

(Non)Disclosure of the First-Generation College Student Identity on Social Media:

Disclosure Decisions, Strategies, and Outcomes

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Pre-Candidacy Proposal

May 31, 2021

Introduction

As of academic year 2015-2016, approximately 56% of enrolled college students in the United States were first-generation college students, meaning that neither parent had attained a bachelor's degree (RTI International, 2019). Despite the fact that this student population makes up the majority, they face additional hurdles to college access, retention, and completion that are often attributed to a lack of information about college. Often faced with challenges because their parents cannot provide them with informational support, these students must work to discover alternative sources of support. For many students this alternative support source resides on the internet, specifically on social media platforms (Ellison et al., 2014; Morioka et al., 2016; Wohn et al., 2013). However, it is unclear when and how these students may divulge information about themselves, particularly as it pertains to their first-generation status, as they access these social media resources. (Non)disclosure is related to social support exchange, physical and emotional health, relational outcomes, and societal awareness of overlooked or marginalized identities and experiences (Finkenauer et al., 2018). Thus, understanding first-generation college students' (non)disclosure decisions, strategies, and outcomes is necessary to obtain a deeper understanding of how disclosure can possibly benefit or harm first-generation students as they navigate social media for informational and emotional support during the application and college selection process and how beneficial disclosures can be promoted.

Disclosure refers to “the intentional revelation of information about the self to another person through verbal [i.e., through talking/written] communication” (Finkenauer et al., 2018). Early research focused primarily on two modes of disclosure: face-to-face/verbal and written. Specifically, scholars studied the impact of disclosure on relationship development (Altman & Taylor, 1973; N. L. Collins & Miller, 1994; Jourard, 1971). Beyond the scope of relationship

development, disclosure is connected to both physical and mental well-being outcomes, including decreased physical tension and mental rumination (Greene et al., 2006; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). Additionally, disclosure is associated with the amount of and quality of received social support (e.g., informational, emotional, tangible, esteem, and social network support [Cutrona & Suhr, 1992]), especially for those embodying stigmatized identities (Kalichman et al., 2003; Smith et al., 2008; Zea et al., 2005). Finally, disclosure promotes societal awareness and acceptance, particularly of stigmatized identities (e.g., LGBTQ) and experiences (e.g., having HIV/AIDS) (Cain, 1991; Corrigan, 2005; Derlega et al., 2004). However, responses to disclosures of stigmatized identities are not always positive, and an audience's response to disclosure creates a feedback loop that influences an individual's subsequent disclosure behavior (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). While the disclosure phenomenon is well-studied in face-to-face settings, researchers have pondered about disclosure behaviors in other channels, including computer-mediated online channels and, more recently, social media platforms.

Social media platforms' myriad affordances render them potentially beneficial outlets for disclosures. Conceptualized as "possibilities for action" that are constituted in the relationship between the materiality of a technological artifact and the perceptions of the user (Evans et al., 2017), affordances can facilitate and encourage disclosure. For instance, affordances such as visibility of content in tandem with explicit associations between users enable both one-to-one and one-to-many disclosures, the latter being more difficult to make offline because they require more intense coordination efforts. Moreover, the affordance of anonymity is linked to both desires and decisions to disclose personal information and to reciprocate disclosures (Ammari et al., 2019; Andalibi et al., 2016; Clark-Gordon et al., 2019; Kang et al., 2016; Leavitt, 2015; Ma et al., 2017). Research demonstrates that social media platforms can be an apt space for more

stigmatized disclosures of sensitive subjects including pregnancy loss, mental illness, and sexual abuse because of the anonymity they afford, although anonymity varies within and across platforms (Andalibi et al., 2016, 2017; Andalibi & Forte, 2018; Birnholtz et al., 2015; Choudhury & De, 2014). However, studies suggesting the role of anonymity in disclosure predate the Internet (Rubin, 1974) so anonymity does not necessarily distinguish offline and online disclosures. Online disclosures can also be asynchronous, distinguishing them from face-to-face disclosures. Taken together, the assemblages of affordances in the social media ecosystem render social media an apt site of disclosure.

Those who Goffman terms “discreditable” whose stigmatized identities are concealable insofar as they are less perceptible and obtrusive in everyday interactions (Goffman, 1986), may leverage social media’s affordances to make important disclosures related to their identity. Importantly, though, the relationship between disclosure and its many outcomes is in large part mediated by the audience that receives the disclosure and whether their responses are socially supportive or socially rejecting (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). The presence of stigma adds an unsettling degree of uncertainty to how an audience will respond, but it is precisely these responses which in many cases facilitates positive or negative outcomes of a disclosure. Additionally, matters are further complicated on social media platforms where a disclosure’s actual audience may be partially or entirely obscured, leaving it up to the discloser to gauge the risks associated with their imagined audience (Litt, 2012). Thus, those with concealable stigmatized identities must make significant disclosure decisions bearing in mind the confluence of risk and an often-obfuscated audience.

First-generation college students may possess a concealable stigmatized identity since these students face enacted stigma (i.e., external stigma, discriminatory treatment from others) in

the form of microaggressions for their parents' lack of education and, in many cases, their working-class status (RTI International, 2019). Parents' lack of education may produce stigma since it can create a (mis)perception that students do not value education and that they are academically and socially underprepared for higher education (Orbe, 2004, 2008). Evidence also suggests that first-generation students internalize this stigma (Orbe, 2004, 2008). Furthermore, generally speaking, they must disclose their identity for it to be known by others, although some social information pertaining to the stigmatized identity may leak via speech, dress, or lack of procedural knowledge about higher education (Ellis et al., 2019; Gray et al., 2018; Sarcedo et al., 2015; Warnock & Hurst, 2016).

Research on first-generation college students has demonstrated disparities between first-generation and continuing-generation students in terms of college access and persistence as well as degree attainment (RTI International, 2019). Potential mechanisms underlying these overarching disparities include particular disparities in social support, social capital, and well-being (Barry et al., 2009; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moschetti & Hudley, 2008). Social media is one site where first-generation students can engage in identity work and build their social network, which can then augment their social capital, social support, and wellbeing (Morioka et al., 2016; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2018; Ware & Ramos, 2013; Wohn et al., 2013). However, it is unclear how identity disclosures made by first-generation college students on social media during the pre-college and early college stages may facilitate the augmentation of social capital, social support, and wellbeing. While disclosure can possibly elicit more tailored and trusted informational support as well as emotional support, stigma and identity management concerns may play a more definitive role in shaping self-presentation strategies on social media. Specifically, students may anticipate stigmatizing reactions from audience members, stifling

their ability to freely and safely disclose. Additionally, first-generation college students may not desire disclosure because they wish to manage their impression and identity and do not want others' impressions of them to be collapsed to a stereotypical view of what a first-generation college student is. Thus, first-generation college students' (non)disclosures on social media comprise a rich context in which to examine the intersection of stigma, self-presentation, impression management, and identity in a context that is underexplored in computing research.

In sum, the overarching research question that guides the present study is: In the context of first-generation college students' engagement with social media as they apply for and select a college, what motivates their first-generation identity (non)disclosure decisions, what (non)disclosure strategies do they use, and what outcomes do they perceive as a result? This question will be addressed using semi-structured interviews. Sub-questions for this project include: How do various identity facets influence (non)disclosure in this context? How do anonymity/identifiability and audience influence (non)disclosure decisions and strategies?

This project weaves together previously disparate strands of research pertaining to first-generation college students, stigma, social media, and disclosure. This work has the potential to unpack perceptions of stigma experienced by first-generation college students and elucidate the extent to which the first-generation identity can be considered a concealable stigmatized identity (CSI) by comparing findings to those in other concealable stigmatized identity contexts. Additionally, it may contribute to theory around social media disclosures, self-presentation, and identity management for those with concealable stigmatized identities, which is relevant to the fields of human-computer interaction and computer-mediated communication. These findings could also signal that the concealable stigmatized identity framing of first-generation college students may be generative for developing and refining educational theory that concerns the

support of low-resourced students. Finally, this project has the potential to elicit recommendations for platform designs that support underrepresented students' college-related social media participation and promote desired and beneficial identity disclosures.

Literature Review

First-Generation College Students

The concept of “first-generation college student” was originally developed by higher education administrators in the late 1970s to determine student eligibility for outreach programs geared toward disadvantaged students (Auclair et al., 2008; Ward et al., 2012). The first research examining college generational status discovered that first-generation students were more vulnerable to attrition compared to continuing-generation students (Billson & Terry, 1982). Since then, research has frequently sought to compare first-generation college students to their continuing-generation counterparts, finding that first-generation college students are less academically prepared, have less assistance with applying to college, and are more likely to drop out of college than continuing-generation students (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2006).

There are a wide variety of definitions of “first-generation college student” used in educational research. In order to determine federal program eligibility (Auclair et al., 2008), first-generation students are defined as students whose parents have not completed their bachelor's degree in the United States. Some research, however, more narrowly defines this underserved student population as students whose parents had no higher education experience. Still, there exist documented disparities between first-generation and continuing-generation students even when “first-generation college student” was conceptualized in the broadest way possible (RTI International, 2019).

While some scholars acknowledge differences between subgroups of first-generation college students, others treat this population as a homogenous group. The homogenization of first-generation college students can be harmful, for it may lead to educational policies and practices that do not meet the needs of particular sub-groups of first-generation college students (Kim et al., 2020). Moving away from “first-generation” as a homogenous category, emerging scholarship (Patfield et al., 2020) identifies three groups of first-generation students that vary based on social capital: inheritors, opportunists, and outsiders. Inheritors are students who benefit from having a close tie to a predecessor, a family member other than a parent, who has pursued higher education. Opportunists, while lacking a close tie to a predecessor, use schools, communities, and social media to assemble their own social capital. Outsiders are the most precarious subset of first-generation college students, because they face silences surrounding higher education in their families, schools, and broader communities. Additional studies echo that first-generation students whose siblings went to college (“inheritors”) had more parental, peer, and institutional support than first-generation college students without a sibling who attended college (“opportunists” or “outsiders”) (Kim et al., 2020). Moreover, the homogenization of the first-generation college student population in extant work highlights the need for an intersectional approach, or an approach that examines and interrogates interlocking systems of power and oppression (P. H. Collins, 2002; Crenshaw, 1989, 1990; McCall, 2005), to studies of this student group moving forward. Such an approach can help us acknowledge and meet the diverse needs of first-generation college students who embody different and multiple stigmatized or otherwise marginalized identities.

Because in many cases the first-generation identity cannot be immediately recognized and must be disclosed to be known, it can be considered a concealable stigmatized identity

(CSI). In other words, “there is no visible marker to distinguish [first-generation college students] from their more-privileged peers” (Warnock & Hurst, 2016, p. 261). According to Goffman, this instantiation of stigma is less perceptible and does not tend to obstruct everyday communication (Goffman, 1986). While most research has considered the stigma surrounding first-generation, low-income students (Warnock & Hurst, 2016), some work suggests that all first-generation college students, regardless of socioeconomic status, face stigma (Orbe, 2004, 2008). Stigma exists when difference is labeled, negatively stereotyped, placed in distinct categories, and when one is discriminated against on the basis of that difference (Link & Phelan, 2001). First-generation college students may experience stigma directly, which is evidenced by the prevalence of microaggressions, including microinsults, microassaults, and microinvalidations they face. These microaggressions demean the identities of first-generation college students, question their merit and academic achievement, patronize the college degree attainment and college knowledge of parents, and stigmatized their lived experiences overtly or through more subtle body language and remarks (Ellis et al., 2019; Gray et al., 2018; Sue & Constantine, 2007). Furthermore, students may experience secondary stigma (Nyblade et al., 2017) or stigma by association (Goldstein, 2017) both of which refer to the stigmatization of someone relationally close to or more geographically proximal to the stigmatized individual or group, because their parent(s) are stigmatized for a lack of education.

Disclosure of a Concealable Stigmatized Identity

Research on disclosure, particularly stigmatized disclosures, tends to focus on three distinct elements: decision-making, strategies, and outcomes. Decision-making refers to the cognitive processes invoked when individuals decide whether or not to disclose and to whom they should disclose, if at all. Strategies refer to the actions or practices involved in making the

actual disclosure after the decision is made. Finally, decisions and strategies together influence what happens intrapersonally, interpersonally, and even societally as a result of disclosure both in the short- and long-term.

(Non)Disclosure Decisions

Research suggests myriad factors that determine whether an individual decides to disclose their concealable stigmatized identity. Many disclosures take place surreptitiously, sometimes in response to a disclosure, as theorized by social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Sometimes, though, individuals make the decision of whether or not to disclose strategically based on the level of trust someone has in the recipient of their disclosure (Davidson & Henderson, 2010; Masur & Scharrow, 2016; Medley et al., 2009). The quality of relationships with peers, family, and friends dictate to whom a person feels safe disclosing (Davidson & Henderson, 2010; McElvaney, 2015). Personality traits also play a role, with more open and outgoing people opting for disclosure compared to reserved individuals (Fesko, 2001). A need for services and support also drives disclosure decisions for those with concealable stigmatized identities, highlighting the ways in which disclosure decisions involve agency which is often constrained when one is in need of fundamental resources (Fesko, 2001).

Somewhat similar factors inform stigmatized (non)disclosures in social media contexts. The Disclosure Decision-Making Framework (DDM) by Andalibi and Forte (Andalibi, 2020; 2018) explicates (non)disclosure decision-making factors related to the disclosure of stigmatized identities and experiences online. In particular, it posits various factor types that contribute to the ultimate decision, including self-related, audience-related, network-level, platform and affordance-related, temporal, and societal factors. In doing so, it reflects the larger body of scholarship on (non)disclosure decisions in face-to-face contexts by acknowledging the need for

social support (self-related factor), disclosures made in response to or inspired by prior disclosures (network-level factor) and the desire to raise awareness (societal factor). However, it explicitly acknowledges the affordances of online platforms and how they uniquely impact disclosure decisions. For instance, the visibility of content on social media platforms enables users to see other people's posted disclosures, which in turn encourages them to make disclosures of their own. Moreover, visibility of content in tandem with the ability to engage in one-to-many communication enables people to make one difficult disclosure broadcast to all network members as opposed to many individual disclosures, making disclosure less arduous. The asynchronicity afforded by social media platforms also allows people to distance themselves from the immediate reactions of others, which can promote disclosure. This framework is applicable not only to the pregnancy loss context it originated in, but also extends more broadly to other stigmatized identities such as that of a sexual abuse survivor (Barta, 2019; Gallagher et al., 2019) and to contexts in which individuals embody multiple stigmatized identities (Pyle et al., 2021).

(Non)Disclosure Strategies

People with concealable stigmatized identities employ a range of disclosure strategies, ranging from direct disclosure to large groups and organizations to indirect disclosure or total nondisclosure. Direct disclosures are comparable to Jourard's "willful disclosures," which involve the revelation of personal information in such a way that the recipient has "no shadow of a doubt" as to what this information means (Jourard, 1971, p. 16). Some people opt to disclose directly to a large group of people (though rarely all at once), such as their entire workplace or community, in a process sometimes referred to as "indiscriminate disclosure" (Corrigan & Rao, 2012; Fesko, 2001; Medley et al., 2009). Others opt for selective disclosures made directly to

strategically chosen individuals, typically close family and friends (Corrigan & Rao, 2012; Fesko, 2001; Medley et al., 2009; Schneider & Conrad, 1980). Another disclosure strategy involves indirectly disclosing, which can be particularly valuable in situations involving social risk. Of course, there are also people who choose the route of total non-disclosure or “secrecy” and do not reveal any facet of their stigmatized identity to anyone (Corrigan & Rao, 2012; Fesko, 2001; McElvaney, 2015). Many people who opt for non-disclosure do so at the urging of “stigma coaches,” or people in their life such as parents or close friends who teach them to conceal their identity to protect their safety (Schneider & Conrad, 1980).

Individuals engage in (non)disclosure similarly offline and online in that they use direct and indirect strategies, albeit influenced by the affordances of the communication channel. Social media users can make explicit direct disclosures that leave little room for interpretation but can also disclose indirectly. Indirect disclosure consists of ambiguous sharing of personal information in a manner that invites doubt but may also invite social support from particularly aware audience members (Andalibi, Haimson, et al., 2018; Marwick & boyd, 2014). One instantiation of this phenomenon is called “vague-booking,” wherein a person posts a message on a social media platform that is purposely vague and open to multiple interpretations (Berryman et al., 2017). Another strategy is social steganography, which is similar to vague-booking in that it refers to the secretive way that messages are encoded so that only certain audience members would understand them (Marwick & boyd, 2014). Indirect disclosure strategies can vary based on the obviousness of the content, by whom the content was created, and by whom the content was shared according to Andalibi et al. (2018). People who experience stigma as a result of their embodied identities or experiences may be more likely to engage in

indirect disclosure because it allows them to seek social support while also engaging in privacy regulation (Andalibi, Morris, et al., 2018).

(Non)Disclosure Outcomes

There are also a wide variety of documented outcomes of the (non)disclosure of a concealable stigmatized identity. Those who disclose receive services and social support, and disclosure may also strengthen their relationships (Fesko, 2001; Medley et al., 2009). In addition, disclosure of a concealable stigmatized identity is political and can raise awareness around the identity itself (Cain, 1991; Corrigan, 2005). Conversely, disclosure can put those with a concealable stigmatized identity at risk for further stigma or discrimination and may even disrupt their personal relationships (Fesko, 2001; Medley et al., 2009). Non-disclosure, on the other hand, prevents individuals from accessing necessary services and social support, and may also further one's social isolation (Davidson & Henderson, 2010; Fesko, 2001; Medley et al., 2009). However, it may also enable individuals to "pass" and receive the privileges afforded to a person without a stigmatized identity (Goffman, 1986). Moreover, non-disclosure may yield health outcomes, but findings are mixed as some studies point to potential physical and psychosocial health benefits of nondisclosure and some point to adverse health outcomes (Camacho et al., 2020).

Fundamentally, outcomes of (non)disclosure are similar offline and online. Disclosures made online can promote the exchange of social support and improve psychosocial well-being. Those who disclose can receive support both from similar others in their network who may share the stigmatized identity or experience as well as those who are dissimilar yet empathetic others (Andalibi, 2019). At the broader societal level, both one-to-one and one-to-many disclosures challenge stigma and bring awareness to identities that have historically been overlooked and

pushed to the margins (Andalibi, 2019). In the case of one-to-many disclosures, network-level reciprocal disclosures promote the emergence of networked counterpublics of stigmatized or otherwise marginalized individuals who can, together, leverage epistemic, discursive, and cultural power such as those involved in the #MeToo movement (Gallagher et al., 2019; Jackson et al., 2020). However, in some cases disclosures breed negative outcomes. Visibility, while important to the destigmatization process, can be risky for stigmatized individuals as they may be surveilled and harassed (Barta, 2019).

Multiply Marginalized/Stigmatized Identities & An Intersectional Approach

While being first-generation may in and of itself constitute a concealable stigmatized identity, first-generation college students frequently embody multiple stigmatized or otherwise marginalized identities (RTI International, 2019). For instance, many come from lower-income backgrounds, are more likely to be non-traditional college students (i.e., older or having dependents) and are more likely than continuing-generation students to be non-white and female (RTI International, 2019). As such, these students may face unique forms of marginalization based on the intersections of these identities in relation to their external environment, and/or may experience what is known as intersectional stigma (Turan et al., 2019).

To understand intersectional stigma, one must first understand the origins and tenets of intersectionality theory. While intersectional approaches have been used for decades, particularly in Black feminist and womanist activism as well as critical race theory, Kimberlé Crenshaw is attributed with popularizing this framework within the academy (Crenshaw, 1990), and other Black women scholars including Patricia Hill Collins have advanced the theoretical framework in the ensuing decades (P. H. Collins, 2002). They have called attention to the fact that Black women, and others who embody more than one marginalized identity, are multiply oppressed

within a looming matrix of domination that values and grants power to white, cisgender, masculine, able-bodied citizens at the expense of those who do not hold these identities (P. H. Collins, 2002). Significantly, the effects of multiple social locations are not additive, but instead these social locations intersect to inform a particular configuration of power and oppression. Intersectional stigma, then, refers to stigma experienced by a person inhabiting intersecting stigmatized identities (Turan et al., 2019).

Prior work has documented the (intersectional) stigma faced by first-generation, low-income students (Warnock & Hurst, 2016). These stigmas are compounded when these students are also racial minorities that are underrepresented on college campuses, specifically on predominately white institutions (PWIs). Microaggressions, including microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations, are wielded at low-income, first-generation students of color (Gray et al., 2018; Sarcedo et al., 2015; Sue & Constantine, 2007). For example, these students are discouraged from pursuing graduate education or other activities for high-achieving students and are met with surprise when disclosing their achievements (Sarcedo et al., 2015). They are also assumed to be first-generation and low-income without disclosing that information, exemplifying a phenomenon called “identity collapse” wherein less visible aspects of a person’s identity (e.g., class, college generational status) are assumed based on more visible identity cues (e.g., race) (Gray et al., 2018; Morales, 2014; Sarcedo et al., 2015). Research suggests that first-generation students who embody multiple marginalized identities may experience a more intense emotional effect of microaggressions, often resulting in internalized stigma that makes it difficult for students to visualize success and easier for students to internalize the idea that they do not belong in college (Sarcedo et al., 2015). Importantly, race-based microaggressions do not just occur in the college context, but in secondary school settings

as well (Banks et al., 2020; Compton-Lilly, 2020; Henfield, 2011; Johnston-Goodstar & Roholt, 2017), which could have implications for disclosure practices in the pre-college stage because enacted stigma could lead individuals to believe that the costs of disclosure outweigh potential benefits.

Due to different and compounded configurations of stigma and marginalization, the risks for disclosure may be higher for first-generation, low-income, racial minority students as these students may face harassment and abuse targeted toward their multiple marginalized identities. While it has been shown that African American sexual minority women are less likely to disclose their identities to people outside of their family (Aranda et al., 2015), it remains unclear how these findings might extend to other types of identity disclosures made by people of color who embody multiple marginalized identities. Still, it provides some evidence that there are racial differences in the disclosure of a marginalized or stigmatized identity. Furthermore, the aforementioned phenomenon of identity collapse can lead first-generation students to “dodge” or “code switch” in order to withhold information about a stigmatized identity and protect or improve how their status is evaluated by others (Gray et al., 2018). Work on dodging and code-switching for this population, however, has not considered whether dodging and code-switching practices extend to social media contexts. It may be the case that dodging and code-switching extend to the online environment in the form of nondisclosure or indirect disclosure. Conversely, affordances such as anonymity may enable safer disclosures of stigmatized identities/experiences, or disclosures that are not met with negative outcomes like physical, verbal, and/or emotional abuse.

In sum, this work draws from the theoretical framework of intersectionality and takes an intracategorical approach, which examines “a single social group at a neglected point of

intersection...” to reveal “the differences and complexities of experience embodied in that location” (McCall, 2005, pp. 1780–1782), to address the question of how other facets of first-generation college students’ identities intersect with the first-generation identity to inform social media (non)disclosure decisions, strategies, and outcomes. Unlike the anticategorical approach (McCall, 2005), which eschews categories altogether, this study seeks to understand a category that, while socially constructed and heterogeneous, is important both to many student’s self-concepts and also to higher education institutions who use this categorization to determine resource eligibility. The alternative, the intercategorical approach which McCall (2005) outlines, is of limited utility to answering the research questions guiding this study because it is concerned with relationships among social groups rather than the experiences of a single social group.

Perceptions of Identifiability

Anonymity and, conversely, identifiability have been extensively researched in both the computer-mediated communication and human-computer interaction fields. Over the years, scholars have developed a more nuanced conceptualization of identifiability as existing on a continuum rather than being wholly present or absent (“To Reveal or Not to Reveal,” 1998). Other research has painted a still more granular picture, examining the anonymity and identifiability of specific interactions on a platform as opposed to focusing on the overarching classification of the platform itself (Ellison et al., 2016). For instance, Facebook confessional boards in which disclosers submit posts to a moderator who anonymizes them and opens them up to identified responses constitute one configuration of anonymity in the broader context of an identified platform (Birnholtz et al., 2015; Rho et al., 2017). Moreover, prior work has disentangled objective and subjective identifiability and anonymity (Marx, 1999; “To Reveal or Not to Reveal,” 1998). By emphasizing subjective identifiability, work can more directly

concern itself with the lived experiences of social media users and their navigation of platform features and affordances. While nothing may ever be truly objectively anonymous given the buying and selling of data harnessed by prominent commercial platforms as well as the tracking of IP addresses, examining perceptions of identifiability/anonymity is nonetheless important because it influences user behavior, which in turn can impact outcomes of use.

Greater degrees of anonymity can decrease inhibition which, in turn, may promote self-disclosure (Clark-Gordon et al., 2019; Joinson, 2001; Suler, 2004). Conversely, greater degrees of identifiability may be useful for the establishment of relationships and the development of credibility and reputation (“To Reveal or Not to Reveal,” 1998). For first-generation college students, relational development and credibility/reputation may be of particular importance as they begin to transition their identity to that of a college student. In light of these tensions, this work seeks to understand how perceptions of anonymity and identifiability on social media platforms influence first-generation college students’ (non)disclosure decisions and strategies.

Audience

Computer-mediated communication is distinguished by a communicating dyad or group’s lack of physical co-presence and the use of computing technologies to mediate interactions. Because one’s communicative audience is not physically present, combined with the fact that social media platforms in particular promote one-to-many communicative acts, one’s actual audience is rather opaque. Actual audience refers to the group of individuals who do bear witness to one’s social media content, which is a subset of one’s total network due to the algorithmic news feed curation practices of mainstream platforms in addition to the use practices of network members. Further contributing to this opacity is the decision of prominent social media platforms like Facebook to *not* provide data about who has observed a given user’s posts. To make up for a

general lack of knowledge about one's actual audience, which characterizes social media (but has analog antecedents in broadcast disclosures made on television, for instance), people imagine audiences, or create a "mental conceptualization of the people with whom [they] are communicating" (Litt, 2012, p. 331). Prior work has unearthed knowledge about what factors influence a person's imagined audience on social media. These factors are structural (e.g., social norms, cues given off by the audience, features and affordances of platforms) and agential (e.g., social skills, internet skills, and motivation for use) (Litt, 2012).

Social media users' imagined audiences differ in size, composition, and abstraction. On Facebook, users' imagined audiences are smaller than their actual audiences as evidenced by server-level data (Bernstein et al., 2013). Composition of imagined audience varies not only from user to user, but from interaction to interaction. For instance, Twitter users imagined different audiences from tweet to tweet, ranging from categories of people (e.g., friends) to an "ideal" person who shares their perspective to even oneself (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Moreover, imagined audience varies on the dimension of abstraction. While some users in specific contexts imagined broad and abstract categories of people (e.g., the world, friends), others' imaginations exhibited greater degrees of concreteness (e.g., professional ties, people who share the same religion) (Litt & Hargittai, 2016). Some even imagined a phantasmal audience of someone or something that is unlikely to respond, such as an inanimate object, animal, or famous person or brand (Litt & Hargittai, 2016).

Not only do people imagine audience size, composition, and abstraction, but they also imagine audience impressions of them and their content. For example, women Facebook users in Saudi Arabia, where gendered expectations of appropriate self-presentation have been described as particularly rigid, imagined their Facebook audience's impressions of them based on their own

expectations or actual experiences of criticism by their network (Alsaggaf, 2019). Many users may opt for a *lowest common denominator* approach whereby they judge what disclosures are normatively acceptable to their entire imagined audience and post accordingly (Hogan, 2010). Thus, particularly in situations with the possibility for stigma and judgment, imagined audience impressions may matter as much as dimensions of size and composition and may be informed by prior experiences with enacted stigma or judgment more broadly. Importantly, this body of work has suggested that one's imagined audience, influenced by the aforementioned factors, in turn influences user behavior displayed to actual audiences (Bernstein et al., 2013). Moreover, imagined audiences influence social media (non)disclosures of concealable stigmatized identities on social media (Pyle et al., 2021). For instance, the composition of one's imagined audience and expectations for how one's imagined audience would perceive them influenced nondisclosure decisions for those experiencing pregnancy loss (Andalibi, 2020). Additionally, LGBT parents made (non)disclosure decisions not only on the basis of one's current imagined audience, but also with one's future imagined audience in mind (Blackwell et al., 2016). Furthermore, the opacity of both imagined and actual audiences on social media platforms can be problematic for stigmatized individuals such as undocumented immigrants who must continuously make (non)disclosure decisions that could have safety-related and legal ramifications (Guberek et al., 2018). However, no work has been done thus far that investigates audience's influence on (non)disclosure decisions for first-generation college students who may experience judgment on the basis of their identity/identities.

Taken together, prior research informs the following overarching research question and sub-questions:

RQ1: What factors motivate first-generation college students' (non)disclosure of their first-generation identity on social media as they apply to and select a college? What (non)disclosure strategies do they use? What outcomes do they perceive as a result of (non)disclosure?

- a) How do intersections of various identity facets inform first-generation college students' disclosure decisions, strategies, and outcomes?
- b) How do perceptions of anonymity and identifiability influence first-generation college students' (non)disclosure decisions, strategies, and outcomes?
- c) How does the imagined audience influence first-generation college students' (non)disclosure decisions, strategies, and outcomes?

Methods

Methodological Approach

I take a constructivist or interpretivist (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) approach to investigating the aforementioned research questions. By taking a constructivist or interpretivist approach, I acknowledge that reality is socially constructed. I seek to elicit multiple, complex meanings of experiences described by participants and contextualize these meanings within the historical and cultural settings in which participants are embedded.

Recruitment

I plan on recruiting participants who self-identify as incoming first-generation college students and who use social media via a call for participants posted to major social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, and Discord. Specifically, a call for participants will be posted on several Facebook groups related to college admissions, transitions, finances, and college life. A call for participants will be posted on the researcher's academic Twitter and Instagram accounts using the hashtags #ApplyingtoCollege, #firstgenerationcollegestudent, and

#firstgen. Finally, a call for participants will be posted to the subreddit r/ApplyingtoCollege and to a Discord server for college-bound students. I plan to include a screening survey along with the call for participants for several reasons. First, I want to ensure that students will have just applied to college in the past academic year and will begin college in the upcoming academic year (2021-2022). Second, I want to ensure that I capture a wide variety of demographics in my subsequent interviews. Specifically, I want to ensure a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, genders, socioeconomic statuses, and rural/urban backgrounds to gauge the potential effect of possessing multiple marginalized and stigmatized identities on (non)disclosure. Importantly, I plan to use the screening survey to capture potential participants' parents' and siblings' highest level of education as well as exposure to conversations about college in offline institutions like schools, churches, and extracurricular activities. Capturing this information will help me represent various subgroups of first-generation students such as inheritors, opportunists, and outsiders (Patfield et al., 2020). Finally, the screening survey will be used to try to gather a sample that used a variety of social media platforms during the application and selection process and that engaged in both disclosure and nondisclosure. I plan to conduct approximately twenty interviews in order to reach saturation, and I will know I have reached saturation when I cease to hear new themes from my interviewees.

Data Collection

I plan to conduct semi-structured interviews in order to systematically assess my research questions while allowing participants to freely explain their experiences. Interviews will take place via video or voice call both due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the fact that participants will not necessarily live in the immediate area. I will explore whether or not participants disclosed their first-generation identity as they sought support and information related to college

and why they did or did not do so. If they did disclose, I will ask more about their direct and indirect disclosure decision, strategies, and outcomes. Specifically, I will ask why they disclosed, to whom they disclosed (or to whom they *imagined* they disclosed), the platform(s) on which they disclosed, and what outcomes they perceived as a result of disclosure. If they did not disclose, I will ask about their nondisclosure decision, anticipated reactions from their imagined audience if they were to disclose, who they imagined their audience to be on various platforms they used for college-related information and emotional support, what features of online spaces may make it easier or more difficult for them to disclose, and what outcomes might stem from their nondisclosure decision.

Analysis Plan

I plan on first conducting iterative open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) to look for patterns in the data that might emerge. This will produce a set of codes along with code notes to explain the content of codes. I will then organize codes into categories and subcodes and iterate to discover how these categories and subcodes are interrelated using axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Then I will conduct a thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2014) to group codes into overarching themes. Finally, I will use these overarching themes to construct findings.

Timetable

Stage	Activity	Dates
Research design & planning	Finalize research questions	August 2020 – November 2020
	Develop research design	November 2020 – March 2021
	Prepare research proposal	November 2020 – March 2021

	Prepare & Submit IRB	November 2020 – March 2021
Literature review	Search and synthesize relevant literature	August 2020 – November 2020
	Prepare draft literature review	
Data collection	Finalize sampling plan	August 2020 – March 2021
	Develop data collection instrument (interview protocol)	
	Pre-test/pilot data collection instrument	November 2020 – March 2021
	Carry out data collection	April 2021 - August 2021
	Write up data collection	April 2021 – August 2021
Data analysis	Prepare data	April 2021 – August 2021
	Analyze data	April 2021 – August 2021
	Draw conclusions/recommendations	May 2021 – August 2021
Writing up	Draft	May 2021 – August 2021
	Review draft with advisors	June 2021 – August 2021
	Final editing	August 2021 – December 2021
Present/defend	Create presentation	November 2021 – December 2021
	Prepare for presentation	November 2021 – December 2021
	Defend	January, 2022

Target Outlets

- Archival Conferences & Journals

- Social Media + Society
- Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication
- New Media & Society
- Computer Human Interaction (CHI)
- Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW)
- Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction (TOCHI)
- Non-Archival Conferences
 - National Communication Association
 - International Communication Association

Appendix: Interview Protocol

Opening

Thank you so much for being willing to share your experiences with me. This study is about first-generation college students' social media use as they applied to and selected a college. I'm going to start out with asking some questions about your experience as a first-generation student. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions I will ask – I'm really just interested in learning about and understanding your experiences.

Please know that you can pause or stop this conversation at any time without any explanations or penalties. If there are any questions you don't want to answer, just let me know and we can skip them.

I'll be recording the audio of this conversation with your permission, but you won't be identifiable in any papers or research products that are created as a result of this research. Upon completion of the interview, I will send a \$25 Amazon e-gift card to your email. Is it okay if I start recording now? Do you have any questions for me before we start?

Is it okay if I start recording now?

Warm Up

- Small talk/How are you doing today?
- So, tell me where you're at in terms of the college admissions and enrollment process.
 - What kinds of places did you apply to? How many?
 - What made you choose those places to apply to?
 - Have you selected where to attend? If so, what made you choose that school?

Now we're going to talk about how you did or did not share about being first-generation online as you applied to and selected a college.

First-Gen Identity Disclosure

Online

- You mentioned in the screening survey that you used [online platform(s)] as you were applying to/selecting a college.
 - Did you ever share on these platforms that you're a first-generation college student or that your parents didn't complete a four-year degree in the U.S.?

[if YES direct disclosure]

- Could you describe that/those experience(s)?
 - On what platform(s) did you share?
 - What made you want to share this aspect of your identity?

- Were there any other reasons you shared?
 - Who did you share with?
 - What made you choose to share with them?
 - When you shared, was it anonymous or connected with your real name?
 - What made you choose to share in that way?
 - Who do you think saw you share that?
 - Why do you think that?
 - Was there anything about [platform] that encouraged you to tell people this?
 - If yes:
 - What was it?
 - How did it encourage you?
- What kinds of responses did you expect when you shared about being first-generation online?
- What kinds of responses did you receive when you told people that you're a first-generation college student? What responses stood out to you? Please be specific and provide an example if possible.
 - What did helpful or supportive responses look like?
 - Did you receive any unhelpful responses?
 - If yes: what made them unhelpful?
 - If no: Why do you think that is? What would an unhelpful response look like?
- Did anything else happen as a result of you telling people online that you're first-generation?
- Have you seen other people post online about being first-gen?
 - If so:
 - What did you think of that?
 - Why do you think those people posted about that?
 - Did that influence you to post or not post about being first-gen?
 - If yes: Was it the specific post that influenced you, or seeing content in general about being first-gen?
 - What did responses to those posts look like?
 - Did you ever like, comment, or engage in any way with those posts? Why or why not?
 - If not: Can you think of reasons why *other* people might not want to tell people about being first-gen in online spaces?
- Have you ever seen any content online that made you feel like you might be judged for being first-gen?
 - If so:
 - What was that content like?

- Who posted that content? (Someone you knew or not?)
- Did that influence you to post or not post about being first-gen?
- Why do you think that content was posted?

[if NO direct disclosure]

- Did anyone online already know that you're first-generation?
 - If yes: How do you think they knew?
- Did you ever imply or hint at the fact that you were a first-generation college student when you looked for information or support online during the application and school selection process?
 - If yes: What did that look like?
 - What made you want to hint at this aspect of your identity?
 - Were there any other reasons you hinted at this aspect of your identity?
 - When you hinted about being first-gen, who was your audience?
 - What made you choose to share with them?
 - When you hinted at being first-gen, was it anonymous or connected with your real name?
 - What made you choose to share in that way?
 - Was there anything about [platform] that encouraged you to hint at the fact that you're first-gen?
 - If yes:
 - What was it?
 - How did it encourage you?
- Have there been times you have wanted to or considered sharing about being first-gen but did not?
 - If yes: Tell me about that.
 - If no: Can you think of reasons why *other* people might not want to tell people about being first-gen in online spaces?
- What reactions would you expect to get if you did share this?
 - On what platforms/online spaces?
 - From whom? Tell me about the people you would expect to get those reactions from.
- What makes you expect those reactions?
- Was there anything about [online platform(s)] that discouraged you from sharing this?
 - If yes: What were they and how did they discourage you?
 - If no: Is there anything about [online platform(s)] that might discourage *others* from sharing about being first-gen?
- Is there anything about [online platform(s)] that would encourage you to share this?

- If yes: What are they and how would they encourage you?
- If no: Is there anything about [online platform(s)] that might encourage *others* to share about being first-gen?
- Did not sharing about being first-generation online impact you in any way?
- Have you ever seen any content online that made you feel like you might be judged for being first-gen?
 - If so:
 - What was that content like?
 - Who was that content posted by?
 - Did that influence you to post or not post about being first-gen?
- Have you seen any content online that made you feel like you might be supported for being first-gen?
 - If so:
 - What was that content like?
 - Who was that content posted by?
 - Did that influence you to post or not post about being first-gen?
 - Did it matter who it was posted by?
- Have you seen other people post online about being first-gen?
 - If so:
 - How did that make you feel?
 - Who was that content posted by?
 - Did that influence you to post or not post about being first-gen?
 - What did responses to those posts look like?
 - Did you ever like, comment, or engage in any way with those posts? Why or why not?
- Do you see yourself ever talking about being first-gen online in the future? Why or why not?
 - If yes: what spaces? [probe for the audiences, norms, and features of those spaces that might encourage future disclosure]

I would like to learn from you a bit more about your overall journey applying to and selecting which college to go to.

College-Related Support

Applying to College

- Walk me through the process of applying to colleges and selecting which college to go to, and how your first-generation identity impacted these processes?
 - How would you describe your high school environment?
 - Was it expected that you would go to college?

- What kinds of schools did you end up applying to? (e.g., two-year, four-year, state school, private, etc.)
 - How did you decide to apply to those?
- What school did you select?
 - What made you select that one?
- What kinds of obstacles did you face, if any, as you applied to and selected a college?
 - How did you respond to those obstacles?
- What kinds of help did you need as you applied to college and selected which college to go to? [probe if needed only; let them talk first] These could be things like financial aid information or reassurance.
 - Were you able to get what you needed?
 - If so: How?
 - Did any of the online platforms you mentioned in the screening survey help?
 - How did they help?
 - [can probe for audience/network, typical use/posting behavior, norms of platform]
 - If not: Why do you think you were unable to get what you needed? How did that make you feel?
 - Were any of the online platforms you mentioned in the screening survey unhelpful?
 - What made them unhelpful?
 - [can probe for audience/network, typical use/posting behavior, norms of platform]

So now we're going to start wrapping up by talking a little bit about yourself and your identity.

Identity

- If I were to ask you to describe yourself in a few words, what would you say?
 - You mentioned X. Would you say those are the most important parts of your identity? If not, what's missing?
 - Probe for first-gen identity: Is your first-gen identity important? Why or why not?
- Did any identities (like race or gender) impact your application/selection process in any way?
 - If so: How? [ask for examples]
 - Which of these identities was most important to your application/selection process?

- Did your identities impact your use of [online platform(s)] while applying to or selecting a college?
 - If so: How? [ask for examples]
- Are there ways you think online spaces could have been more helpful to you during this process?

Closing

- Is there anything else you would like to share about being first-generation?
- Is there anything else you would like to share about the role the internet and social media played as you applied for and later selected a college?
- Is there anything you'd like to mention that hasn't come up yet?

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