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First-Year Students' Use of Social Network Sites to Reduce the Uncertainty of Anticipatory Socialization

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Abstract

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Keywords

college students, social networks, first-year experience

Disciplines

Higher Education

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Abstract. This study surveyed 399 incoming first-year students at two colleges in the Midwest on their use of social network sites before college entry and its impact on various dimensions of the first-year experience. Significant correlations were found for two pairs of variables: (a) students who used social network sites before arriving on campus reported greater roommate compatibility than students who did not use such sites and (b) students who rated the information on social network sites as high in accuracy also reported a high match between their first-year expectations and experiences. Implications for student affairs administrators are discussed.

The successful socialization of U.S. undergraduate students has been investigated from both institutional and individual perspectives. From an organizational perspective, scholars have examined college characteristics, students' connections to the college environment, and the effect of the academic environment on student values, career choices, and personal goals (Astin, 1993; Smith & Wertlieb, 2005; Weidman, 1989). For individuals entering new environments, anticipatory concerns include coping with the expectations of others, managing self-concepts in a time of change, and letting go of the familiar (Conrad & Poole, 1998). For years, students have begun the transition from high school to residential college by contacting their future roommates and peers through telephone calls, letters, and face-to-face (FtF) visits. With the emergence of social network sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, today's students are interacting in new ways before arriving on campus (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Lenhart, Lewis, & Rainie, 2006; Twenge, 2006). Anecdotal evidence in the popular press suggests incoming residential first-year students are using SNSs

to meet their roommates (Johnson, 2011; Levin, 2006; Levy, 2007; Lombard, 2007). Recent research has investigated the online college culture, including social networks (Haythornthwaite, 2005); virtual community attraction (Ridings & Gefen, 2004); students' use of e-mail, blogs, and SNSs (DeAndrea, Ellison, LaRose, Steinfield, & Fiore, 2011; Hargittai, 2007); and the representation of self on SNSs (Stritzke, Nguyen, & Durkin, 2004; Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008). However, students' use of SNSs to address their uncertainties before entering college remains understudied. In particular, little is known about the role SNSs play in reducing uncertainty and shaping the perceptions of incoming students about their roommates and college life in general. Given the widespread use of SNSs by high school and college students (Ellison et al., 2007; Hargittai, 2007; Lenhart et al., 2006) and the importance that colleges and universities place on the successful socialization of new students, this area merits empirical study.

Two broad questions structured this research: (a) Do students use SNSs to address their uncertainties as they prepare to enter college? and (b) What role do SNSs play in shaping the initial perceptions of incoming students about their roommates, residence halls, and the college?

Literature Review

The review of the literature begins with a brief explanation of the socialization stages newcomers experience in any unfamiliar institutional setting and then describes how entering first-year, residential college students use computer-mediated communication (CMC) to address concerns during anticipatory socialization. Next, the authors introduce and use uncertainty reduction theory (URT; Berger & Calabrese, 1975) to explain students' information-seeking behavior before entering college and describe the various strategies students use to reduce their uncertainties.

The Socialization Process

The literature on socialization has focused largely on the processes people use to enter and become part of the work world. Organizational socialization has been conceptualized as occurring in three phases: (a) anticipatory, (b) encounter, and (c) metamorphosis (Van Maanen, 1975). *Anticipatory socialization* begins in childhood with learning about work in general, specific occupations, and ultimately a particular organization (Van Maanen, 1975). In the *encounter phase*, when people first enter an organization, they experience "change, contrast and surprise" (Miller, 2006, p. 149)

and must work to understand the new culture. *Metamorphosis*, the final phase, occurs when newcomers have "made the transition from outsider to insider" (Miller, 2006, p. 150).

The process of socialization also has been applied to the educational experiences of elementary, secondary, and college students (Staton, 1990; Tinto, 1993; Weidman, 1989). Transitioning from high school to college, students often have idealized expectations of being a first-year college student as they anticipate developing new social relationships, establishing new routines, and adjusting to new surroundings. Hockings, Cooke, and Bowl (2007) found that the uncertainties of incoming first-year, residential students clustered around themes of achieving a sense of belonging, managing money, making friends, being alone and fitting in, developing identity, and recieving fair and equal treatment.

Roommates can help first-year students achieve a sense of belonging, make friends, and fit in. Marek, Wanzer, and Knapp (2004) reported that first impressions affect subsequent communication patterns among college roommates. Studies have shown that roommate rapport relates positively to communication competence (Hawken, Duran, & Kelly, 1991) and that roommate similarity increases roommate satisfaction (Heckert, 1999; Martin & Anderson, 1995). When students are unfamiliar with their roommates, they might make attributions about the intent and stability of the other's behavior (Sillars, 1980), especially behavior involving conflict. In addition to interpersonal uncertainties, first-year students also might be unfamiliar with the campus and their residence hall. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) reported that living on campus was a significant within-college determinant of the impact of college for new students. When situations are uncertain, new students are likely to seek out the knowledge and views of others; thus, they might contact their future roommates and classmates (Conrad & Poole, 2005), often online.

This study focused on the anticipatory socialization concerns first-year students had before they arrived on campus and their initial encounters with the campus community. Specifically, the authors examined CMC as a new medium first-year college students use to seek information during anticipatory socialization and the impact of SNSs on incoming first-year students' initial perceptions of the college experience.

College Students and Social Network Sites

As of June 2012, 273 million North Americans and 2.4 billion people worldwide (www.Internetworldstats.com) had accessed the Internet. Studies of U.S. undergraduates report a wide range of Internet usage, from one to 10 hours per day, including an hour or more interacting on SNSs (Budden, Anthony, Budden, & Jones,

2007; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2006; Vanden Boogart, 2006). SNSs are web-based services that allow individuals to (a) construct a public or semipublic profile within a bounded system, (b) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (c) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 2)

SNSs, e-mail, blogs, and instant messaging have replaced some FtF and telephone conversations as ways to interact with others. Although differences exist between CMC and FtF interactions, such as limited cues, potential asynchronicity, and text format, Vieta (2005) argued that "Internet practices are not sharply distinct" (p. 28) from other means of interaction. In Lenhart et al.'s (2006) study, half of all teenagers reported that CMC had improved their lives and their relationships with friends, and frequent users expressed especially positive comments about the "friendship enhancing" and maintaining qualities of CMC (p. 356). College students in Vanden Boogart's (2006) study reported an average of 145 Facebook friends on their home campus and 127 friends at other institutions, with a majority of the participants using "Facebook to stay connected with high school friends" (p. 36). Besides maintaining existing friendships, SNSs also allow students to connect with new people and access their websites, friends' lists, and photos (Bumgarner, 2007).

Uncertainty Reduction Theory

Acquiring online information about future classmates before entering college might help incoming students reduce their uncertainty so that, when they later communicate in person, they will have gained a sense of their common interests. To explain how people strategically seek to minimize uncertainty in their social interactions, Berger and Calabrese (1975) developed URT, which assumes that people experience uncertainty in initial interactions, generating cognitive stress. People then seek to reduce uncertainty by increasing predictability, or the likelihood they will be able to anticipate how another will communicate or behave and their own ability to explain the meaning of the other's behavior. Berger and Calabrese viewed interpersonal communication as a developmental process with predictable stages in relationship building. In the entry phase, the initial interactions between strangers are guided by cultural customs and rules, such as responding to initial inquiries and asking similar questions. In the personal phase, people are more spontaneous and reveal more personal information, and in the exit phase, individuals decide whether they will interact in the future.

Berger (1997) argued that people use three strategies to reduce uncertainty in interpersonal relationships: (a) passive strategies, which use unobtrusive obser-

vation; (b) active strategies, which use third parties to obtain necessary information; and (c) interactive strategies, which involve people directly engaging another person to seek information and reduce uncertainty. Ramirez, Walther, Burgoon, and Sunnafrank (2002) also proposed a fourth strategy, extractive, which is unique to CMC, because it involves gathering information about others via search engines, such as Google or electronic bulletin boards.

URT is based on axioms. The axiom most germane to this study maintains that high levels of uncertainty increase information-seeking behavior and a decline in uncertainty reduces information-seeking behavior. Students' online information-seeking behavior reflects a desire to reduce uncertainty about their future roommates by searching for answers to demographic questions and more intimate topics related to their values, attitudes, and opinions (Sanders, 2006).

Research Questions

The following research questions explore the role of CMC in helping first-year college students reduce their feelings of uncertainty before arriving on campus. According to URT, high levels of uncertainty increase information-seeking behavior; thus, the first research question aims to describe the manner and frequency with which new college students use CMC to gather information in general as well as information about others:

RQ1: How frequently do entering first-year college students use the Internet and SNSs to seek information?

Today's college students view CMC as essential for their social involvement as well as academic work (Haythornthwaite, 2005). Online social networks can facilitate communication among people who share common interests, such as attending the same school (Wakefield, Ribchester, & France, 2009). The second research question tests whether entering students use SNSs to seek information about their future roommates before meeting FtF:

RQ2: Do entering first-year college students use SNSs to learn about their future roommates?

Students' anticipatory socialization includes expectations they bring to their first-year college experience. Smith and Wertlieb (2005) found that students' social expectations about what college is like did not align with their experiences, as students reported higher than expected feelings of loneliness and a decrease (from expected levels) in making lifelong friends. Peers, in part, influence students' pre-entrance

expectations of college life. In 2010, 7.9 million American high school students used Facebook (www.istrategylabs.com), making it possible to connect with each other online before arriving on campus and leading to the third research question:

RQ3: Does SNS use before arrival on campus affect entering first-year students' initial impressions of roommates, residence halls, and the college in general?

Some students report that CMC strengthens their existing friendships and is a good forum to meet people but not necessarily an environment to make new friends (Lenhart et al., 2006). These perceptions may arise because 56% of student online users report experimenting in their relationships by presenting multiple identities online (Barnes, 2006). Students' perceptions of the accuracy of the information they receive through CMC vary. Some students distrust CMC messages and interact only with people they already know, whereas others accept CMC identity modification as a part of the environment and are cautious in their interpretations and the believability they assign to these messages (Lenhart et al., 2006; Ellison et al., 2007). Thus, the fourth research question asks:

RQ4: Do entering first-year students' evaluations of the information found on SNSs about other people affect their initial impressions of roommates, residence halls, and the college in general?

Method

A sample of 399 respondents was drawn from all incoming first-year students[1] (1,418) in fall 2006 at two liberal arts colleges in the Midwest. The colleges are similar in size; both are coeducational and residential with historic ties to two Christian denominations, providing a large pool of similar students. Both colleges encourage students to contact their assigned roommates before arriving on campus. College B made this recommendation in a letter regarding roommate assignments. Table 1 shows the majority of respondents were female (69.4%), which is slightly higher than the enrollment statistics of the incoming first-year students at both schools (College A: 57% female; College B: 59% female). One school houses first-year students in triple bedrooms, the other in double bedrooms. Most students (88.9%) did not know their roommates before arriving on campus. All respondents lived in campus residences.

After receiving approval from the research review boards of both colleges, the authors contacted all incoming first-year students via e-mail and invited them to

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[1] In the body of the text, the authors use the term preferred by one of the institutions, "first-year student." When they developed the questionnaire earlier, however, the word "freshman" was used.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants (*N* = 399)

Characteristic	College A		College B		Total		
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*	*p*
Gender							
Male	43	37.1	79	27.9	122	30.6	0.07
Female	73	62.9	204	72.1	277	69.4	
Urbanicity							
Urban	43	37.1	23	8.2	66	16.6	< 0.001
Suburban	18	15.5	152	53.9	170	42.7	
Rural/small town	55	47.4	107	37.0	162	40.7	
Number of roommates							
One	42	36.5	248	87.9	290	73.0	< 0.001
More than one	73	63.5	34	12.1	107	27.0	
Knew roommate previously							
Yes	12	10.3	32	11.4	44	11.1	0.76
No	104	89.7	249	88.6	353	88.9	
Requested roommate							
Yes	11	9.5	38	13.5	49	12.3	0.27
No	105	90.5	244	86.5	349	87.7	

complete an online questionnaire based on a review of the research on first-year student socialization and Internet use. Questions measured roommate compatibility and conflict, Internet use and efficacy, and overall social experience of college (e.g., extracurricular activity, study time, and residential life). Students were not offered any academic credit or other incentives to participate. The response rate of 28% (399 students) was similar to that of other Internet surveys of college students (e.g., Bumgarner, 2007; Longerbeam, Inkelas, Johnson, & Lee, 2007). Students received the questionnaire during the second week of the fall semester. This time was selected intentionally because students had moved into their residence halls and begun classes but had not yet had many differentiating experiences. To protect individuals' identities, respondents were not asked for their names or e-mail addresses. All responses were returned within two weeks. Respondents were assigned case numbers for data analysis.

Social Network Experience Variables

The questionnaire used existing and validated measures (e.g., Clatterbuck, 1979; Sillars, 1980) when possible and assessed five SNS experience variables and six first-year student experience variables.

Use of social network sites. Three items measured students' use of SNSs (RQ 1 and RQ2): (a) whether the incoming students used a SNS to contact their roommate before coming to college (Y/N); (b) which mode they used to initiate contact with their roommate before coming to campus (i.e., telephone, e-mail, SNSs, in person, letter, IM, web log, text message, video chat); and (c) how frequently students were using a SNS at week two of the semester (1 = daily use; 2 = nondaily use).

Perceptions of social network sites. Two global measures of attributional confidence, adapted from Clatterbuck's CL7 attributional confidence scale (Clatterbuck, 1979), were taken (RQ 4). Using 7-point Likert scales, the authors measured (a) how important SNSs were to students in learning about others (1 = *Not At All Important,* 7 = *Extremely Important*) and (b) how accurate students perceived the information about others on SNSs to be (1 = *Not At All Accurate;* 7 = *Extremely Accurate*).

First-Year Student Experience Variables

Roommate compatibility. Roommate similarity increases roommate satisfaction (Heckert, 1999; Martin & Anderson, 1995; Wetzel, Schwartz, & Vasu, 1979). Roommate compatibility (RQ 3 and RQ4), however, is no longer determined solely through FtF interactions but also may be developed through CMC. Compatibility was measured with a single question using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *Not At All Compatible;* 7 = *Highly Compatible*).

Roommate conflict. Using SNSs to learn about each other before meeting in person (RQ3 and RQ4) might affect assigned roommates' subsequent interactions (Shonbeck, 2006), including conflict. To measure conflict, the authors asked whether students had experienced any conflict with their roommate (Y/N).

Expectations of being a first-year student. One question adapted from Smith and Wertlieb (2005) measured expectations of being a first-year student (RQ 3 and RQ4): "How does your experience of being a first-year student compare to your expectations of being a first-year student?" Students reported their answers on a 7- point Likert scale (1 = *Very Different;* 7 = *Very Much Like What I Expected*).

Ideal conception of being a first-year student. Although students have varying ideas about college life (RQ 3 and RQ 4), some have unrealistically high

expectations and feel disappointed by their fellow students and the institution (Larose & Boivin, 1998; Paul & Brier, 2001). One question measured this variable: "How does your experience of being a first-year student compare to your ideal conception of being a first-year student?" Students answered using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *Very Different;* 7 = *Very Much Like What I Wanted*).

Satisfaction with residence hall. One item measured students' satisfaction with their residence hall (RQ 3 and RQ4) on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *Not At All Satisfied;* 7 = *Completely Satisfied*).

Satisfaction with college. The questionnaire also included a general satisfaction measure of the college (RQ 3 and RQ4) containing one item: "All things considered, how satisfied are you with X College?" Responses were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *Not At All Satisfied;* 7 = *Extremely Satisfied*).

Analysis

Chi-squared tests were used to assess the significance of relationships between pairs of categorical variables in Table 1. Given the study's focus on uncertainty reduction behaviors, only responses from students who did not request their roommates were included in subsequent analyses (*n* = 349). To investigate research questions three and four, Pearson correlations were used. Six response variables were potentially related to first-year student experiences, and five explanatory variables related to experience with SNSs. The statistical methods for dichotomous variables (e.g., point-biserial correlations; two-sample *t*-tests) were equivalent to the Pearson correlation, which was selected to provide a similar analytic structure across analyses. All tests were assessed for statistical significance using the .05 level of probability.

Results

The first research question asked how frequently entering first-year college students used the Internet and SNSs. Table 2 shows that the plurality of students (43.5%) used the Internet one to two hours a day, with the next largest group of students (26.8%) using the Internet two to three hours per day. The majority of students (67.3%) used SNSs daily, and the next largest group (20.8%) accessed SNSs several times per week.

The second research question focused on the interpersonal dimension of first-year student anticipatory socialization. Nearly all respondents (97.4%) initiated interactive contact with their roommates at some point before coming to campus. As

Table 2
Students' Use of the Internet and Social Network Sites (n = 349)

Question	Responses	
	n	%
How much time per day is spent on Internet?		
Less than 1 hour	50	14.1
1-2 hours	151	43.5
2-3 hours	93	26.8
3-4 hours	36	10.4
More than 4 hours	17	4.9
How often uses SNSs		
Never	28	8.1
Once a month	4	1.2
Once a week	9	2.6
Several times per week	72	20.8
Daily	233	67.3

shown in Table 3, most students initiated contact with their roommate at least three times, with the average being 5.2 (SD = 4.7). Among students who contacted their roommates at least once, the most used modes of communication were (a) phone, 38.2%; (b) e-mail, 36.7%; and (c) SNS, 21.5%. In addition to interactive strategies, a slight majority (51.4%) of students used an active strategy (i.e., using third parties to obtain information) to learn about their roommates before contacting them. Use of SNSs (88%) was by far the most common active strategy used. A small percentage of students had parents collect information about roommates.

Slightly fewer students (90.8%) reported at least one contact initiated by the roommate (Table 3). The methods used by roommates to initiate contact mirrored those of the respondents, with roommates relying most frequently on e-mail (67.3%, 228), phone (62.9%, 214), and SNS (48.1%, 163).

For research questions three and four, Pearson correlations were used to test for significant relationships between first-year student life variables and experience with SNS variables. A total of 30 Pearson correlations were computed between all pairs of explanatory (five) and response (six) variables and are shown in Table 4.

The third research question focused on the relationship between students' SNS experience before they arrived on campus and their initial impressions of college life and is represented by the first three lines in Table 4 (used SNS previously, SNS best

Table 3
Anticipatory Socialization Behaviors (*n* = 349)

Behavior	Responses	
	n	%
Respondent initiated contact with roommate before coming to campus at least once	339	97.4
Method used to initiate contact		
Telephone	126	38.2
E-mail	121	36.7
SNSs	71	21.5
In person	6	1.8
Letter	2	0.6
IM	2	0.6
Blog	1	0.3
Text message	1	0.3
Video chat	1	0.3
Roommate initiated contact with the respondent at least once	315	90.8
Respondent used active information-seeking strategy before initiating contact	179	51.4
Active strategy used		
SNS	159	88.0
Google search	14	7.8
Ask friends about roommate	10	5.6
Talk with people who might know roommate	9	5.0
Contact the college	5	2.8
Respondent's parents participated in information seeking	31	9.0
Number of times student initiated contact with roommate		
0-2		31.7
3-5		39.4
6-10		23.1
11+		5.9

Table 4

Pearson Correlations Between SNS Experiences and First-Year Student Experiences

Use and perceptions of SNS	Roommate compatibility	Roommate conflict[a]	Matching expectations with experiences	Ideal conception matching experience	Overall satisfaction with college	Overall satisfaction with residence hall
Used SNS previously	-0.12*[b]	-0.05	-0.04	0.03	0.01	0.01
SNS best method	-0.04	-0.00	-0.01	0.09	-0.00	-0.00
Daily user of SNS	0.10	0.05	0.09	0.08	0.07	0.09
Perceived importance of SNS	0.03	-0.07	0.05	0.02	0.01	0.01
Perceived accuracy of SNS	0.09	0.07	0.16**[c]	0.02	0.06	0.09

[a]Logistic regression models also were used to model roommate conflict by each of the SNS experience variables with comparable results (none were significant at alpha = 0.05). [b]The average roommate compatibility score for students who contacted their roommates via SNSs before college was 5.4 (s = 1.4), compared to 5.1 (s = 1.7) for students who did not contact their roommates using SNSs before college. The corresponding linear regression model of using SNSs to learn about the roommate before coming to college with roommate compatibility after adjusting for four demographic covariates (i.e., gender, urbanicity, number of roommates, and college A/B) also indicated a significant relationship between using SNSs before college and roommate compatibility (p = 0.03). [c]The corresponding linear regression model of perceived accuracy of SNSs with having college expectations match experiences after adjusting for four demographic covariates also indicated a significant relationship between using SNSs before college and roommate compatibility (p = 0.005).
$*p < .05.$ $**p < .01.$

method, and daily user of SNS). One of the correlations was significant: roommate compatibility and use of SNSs to contact roommate before coming to campus.

Students who used SNSs before arriving on campus reported being more compatible with their roommates (5.4, SD = 1.4); whereas, the mean roommate compatibility of students not using SNSs before coming to campus was 5.1 (SD = 1.7). This difference, when adjusted for the four demographic covariates in a linear regression model, was significant (p = 0.03). The fourth research question asked how students' evaluations of the information found on SNSs affected their first impressions of college life. The last two rows in Table 4 show the results of the two items used to measure students' perceptions of SNSs. Testing for significant correlations between first-year student life variables and experience with SNS variables yielded a significant relationship between perceived accuracy of information on SNSs and how closely

expectations of being a first-year student aligned with their experiences. The correlation between the accuracy and expectations scales was significant ($p = .005$) when estimated in a linear regression model adjusting for the four demographic covariates. The students who perceived the information on SNSs to be higher in accuracy also reported a higher match between their expectations of being a first-year student and their actual experience.

Discussion

Results from this study suggested that first-year students use many traditional and electronic means before entering college to seek information to reduce uncertainty regarding their future roommates. About half sought this information before initiating contact with roommates. Most students (67%) reported being contacted by future roommates through e-mail, but once contact had been established, the most helpful mode of getting to know their roommates was the telephone (38%). This finding was consistent with Lenhart et al.'s (2006) study, which found that students frequently used the telephone to contact friends because nuances of communication and emotions were apparent and they could immediately address or correct social errors. In contrast, 80% of the students who also used e-mail or SNSs to contact their future roommates reported that their electronic interactions were important and accurate sources of information. The authors' research showed that first-year incoming students frequently used SNSs before arriving on campus to search for information about people they did not yet know as a precursor to FtF interaction.

This study demonstrated that roommate compatibility is correlated to the previous use of SNSs to communicate with roommates and that those students who used SNSs before coming to campus felt more compatible with their roommates (Table 4). In part, this compatibility may be explained by URT, which asserts that, as uncertainty decreases, liking the other increases (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). When people have high levels of uncertainty, they increase their information-seeking behavior by (a) accessing Facebook or other SNSs to reduce uncertainty both through the posted comments and pictures of others that appear on personal sites (extractive strategy); (b) contacting a future roommate through e-mail, which involves self-disclosure and direct questions (interactive strategy); and (c) using direct engagement (active strategy). SNSs provide multiple layers of verbal and nonverbal information about the other and, thereby, reduce uncertainty from a variety of perspectives. Although the amount of uncertainty reduction attributed to SNSs or other means of interaction could not be measured precisely, the evidence suggested that SNSs did provide a means of extractive and interactive information seeking to reduce uncertainty.

This study also demonstrated that students who perceived information on SNSs to be higher in accuracy also reported a higher match between their expectations of being a first-year student and their actual experience on campus (Table 4). According to URT, people often use information seeking to deal with concerns about unfamiliar situations. If people perceive the source of information to be accurate or reliable, they are more likely to trust the content of the information. If the content includes positive information about the campus or other students, the information seeker is reassured and less uncertain about this new place.

Some of the other variables tested, such as overall satisfaction with the residence hall or college, did not yield significant results, perhaps because the questionnaire was taken too early in the semester for students to have formed strong opinions about these aspects of campus life. Regarding roommate relationships, students had one week of orientation and two weeks of classes to become acquainted with their room-mates. Regarding satisfaction with the residence hall, if this was the students' first time living in a group setting, they may not have known what to expect or how to compare it to their lived experience. Regarding overall satisfaction with the college, students might not have had a strong idea of what to expect from their institution or had not yet received any grades to assess their academic performance. Students' ideal conception of being a first-year student also was not significantly correlated with any explanatory variable. This measure might have been too broad.

Several SNS experience variables were found to be nonsignificant. SNSs were not identified as the most helpful way to contact future roommates. Although this finding was initially surprising, the lack of significance was consistent with Lenhart et al.'s (2006) conclusion that youth prefer the telephone for contacting friends because it allows them to transmit nonverbal cues such as tone, rate, and inflection. Also, students might have been using multiple modes of contact (sometimes simultaneously), not just one or the other, and did not have a strong preference.

Limitations

The study had several limitations. First, the questionnaire design was based on previous studies, but other research methods, including interviews and focus groups, might have provided additional insights about relevant factors regarding socialization. Including more open-ended questions along with the existing Likert items could have enriched the collected data. Wherever possible, existing measures were adapted from previous studies (e.g., Sillars, 1980). However, more precise measures were needed for some items, such as the helpfulness of various modes of communication.

Because URT posits three functions of information-seeking behavior (anticipated interaction, incentives for interaction, and assessment of deviance), a more comprehensive scale could be developed to measure various modes of communication on these three dimensions. Because the survey relied on self-reports, some potential bias in the data or underreporting of information, such as whether parents sought information about an assigned roommate, might exist. For example, student development staff at College B noted an increase in parental use of SNSs to screen their student's assigned roommate and occasionally to request a change in assignment (J. Jobson, personal communication, spring 2008). Also, students might not have been able to recall accurately exactly how much time they spent "on average" on the Internet.

A second limitation concerned the sample. Although the sample size was acceptable, the response rate might have been affected by the timing of the survey. The data were collected early in the semester when first-year students might not have been accustomed to using the campus e-mail system, thereby reducing the potential response rate.

Administering the questionnaire early in the term raised another concern about a possible honeymoon effect concerning roommate compatibility. Unless students had serious roommate problems, they most likely would still have been enjoying the novelty of these new relationships and the process of learning about one another. If the data had been collected later, students may have had more time to discover differences with their roommates and experience conflict, but then other effects (besides early use of SNSs) could explain their perceptions of compatibility. Ideally, a longitudinal study could measure real change over time.

Future Research

This study examined how incoming first-year students use SNSs to reduce the uncertainties associated with anticipatory socialization. It contributes to the methodological study of SNSs by extending the URT model to the pre-entry stage of relationship building among college students and how students' online information-seeking behavior is related to outcomes such as roommate compatibility and expectations of college life. One finding was that students who used SNSs before arriving on campus reported greater roommate compatibility than students who did not. Given the relatively small effect size of this relationship, replication of this association in additional samples should be considered. Also, what kind of information about one's roommate (i.e., anticipated interaction, incentive for interaction, or assessment of deviance)

accounts for most of the variance in students' perceptions of roommate compatibility and is worth further exploration.

A second finding of the study was that students who rated the information on SNSs as high in accuracy also reported a higher match between their first-year expectations and experiences. It would be useful to learn what features of SNSs lead to perceptions of information accuracy among first-year students. What types of information do SNS users pay particular attention to when assessing compatibility with others? When does overreliance on SNSs hinder relationship development? URT holds that interpersonal communication is a developmental process occurring in stages. In the anticipatory socialization stage, SNSs are readily available sources of information about colleges and other students. Over time, as students become more familiar with their roommates and campuses, they will be exposed to information about the college that may lead them to evaluate differently the accuracy of what they found on SNSs. This relationship is worth further exploration. Finally, recognizing that the pre-entry phase may not be the same for all students and that technology can be used for varying purposes, longitudinal research that examines how students' use of SNSs changes over their four years of college (and beyond) would provide helpful insights into this complex transition.

Implications for Practice

These findings confirmed what student development professionals already have surmised in working with incoming first-year college students. Although colleges and universities provide much information, many new students still experience dissonance or uncertainty and seek personal information regarding their peers. At College B, during the summer before college entry, student development staff assigned incoming students to small groups that met FtF during fall orientation. However, even before those assignments were announced, many students had already learned who their future group members would be through interacting on SNSs (D. Campanella, personal communication, spring 2008). Given the high use of SNSs by first-year students to reduce uncertainty, student development administrators should not fight the trend but use it to their advantage and facilitate as much FtF and computer-mediated communication as possible among new students and between their offices and students.

Additional suggestions for practice include developing secure, internal SNSs for use in specific courses for incoming students. Student feedback from one such institution doing this identified several perceived benefits, including getting to know people by face before arrival on campus, being able to recognize people, and getting an idea of other students in their courses (Wakefield et al., 2009). Secure, internal SNSs also

can be developed for the entire entering class of first-year students. These networks allow staff to engage with students who want to "friend" them before their arrival on campus and provide a space for students to post pictures, chat with their peers, read student blogs, join interest groups, and prepare for orientation week (D. Campanella, personal communication, spring 2008). In addition to benefiting students directly, these internal networks also can help staff assess their incoming students' expectations and experiences to better tailor their orientation programs to student needs. Gruber (2009) suggested such sites could be maintained throughout students' college years and as alumni to maintain long-term connections.

Because many students use SNSs during the college selection and admission process and to establish and maintain friendships, colleges need to assess the role of social media on campus and its impact on the perceptions of students. Given the finding that more than 90% of students report the information on SNSs to be accurate or somewhat accurate, student development staff should encourage students to evaluate critically the information found on such sites, be careful in making judgments or attributions about others, and be aware of how they represent themselves on SNSs.

Conclusion

One of the key assumptions of URT is that interpersonal communication reduces uncertainty. Strangers use information-seeking strategies to increase their ability to predict how others will behave. First-year college students use SNSs (not just interpersonal communication) to reduce uncertainty before meeting their future roommates. Students who perceived the information on SNSs to be high in accuracy also reported a higher match between their expectations of being a first-year student and their actual experience on campus. These findings suggested that SNSs influence information seeking and interpretation about college life for incoming first-year students. By viewing the use of SNSs by incoming first-year students as part of the anticipatory and encounter socialization stages of college life, student development professionals will be better able to understand the expectations, concerns, fears, goals, and aspirations of new students.

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