

The Role of Social Media in Shaping Career Choices of Asian American Students

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Abstract

This study explored the role of social media on the career choices of Asian American students, particularly those opting for non-STEM fields, drawing on qualitative data from a sample of 12 participants. The findings revealed that social media exerted both positive and negative influences on career development. Positive influences included exposure to diverse career possibilities, fostering community connections and support, and providing role models and inspirational content. Conversely, social media could also distort career choices by presenting unrealistic portrayals of different fields. Neutral influences, such as personal decision-making and the sense of belonging facilitated by social media, were also noted. The study underscored the enhancement of self-efficacy and outcome expectations through social media, while also highlighting contextual supports and barriers. Despite the limitations of the small sample size, the research provided valuable insights and suggested directions for future studies to explore the long-term impacts and the potential of social media platforms to support career development. These findings underscored the importance of a balanced and critical approach to the use of social media in shaping career trajectories.

Keywords: Asian American, social media, social cognitive career theory, self-efficacy

Introduction

Asian American students have historically been overrepresented in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields, a trend driven by cultural and familial expectations that emphasize the perceived stability and prestige of these careers (Hui & Lent, 2018; Kang et al., 2023; Shen & Liao, 2022). However, those who diverged from this path and pursued non-STEM careers often encountered a unique set of challenges. These challenges can include a lack of support from family and community, limited role models, and societal stereotypes that question their career choices (Cooc & Kim, 2021). In recent years, social media has emerged as a considerable influence on people's lives, providing a platform for Asian American students to explore and validate their interests outside of traditional expectations. This study aimed to give voice to Asian American students in non-STEM fields, allowing them to share their subjective experiences and highlighting the role of social media in shaping their career choices. By examining these influences, the study sought to understand how social media can both challenge and support the career aspirations of Asian American students in non-STEM disciplines.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding this study is social cognitive career theory (SCCT) which emphasizes the critical roles of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals in career development (Lent et al., 1994). SCCT provides a comprehensive framework for understanding career decision-making processes. According to Lent et al. (1994), self-efficacy beliefs, which refer to an individual's confidence in their ability to perform specific tasks, significantly influence career interests. These interests subsequently affect career choices and performance. SCCT also acknowledges the importance of personal goals, which guide the direction and intensity of career-related efforts. These goals, shaped by self-efficacy and outcome expectations, play a crucial role in career planning and persistence (Lent et al., 1994, 2000).

Moreover, SCCT considers contextual factors, such as social support and barriers, which can either facilitate or hinder career development. Social support, such as encouragement from family and mentors, can enhance self-efficacy and positive outcome expectations. Conversely, barriers like negative stereotypes or limited access to resources can impede career progress (Lent, 2005; Lent et al., 2010). In summary, SCCT provides a robust model for exploring how self-efficacy, outcome expectations, personal goals, and contextual factors interact to influence career development. This theory is particularly pertinent in examining the career choices of Asian American students, as it highlights the interplay between individual beliefs and external influences in shaping career trajectories.

Related Literature

Social media has fundamentally transformed many aspects of society, particularly in the realm of education and socialization among students. Yang (2018) conducted a study on the acculturation and adaptation of Chinese

students in America, highlighting the significant role that US-based social media platforms play in their everyday lives. The research points to social media as a crucial tool for these students to navigate and assimilate into American culture while maintaining ties with their native heritage. Similarly, Lim Xing Fei and Yuek Li (2022) revealed the significant impact YouTubers have on the attitudes and behaviors of their young audiences, particularly among Asian American students who are avid consumers of YouTube content. Lee and Zhou (2020) addressed the misperceptions about culture and Asian American achievement, highlighting the role of social media in both perpetuating and challenging stereotypes. King and Fretwell (2022) further explored the portrayal of cultural identity by Asian American influencers on Instagram, shedding light on how social media platforms are used to navigate and express cultural identities among Asian American students.

Social media's impact on academic engagement and social interactions has been widely documented. Tuli et al. (2022) examined the broader impact of social media on student life, noting its pervasive influence on academic engagement and social interactions. Their findings suggest that social media can both enhance and detract from students' academic performance, depending on usage patterns and the nature of the content consumed. Perez et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review of social media as a teaching and learning tool in higher education, underscoring its potential to enhance educational outcomes through increased accessibility and interactive learning opportunities. Akbari and Rochaety (2023) explored the impact of YouTube watch time on higher education institution promotions and admissions, illustrating the platform's influence on student recruitment and institutional visibility.

The role of social media in shaping perceptions and social dynamics within educational environments has been explored by several studies. Shahzad (2021) explored the factors that contribute to a YouTuber's popularity among students, illustrating the platform's role in shaping perceptions and social dynamics within educational environments. Kong and Ahn (2020) investigated the information adoption behaviors on YouTube, emphasizing the influence of different genres on user engagement. Their findings illustrate the variability in content consumption and its impact on knowledge acquisition and social interaction. Marbun et al. (2020) examined the effects of social media culture and knowledge transfer on performance, pointing to the enhanced collaborative potential of social media platforms. This study suggests that social media can facilitate knowledge sharing and improve performance in both academic and professional contexts.

The broader societal implications of social media have also been a focus of research. Rawath et al. (2019) provided insights into the impact of social media on youth, emphasizing its dual role as a source of information and a platform for social interaction. They revealed that while social media facilitates connectivity and information exchange, it also presents challenges related to privacy and mental health. Bahadur (2021) investigated the negative effects of social media on youth, providing a critical perspective on issues such as cyberbullying, addiction, and mental health challenges. This study highlights the need for balanced and mindful social media use among students. Chen and Xiao (2022) examined the effect of social media on the development of students' affective variables, such as motivation and self-efficacy, revealing its potential to positively influence the emotional and psychological aspects of student life.

Finally, studies have also looked at the influence of social media on socialization and community engagement. Akdag et al. (2019) analyzed the impact of social media on university students' socialization, using statistical reasoning to reveal complex patterns of interaction and engagement. Their findings suggest that social media plays a significant role in shaping social networks and peer relationships. Dennen et al. (2020) reviewed the intersection of social media, teenagers, and the school context, highlighting the implications for education and socialization. Their findings indicate that social media can both support and hinder educational experiences, depending on the context and manner of use. Gammoudi et al. (2022) conducted a survey on the influence environment of social media and the identification of influencers, underscoring the importance of understanding the dynamics of influencer impact, particularly in educational settings. Zamroni et al. (2019) found that 61% of students use social media to gather information relevant to their career decisions. Despite the extensive research on social media's impact on various aspects of student life, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding Asian American students' career choices. This study aims to fill this gap.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research approach to investigate the research question: "How does social media influence the career choices of Asian American students?" The study used purposeful criterion sampling to recruit Asian American individuals who are either currently pursuing or have recently graduated from non-STEM college majors in the United States. From the 104 respondents to the recruitment post on LinkedIn, 12 participants were randomly selected to participate in the study. The selected participants came from ten Asian countries: Afghanistan, Armenia, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Japan, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Singapore. The study

adopted a transcendental phenomenological design to capture different perspectives and minimize biased interpretation. Data collection methods included individual interviews, letter writing, and focus groups, providing a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences. The analysis focused on understanding the role of social media in their career decision-making processes.

Findings

The transcendental phenomenological analysis of the collected data revealed several themes that provide a comprehensive understanding of how social media influences career choices among Asian Americans in non-STEM fields. These influences can be categorized into three groups: positive, neutral, and negative. Positive influences include (1) exposure to career possibilities, (2) community connection and support, and (3) role models and inspiration. Neutral Influences which are not related to career choices include (1) personal decision-making, and (2) social media as a platform for belonging.

Exposure to Career Possibilities. Social media platforms expose users to different career possibilities. Some students reported that social media shaped their worldview and exposed them to various career possibilities. Seeing professionals share their experiences in fields like publishing, journalism, or academia helped students envision potential career trajectories within the humanities. This exposure can significantly influence career interests and choices by providing information and inspiration that might not be available through traditional channels.

Community Connection and Support. Social media helped the study participants stay connected with their communities and provided a platform for discussion and mutual encouragement. Students often found that social media helped them stay in touch with their community and with people far away. It allowed them to discuss challenges, talk about their worries, share experiences, and encourage each other to move forward. This sense of community provided the participants the emotional support and practical advice, which are crucial for career development.

Role Models and Inspiration. Seeing representation of Asians in various roles on social media motivated the study participants. Students often found that seeing other Asians portrayed in various roles via social media or in political roles gave them motivation. Representation could enhance self-efficacy and outcome expectations by providing relatable role models and success stories. These stories served as a source of inspiration and motivation for students. Images and posts that inspire creativity and imagination on social media lead to increased self-efficacy and motivation to pursue certain career paths.

Personal Decision Making. Some students believed that their career choices were personal decisions that were not significantly influenced by social media. They emphasized the importance of individual agency and the influence of other factors such as personal interests, values, and experiences. While social media might provide occasional insights and exposure to different perspectives, its impact on their decision-making process was limited compared to other factors.

Social Media as a Platform for Belonging. Participants mentioned social media as a tool that provides a sense of freedom and belonging, allowing individuals to connect globally and maintain cultural ties. These individuals felt that having a free hand on social media gives them a different sense of belonging. They emphasized the importance of staying connected with their community through social media.

Negative Influences. Some students perceived social media as a potential negative influence that could distort their career choices. They noted that while social media showed a lot of cool and fun things about different fields, it might sometimes mess up their choice due to the positive portrayals of majors they were not pursuing. This highlights the need for critical engagement with social media content to avoid unrealistic expectations and potential disappointment.

Discussion

The findings of this study align closely with the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) by Lent et al. (1994), emphasizing the roles of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and contextual supports and barriers in career development.

Self-Efficacy and Outcome Expectations

This study revealed that social media significantly enhances career-related self-efficacy among Asian American students. By providing success stories and practical advice, social media platforms serve as a repository of motivational content. For instance, students reported feeling more confident and motivated to pursue their desired careers after seeing professionals share their experiences and achievements. This observation aligns with SCCT's

assertion that self-efficacy beliefs influence career interests and subsequent career choices. In terms of outcome expectations, social media shapes students' beliefs about the potential rewards of various career paths. The visibility of role models in diverse fields helps students anticipate favorable outcomes, such as personal satisfaction and financial stability. This supports SCCT's premise that positive outcome expectations can motivate individuals to pursue certain career trajectories.

Contextual Supports and Barriers

The study also highlighted the dual role of social media as both a support and a barrier in career development. Social media provides numerous networking opportunities and access to mentorship, which are crucial for career guidance and support. These platforms enable students to connect with professionals, seek advice, and gain insights into different career paths. This aligns with SCCT's emphasis on the importance of social support in enhancing self-efficacy and positive outcome expectations. However, social media also presents significant barriers, such as exposure to negative stereotypes and unrealistic portrayals of certain careers. Students reported feeling disillusioned by the glamorized depictions of professional life, which sometimes led to unrealistic expectations and subsequent disappointments. This finding is consistent with SCCT's recognition of contextual barriers that can impede career progress.

Conclusion

This study addresses the significant influence of social media on the career choices of Asian American students. Social media shapes their self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals, presenting both opportunities and challenges. This underscores the need for a balanced and critical approach to its use in career development. However, the study has a limitation on the small sample size of 12 participants which did not capture the full diversity and complexity of the Asian American student population.

Future research should include a larger and more diverse sample to explore the long-term impacts of social media on career trajectories. Additionally, it is essential to investigate the potential differences across various social media platforms and develop interventions that leverage social media to support career development. These interventions should be tailored to address the unique needs of Asian American students. By addressing these gaps, future studies can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted influences of social media on career development. This will help develop strategies to harness the positive potential of social media while mitigating its risks. The study findings not only align with but also expand upon the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) by highlighting the significant role of social media in influencing self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and contextual supports and barriers among Asian American students.

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