequently, I re-coded the entire dataset with this specific focus, utilizing ATLAS.ti for assistance. The codes generated were used to organize initial themes and construct a thematic map. Through the thematic map, I identified the contradictory patterns in participants' views toward social media. I refined the thematic structure in a recursive manner by comparing the map, the codes, and the data sections back and forth.

Findings

Participants' contradictory views toward social media's role in their college choice system can be summarized into three themes: (a) abundant but insufficient information, (b) helpful but not impactful for college choice, and (c) inspiring but distressing experiences.

Abundant But Insufficient Information

Participants commonly indicated how they are exposed to everyday college life through social media. As their classmates and friends at high school graduated and went to college, their social media pages were naturally filled with what their friends post about their college life: "I was just clicking through Instagram stories. I just so happened to see something about college. … it shows what they're serving that Wednesday at [College A][1] that's where my friend goes"

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[1] All college names are pseudonyms.

(James)[2]. Participants also encountered college students' "day in my life" and "sorority rush" videos, showing every college life: "It'll just be like kids walking to class, going to the cafeteria, they cleaning their dorms and stuff like that" (Estella).

Despite the daily exposure to general college life through social media, teens expressed difficulty with finding specific information that is directly relevant to their interests. For instance, Estella, who aims for a nursing major in college, explained how she was not following any nursing student on social media: "you have to really search their life because they don't post the nursing program as often. So if they're not my friends, and I don't know them per se, then I don't know. No, I don't follow them" (Estella). Another prospective nursing student, Tiffany, tried to find nursing students but failed: "I've been trying to look but I can't really find anybody. Anybody for the schools I wanna go to. Let me put it like that."

Helpful But Not Impactful for College Choice

Participants viewed social media information as providing a wide range of information, encompassing application deadlines, scholarship, and college students' perspectives. Particularly, regarding college students' perspectives, teens highlighted how they could see multifaceted aspects of college life through social media, both positive and negative. For example, through social media, they learned about various issues related to the school they were interested in, including campus drama, insufficient housing, and damaged facilities.

Nevertheless, their college choice was not influenced by the negative narratives. Participants emphasized that the information they obtain through social media is "still digital" and "not your own experience" (James), and that other more important factors play a part in their college choice: "there's more than social media that influences us" (Fred). For example, one of the main factors influencing their college choice was college tour experience. James explained how his college tour experiences led him to considering two colleges: "[College B] has a really nice campus. And the environment and people in there, I just- I love- I love the atmosphere. I love the scenery of it," and "The main reason for [College C] is I actually I took a tour there."

Inspiring But Distressing Experiences

Through social media, teens also saw the achievement of others who they have known for a long time or those who share similar identities to them, which served as a powerful source of inspiration. For example, Jasmine came across an Instagram reel titled *College For All*, featuring a Black girl showcasing the multitude of colleges she had been accepted to. Reflecting on this, Jasmine shared that:

> as a person of color, people don't expect you to go to college. And especially if nobody around you pass thing. And so she got accepted into all those colleges. And I thought, if she can do it, then I can do it, too (Jasmine).

However, it was not that they only see others' achievements. As Jasmine notes, "I don't think it's all fun. I think it's some classes that you have to take, it's hard." Witnessing the challenges faced

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[2] All participants' names are pseudonyms.

by college students, particularly the academic difficulties, instilled a sense of apprehension in them. It even led to questioning whether college was the right fit for them: "When they struggle, when they can't get their work in and all that I see a lot. So it makes me wonder like "is college what I really want … struggling is my biggest fear in college" (Tiffany).

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings show prospective first-generation students' contradictory perspectives toward the role of social media in their college choice system. The teens' perceptions partly corroborate the promises of digital technology—democratizing information, enabling participation, and instilling hope. Yet the other side of the teens' views conflicts with the promises, unfolding the complicated realities of social media usage intertwined with the teens' social contexts.

Social media appears to democratize information, giving teens a vicarious experience of everyday college life. However, participants' exposure to college information was largely influenced by algorithmic systems rather than their own initiatives. As peers transitioned from high school to college, the participants' social media feeds naturally became saturated with college-related content, reflecting changes in their online network compositions (e.g., Brown et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2022). When the teens actively made efforts to find specific information about their desired major, they encountered frustrations due to a lack of available or easily accessible information on social media.

Teens recognized the value of authentic perspectives shared by college students on social media, where the participatory culture allowed them to observe diverse facets of college life. (e.g., Brown et al., 2022, Brown & Ellison, 2021). However, participants viewed the mediated nature of social media information as inadequate to influence their college choice. Instead, participants placed higher value on firsthand experiences, such as college tours, an opportunity not everyone among the participants had the chance to partake in.

Observing others' achievements through social media provided participants with a source of hope. Individuals on social media platforms served as symbolic models for observation and learning, as proposed by Bandura (1999). However, social media content portraying the challenges faced by college students also fueled anxiety and fear about the college experience. This apprehension may be amplified for participants as prospective first-generation students lacking immediate networks, such as parents who passed through the college journey. The teens' engagement with social media was intricately connected to their social context, potentially influencing the emotional impact of their social media use.

In conclusion, social media can play a role in potential first-generation college students' college choice system, only with enduring boundaries and constraints within the system. These gaps highlight the structural inequality and raise questions about who is responsible for dealing with the issues of inequality in college access. I contend that formal schools play a crucial societal role as part of a compulsory educational system, offering students more in-person opportunities to explore college through initiatives like college expos, tours, and mentoring programs with college students.

Author's Contributions

DJ developed the study, collected and analyzed the data, and wrote the paper.

Open Researcher and Contributor Identifier (ORCID)

Daeun Jung (iD) https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7574-4862

Ethics Statement

Ethics approval has been granted by the Florida State University Research Ethics Board.

Conflict of Interest

 The author does not declare any conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data is unavailable in accordance with the ethics agreement for this study. The author has undertaken the responsibility to ensure that all requisite measures for protecting the privacy of human research subjects have been implemented.

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