Impact of Online Social Network on American College Students' Reading Practices

By SuHua Huang and Matthew Capps

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate social networking sites (SNS) and ways college students spend their time on both conventional academic and recreational reading. A total of 1,265 (466 male and 799 female) college students voluntarily participated in the study by completing a self-report survey. Descriptive analysis indicated that the average amount of time students spent (M) on academic reading (AR), recreational reading (RR), and social networking (SN) was 7.72 hours, 4.24 hours, and 16.13 hours per week, respectively. When compared with various classifications, freshmen students spent more time on SN (M=18.05 hours) and less time on both AR (M= 6.22 hours) and RR (M=3.47 hours) than other groups. A zero-order correlation statistical analysis indicated socializing with others by using some social networking sites (SNS) (e.g., Facebook) was positively correlated with college students' recreational reading (RR), but was not correlated with academic reading (AR).

Introduction

Research on college students has indicated a number of different outcomes associated with particular types of college students' experiences (e.g., contact with professors, students' attitudes, motivations, and activities) and differences among types of institutions and subgroups of students (Kelly & Lee, 2009). However, spending time in reading is one important dimension for college students that has not been studied extensively (Hendel & Harrold, 2004), and little empirical evidence has been gathered about college students' reading activities (Huang, Capps, Blacklock, & Garza, 2012). As a result, studies of college students' reading practices have been either inconsistent or limited (Mokhtari, Reichard, & Gardner, 2009).

Recent national reports by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA, 2004; 2007) and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2005) examined voluntary reading and reading achievement among American youth and adults. Both reports stated that young adults in the United States today are not only spending less time reading and less time than their counterparts in the past, but also are reading less well. Hendel and Harrod (2004) also indicated that college students' reading for both recreation and mandatory academic work has declined. The NEA and NCES reports also alluded to a resulting negative impact on social and economic prosperity. The social and economic implications raise the question, "why are college students reading less?"

One possible explanation may be found in online social networking, which has been a rapidly adopted "behavior routine for many college students" (Eberhardt, 2007, p. 18). More specifically, college students

have used Facebook, MySpace, and other online social networking sites to develop a significant interactive feature of technological student life (Eberhardt; Notley, 2008). Social networking sites are not only emerging as important tools in today's schools, but they also provide very popular out-of-school computer activities among American youth (Cassey & Evans, 2011; Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010).

In spite of the popularity of SNS, relatively few studies have investigated the link between social networking and education (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Even fewer studies have investigated how online social networking might reduce the amount of time spent on conventional reading for academic or nonacademic purposes. While interest in social networking practices and their implications for education is growing (Greenhow & Burton, 2011), the impact of social networking on college students' academic lives merits further discussion.

The purpose of the study was to investigate social networking sites (SNS) and how college students spend time on both conventional academic and recreational reading. In order to address the aim of the study, related literature is reviewed and key features of SNS are defined. A brief overview of the research methods is provided before presenting the results.

Literature Review

Reading Research on College Students

A small number of published studies report varying factors have influenced college students' reading practices. Blackwood, Flowers, Rogers, and Staik (1991) surveyed 333 college seniors enrolled at a small liberal arts public university. The findings indicated students spent about 2.5 hours per week on recreational reading during school when it was in-session and slightly more during vacations. Sheorey and Mokhtari (1994) examined the reading habits of 85 college students enrolled at a large midwestern university in the United States. They reported that students spent an average of 4.75 hours per week on nonacademic reading and an average of 9.7 hours per week on academic reading.

Two recent research studies investigated the effectiveness of the Internet on college students' reading practices. Mokhtari et al. (2009) surveyed 539 college students concerning time spent on academic reading, recreational reading, and the Internet. They found that 285 respondents spent an average of 5.7 hours per week on recreational reading, and 318 respondents spent 10.85 hours weekly on academic reading. The study also reported that 85% of the respondents spent 12.35 hours per week on the Internet. The findings indicated that students enjoyed using the Internet instead of spending time on recreational and academic reading, and also enjoyed watching television. Huang et al. (2012) surveyed 1,250 undergraduate and graduate students across interdisciplinary areas at a public liberal arts university in the southwestern United States. The results indicated that online reading was the most popular type of reading, and reading non-major academic books

was the least popular. These students devoted more time to reading or skimming online E-books, conducting web searches, and searching online library databases, than they did to reading traditional print books.

Definition of Social Network Sites and Their Relation to Academic Learning Resources

The meaning of *social network site* varies across areas and among individuals (Donath & Boyd, 2004; Lange, 2007). According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), an online social network site (SNS) is a "web-based service that allows individuals to (1) construct a public or semipublic profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (p. 211). Online social networking provides connections that allow users to make "friends" (Greenhow & Burton, 2011).

Some studies investigated the effectiveness of the use of SNS on college students' academic lives. One study related to college students' feelings about having their professors on Facebook (Hewitt & Forte, 2006), and another to how a faculty presence on Facebook impacts student motivation, affective learning, and classroom climate (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007). Both studies indicated that college students liked having professors join them on Facebook. A few studies investigated activities on which college students spend the most amount of time when on SNS. The Syracuse University Online Communities Research Team (2006) found that 92% of their students used Facebook on a daily basis to maintain relationships with friends they had met in person or new online friends. Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe (2007) investigated undergraduate college students (n=286) using Facebook. They found that Facebook may help some college students reduce social barriers and learning anxiety. The findings of the National School Board Association (2007) indicated that 60% of the college respondents talked about education topics, and 50% of the students talked particularly about school work by using SNS. Salaway, Borreson, and Nelson's study (2008) of US college students (ages 18–25) indicated 85% of college students spent an average of 19.6 hours per week on online network sites (primarily Facebook) for work, school, or recreational activities. Younger respondents reported spending more time on SNS than older respondents. The study also found 73.9 % of the respondents used blogs, wikis, and photo or video websites to share academic and nonacademic information. A recent Pew study (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010) indicated that more than 75% of young adults reportedly had a profile on an SNS like Facebook or MySpace and that they devote an average of nine hours a week to maintain their online network accounts.

The Present Study

To meet the abovementioned research gap, this study was designed to investigate the difference among classification of students in time spent on academic and recreational reading, and how the advent of online network sites has influenced college students' reading practice. Two major research questions were addressed in this study.

1. How much time do American college students spend weekly on academic reading, recreational reading, and social network sites?

2. How do academic reading, recreational reading, and online social networking vary by classification of students?

Methods

Participants

Participants were enrolled at a public arts university in the southwestern United States during the 2012 academic year. One thousand two hundred six-five (466 male and 799 female) of 6,500 students across interdisciplinary areas voluntarily completed a self-report survey. The respondents were classified as freshmen (12%); sophomores (17%); juniors (25%); seniors (36%); and graduate students (10%). The ethnic groups included Caucasians (75%); African Americans (12%); Native Americans (2%); Latinos (10%); Asians (.5%); and others (.5%).

Instrument

The *College Students' Reading Habits Survey (RHS)*, which has a similar number of items to previous research studies on the reading habits and interests of American students (e.g., Chen, 2007; Gallik, 1999; Sheorey & Mokhtari, 1994). The survey mainly asked American college students how much time they dedicated to seven major activities during the week, including academic reading, recreational reading, spending time on the Internet, sleeping, sport and recreation, part-time job, and socializing with others by using Facebook, MySpace, and so forth. The researchers created nine time frames (e.g., none, 1–4 hours, 5–10 hours, 11–15 hours, 16–20 hours, 21–25 hours, 26–30 hours, 31–35 hours, and 36–40 hours) for the survey.

Procedures

Before the study began, the researchers sent emails to the university's instructors asking for permission to recruit students to participate in the study. In the following weeks, the researchers and assistants visited participating classrooms and distributed surveys to the students. Brief print and aural instructions explaining how to respond to each question were distributed before surveys were given to the students. Students were assured that all data would remain confidential and would be used for research purposes only. Students spent approximately ten minutes to complete the survey anonymously.

Results

Time Spent on Academic Reading, Recreational Reading, and Social Network Sites

Table 1 displays the amount of reported time the respondents spent on academic reading (AR), recreational reading (RR), and social networking (SN). To quantify the responses, each ordinal response was converted to a median response (e.g., 2.5 for 1–4 hours, 7.5 for 5–10 hours, 13 for 11–15 hours, 18 for 16–20 hours, 23 for 21–25 hours, 28 for 26–30 hours, 33 for 31–25 hours, and 38 for 36–40 hours); mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) were calculated. The average amount of time the respondents spent for AR (M=7.72), RR (M=4.24), and SN (M=16.13) per week, respectively.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Hours Per Week Spent on Academic Reading, Recreational Reading, and Social Networking

	None %	1-4 %	5-10 %	11-15 %	16-20 %	21-25 %	26-30 %	31-35 %	36-40 %	M	S.D.
AR	4.7	44	25	12.6	6.2	2.6	2.2	1.2	0.9	7.72	7.5
RR	28	47	14	6.0	3.0	1.0	0.4	0.1	0.5	4.24	5.8
SN	2.0	15.1	21.3	16.7	13.8	9.1	7.8	4.0	10.3	16.13	11.28

To investigate the time the respondents spent on each major activity, descriptive statistics were used to summarize the major activities the respondents reported. Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations for the amount of time the respondents reported spending on the Internet (INT), at part-time jobs (PJ), participating in sports and recreation (SP), and sleeping (SL). The average time that the respondents spent on INT, PJ, SP, SL were 8.95 hours, 13.33 hours, 6.94 hours, and 29.85 hours per week, respectively.

Table 2

Average Hours per Week Spent on the Internet, Part-time Job, Sports and Recreation, and Sleeping

	N	M	SD
Internet (INT)	1,265	8.95	8.59
Part-time Job (PJ)	1,242	13.33	13.03
Sport and recreation (SP)	1,263	6.94	7.40
Sleeping (SL)	1,265	29.85	11.18

A set of paired sample tests was conducted to determine whether the respondents spent more time on all other activities versus academic and recreational reading. Results indicated that students spent more time on part-time jobs, sports/recreation, and socializing with others by using SNS than they did on academic or recreational reading (p<.001). Results of the paired sample test are included in Table 3.

Table 3

Results of the Paired Sample T-tests comparing Academic and Recreational Reading to Part-time Job, Sports and Recreations, and Social Networking

	Mean	SD	t	df	P
PJ-AR	8.32	14.02	-20.91	1242	.000
PL-RR	9.03	14.48	-21.96	1242	.000
SP-AR	1.89	8.64	-7.78	1263	.000
SP-RR	2.62	8.88	-10.48	1263	.000
SN-AR	11.10	12.51	-31.56	1265	.000
SN-RR	11.82	12.10	-37.74	1265	.000

A zero-order correlation was conducted to further investigate the five variables (PJ, INT, SP, SL, and SN) in relation to AR and RR. Table 4 shows the correlations among the five variables. The strongest correlation was identified between time spent on INT and time spent in SN (r=.322, p <.001). The significant correlations with AR include RR (r=.265, p<.001) and INT (r=.154). Three variables, SP(r=.139, p<.001), INT (r=.235, p<.001), and SN (r=.132, p<.001) had significant correlations with RR.

Table 4

Results of Zero Order Correlation between Hours per Week Spent on Academic Reading, Recreational Reading, Part-time Job, Sports and Recreation, Internet, Sleeping, and Social Networking

	AR	RR	PJ	SP	INT	SL
AR						
RR	.265**					
PJ	-.039	-.021				
SP	.084**	.139**	-0.057			
INT	.154**	.235**	-.049	.157**		
SL	-.080**	-.043	.084**	.049	.055*	
SN	-.038	.132**	-.002	.234**	.322**	.260**

Notes: *p< .05, ** p<.001

Group Differences in Academic Reading, Recreational Reading, and Social Network Sites

To identify each classification's time spent on AR, RR, and SN, descriptive statistics were used. Table 5 presents the mean and standard deviation for the amount of time the respondents reported for these activities.

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics for Hours per Spent on Academic Reading, Recreational Reading, and Social Networking by Classifications

Classification		N	M	SD
Freshman	AR	149	6.22	7.09
	RR	149	3.47	5.33
	SN	149	18.05	11.26
Sophomore	AR	221	6.83	7.20
	RR	221	4.10	6.42
	SN	221	17.36	11.80
Junior	AR	307	8.16	7.81
	RR	307	3.97	5.97
	SN	307	16.62	7.97
Senior	AR	461	7.74	11.18
	RR	461	4.45	5.65
	SN	461	15.33	10.82
Graduate	AR	127	8.34	8.51
	RR	127	5.40	5.93
	SN	127	13.72	11.75

To determine the extent to which differences exist among all classifications in regard to the amount of time spent on social networking sites (SNS), a one-way ANOVA was conducted. Results indicated a significant difference ($F=4.0$, $p<.01$) between levels of student classifications as to the amount of hours spent per week on the SNS. However, there is inconclusive evidence from the post-hoc test to determine where the different exist.

Discussion

The findings indicated that the average time respondents spent per week on AR was approximately 7.72 hours, 4.24 hours on RR, and 16.13 hours on SN (primarily Facebook). In a comparison of the differences among various classifications, the results indicated that freshmen students spent more time on SN (M=18.05 hours) and less time on both AR (M= 6.22 hours) and RR (M=3.47 hours) than other groups.

The findings indicated the respondents were spending more time on social networking websites (e.g., Facebook) than they were on both academic and recreational reading. The findings confirmed earlier studies indicating that on a weekly basis, college students enjoyed using social media and social networks more than reading for academic purposes or recreational reading (e.g., Huang et al., 2012; Mokhtari et al., 2009). The findings suggested that Online social networking has probably already found its way into various parts of students' daily lives (e.g., Jones, Johnson-Yale, Millermaier, & Perez, 2008; Salaway et al., 2008). These changes have certainly had an influenced on students' reading practices and also on the amount of time students spend on both academic reading and recreational reading.

Findings of the correlation supported the proposition that using online social networks to socialize with others (SN) and INT were significant factors in the time students devoted to academic and recreational reading. The findings were consistent with some previous studies that found students used online social networks to extend friendships and communicate with friends (e.g., Ito et al., 2010). The findings suggested that college students probably can quickly use rapidly developing technology resources to build and maintain social networks outside of school (e.g., Ito, Baumer, Bittanti, Boyd, Cody, & Herr-Stephenson, 2010; Eberhardt, 2007; Salaway et al., 2008). The findings also suggested that the evolution of these communication technologies has been fascinating for college students, enabling them to update communication styles and also to change their social communication and social discourse (e.g., Gee, 2007; Leu, O'Byrne, Zawilinski, McVerry, & Everett-Cacopardo, 2009). In contrast, when students spend more time creating and maintaining profiles and the like for friends, this could reduce the amount of time spent on academic and recreational reading endeavors (e.g., Huang et al., 2012; Eberhardt, 2007; Salaway et al., 2008).

The amount of time college students spent on academic and recreational reading was higher in this study than in some previous studies (e.g., Blackwood et al.,1991; Gallik, 1999), which found that students spent approximately 2.5 hours per week on reading for pleasure. By contrast, this study found that the amount of the time students spent on reading, an average of 9.7 hours per week on AR and 4.75 hours on RR, were less than Sheorey and Mokhtari (1994) found in their study. Although this study used surveys similar to these previous studies (e.g., Gallik, 1999; Sheorey & Mokhtari, 1994), disparate results may have been due to the construction of the Internet activity categories (e.g., socializing with others by using online social networking (Facebook). The findings suggested that the Internet technology has touched many aspects of current college students' lives for both personal and academic purposes across the United States (e.g., Jones et al., 2008).

An investigation of group differences in terms of time spent on AR, RR, and SN revealed some interesting results. The young freshman respondents spent more time on the SNS than other groups. The findings were confirmed and also suggested by some previous studies showing that freshman students begin making the transition to college life by using online social network sites (e.g., Facebook) to adjust to their first-year

experience with a new academic culture and community in college settings or to develop friendships (e.g., Eberhardt, 2007; Ellison et al., 2007; Salaway, et al., 2008).

Although the graduate respondents spent more time on AR and RR than the undergraduate respondents did, they spent more time on SN (M=13.72 hours) than on both academic reading (M=8.34 hours) and reading for pleasure (M=5.40 hours). The findings suggested that social networking certainly plays an essential role in the lives of all levels of students (e.g., Eberhardt, 2007; Lange, 2007; Salaway, et al., 2008) including graduate students. Graduate students can also use the latest SNS to enrich their academic and personal lives. The findings suggested that the popularity of SNS probably not only helps users maintain or forge new relationships, but also helps them share personal information and update academic life (e.g., Salaway et al., 2008; Mazer et al., 2007).

Implications

The study had two implications for college educators. Based on the survey, 100% of the respondents (n=1,265) had a profile on a social network, primarily Facebook. The study has implied that online social networking has certainly become a popular globalized social medium for young adults in the United States and other nations (e.g., Boyd, 2007; Ito et al., 2010). Social network sites have changed the features of American campuses, "student cultures, and learning methods; adoptions of SNS have become a pervasive part of students' lives" (Eberhardt, 2007, p. 20). Furthermore, these changes will continue due to the fast pace of Internet technology development (Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008).

Despite the fact that new social media is changing how college students engage social cultures and norms as well as learning patterns, the idea of social networking has not yet " completely revolutionized student life or learning on college campus" (Eberhardt, 2007, p. 26). Online networks can be used for academic purposes such as peer-to-peer knowledge sharing, collaboration, and evaluation (Gee, 2007; Ito, 2006). College professors need to recognize the power of technology and SNS in college students' academic learning and to make research efforts to investigate social networking tools that can inspire students' efforts in academic learning. Instructors must design courses that engage students in using existing online resources and networks to promote academic achievement and motivation to read (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009b). In turn, it is hoped that these changes would encourage students to engage in online or offline academic (or "school-related" reading) and recreational reading (or "free voluntary reading not related to academic work"). This is critically important so that students develop reading interests and achieve academically (Krashen, 2004).

Since digital media and networks have become embedded in college students' lives and are also part of "broad-based changes" in how they engage in reading and communication (e.g., Ito et al., 2010, p.xi), college students are more computer-mediated and motivated communicators (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009a). Certainly, college students stay online and engage in multimedia communication as part of their daily lives. We are facing a new challenge in which college students are central actors in

social media and online communication. College professors need to look at the relationship between students' practices on social network sites and their academic learning, and to keep creating a vision of continual technology integration in their classrooms (e.g., Greenhow & Burton, 2011; Turbill & Murray, 2006). College professors need to be aware and develop a sensitivity to technology and use valuable resources and information to create "new digital" or "visual learning" environments that students are interested in and that also support their academic engagement.

Limitations and Future Studies

The study had five limitations:

1. The study was conducted at only one university in the United States and the results may not be generalized to the larger population of American college students. Future study could be conducted to compare students' reading practices among different types of institutions.

2. The survey had nine time frames (e.g., none, 1-4 hours, 5-10 hours, 11-15 hours, 16-20 hours, 21-25 hours, 26-30 hours, 31-35 hours, and 36-40 hours). The time frames may not indicate the exact time that participants spent on each activity. A future study can include hourly time frames for a more definitive investigation of the time college students spend on each activity.

3. The study did not specifically ask what activities and purposes the students spent time on when using SNS and the Internet. A future study may create more activity categories from which to select.

4. The study did not investigate whether college students' spending more time on SNS affected their academic performance, such as their GPAs. Future research could compare students' time on SNS and academic performance, such as GPA scores.

5. The final limitation was a correlation statistical analysis that indicated moderate positive relationships among the Internet (INT), academic reading (AR), recreational reading (RR), and sport and recreation (SP). In addition, there were moderate positive correlations among four variables: socializing with others by using social network sites (SN), SP, INT, and sleeping (SL). Further study may use longitudinal or qualitative study methods that could provide greater depth and understanding of students' perspectives, or, employing mixed methods, educators could gain insight into students' educational needs and understand how online social networking changes their educational attainment.

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