

# **SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE BY MILLENNIAL COLLEGE STUDENTS: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DIGITAL-AGE STUDENT LEADER**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*There have been a variety of social media platforms available for consumption; so millennial students may be able to connect through technology to assist with their academic development. A significant amount of development occurs for college students who are & which are considered millennials. The social media platform connection began when these students were in junior high school, as an academic and engaging experience.*

*To explain the social media usage by millennial college students, this study explores college student leadership development through the impact of social media usage within digital education.*

**Keywords:** Student Leadership Development, Social Media, Digital Education, Millennials, Student Success.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Learning in the modern age, in the context of higher education demands an understanding of the various social media experiences that millennial aged college students experience, through the lens of student developmental. Palfrey & Gasser (2008) asserted that social media platforms were introduced and increased in popularity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as an online social engagement tool through various social sites such as Bebo, Myspace, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and now Snapchat. Perrin (2015) reported that 94% of today's internet browsers range in age from 18 to 29 years old, also known as the millennial generation. Perrin (2015) affirmed that social media initially targeted adolescents and young adults, but all individuals now utilize these technology sources across their lifecycle as a developmental activity.

Many colleges and universities are illustrated as environments where social media activity receives substantial attention due to the educational importance on research and technology (Dede, 2013). Martinez-Aleman (2014) stated that college students are the most frequent and substantial social media users for sociability and research gathering purposes. However, many student students struggle to develop social skills and demonstrate loneliness, depression, and isolation throughout their collegiate experience (Eisenberg et al., 2013; Reetz, et al., 2015). Research also directs higher educational professionals to understand the crucial components of helping students succeed academically through these negative social interactions (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001; Chou et al., 2011). A variety of research from (Chickering & Ressler, 1993; Schlossberg, 1995; Bronfenbrenner, 1993) provides exploration of prominent identity theories that have application to understanding millennial college students' use of social

media. For the purposes of this study, research will explore college student development and adult identity development theories, with the additional explorations of student success research.

### **ADULT MILLENNIAL STUDENT IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT**

Since majority of the student population age ranges from 18-29 years old, they are categorized in a time frame of adult identity development (Gray et al., 2013). Marcia (1966) stated that identity development takes individuals through two tasks, commitment and exploration. Arnett (2000) alluded that emerging adulthood will be a time when skills are developed for social independence, career exploration, and maintaining relationships. After this is developed, experimentation of social identity will have been established. Gray et al. (2013) and Martinez-Aleman (2014) explained that the internet and college experience enables this by providing laboratories for exploration from parental oversight.

As Jones & Abes (2013) explained, *“The study of identity may be considered an investigation into the stories of one’s life; as an individual constructs a sense of self, tempered by the external world, a story unfolds and gets written. If technology is part of one’s life, then weaving technology tools like social media into an identity development theory is important. However, at the root of identity development are the answers to questions about which I am and what will I be.”* (Jones & Abes, 2013)

#### **Chickering and Ressler’s Vectors of Identity Development**

According to Pascarella & Terenzi (2005), balancing identity exploration and experimentation, as well as commitment, highlights the works of psychosocial theorists (Chickering & Ressler, 1993) who developed seven vectors of student development. Pascarella and Terenzi alluded that the seven vectors are listed as:

1. Developing competence.
2. Managing emotions.
3. Moving through autonomy toward interdependence.
4. Developing mature interpersonal relationships.
5. Establishing identity.
6. Developing purpose.
7. Developing integrity.

Through this theory, students differentiate and integrate encounters into their own values and ideas. This took identity development for college students into other developmental needs.

#### **Schlossberg’s Transition Theory**

Evans et al. (2010) mentioned that Schlossberg proposed a theory to help understand how adults cope with transitions or change in their own lives. The researchers alluded that these transitions were defined by (Schlossberg et al., 1995) as an event or non-event that results in change. Schlossberg’s Transition Theory is a framework to assist higher educational professionals with college students to understand the meaning of transition in their life and to cope with the adaption and change that occurs (Evans et al., 2010). Anderson et al. (2012) identified that the model has three major components: (1) approaching transitions, (2) taking stock of coping resources, and (3) taking charge. According to Gray et al. (2013), college students’ transition to campus life is significant through adjusting into campus groups through

social, emotional, and academic means. Mullendore & Banahan (2004) insinuated that providing a new student-orientation program/forum to assist each college student in this transitional process that includes academic developmental programs and services throughout the first six weeks of class and a first-year seminar. Tinto's (1982) model of student integration mentions that college students have a need to maintain interactions as they adjust to the college environment.

### **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model**

According to Bronfenbrenner & Morris' (1998) the ecological theory model is surrounded by four levels of content: (1) microsystem, (2) mesosystem, (3) exosystem, and (4) macrosystem. The ecological model systems are where the work of the development occurs as an individual's developmentally instigative characteristics inhibit or provoke reactions forces and resources from the environment in the course of proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). A microsystem is a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relationships experienced by the developing persons in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). Renn & Arnold (2003), listed examples of microsystems for college students, including roommates, faculty relationships, athletic teams, and families. Microsystems not only influence the person, but also other microsystems.

A mesosystem *"comprise linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings containing the developing person"* (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). This system includes not only campus culture but also multiple roles and systems, such as a college roommate or an athletic team. For example, a student's roommate is also on his or her soccer team, with each role having different obligations. Development is promoted in the synergy between micro and mesosystems. Some of these mesosystems are out of the students' control or creation, such as campus culture or a campus peer culture. This is what makes up the exosystem. This is an influential system, especially on microsystems, which (Renn & Arnold, 2003) list as federal financial aid policies, family workplace, and National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) regulations. These factors may impact certain students more than others, but they are always beyond one's control (Evans et al., 2010). The final context is macrosystem, which makes up an entire system, such as American democracy.

## **DIGITAL MILLENNIAL COLLEGE STUDENT IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT**

In reviewing previous literature, there is currently no theory in existence relating to college student identity development that analyzes the impact of social media. In a recent publication entitled *"Engaging Students through Social Media,"* (Junco, 2014) concluded that there was a gap in the literature explaining that what was missing in this ecosystem were student affairs professionals who understand how student behaviors on social media are connected to students' overall developmental paths.

A social media user's ability to selectively identify themselves, while using Facebook, Instagram, or Snapchat, has been observed through a selection of methods. Junco (2012), described these online identities as pseudonym and anonymity. The researcher explained that a true identity is described as when a profile includes *"the person's real name, real demographic information, and real pictures"*. Junco (2013), also explained that in contrast, a pseudonym is when a profile includes fake or hoax accounts, *"used to represent the user and his or her online contributions"*; demographic information does not match up with the true identity of the account.

A microblogging and social networking website known as Tumblr is categorized as a social platform that majority of its users establish pseudonym accounts instead of establish profile accounts with their true identity (Junco, 2014).

In the social media universe, users can use anonymity expressions to hide their identities, including their gender, age, and location from other users browsing the virtual community (Luarn & Hsieh, 2014). These researchers explained that a great example of an anonymity expression is Snapchat. Junco (2014), described that the biggest difference with anonymity expression is the ability to disconnect from a user's true identity by communicating with the social media environment without anyone knowing who they truly are.

## **COLLEGE STUDENT LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**

In today's society, Ingleton (2013) mentioned that college student leadership development is an emerging field. He alluded that contemporary theories of leadership redistribute power to followers and prioritize self-awareness, ethics, and morality, as well as being a socially responsible leader. As is evidenced in the literature, researchers, such as (Astin, 1984; Bass, 1985; Mayer & Baloverly, 1987; Allen et al., 2012), have explored leadership from all developmental stages with minimal knowledge on how leadership develops over time or the identity transformation within leadership.

Higher education has provided formal opportunities to college students, such as leadership positions, programs, and retreats (Ingleton, 2013). Student development theorist (Astin, 1984) called upon universities to provide leadership development both in and out of the classroom and advocated for students to be empowered to be social change agents. University programs are held accountable by the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS), which declared, "*Colleges need to develop not just better, but more leaders, and that students must be better prepared to serve as citizen leaders in a global community*" (Miller, 2003). As such, Ingleton (2013) called for leadership programs to provide knowledge, skills, and value clarification through theory and practice in digital education.

## **DEVELOPING DIGIAL STUDENT LEADERS THROUGH DIGITAL EDUCATION**

Leadership theories provided frameworks and language to consider for college student leadership development. Terms such as change agent, self-awareness, authenticity, ethics, morals, and followership were commonly mentioned. By applying these leadership theories to a digital context, what it takes to be a digital student leader emerges. Digital education can be looked at with research and guidance on digital literacies, digital citizenship, and digital identity, as well as digital leadership. Youth born after 1980 are labeled as "*digital natives*" (Prensky, 2001), since they have grown up with emerging technologies. However, an anticipated outcome of the research will indicate that students, who have grown up with digital advances and tools, don't necessarily possess competence in the use of these tools. Greenhow & Robelia (2009), discussed the digital disconnect students face, which is a result of schools failing to cultivate their use, interest, or skill levels in the curriculum. Digital education for college students is important as youth develop knowledge and skills to meet the quickly evolving networked society they will enter after graduation.

## Personal Motivation to Persist through Social Integration

Social integration exerts an influence on the student's subsequent level of commitment to the college or university (Tinto, 1975). The greater the student's level of social integration, the greater is his or her degree of subsequent commitment to the college or university. The student's initial level of commitment to the college or university also shapes his or her degree of subsequent commitment to their institution. The greater the student's subsequent commitment to the college or university, the greater his or her likelihood of persistence (Tinto, 1975). According to Roberts & Styron (2009), social activities and events assist students in integrating and adapting into an unfamiliar environment. These events create a social connectedness that fosters a sense of belonging to the institutions and group (Roberts & Styron, 2009). Terrion & Daoust (2011), stated that the more students are involved in campus activities the greater the chance of persistence. Activities that were geared toward or focused on students, such as social gatherings and community engagement projects assisted students in fostering a relationship with not only the local community, but also the university community (Terrion & Daoust, 2011). A level of ease is created when students reach what (Roberts & Styron 2009) define as "*psychological comfort*." Terrion and Daoust stated the level to which a student becomes involved on campus determines their level of commitment to the institutions and persistence to graduation (Terrion & Daoust, 2011). Building these types of relationships and experiences, whether formal or informal, inside or outside the classroom, created a sense of belonging and support (Tinto, 2006).

## DISCUSSION

Tinto's (2006), research concluded that academic persistence is greatly influenced by how effective an institution is in integrating a student into both the academic and social environment. The development of academic skills affects a student's self-confidence, self-efficacy, attitude toward education, and academic persistence (Terrion & Daoust, 2011). The lived experience of the student is framed by this connection (Tinto, 2006). Further, students who know of and believe there are resources on their campuses are able to more successfully handle the transition to college (Brissette et al., 2002). By applying social media tools to the value of the on-campus experience, online communication can be connected to stronger offline relationships (Jacobsen & Forste, 2011).

In addition, Boyd (2014), called for digital education in all settings, ages, and roles, "*Whether in school or in informal settings, youth need opportunities to develop the skills and knowledge to engage with contemporary technology effectively and meaningfully. Becoming literate in a networked age requires hard work, regardless of age*".

## CONCLUSION

The social process of adjusting to college can be aided through social media. Digital technology education should not be the introduction of tools; rather, it is the means by which students take advantage of social media in their roles on campus, as active members of the global community, and as future leaders in their chosen professions. This is rooted in research by in which young adults used social media to develop digital skills and further social development.

## RECOMMENDATION

In expounding the literature, further studies could offer new opportunities to thoroughly bring to light this educational process by developing a qualities or skillsets to assist leaders capable of utilizing social media mainstreams for positive aspects on society developments during the undergraduate experience.

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