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Information Seeking during a Life Transition

Through the life course, the individual engages in a series of transitions that shape them personally and in the eye of society (Elder, 1994; Elder, 1998). Common transitions include developmental transitions, situational transitions, and health-related transitions; other forms of transition, including role transitions, social/legal transitions and individualistic transitions are comprised of a series of transitions or life events (Arnett, 1997, 2001; George, 1993; Liddle et al., 2004). In general, a transition can be theorized as an interruption, in which one's schema, or sense of understanding of the world, is interrupted and new discrepancies are revealed (Mandler, 1990). The in-transition individual seeks resources which help them repair their transition-related discrepancies and construct new schemas. Though the process of transition is commonplace, reaction and adaptation to transition exert strong influence on an individual's life trajectory (Hogan & Astone, 1986; Schlossberg, 1981).

Studies of transition cover a wide range of events spanning the life course. The transition to adulthood, relocation, career change and the death of a loved one are extensively researched, exemplar transitions. Many studies of transition, particularly those with disciplinary roots in psychology or sociology, examine the relationship between transition, stress, and social support (Bardi & Ryff, 2007; Brissette et al., 2002; George, 1993; Wheaton, 1990). Social support is a construct used to describe the beneficial aspects of relationships, the general elements of which are instrumental aid, emotional aid, and informational aid (Cohen & Gottlieb, 2000; House et al., 1988). Two main theoretical elaborations of the stress-social support theory include the buffering and main-effect hypothesis (Cohen & Wills, 1985). The buffering hypothesis, rooted in Durkhemian social analysis, examines the relationship between stress-related health outcomes and the support provided by social groups. The main-effect hypothesis examines the direct relationship between one's social connections and one's stress-related health outcomes.

The present study is an exploration of information seeking during a life transition - the particular transition being the transition from high school to college. Within the larger theoretical framework of stress-social support theories, social support is shown to be beneficial during the transition to college (Aseltine & Gore, 1993; Compas et al., 1986; Pratt et al., 2000). Studied variables include the attachment to parents (Berman & Sperling, 1991; Larose & Boivin, 1998), attachment to friends (Paul & Brier, 2001), establishment of new friendships (Buote et al., 2007), and access to supportive institutional resources (Pancer et al., 2004; Pratt et al., 2000). The level of access a student has to supportive resources has been shown to positively impact the transition to college, where outcomes include lower stress-related health incidents, better adjustment to college, and higher retention and completion rates.

The location of resources, the establishment of friendships, and maintenance of ties to supportive family and friends are information-communication processes that are, on the modern college campus, enacted within and between virtual and physical spaces. Just as the dormitory is a main physical space for interaction, the social networking site is a key virtual space for communication and transmission of information and support (Bumgarner, 2007; Ellison et al., 2007; Joinson, 2008; Lampe et al., 2007, 2008). This study seeks to explore the supportive role the online social network plays during the transition to college.

Online social networks (or, social networking sites), such as Facebook and Myspace, are Internet and communication technologies (ICT's) that support the enumeration of one's social networks (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). These sites provide a mediated space for communication, discovery of social information, and socialization into larger cultures and social identities (for the purpose of this study, the college campus). The core component of an online social network is a profile; the profile is a place to share pictures and personal information, host applications, and enumerate connections with friends. The profile, and derivative activity shared through news feeds, provide ongoing information interaction between an individual and her social network. In addition to profile-centric communication, social network sites provide numerous facilities for off-profile

communication, such as through chat (IM-like) or private (email-like) communications. The online social network is a nexus for information and communication on the modern college campus.

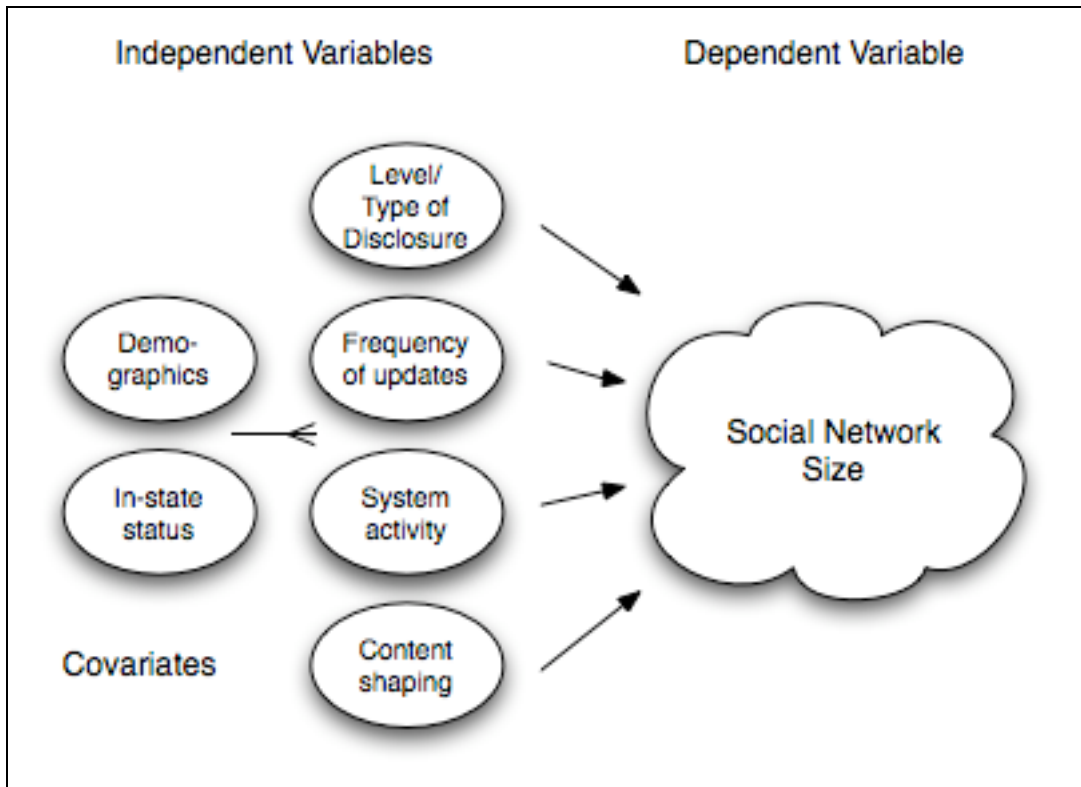
The student transitioning to college is in the midst of a number of transitions. At a high level, these students are firmly within the transition to adulthood (Hogan, 1978; Hogan & Astone, 1986), or what Arnett (2000) has recently termed the process of "emerging adulthood." Within the transition to college are a number of sub-transitions: leaving home/relocation, establishment of new social contacts, habituation, the emergence of new responsibilities, and societal and legal transitions as determined by age. These transitions, and their requisite schema interruptions, create informational needs that are addressed by the online social network. For example, the online social network may augment the development of social contacts, as it allows for efficient communication with friends met on campus (Lampe et al., 2006).

This particular study of the information seeking behavior of students from high school to college will use a multi-theoretic, mixed methods approach. Particularly, the study seeks to explore the relationship between online social network use and social-support related variables. The study then seeks to document the information seeking behaviors of transitioning students using the Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS) paradigm. The ELIS paradigm (Savolainen, 1995) explores the sensemaking process as individuals seek mastery of everyday life. It pays particular attention to contextual features of the setting, and the role that groups and "small worlds" play in information behavior (Chatman, 1996; Chatman, 1991; Huotari & Chatman, 2001).

The methodology of the study involves three discrete parts. The first part is analysis of a large data set of Facebook profiles collected in 2005. This dataset is a longitudinal census of Freshman Facebook profiles, collected over the first twenty-four weeks of the 2005-2006 school year. This data collection was approved by the IRB, and was approved after collection by Facebook. The particular focus of this study will be to explore the relationship between demographic- and profile-based variables and the size of the social

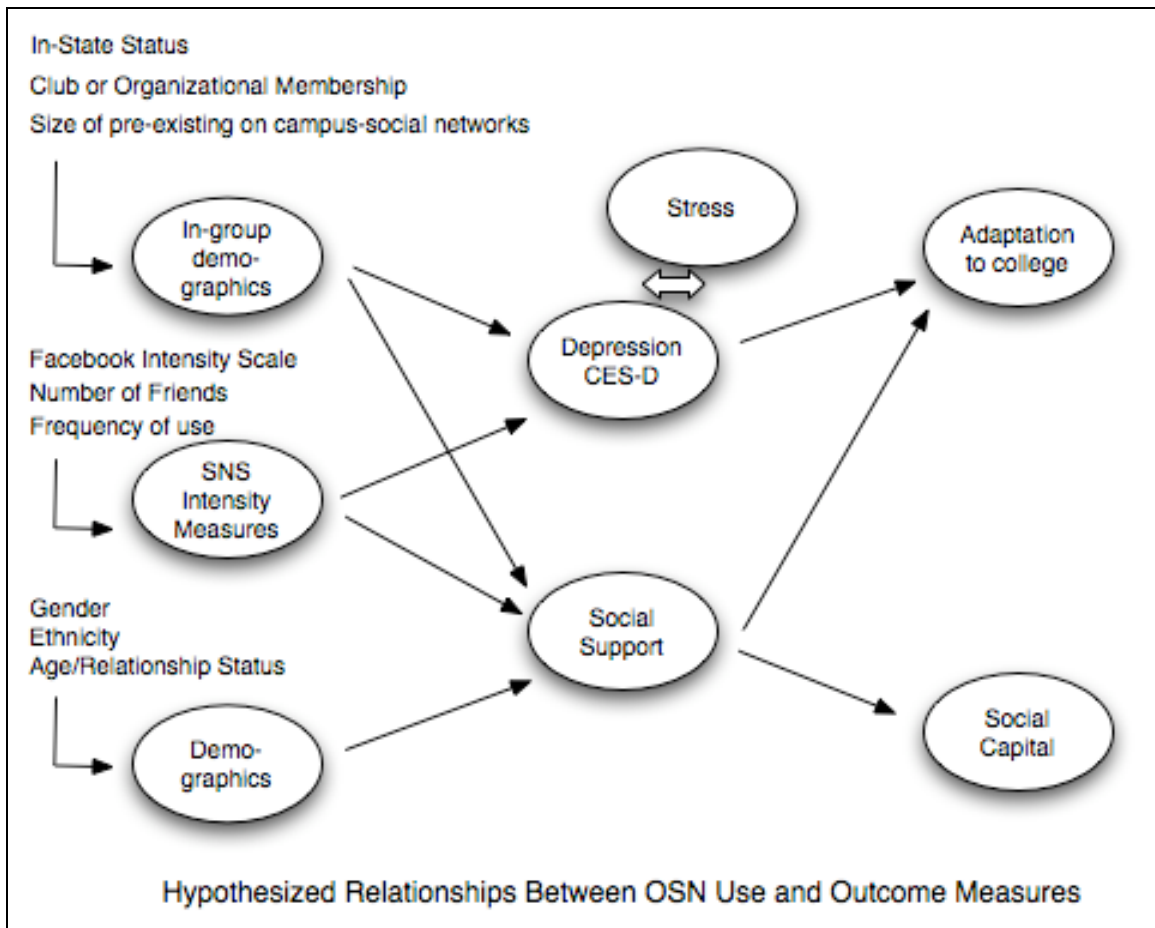
network over time. The size of the social network is a key instrumental variable in social-support theories of transitions. This analysis will show the relationship between online social network use, information sharing, information maintenance and social network size.

Component One:



The second component of this study is a longitudinal survey that will be administered to a panel of Freshman over the course of the year, with a likely maximum of two administrations. The purpose of this survey is to measure the effect of social network use on a number of validated measures, including adaptation to college (Baker & Siryk, 1989), depression (CES-D), social support (Sarason et al., 1987), stress and social capital (Ellison et al., 2007). The models will be analyzed independently for between-subjects effects, and they will be analyzed longitudinally for within- and between-subjects effects using hierarchical linear modeling to account for the non-independence of the repeated measures.

Component Two:



Using the principles of the Tailored Design Method (Dillman, 2007), students will be solicited to the survey with a postcard mailing. The postcard will direct them to a website where they will be administered the survey. Follow-up reminders will be sent via email. Twenty-five iTunes gift certificates, and one iPod Touch will be incentive. Goal response rate is 30-40%. A recent study of a undergraduate cohort by Smyth et. al. (2009) reported response rate of between 50 and 59 percent to a web survey. However, the study offered a two-dollar cash prepaid incentive; this study does not have a comparable budget.

The third component is a set of 20-30 in-depth qualitative interviews with students, with a goal of exploring how students used the online social network as part of their ELIS needs during the transition to college. The goal is to describe the particular information

needs answered by the online social network, and to describe the critical incidents in which the student turns to the online social network for support. Interviews will be conducted in-person or by phone (in person, preferably). The interviews will be transcribed, and then open coded using the Atlas.ti software.

Specific issues and challenges:

- I am interested in discussing the integration of mixed-methods approaches in information seeking studies.
- I am interested in feedback regarding the tradeoff of not running a repeated-measures survey, and instead making the survey pseudo-longitudinal (through time-framing of questions).
- I am interested in getting general feedback on the use of social support theories in information studies; how can I target this more effectively.
- I am interested in talking to anyone with experience with ELIS-type studies.

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