# Social Media's Role in Prospective First-Generation Students' College Decisions

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## Introduction

In previous research, there is no clear causation or correlation between social media and first-generation college choices. In this study, we focused on student's social capital, which is the resources embedded in one's social networks that individuals can use to reach their goals (Whiteley, 2015). Bonding social capital is associated with strong ties such as family members and close friends who share one's social niche, while bridging social capital is related to weak ties that allow individuals to be exposed to a broader range of people and novel perspectives (Putnam, 2000). A body of literature (e.g., Ellison et al., 2007; Ellison et al., 2014; Greenhow & Burton, 2011) emphasized that social media can be used as a facilitator to expand upon one's social capital, allowing them to convert their latent ties into weak ties.

However, educational system inputs too much educational responsibility on technological sources, for instance, social media, to inform their students (Macgilchrist, 2018). Technology usage is more complex, entangled with individual social material settings (Selwyn, 2012), and college decisions are based on multiple factors including their individual habitus (i.e., their internalized system of thoughts, beliefs, and perspectives), school and community, higher education, social, economic, and policy contexts (Perna,2006). Thus, social media's role should be examined within the broader context of the teen's college choice system, in which social media usage is embedded. We will navigate through these studies by asking ourself these questions:

How do prospective first-generation students describe their social media usage related to college?
    1-1. What networks do they engage with?
    1-2. What topics do they explore?

## Methods

**Participants**
11 high school seniors from 5 high schools in the southeastern United States. All participants identified as 12th graders, potential first-generation college students, and users of social media to learn about college
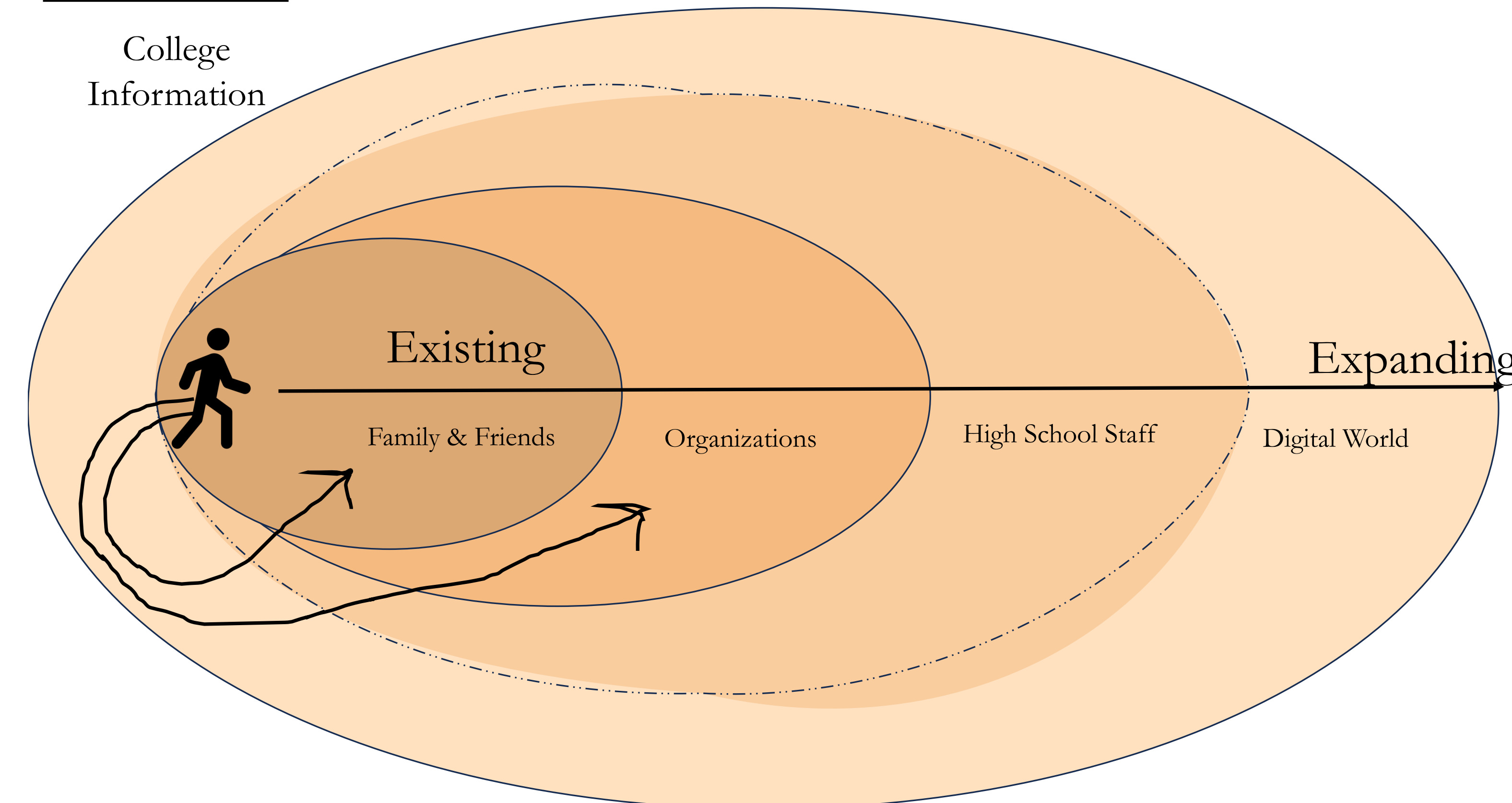
**Data Collection**
Two semi-structured interviews (30 and 90 minutes, respectively) and social media diaries (7 days)

**Data Analysis**
Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), a pattern-based method for analyzing qualitative data to create themes.

## Results

### Networks



First-Generation college students tended to remain in their already existing networks and were sometimes reluctant to expand into other networks. They remained in their personal information sources in which they were more likely to connect with friends and family than their school guidance counselors because of trust and authenticity. Also, social media norms prohibited students from actively expanding their network connections beyond their personal networks.

### Topics

| College major | College option | College application | Scholarship | College transition |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| College major Career Daily life of a person with career School work review | College options College students' perspectives Specific college College event College sports Greek culture Daily life of a college student College organization | College stats College acceptance results College application tips College essay Deadlines (ACT/SAT) Deadlines (college application) | Scholarship/ college fund | College preparation Advice for incoming freshmen Study tips |

There were many topics that First-Generation students engaged with on social media that ultimately led to a wide variety of both academic and lifestyle information that were imperative in making their college decisions. However, this also led to an "overwhelming" feeling as the First-Generation students needed to be able to sift through this information regarding what was important to them.

## Discussion

On the contrary to our beliefs, when seeking information from their social capital first-generation students tend to gain information from their personal (close relationships) networks as social media reinforces these networks rather than expanding, preventing a potential connection between students and their weak ties.

On social media platforms there is a large variety of college topics that first-generation students may encounter. Although students have access to a vast amount of college information, they may become overwhelmed facilitating their inability to filter through the information.

## Conclusion

Social media play a beneficial role in prospective first-generation students' college decisions, albeit with enduring boundaries and constraints. To support prospective first-generation students' college access and effective social media usage for this endeavor,

- High schools can encourage relationship building between prospective first-gen students and colleges through college expos and campus tours, which can also lead to students expanding their networks through social media
- High schools' college readiness program  (e.g., AVID) could be expanded, which provide lessons on:
  - How to sift through a wide range of information about college on social media
  - How to make a professional college account on social media (to counteract the social media norm)
- College outreach programs should expand,  and college ambassadors can advocate for their college in high schools.

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