

Does social network site use affect student grades and learning? essay sample

[Education](#), [Learning](#)



Research on social networking sites and learning achievement is particularly slight when compared to studies of privacy, safety, social capital, and psychological well-being. To date, two studies exemplify the debate surrounding SNS, youth, and educational achievement. A conference paper by Karpinski (2009) received much media attention with findings that college Facebook users have lower GPAs than students who are not users of the site. Karpinski offers several hypotheses for these findings. For example, perhaps Facebook users spend too much time online and less time studying.

However, the study did not rigorously examine counter hypotheses and remains a rather exploratory, basic attempt to understand the effect of SNS on learning. Pasek, more, and Hargittai (2009) note several clear limitations of the Karpinski study. First, the sample of students is clearly limited.

Second, the study utilizes few control variables in the analysis. And finally, Pasek et al. take issue with the liberal conclusions of Karpinski, namely, that the original study offers strong evidence for a negative relationship between Facebook use and grades. Pasek et al. offer three additional analyses that use a larger sample of undergraduate students, a nationally representative sample of 14-22 year olds, and a longitudinal dataset.

The authors utilize more control variables including race, socioeconomic status, and previous academic achievement variables. From this analysis, the researchers find that Facebook usage has no significant relationship to GPA in any of their datasets. The researchers in this debate suggest that the Facebook/GPA relationship is an interesting avenue for future studies.

However, aside from the fact that many youth use Facebook, there appear to be no substantive theoretical reasons why Facebook use might influence

GPA. As noted earlier, adolescents use the Internet for diverse communication and social goals. If perhaps a large percentage of youth interactions on Facebook were school-or academic-related, one might find a relationship to measures such as GPA. However, measurement of these communication patterns is lacking in the current literature and is a critical area for additional studies. The work of new media literacy researchers provides one avenue to better specify behaviors that might lead to learning. Most studies of social media and youth education define learning from a literacy perspective (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Ito et al., 2009; Jenkins, 2006).

The literacy perspective focuses on learning practices, such as creating media, rather than traditional measures of learning such as grades or standardized assessments. Hull and Schultz (2001) note that one major contribution of literacy scholars is to understand the concept of practices. Children's activities in school—i. e., listening to a teacher's lecture, practicing problems on worksheets, taking tests to assess their learning—can be seen as specialized literacy practices. Formal schooling is designed to teach students to perform well in those behaviors. However, literacy practices outside of school may serve very disparate functions than expected in the classroom. In the context of new technologies, youth today communicate and learn very different practices outside of school. Engaging in social networking interactions is a different literacy practice than successfully completing a multiple-choice test. This direction is particularly fruitful to consider how youth's everyday practices with technology

constitute learning in and of itself, and how these activities are in stark contrast to practices within school.

Jenkins (2006) observes that youth today must be literate in several practices within social media environments. For example, he defines performance as the ability to adopt different identities for the purpose of discovery. Perhaps SNS, which are ideal identity building tools, can be used to aid students in exploring different characters, voices, and perspectives during the learning process. Jenkins characterizes appropriation as a skill to remix content from disparate sources to communicate ideas. SNS are environments that integrate numerous media tools, and could theoretically be applied to help students collect, synthesize, and remix content. He defines networking as the capacity to search for, integrate, and disseminate information. Similarly, SNS offer a natural environment to examine youth information practices. The early studies of youth literacy with social media suggest that adolescents do in fact practice these skills. Ethnographic studies find that teens use social technologies to delve deeper into interest-driven communities and activities (Ito et al., 2009).

Perhaps SNS provide a platform for youth to participate in communities that help them learn, and practice skills, within particular knowledge areas.

Greenhow and Robelia (2009) examine the SNS use of 11 low-income youth and find numerous social behaviors that provide a theoretical link to learning outcomes. For example, students in their study use MySpace profiles to display creative work and receive feedback from their network. Youth report experiencing social support for school-related tasks, daily stresses, and

problems. SNS help blend school and outside life for the teenagers in this study. These ethnographic studies offer rich accounts of new and vital literacy practices among youth. Similarly, research on college-age youth find that they produce a tremendous volume of writing via tools like SNS, blogs, emails, and other social media environments (Fishman, Lunsford, McGregor, & Otuteye, 2005; Stanford Study of Writing, n. d.). For researchers of social media effects, these exploratory accounts of media practices provide a vital link to learning outcomes. Perhaps SNS that: (a) are used for particular educational means, (b) have strong academic cultures that are built within the online community, and (c) encourage particular information and social learning behaviors will lead to better learning outcomes.

These are open hypotheses for social media scholars. This area is ripe for interdisciplinary studies that combine insights from literacy, media effects, and information perspectives. Ultimately, researchers interested in traditional academic outcomes such as high-school completion, academic engagement, grades, and test scores must specify what practices would theoretically improve these outcomes. The research on SNS, social capital, and psychological well-being offers an additional link to student learning through the mechanism of academic engagement. The concept of engagement can be defined in behavioral, emotional, and cognitive terms (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Behavioral engagement refers to participation in academic, social, or extracurricular activities. Emotional engagement describes the positive and negative feelings students may have towards teachers, peers, and the broader school community. Cognitive

engagement depicts the idea that a student is willing to expend the energy to comprehend difficult concepts and learn new skills. As noted in this review, much of the research on SNS suggests that as students more frequently interact with their network, they develop higher quality relationships with others.

Education researchers who examine the social context of learning in areas such as out-of-school time, extracurricular activity, and classroom climate also find a link between high-quality relationships, students' academic engagement, and achievement (Eccles & Templeton, 2002; Feldman & Matjasko, 2005; Martin & Dowson, 2009). A major hypothesis among education researchers is that youth participation in extracurricular and school activities increases their social connectedness with teachers and peers (Eccles & Templeton, 2002; Feldman & Matjasko, 2005). This connectedness is related to increased engagement with school and academics. Engagement has also been related to a lesser likelihood to drop out of school (Fredericks et al., 2004). These hypotheses are still major questions for education research. SNS offer a new context within which to observe how relationships influence school engagement, grades, and student achievement. Researchers of SNS also have the ability to directly observe how online relationship networks may facilitate this social learning process. What interactions in SNS might a researcher expect to affect student engagement?

Martin and Dowson (2009) offer some hypotheses culled from a variety of social learning theories such as expectancy theory, goal theory, self-

determination theory, and self-efficacy. Expectancy theory and goal theory suggests that one's peers communicate which behaviors and goals are of value. For example, a student will value achieving good grades and set this as a goal, if his or her friends also strive for high achievement. Similarly, Eccles and Templeton (2002) also suggest that peer groups transmit a social identity that affects student behaviors. Self-determination theory proposes that if a student's psychological need to belong is met, he or she is much more likely to take academic risks, explore more ideas, and persist when presented with difficult work. Self-efficacy, a major part of Bandura's (2002) social cognitive theory, describes how capable one feels about accomplishing a task. When teachers, parents, and friends model the kinds of behavior that lead to academic success (i. e., study habits or information seeking), a student subsequently feels more capable about achieving success.

Martin and Dowson (2009) observe that high-quality relationships with adults, teachers, and peers impact these social learning mechanisms. These theories also highlight the educational impact of SNS. Quality relationships might allow students to feel more connected to school and thus take academic risks. Other peers might communicate what goals and behaviors are valued, through their status messages and wall posts. Finally, students might model positive academic behaviors by posting their behaviors or sharing information in SNS. These types of interactions begin to specify how relationship development in SNS may contribute to increased engagement and learning. Perhaps teachers can utilize SNS to engage their students,

develop closer relationships, and model positive learning behaviors over time. Such educational hypotheses have yet to be tested in formal studies.

Finally, SNS researchers can learn much from past studies in television and adolescent learning. For example, Karpinski (2009) offers a possible hypothesis that Facebook users might spend less time studying, thus explaining their lower GPA. This idea is called the displacement hypothesis, and has been examined by early television researchers who posited that television took away students' study time (Hornik, 1981). Studies of students' extracurricular activities instead suggest that new media, such as Facebook, replace or enhance other leisure activities, but do not take away time from youth (Roberts & Foehr, 2008). The critical question for future studies is not whether youth use one technology or another, but what kinds of interactions and content they experience in these virtual settings.