



# Social Media and College-Related Social Support Exchange for First-Generation, Low-Income Students: The Role of Identity Disclosures

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First-generation, low-income (FGLI) students face barriers to college access and retention that reproduce socioeconomic inequities. These students turn to social media for college-related social support. However, while students can reap benefits from social media, it is crucial to investigate under what conditions social media interactions facilitate or hinder students' access to college-related social support. We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 20 FGLI students in the United States who applied for college in the 2020-2021 application cycle. Our findings illustrate how FGLI identity disclosures on social media can facilitate access to college-related social support when met with supportive or neutral responses, while stigmatizing reactions can disrupt access to these benefits. We draw from the lenses of the "doubly disadvantaged" and "privileged poor" used to describe FGLI students in post-secondary education to argue that engaging in FGLI identity disclosures on social media can help students become academically and psychosocially prepared for collegiate environments. Finally, we discuss the implications of this work for theoretical frameworks centering social media and social support, consider when stigma might lead to support space abandonment, and describe the potential implications for social media design.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in HCI**.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: social media, disclosure, identity, stigma, education, college access, social support, Reddit, Discord

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Historically, a complex combination of socioeconomic phenomena and higher education policies and practices have merged to discourage first-generation, low-income (henceforth referred to as FGLI) students from accessing and navigating post-secondary institutions in the United States [136]. Barriers to college access and persistence represent a glaring equity issue, especially among public universities whose mission is to make knowledge available as a public good [27]. Starting but not completing a degree can harm students who do not benefit from attaining the degree but invest

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time and money into pursuing it [113]. Moreover, financial and informational barriers to access and retention for FGLI students can lead to the social reproduction [23] of poverty by ensuring that only students with sufficient familial resources, including money and social capital, have the opportunity to gain an education that can propel them into high-paying jobs. Additionally, these barriers can lead to an under-trained U.S. workforce that is unable to compete in an increasingly competitive global economy, as FGLI students make up a significant population of students throughout the country [77]. With growing numbers of FGLI students seeking access to university education, it is important to investigate both successes and barriers they may face in college access and persistence.

Social support, or “everyday behaviors that...communicate to an individual that she or he is valued and cared for by others” [26], is integral to FGLI students’ successful transition to and through college [62]. However, this same student population often experiences challenges accessing relevant college-related support because they typically lack access to individuals in their networks [136], especially family members, that can provide them with relevant support in this domain. For instance, FGLI students tend to lack the kinds of informational and tangible support that would help them navigate the college application process [63], while financial stressors and not knowing the “hidden curriculum” (i.e., the tacit norms, values, and beliefs of higher education) can impede persistence through college [92, 99]. In addition, the institutional agents (e.g., high school teachers and counseling staff) that could provide the forms of support most relevant to these students are not always well-equipped to do so [93]. For example, they may not know what support is needed and may assume that students know certain information unless they specifically state otherwise. Stigmatization, a social process involving 1) the labeling and stereotyping of difference, 2) the physical and/or social separation of the stigmatized and non-stigmatized, 3) status loss, and 4) discrimination [89], also impacts FGLI students. For instance, stigmatization of FGLI students’ socioeconomic status and their parents’ levels of education [138] may stymie these students’ ability to safely disclose their circumstances to those in their immediate in-person networks, potentially leading students to turn to social media interactions with a broader audience of known and/or unknown ties to replace or supplement in-person resources.

Social media can serve as spaces where people facing stigma or other forms of marginalization can exchange social support [7, 11, 16, 46, 58, 116]. Specifically, FGLI students use social media to reap support in the form of information, mentors, and college aspirations, to name a few [80, 137, 139]. Notably, studying contexts outside of the educational domain, social media scholars (e.g., [50, 51]) posit that online requests for support are intrinsic to successful development and activation of support. Scholars generally categorize acts of social support-seeking as direct (i.e., explicit requests for support around a stated problem) and indirect (i.e., hinting that a problem exists without explicitly describing it) [10, 15]. Sometimes, people disclose relevant identities and experiences when seeking support online [7, 8]. Disclosure or the revelation of aspects of one’s true self to others [81] can aid support-seeking by providing necessary context to support providers. Yet, disclosures can also be met with adverse, hostile reactions that may adversely impact the health and well-being of the support-seeker [32]. Taken together, prior work suggests that students may invoke and disclose their FGLI identity when making explicit or tacit requests for college-related social support on social media to maximize the relevance and helpfulness of the support they receive.

To investigate under what circumstances students disclose their FGLI identities on social media and how this may play a role in college-related social support exchange, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with FGLI students (N=20) from across the United States who applied to college in the 2020-2021 application cycle. We centered the interview protocol around whether and how students disclosed their FGLI identity on social media platforms to better understand how such disclosures could serve as a conduit or barrier to relevant forms of college-related social support exchange.

We found that many students did disclose their FGLI identity, both to unknown (i.e., not in their pre-existing networks) and dissimilar (i.e., not FGLI) others in college-going communities on platforms like Reddit as well as to similar others (i.e., fellow FGLI students) on insular Discord servers. Whether students perceived social support-related outcomes of their disclosures as positive or negative hinged upon their social media audience's responses to these disclosures. Received support encompassed a range of support types identified in extant social support typologies, including informational, emotional, and esteem support [43]. However, when students experienced negative and/or stigmatizing reactions to their disclosures on social media, they reported adverse psychological effects (e.g., lowered sense of belonging in conversations about college and, by extension, post-secondary institutions) and a tendency to abandon these online support spaces, which could be harmful to their future support-seeking as they transition to college.

Our work contributes to college access and social media research in two ways. First, in his book, *The Privileged Poor*, Jack [79] notes that FGLI students' access to preparatory institutions can propel them from "doubly disadvantaged" students with little knowledge of collegiate environments to the "privileged poor" who, while still low-income, are academically, socially, and psychologically prepared for colleges and universities. Based on our findings, we suggest that social media disclosures of students' FGLI identities can serve a similar role, facilitating greater access to the kinds of online college-related social support (primarily informational and emotional) necessary to access and persist in higher education institutions. Second, we argue that FGLI students' social media identity disclosures represent an extension of the "social transition machinery" framework [65]. This framework argues that social media platforms can work in tandem to facilitate identity transitions by affording discrete yet complementary forms of self-presentation in the forms of disclosure and identity work. This study's findings extend that framework by demonstrating that platforms can serve a similar role in facilitating students' transition to the "privileged poor," but that the same disclosure behaviors that facilitate this transition can also disrupt it. Finally, we highlight how improved forms of content moderation, such as content warnings, may reduce some of the concerns surrounding disclosure and stigma in college-related online spaces on social media, rendering platforms – and the college-going online communities housed within them – safer for college-related support exchange for FGLI students.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This interdisciplinary investigation draws from the education, communication studies, human-computer interaction (HCI), and Computer-Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) literature to describe how FGLI students use social media platforms for identity disclosure and college-related social support during the college application and selection processes.

### 2.1 First-Generation, Low-Income Students & the College Application Process

Initially developed by U.S.-based higher education administrators in the late 1970s to determine eligibility for outreach programs geared toward disadvantaged students, the term "first-generation college student" has skyrocketed in usage in the past few decades [136]. The term provides students and their families with language that enables conversations around college access barriers and resilience. Educators and higher education administrators leverage the term to gather data on the needs and obstacles experienced by these students in order to develop interventions that support their college access and persistence. While the precise definition of a first-generation student varies slightly across institutions, students are typically considered first-generation if neither parent has

completed their bachelor's degree in the United States [136]. As of 2016<sup>1</sup>, 56% of college students in the United States were first-generation [77]. Moreover, about 20% of dependent U.S.-based undergraduate students are low-income, defined as meeting the federal poverty threshold<sup>2</sup> [57].

Research involving this student population has historically focused on disparities between first-generation students and their continuing-generation counterparts in college access and retention [30]. According to the Center for First-Generation Student Success, gaps remain between first-generation and continuing-generation students in terms of full-time enrollment rates, dropout and persistence rates, and degree attainment rates [78]. Moreover, additional factors like student employment can impact low-income students' focus on their post-secondary education goals.

In addition to difficulties in post-secondary access and retention, this student population also confronts intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges as they face stigma associated with their first-generation and low-income identities. Warnock and Hurst's ethnographic investigation notes that these students possess an "invisible and stigmatized identity in flux" [138]. As their social class identity is often invisible, these students may face stigmatization in the form of alienation as their identity's relative invisibility prevents them from organizing and gaining support around it, in contrast to more (but not always) visible identities like race or ethnicity. In addition to these forms of stigma, they may face secondary stigma [40] or stigma by association [102]<sup>3</sup> due to their parents' educational background. FGLI students of color who face classed and racialized microaggressions may experience compounded, intersectional [128] forms of stigmatization. For instance, Sarcedo et al. [110] documented microaggressions (a type of stigmatizing interaction), including microinvalidations against FGLI students of color that had emotional and academic impacts. These interactions made it more challenging to envision success in the collegiate context and communicated to these students that they did not belong in post-secondary education. Importantly, stigma is not only enacted (i.e., directly experienced by an individual) but also *anticipated*, meaning that individuals expect that others will stigmatize them if they know about their stigmatized identity [104]. This is significant because, like enacted stigma, anticipated stigma is also linked to lower psychological well-being [104]. Finally, FGLI students, like other underrepresented populations in higher education institutions, could experience stigmatization when their college acceptances are reduced to their identities instead of their achievement. Prior work, including experimental work, has articulated a "stigma of incompetence" [72] around those who are thought to benefit from various affirmative action policies.

During the college application process, all college applicants, regardless of socio-economic background, face challenges. The college application process is rife with competitiveness, resulting in stress, sleep deprivation, and harm to applicants' mental and physical well-being [41]. The various components of the college application, namely applying for financial aid and crafting the personal essay, are stress-inducing and may even serve as barriers to college access. Applying for financial aid can be cumbersome for students who lack networks to guide them through the process and provide necessary documentation [29, 35]. Moreover, students may have trouble accessing the required technology to complete the federal aid application (FAFSA)<sup>4</sup> and may deal with technical glitches that they are ill-equipped to resolve [35]. Thus, it is not surprising that many students,

<sup>1</sup>These are the most recent set of statistics available, to the authors' knowledge, that explicitly quantifies the number of first-generation students in higher education institutions.

<sup>2</sup>Pew Research Center measured poverty using the income-to-poverty ratio, a common measure that accounts for income given family size.

<sup>3</sup>"Secondary stigma" and "stigma by association" are similar terms that refer to the negative consequences faced by those associated with a stigmatized individual via meaningful relationships, voluntary associations, or close proximity [40, 102].

<sup>4</sup>FAFSA, or the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, helps determine one's eligibility for federal, state, school, and private aid opportunities [129]

*especially* low-income students and students of color, do not submit their federal aid applications at all or submit them late [29, 94]. Even after one manages to submit the federal aid application, they may fail to properly complete tedious verification processes [37], exacerbating the stress of the application process. Additionally, crafting the college essay can be stressful as students navigate how to convey themselves “authentically” while highlighting the challenges they have faced. Some scholars argue that this facilitates “competitive victimhood” by incentivizing students to play up their trauma for admissions teams which can be harmful and degrading for applicants [124].

Importantly, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated many of these stressors, especially given the changing landscape in institutional policy (e.g., test-optional admissions) and uncertainty about how to set oneself apart as an applicant when many extracurriculars were paused due to stay-at-home orders [2]. COVID-19 also complicates college selection once a student receives a decision from a college. This selection process was made more arduous throughout the COVID-19 pandemic’s early phases, as many students were not able to tour university campuses and attend in-person information sessions [82].

Social media platforms provide opportunities for students to supplement the offline social support resources they can access or cultivate resources they cannot access in their offline environments. Prior work has demonstrated the immense potential of social media to help mitigate college access disparities. For instance, social media can serve as a conduit by which first-generation students develop college aspirations [139]. Additionally, social media can facilitate the provision of informational support [80] and mentoring [137] as they apply to and transition to college. After applying, social media can serve as a space for identity work fundamental to students’ college transitions [95]. Even after arriving on campus, FGLI students can harness the resources embedded in social media platforms to better adjust to college [64], particularly when they use social media platforms to connect with on-campus friends [141]. However, it is less clear what kinds of social media interactions best facilitate or detract from students’ ability to cultivate college-related social support as they apply to and select a college to attend – which this study seeks to address.

## 2.2 Features and Affordances of Reddit, Discord, and Instagram

“Social media” operates as an umbrella term used to describe social technologies that enable self-presentation and connection to others. A subset of “social media” platforms are social network sites (SNS). One commonly-accepted definition of SNS considers them to be “networked communication” platforms “in which participants 1) have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-level data; 2) can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and 3) can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site” [49].

Carr & Hayes [28] define social media as “Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others.”

What these definitions have in common are their respective emphases on one’s ability to use the features and affordances of internet-based platforms (i.e., properties that emerge in the interaction between a technology’s features and users’ perceptions of what that technology enables) [54, 55, 60] to present oneself to a variety of audiences and to consume, generate, and engage with others’ content. As the present study primarily focuses on the platforms Reddit, Discord, and Instagram<sup>5</sup>, we describe these platforms’ features and affordances in relation to self-presentation and sharing

<sup>5</sup>While we focus on Reddit, Discord, and Instagram because these were mentioned most by our participants, we emphasize that we did not set out to focus on these platforms in particular when designing this study.



and/or engaging with user-generated content next. We note that each platform houses constellations of smaller topical or identity-based online communities that are relevant to the current study.

**2.2.1 Reddit.** Boasting 52 million daily active users and over 138,000 active topical communities, or ‘subreddits’ [101] ranging from those that discuss television shows to those that house college application advice, Reddit serves as a public discussion forum combining pseudonymity and community-based moderation. Users adopt pseudonyms – both persistent usernames and ephemeral “throwaway accounts” to engage on the platform, though their participation histories within the platform are publicly available [86], with throwaway accounts affording more anonymity which can be useful for discourse about sensitive and stigmatized topics [7, 8]. Reddit’s approach to content moderation relies on two levels of moderation: 1) higher-level, site-wide moderation (i.e., banning entire subreddits dedicated to hate speech) and 2) volunteer moderation within individual subreddits. Volunteer moderation consists of appointed members of a given subreddit working together to moderate content, both through direct moderation tools and through the community’s “upvoting” and “downvoting” of content to promote or demote its visibility [101, 119]. Reddit also allows its subreddits to develop their own community guidelines and deploy polls to survey the community in order to govern and moderate more effectively.

**2.2.2 Discord.** Originated to support online gaming communities and popularized during the COVID-19 pandemic, Discord combines text, voice, and video chat functionality and enables users to create their own “servers” to which they must invite others to join [115]. These servers span purposes ranging from discussion of video games to support groups for specific identity groups. Within servers, users can create “channels” or chat rooms to discuss relevant topics [115]. Users assume particular platform governance ‘roles’ including owner, administrator, moderator, and member [106]. Moreover, server owners, administrators, and moderators can integrate “bots” and other tools to moderate content produced and distributed within the server [59]. While originally developed and utilized in the context of gaming, the platform has become increasingly used in K-12 and post-secondary education contexts during the COVID-19 pandemic [133].

**2.2.3 Instagram.** Instagram is a visual image-sharing platform involving networks of “followers” and those whom they follow [118]. Unlike platforms like Facebook, which rely on reciprocated networks of “Friends”, Instagram does not require relational reciprocity – one user may follow a user who does not follow them back [118]. In addition to persistently available “posts”, Instagram enables users to share ephemeral “Stories” that disappear after 24 hours, enabling some users to engage in less restrained, more “authentic” self-presentation [84, 127]. Instagram also allows users to create multiple accounts, and some users leverage this ability to create “Rinstas” (“real” Instagram accounts where they engage in selective self-presentation) and “Finstas” (so-called “fake” Instagram accounts where they engage in less restrained self-presentation to smaller, presumably trusted audiences) [75, 140].

### 2.3 The Promises and Perils of Social Media Use: Self-Disclosure for Social Support-Seeking

Social media’s affordances have the potential to shape perceptions of visibility and safety or exchange of social support, to name a few. For example, elements of social media platforms like the profile, direct messages, and the stream lend themselves to divergent uses and ultimate outcomes, both positive and negative, like social capital accrual and (in)authentic self-presentation [18].

On the one hand, reported benefits of self-presentation and self-disclosure include identity work, self-expression, and social support exchange. Social media platforms allow users to create and curate visible profiles wherein they can reveal (and conceal) various aspects of themselves to

others, a process called self-disclosure. Self-disclosure describes revelations of aspects of oneself to others [81]. The CSCW community has long examined self-disclosure practices, decisions, and outcomes on social media (e.g., [83]), including for marginalized individuals (e.g., [10, 53, 108]). For example, when engaging in self-disclosure, social media users can experiment and receive feedback on provisional selves (i.e., desired “possible selves” that people explore and experiment with) [76, 88, 95]. Much of what people choose to portray about themselves is positive [105], especially in social media spaces that connect people to their networks of known ties (e.g., family, friends), enabling them to engage in selective self-presentation [135] and enforce legal name policies [19, 70]. Yet, social media users can also express more stigmatized identities and experiences via self-disclosure processes, which can lead to gaining various kinds of social support [7, 11, 13, 117] such as emotional, informational, networked, esteem-boosting, and tangible [43]. Moreover, disclosure processes can aid in destigmatizing experiences and identities [3, 16, 58] and fostering a sense of community [3, 16].

On the other hand, self-presentation and self-disclosure via social media platforms may create, perpetuate, and/or enable harm, including but not limited to online harassment [132] or intra-community harm steeped in uneven power relations [134]. A 2021 report from Pew Research shows that 41% of U.S. adults have personally experienced online harassment, and 25% have experienced severe harassment online [132]. While harassment is widespread, it disproportionately impacts individuals from historically marginalized communities, such as women, people of color, and queer individuals [20, 130]. Moreover, online harassment uniquely impacts those who embody multiple historically marginalized identities, such as Black women who experience *misogynoir* or “anti-Black racist misogyny...in US visual and digital culture” [14]. Those who face stigmatization and harassment online sometimes opt to change the ways they engage with platforms via self-censorship or deletion of their digital traces [34]. Some choose to disengage with or depart from platforms entirely [34].

While support can be attained more passively on social media (i.e., through lurking to activate passive appraisal support [116]), prior work suggests that disclosures can help social media users attain relevant forms of social support [91]. This phenomenon is especially pertinent when social media users embody one or more marginalized or stigmatized identities, as these individuals may feel safer or freer making disclosures online compared to disclosures to their offline networks. For instance, social media disclosures helped those with stigmatized illnesses (e.g., depression) exchange support [44] and those who have undergone stigmatized experiences (e.g., sexual abuse) [7]. Disclosures on social media can impact both users’ perceptions of social support as well as enacted support, which has positive downstream influences on well-being [91]. Yet, while disclosures are linked to beneficial forms of social support as well as social capital, privacy concerns [52, 122], fear of stigmatization [4], positivity bias (i.e., the favoring of positive forms of authentic self-presentation over negative ones) [4, 105], and perceiving difference from one’s audience [4] are among factors that may inhibit users’ disclosure behaviors posing barriers to actualize potential benefits.

Taken together, prior work suggests that social media can be beneficial to marginalized groups, including in the context of college access for FGLI students. Work outside of the FGLI and educational context argues that disclosure acts as a key mediator between social media platforms and benefits like social support [91], while work that considers FGLI students’ social media use has not explicitly considered disclosure decisions and behaviors. Yet, the transition to college is a major life event involving considerable social readjustment and is typically shared online both with broad and insular audiences [68]. Given that many of the reported benefits of social media use hinge upon one’s ability to share or disclose their identities and experiences, it is relevant to examine the social media disclosure decisions and behaviors of FGLI students as they apply to and select a college

or university to attend. Moreover, work on adverse outcomes of social media use (e.g., online harassment, stigmatization) raises questions about how these phenomena may play a role in FGLI students' social media experience during this pivotal life stage. Thus, we ask the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** *How do FGLI identity disclosures on social media platforms facilitate or disrupt students' access to college-related social support during the college application and selection processes?*
- **RQ2:** *How do FGLI students describe characteristics of ideal social media environments that would allow them to find needed support during the college application and selection processes?*

### 3 METHODS

#### 3.1 Methodological Approach

This project investigated how students disclosed their FGLI identities on social media during the college application and selection processes and how (if at all) these disclosures were associated with outcomes related to college-related social support exchanges. We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twenty students ( $N = 20$ ) who had completed the college application and selection process in the last academic year (2020- 2021 at the time of data collection). We used a qualitative approach to elicit a rich understanding not only of the disclosures themselves but the contextual factors (e.g., attitudes toward social media, general usage of social media, and motivations behind their use) in which these disclosures were rooted, which may have implications for the outcomes students perceive because of these social media experiences. While we did not measure the positive or negative effects of these disclosures per se, we asked participants their perceptions of what the implications of these disclosures were regarding social support. Our research took an inductive approach wherein presented themes were derived from gathered data, not a priori frameworks [126].

#### 3.2 Researcher Positionality

The research team comprises insiders and outsiders to the population of interest. The first author identifies as FGLI and relied heavily on YouTube to understand what it meant to be a college student before transitioning to college. They have experience studying social media, identity, stigma, self-disclosure, and FGLI students. The second author has studied and implemented interventions to address college access issues for low-income, first-generation, and minority students. The last author has examined social media, identity, disclosure, and marginality. They did not have the terminology to refer to first-generation students growing up outside the US, but their mom went to college when the second author was in elementary/middle school, shaping their relationship to education.

#### 3.3 Data Collection

**3.3.1 Recruitment.** We recruited participants via the social media platforms Instagram and Discord to ensure that participants were active social media users in diverse geographical locations. We chose Instagram as a recruitment site because of its popularity among adolescents [12]. On Instagram, the first author posted the recruitment flyer containing a QR code linking to the screening survey, accompanied by relevant hashtags (e.g., #FGLI, #ApplyingToCollege). While we initially pursued Reddit as an avenue for targeted recruitment of students applying for college, tight moderation efforts prevented recruitment directly from the r/ApplyingtoCollege community. Instead, we recruited in public Discord servers promoted within the relevant subreddit r/ApplyingtoCollege. The first author joined the server and obtained server moderators' permission to post the flyer and a link to the screening survey within one of the server's channels. Students were eligible



to participate if they were 1) age 18 or over, 2) self-identified as being a first-generation student (low-income students were preferred, but it was not a requirement to participate), 3) applied to an undergraduate program in the 2020 - 2021 application cycle.

**3.3.2 Screening Survey.** We invited interested participants to fill out a screening survey that asked about their demographics (including whether they identified as a first-generation student and/or a low-income student) <sup>6</sup>, how important the first-generation identity was to them, their general social media use, whether they disclosed their first-generation identity on social media during the college application and/or selection process, and on which platforms they did or did not disclose this information. The full screening survey and interview protocol can be found in Appendix A. In total, and over the period of one month, we received 104 complete responses to the screening survey. We excluded 42 survey respondents because they were 1) under 18, 2) not first-generation students, or 3) applied to an undergraduate program before 2020 and thus were ineligible to participate in interviews. From there, we engaged in purposive sampling, inviting 32 of the 62 eligible participants to schedule an interview. Purposive sampling, or judgment sampling, “involves selecting a sample of participants who are most likely to address the research question efficiently” [21]. Because there are documented differences among first-generation students’ experiences based on factors like race/ethnicity [36, 110], and gender [36], we purposively selected 32 participants to invite who varied along these dimensions to ascertain how a variety of FGLI students experienced identity disclosures on social media. We continued to schedule and conduct interviews until we no longer discovered new themes, signaling saturation [97]. In total, 20 invited participants scheduled and completed an interview. Interviews ranged from 45 to 65 minutes (average = 55 minutes) and took place via the online video conferencing platform Zoom in May and June of 2021. Interviews covered how participants used social media when applying to and selecting a college, why they did or did not disclose their FGLI identities during this process, and what outcomes they perceived because of their (non)disclosure. All participants were offered \$25 USD gift cards. Our institution’s IRB determined the study exempt from ongoing oversight.

**3.3.3 Participants’ Socio-Demographic Information.** Table 1 includes additional information about participants’ self-reported socio-demographic information <sup>7</sup>. To summarize, participants reflected a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, with nearly 50% of participants identifying as Latino/a/x and over 25% identifying as Asian. Approximately half of the participants identified as men, with about half identifying as women. Table 2 includes additional information about the salience of participants’ FGLI identities, their perceptions of being judged based on FGLI identities, and their social media FGLI identity disclosure behaviors. Generally, most participants felt that their first-generation identities were at least moderately important (95%), disclosed on at least one platform (80%), and perceived judgment of their first-generation identities at least once (80%). Identity salience may have influenced participants’ disclosure behaviors, as those who identified more strongly with being FGLI may have also been more willing to disclose this identity on social media platforms.

<sup>6</sup>We opted to rely on self-identification to determine low-income status, as opposed to basing identification on income thresholds, because these thresholds may not account for family size and location which can determine students’ lived experience with poverty.

<sup>7</sup>The screening survey included demographic questions that offered multiple pre-defined answer options (e.g., man, non-binary) and allowed participants to select multiple options. Each question included an open-ended text box for students to share identities that they felt were not represented within the pre-defined answer options (e.g., Trans-Male, P4).

P#	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Low-Income?
1	Asian	Man	Yes
2	Latino/a/x & Indigenous	Man	Yes
3	Latino/a/x & White	Woman	Yes
4	White	Trans-Male	Yes
5	Latino/a/x & White	Woman	Yes
6	Latino/a/x	Man	Yes
7	Black	Woman	Yes
8	Asian	Man	Yes
9	Latino/a/x	Woman	Yes
10	Middle Eastern & White	Man	Yes
11	Latino/a/x	Man	No
12	Asian	Woman	Yes
13	Asian	Man	Yes
14	Latino/a/x	Woman	Yes
15	Latino/a/x	Woman	Yes
16	Asian	Man	Yes
17	North African	Woman	Yes
18	Latino/a/x & White	Woman	Yes
19	Asian	Woman	Yes
20	Asian	Man	Yes

Table 1. Participants' Self-Reported Socio-Demographic Information

### 3.4 Data Analysis

The automated transcription service Otter.ai transcribed all twenty transcripts, which the first author then checked manually by listening to the audio recordings of each interview and writing descriptive memos. Next, the first author engaged in first-cycle coding<sup>8</sup> of all twenty transcripts using ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software. In this first-cycle coding process, the first author engaged in a combination of provisional coding and open coding, analyzing data by assigning codes based on knowledge of the literature on social media disclosures, stigma, and social support (e.g., [1, 3, 8, 10, 32, 38, 86, 91, 131]) (provisional coding) while remaining open to new themes that may surface inductively (open coding) [109]. This first-cycle coding process resulted in an initial codebook, which was revised in an iterative process as the first author collapsed, condensed, and specified codes throughout the second-cycle coding<sup>9</sup> process. In this phase of analysis (after two rounds of coding), the first author determined that they reached theoretical saturation [56, 73], meaning they ceased seeing new themes surface in the analysis process and generated the themes that animate this paper.

## 4 FINDINGS

Overall, participants varied in their experiences disclosing their FGLI identities on social media. While many did disclose their identities, these participants acknowledged both anticipated and

<sup>8</sup>The first cycle coding process refers to the beginning stages of data analysis in which data is split into individually coded segments [109].

<sup>9</sup>The second cycle coding process refers to the process of filtering and highlighting salient data to generate broader categories and themes for theory-building [109].

P#	FGLI Identity Salience	FGLI Judgment Perceptions?	Disclosed on 1+ Platform?
1	Very Important	Yes	Yes
2	Extremely Important	Yes	Yes
3	Very Important	Yes	Only on certain platforms to certain people
4	Very Important	Yes	Yes
5	Moderately Important	Yes	Yes
6	Very Important	Yes	Not directly/for public information
7	Extremely Important	No	No
8	Very Important	No	Yes
9	Extremely Important	No	Yes
10	Slightly Important	No	No
11	Very Important	Yes	No
12	Very Important	Yes	Yes
13	Very Important	Yes	Yes
14	Extremely Important	Yes	Yes
15	Moderately Important	Yes	Yes
16	Extremely Important	Yes	Situational/Depending on the context
17	Very Important	Yes	Yes
18	Extremely Important	Yes	Yes
19	Extremely Important	Yes	Yes
20	Extremely Important	Yes	Yes

Table 2. Participants’ Self-Reported FGLI Identity Salience, Judgment Perceptions, and Social Media FGLI Identity Disclosure Behavior

enacted experiences of stigmatization on social media related to their FGLI identities. Anticipating these reactions, some participants opted for indirect disclosures [10] made to audiences of similar others. Although participants reported widespread anticipated [32] and enacted [112] stigma in response to their identity disclosures, many participants also described experiences with identity disclosures that facilitated long-term social support exchanges, albeit in insular first-generation student online communities housed within platforms like Discord. However, stigma related to one’s first-generation, low-income identities and college acceptances sometimes compromised or disrupted support exchange processes by influencing students to abandon certain online support spaces. In the following sections, we elaborate on these findings and describe participants’ ideal social media spaces for social support exchange as they prepare to navigate post-secondary institutions. Table 3 lists the social media platforms used by participants when they applied to and selected a college.

4.1 FGLI Identity Disclosures Facilitated College-Related Social Support Exchange

Participants often described disclosures of their FGLI identities on social media platforms (mainly Reddit, Discord, and Instagram) in favorable terms. Specifically, participants noted that these disclosures helped them receive the kinds of social support (e.g., informational, emotional, esteem) critical for successfully maneuvering through higher education institutions. Students primarily reported receiving this support in two ways: through interactions with non-similar others along

P#	Social Media Platforms Used
1	Facebook, Twitter, Discord, Reddit, Instagram
2	TikTok, Twitter, Discord, Reddit, Instagram
3	Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok, Twitter, Discord
4	Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, Reddit, Instagram
5	Discord, Reddit, Instagram
6	TikTok, Discord, Reddit, Instagram
7	Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, Discord, Reddit, Instagram
8	LinkedIn, TikTok, Discord, Reddit, Instagram
9	Facebook, Discord, Reddit, Instagram
10	TikTok, Reddit, Instagram
11	Facebook, Instagram
12	Facebook, TikTok, Discord, Reddit, Instagram
13	Facebook, TikTok, Discord, Reddit, Instagram
14	Facebook, Discord, Reddit, Instagram
15	Facebook, TikTok
16	Facebook, TikTok, Discord, Reddit, Instagram
17	Snapchat, TikTok, Discord, Reddit, Instagram
18	Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Instagram
19	Facebook, Discord, Reddit, Instagram
20	Discord, Reddit, Instagram

Table 3. Social Media Platforms Used by Participants During the College Application and Selection Processes

the FGLI identity dimension (e.g., continuing-generation students on college-related subreddits) and through interactions in more insular online communities consisting of students who shared the FGLI identity dimension (e.g., in FGLI Discord servers).

Interactions with non-similar others (i.e., a wider audience of primarily continuing-generation students) typically took place on Reddit, usually within one of the myriad subreddits devoted to discussing college applications and results. Several participants described these subreddits' general demographic composition, noting that FGLI students were not particularly well-represented. For instance, P17, who used Snapchat, TikTok, Discord, Reddit, and Instagram, notes:

The applying to college Reddit does a census every year where they basically poll all the members about their experiences, and they get a lot of data from there... race, income. The majority of people there are extremely rich. And it shows in all the posts... a lot of people talk about tutoring for standardized testing or something. I didn't get any tutoring, I had to pirate textbooks to be able to study for the ACT <sup>10</sup>. A lot of people talk about struggling with having parents who are overbearing and are really insistent about them getting into top schools to maintain a social circle, [but] my parents don't even know the names of the majority of the schools I applied to. So those experiences are very different from mine. Definitely very rich, concentrated, generally, and that's proven in the census.

Participants like P17 knew that the network of latent ties (i.e., ties that are technically possible but have not yet been socially activated) [71] they could access on this subreddit was unlike themselves

<sup>10</sup>The ACT is a standardized test used for college admissions in the United States which covers English, mathematics, reading, and scientific reasoning skills.

socioeconomically, and thus these latent ties could not necessarily relate to their experiences as FGLI students. This lends support to the notion that supportive spaces online are not necessarily supportive to everyone or in an equitable way. Multiply marginalized users tend to face additional barriers to finding support or, at the very least, representation, a finding identified in prior work (e.g., [9]).

While this online community was technically supportive for those with college-going aspirations, the demographics of the community and the kinds of topics they discuss are, according to many participants, steeped in experiences of privilege, rendering this community less supportive for FGLI students. Additionally, the racial/ethnic and socioeconomic composition of the Reddit *r/ApplyingtoCollege* community led some participants to believe that they would not be welcome. For instance, P8, who used LinkedIn, TikTok, Discord, Reddit, and Instagram, noted:

So, I've seen a demographic survey of the subreddit I talked about and it tends to skew towards white, Asian... white and Asian males. And I think their average income, like, the median income was like \$230,000, which is more than 10 times my family income. So, um, I kind of knew that like, the environment was not going to be like the most inclusive.

Most participants were both Latinx and low-income students who could not necessarily identify with the lived experiences of the more affluent white and (east) Asian students that they were exposed to by browsing popular college-related subreddits. Moreover, although P8 was an Asian young man, he could not identify with his Asian peers within the subreddit because of their perceived stark socioeconomic differences. Thus, aligned with prior work [5, 9], knowing in aggregate who is and is not represented in an online community has implications for perceptions and anticipations of that space's utility for exchanging support.

While some participants experienced real barriers to gaining support as described above, several participants noted receiving informational and emotional support within these college-related subreddits despite these demographic and identity differences. For example, P1, who used Facebook, Twitter, Discord, Reddit, and Instagram, described disclosing his identity on Reddit, saying, *"I was debating whether I should apply to the Questbridge process or if I should apply to the regular process. So I posted a Reddit post saying, 'Hey, like, here are my demographics. I'm first gen, I'm low-income. Do you think I should apply to Questbridge?'"* In response to his disclosures, P1 discovered a college preparation program on the platform, noting, *"Like the [college access program] through the [college outreach office], I saw on Reddit and I applied, I got in, I did that, it was awesome."* This program helps underserved students engage in online courses and research projects and brings students to a prestigious university to ask questions of admissions counselors and financial aid officers. P1's *r/ApplyingtoCollege* Reddit interactions, specifically his identity disclosures, served as a critical bridge between himself and this opportunity, which provided him with a sense of what academic life was like at a post-secondary institution and help him accrue relevant forms of social support, including instrumental/tangible support in the form of college access programs geared toward FGLI students. Thus, the ability to reap informational, emotional and even instrumental support benefits was particularly salient for those able to safely (i.e., without anticipated or enacted stigmatization) disclose their identities in support spaces within overarching platforms such as Reddit with broader audiences of non-similar others. Unfortunately, as described in the next section (Section 4.2), this was not always the case.

In contrast to many participants' experiences disclosing their FGLI identities on college-related subreddits, most participants described highly supportive responses to sharing their identities within Discord servers specifically made for FGLI students. While the prevalence of Discord use was possibly a function of our recruitment routes, we nevertheless found that FGLI students reported



feeling more comfortable sharing their experiences as FGLI students with similar others in these kinds of insular, invite-only spaces. According to P3, who used Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok, Twitter, and Discord:

I think having that baseline, [the] same background, makes it so much easier to talk about it. If I'm so confused about something or I'm not really sure what a certain term means or how to research certain things or how to respond to certain emails for interviews for colleges, things like that. I can definitely ask them and I feel so confident.

College-related subreddits and Discord servers both provided some participants with the informational support that they needed to effectively navigate the application processes for universities and mentally prepare for what life would be like at post-secondary institutions. However, FGLI-centric Discord servers more often provided students with the emotional and even esteem support (or, as P3 notes, confidence) that was intrinsic to their persistence and psychological well-being. As P2, who used TikTok, Twitter, Discord, Reddit, and Instagram, notes, participants felt it was “*a little bit easier to be more vulnerable*” and to disclose among peers with shared socio-economic backgrounds. While the relevance of Discord to our participants could have been a result of our social media-based recruitment strategy, these findings nonetheless highlight the ways that insular online communities for FGLI students helped encourage disclosures that were met with emotionally supportive responses.

Participants tended to extract relevant information from online communities whose membership consisted of non-similar others and then recirculate it within FGLI online communities that were already rich with emotional support. For example, P5, who used Discord, Reddit, and Instagram, described the QuestBridge Discord server, a server for FGLI students, as a space where “*a lot of people use the pins to share information or share scholarships, or other opportunities, like fly-in programs. And that was really helpful. Because my school doesn't provide a lot of those resources.*” Features like pins and bots thus facilitated the recirculation of informational support content obtained from college-related subreddits to Discord servers, making it easier for the FGLI community to organize and keep track of resources most relevant to their community. By recirculating information they had learned from more affluent students with fellow FGLI students, participants were able to find relevant information without the potential for distressing or stigmatizing interactions. For instance, P5 learned about fly-in programs (i.e., programs hosted by a university that allows students to “fly in” and visit the campus) and other FGLI-specific resources. Broadly speaking, students reported that interactions in FGLI-specific online communities housed within popular platforms, in which identity disclosure played an intrinsic role, helped them accrue the college-related social support necessary to familiarize themselves with institutions.

#### 4.2 Stigmatizing Responses to FGLI Identity Disclosures Disrupted Access to College-Related Social Support

When identity disclosures on social media platforms like Reddit, Discord, and Instagram were received positively (or even neutrally), participants reported being able to cultivate the kinds of college-related social support necessary to become familiar with and prepared for collegiate environments. However, most participants did describe situations in which their online FGLI identity disclosures resulted in what they perceived as stigma, particularly when their college-related accomplishments were attributed to their identities as opposed to their efforts. The stigmatization of FGLI identities and experiences can disrupt the exchange of social support, as students may decide to forgo participation in online support spaces on Reddit, Discord, and Instagram to protect themselves psychologically.

Participants described experiences of stigmatization most commonly on the platform Reddit, within college-going subreddits like r/ApplyingtoCollege, r/ChanceMe, and r/CollegeResults. In many cases, FGLI participants' identity disclosures led to conflict and stigmatization, mainly around the time of year in which universities release admissions decisions. Often, stigmatizing responses to FGLI identity disclosures harbored anti-affirmative action sentiment. For example, P1, who used Facebook, Twitter, Discord, Reddit, and Instagram, noted that *"sometimes you would just post a college result and they would say, 'You only got in because you're poor. You only got in because you're Hispanic', that kind of thing."* P1 describes his experience disclosing in r/CollegeResults, a subreddit that asks students to post their college acceptances and rejections along with relevant statistics and demographic characteristics to give readers a sense of how their applications compare and what kinds of decisions they can expect. The heightened emotional environment after decisions are released makes this subreddit prime territory for the indirect stigmatization of FGLI students like P1, who reported feeling scapegoated for the rejections of more affluent students. P5, who used Discord, Reddit, and Instagram, described a challenging experience on Reddit's r/CollegeResults where, according to her, *"once I posted on Reddit, I was like, 'Oh hey, I got into this school,' and there is a person that responded to me and they said, 'Congrats on being an underrepresented minority and first gen because I doubt you would have gotten in otherwise.' And that was very discouraging."* Describing the impact of stigmatizing responses to her identity disclosure in the context of her college acceptances, P5 noted, *"it made me feel like I didn't really deserve my acceptance to that school."* Thus, this participant recalled responses to her identity disclosure in a college-specific subreddit that led her to doubt herself and her accomplishments.

Experiences of stigmatization in general college-related subreddits were not just emotionally frustrating, according to participant reports, but also ostracizing. Participants described discounting these subreddit support spaces entirely in response to experiences with *"toxicity,"* a term used by nearly all participants to describe Reddit and/or the college-going community housed within the platform. For example, P5, who had a particularly negative experience with anti-affirmative action rhetoric and stigmatization, noted, *"And when I started to see those posts more and more, I'd stop going on that subreddit, because it just made me very uncomfortable...it just made me want to delete the app and never open it again."* P5, who noted that she received informational support from browsing college-related subreddits earlier in the interview, reported abandoning them as support spaces for her transition to an institution because of the increasing pervasiveness of stigma directed at FGLI and students of color. P8, who used LinkedIn, TikTok, Discord, Reddit, and Instagram, described a similar experience, saying, *"The way they treat females and underrepresented minorities was also kind of weird as well. But mostly just microaggressive. So that's why I didn't want to use Reddit, it's just not the most comfortable space, I'd say."* While not directly reporting on stigma aimed at FGLI students, P8's experience reflects how consumption of content that stigmatized underrepresented students (e.g., non-white or non-East Asian women, people of color, and low-income folks) within the support space influenced his subsequent college-related support-seeking experiences within that space.

Broadly, experiences of stigmatization on Reddit in response to identity disclosures compromised students' ability to reap college-related social support within online support spaces. First, it disrupted their perceptions of belongingness within conversations around college that took place online. Second, it influenced participants to change their behavior by ceasing participation in college-related subreddits and by abandoning (or considering abandoning in some cases) these subreddits altogether. Abandonment effectively barred these spaces from serving as sources of support in their subsequent transitions to higher education.

### 4.3 FGLI Students' Reddit Content Moderation Preferences

Above, we described participants' experiences with and perceptions of various existing social media spaces vis-a-vis FGLI identity disclosures and the receipt of social support. But what might an online environment specifically designed to facilitate these kinds of support exchanges look like? RQ2 asked about FGLI participants' ideal social media environment or one that would effectively provide them with the social support needed to successfully complete the college application and selection processes. In their responses, participants consistently emphasized improvements to content moderation on Reddit that could render college-related subreddits more ideal social media environments, as they acknowledged that college-related subreddits were rich in informational resources and that, with effective content moderation, they could also be rich in emotional support for FGLI students. In this section, we describe these responses, focusing specifically on content moderation and Reddit, as participants consistently narrowly focused on college-related subreddits and content moderation when describing desired improvements and ideal social media environments.

Specifically, participants pointed to incidents where they experienced stigmatizing or painful remarks on social media based on their FGLI identities and primarily referred to content moderation practices and policies as ways in which stigmatization of the FGLI identity (as well as other identities underrepresented in higher education) on Reddit could be curbed, making Reddit a more efficacious space for college-related support-seeking. P5, for example, who used Discord, Reddit, and Instagram, explicitly stated: *"I feel like moderation should be improved. And people that have these racist or elitist thoughts should be shamed for thinking that way."* While improved content moderation was a shared goal across participants, there was little agreement on exactly what measures should be put in place.

Some students, referencing experiences with perceived stigmatization on Reddit, suggested auto-moderation tools. For instance, P5 wanted auto-moderation to tackle identity-based stigma on Reddit *"because I know one of my friends got called the N-word on one of these subreddits. And he was very hurt by it."* At the same time as they advocated for automated moderation, P5 recognized its limitations, noting, *"you also can't ban words like underrepresented minority or low income, first-gen, because these are words that people use to have conversations about their challenges."* This quote highlights a central tension associated with curbing socio-economic stigmatization on Reddit. While moderation "bots" could be implemented in subreddits to possibly detect and eliminate more blatant identity-based discrimination (i.e., slurs like P5 mentioned), users may invoke proxy terms to discuss affirmative action without detection by automated moderation tools. As not all discussions of affirmative action are stigmatizing, it is similarly challenging for automated tools to understand the intent and impacts of these kinds of comments well enough to respond accordingly. The fact that affirmative action comments may be innocuous or stigmatizing suggests the need for a multi-pronged approach involving some degree of human moderation.

Human moderators on college-related subreddits who are also FGLI community members could perform a broader range of actions to render Reddit a safer space for support and support-seeking amongst FGLI students. For instance, they could institute and update subreddit-specific community guidelines, as described by P5, who says, *"I feel like maybe having something in the rules about just being friendly to people if they are from an underprivileged background."* Noting a possible limitation to this platform governance strategy, P7, who used Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, Discord, Reddit, and Instagram, elaborated:

But other than the guidelines...I don't think people read that. Maybe it's like they could insert a banner when they know that this might be like a hateful community

or something like before you go on the Chance Me Reddit <sup>11</sup>, maybe a banner could come up that says, “Please be aware that some of these things might be hateful” or something. “So please take caution and be cautious of your mental health and don’t take what they say as truth.”

Rather than focusing on punitive (as described by P5, for example), top-down, community-specific guidelines, P7 noted that one potential intervention could involve proactively taking advantage of Reddit’s features, like banners, to set expectations and norms among members of a given subreddit community. This may be a more effective short-term intervention, as calibrating new community members’ expectations might be easier than trying to enforce pro-social behavior, especially given the entrenched nature of other norms.

Beyond community-specific human moderation, some participants emphasized the importance of human-driven platform-wide moderation tactics on Reddit. P12, for example, who used Facebook, TikTok, Discord, Reddit, and Instagram, explained:

I assume it would just take a lot more moderation from Reddit [itself]. But I know there are a lot of problems with that. Because you don’t want to get into censoring people, so I think it’s very tricky, but probably more careful moderation from Reddit, especially in communities where there are a lot of teenagers and people applying to college and children.

While P12 explicitly notes additional considerations around censorship, she recognized the importance of content moderation on Reddit, especially when communities germane to marginalized adolescent populations are involved. We return to this point later in the Discussion when we consider how content warnings on Reddit may allow platforms to engage in forms of content moderation that move away from censorship while providing FGLI students with more agency and control over their exposure to potentially stigmatizing content.

## 5 DISCUSSION

Our findings suggest that participants’ FGLI identity disclosures on social media, particularly Instagram, Reddit, and Discord, can serve as facilitators and disruptors of college-related social support exchanges. Supportive online conversations around these disclosures enabled some students to accrue valuable college-related social support. However, enacted stigmatization [112] in response to disclosures disrupted access to support on these platforms by making them feel unsafe and psychologically harmful for FGLI users. In interpreting our findings, we make the following contributions:

- Bridges the privileged poor framework [79] with social media research to argue that social media interactions and perceptions can also help FGLI students become one of the privileged poor
- Transposes the social transition machinery framework [65] to the college access context and introduces the concept of social transition disruptors
- Describes how stigmatization on social media carries implications for online support space abandonment and reflects on implications for long-term support seeking
- Provides design considerations related to addressing stigmatization in college-related subreddits via content moderation mechanisms, including content warnings

<sup>11</sup>This quote refers to the subreddit r/ChanceMe, an online community where students seek feedback from community members regarding their chances of acceptance at a particular university.

### 5.1 Social Media, Social Transition Machinery, and the Privileged Poor

Our findings indicate that identity disclosures could play prominent roles in facilitating access to primarily informational and emotional forms of college-related social support, corroborating past work on online identity disclosures and social support receipt (i.e., [7, 33, 38, 66, 103]) and extending past works' findings to the college access context for FGLI students. Identity disclosures can help support providers give more tailored informational support, as evidenced by participants who received recommendations for college access programs after sharing their FGLI status on platforms like Reddit. Moreover, identity disclosures can help engender affiliations between individuals who share the FGLI identity, making space for longer-term support exchanges, as evidenced by participants who engaged in-depth with fellow FGLI students in college-related Discord servers. Taken together, the stories shared by participants indicate that informational and emotional support helped them feel not only informed about what college life would look like but also psychologically prepared, similar to how other work has documented the role of social media in demystifying the college experience for FGLI students [95].

Considering these findings, we argue that identity disclosures on platforms like Instagram, Reddit, and Discord can help FGLI students attain forms of informational and emotional college-related social support that position them to access and possibly persist in higher education environments, representing a shift from a "doubly disadvantaged" student to a member of the "privileged poor" [79]. This terminology stems from Anthony Abraham Jack's [79] book, which describes how some FGLI students attend preparatory high schools that help them become one of the "privileged poor", or a low-income student that is exposed to "an early introduction of the world they will enter in college" [79]. According to Jack, other FGLI students occupy the role of "doubly disadvantaged," meaning that they are both low-income and lack familiarity with the environments of many post-secondary institutions. We argue that the doubly disadvantaged/privileged poor framing gives updated language to an extant body of work on social media and college access for first-generation, low-income students (e.g., [25, 46, 80, 95]) and conceptualizes the relationship between social media interactions and students' development of the kinds of capital that help them shift between the "doubly disadvantaged" and "privileged poor" categories [79].

These findings have several implications for researchers working with FGLI populations. Notably, our work suggests that scholars should study students' social media interactions and ecologies [142] to ascertain how the use of multiple social media platforms (and the kinds of activities students engage in across these platforms) can facilitate myriad forms of support exchange. By focusing on FGLI students' social media ecologies rather than their use of a single platform, we were able to derive findings that demonstrate that FGLI students engaged on social media with both those similar and non-similar to them on the FGLI identity dimension, including peers they may not typically access in their offline networks, echoing prior work on social media social support exchange both in the context of college access (e.g., [46]) and in other contexts (e.g., [7]). Moreover, students were able to accrue informational support on Reddit (despite dealing with stigmatized responses to their identity disclosures) and transfer this informational support to more emotionally supportive FGLI-centric Discord servers. Future work can elucidate the strengths FGLI students possess and accrue in online environments (e.g., Community Cultural Wealth, see [24]) and understand how engagement on social media platforms may replicate or exacerbate some of the struggles FGLI students face offline as they seek social support.

In addition to informing research with FGLI populations, these findings carry implications for social media research in that they demonstrate the utility of the social transition machinery framework [65] in the college access context. Social transition machinery "describes the ways that, for people facing life transitions, multiple social media sites remain separate and serve different



purposes yet work together to facilitate life transitions” [65]. For FGLI students, transitioning from home communities to post-secondary institutions can be particularly difficult and stressful [85]. Students’ ability to navigate this transition successfully (as a member of the “privileged poor”) has consequences for their later persistence and academic success. Findings from this study corroborate that social media interactions such as identity disclosures can facilitate this transition. As such, this study extends the social transition machinery framework to a new context of FGLI students and college access. Unlike the platforms Tumblr and Facebook, which in tandem formed the social transition machinery for the transgender participants in Haimson’s [65] work, participants in the present study engaged in interactions on college-related online communities primarily within both Reddit and Discord, but also on Instagram, to facilitate the eventual transition to college.

Participants’ experiences reflected Haimson’s theorization of social transition machinery in several ways. For instance, both Reddit’s and Discord’s college-related online communities provided participants with unique forms of social support, typically informational support from Reddit and emotional and esteem support from Discord. Additionally, participants were able to highlight different aspects of their identities in different communities on Reddit and Discord. While the trans participants in Haimson’s [65] work turned to Tumblr for in-depth, interactive identity work and Facebook for broadcasting identity change as an event, participants in this study employed FGLI-centric Discord servers for more profound and safer identity disclosures and discussions while maintaining college-related subreddits as a source of valuable information around college-going. Yet, for both populations, one platform (Tumblr for transgender people and Discord for FGLI students) served as a centrally important online space where participants could present aspects of their marginalized identities that they may otherwise hide to audiences of similar others. The second platform (Facebook for transgender people and college-related subreddits for FGLI students) afforded opportunities to broadcast disclosures to and receive support from a wider audience of non-similar others (i.e., non-FGLI students). The differences between the role that Reddit and Discord played as social transition machinery may have stemmed from the invite-only nature of Discord and the prevalence of similar-others within FGLI-centric Discord servers as compared to college-related subreddits, which were broad and open to everyone.

However, in other ways, the social transition machinery framework did not map neatly onto the experiences of FGLI students making transitions from doubly disadvantaged to privileged poor. For example, rather than relying on one platform for more intense and ongoing mid-transition identity work and the other for broadcasted disclosures of one’s identity to broader audiences, FGLI students turned to the same platform (Discord) for both identity work and broadcasted disclosures within the context of FGLI-specific online communities, while college-related subreddits served as spaces where disclosures were leveraged strategically for information-seeking purposes. This aligns with prior work elucidating differences in social support provision between general online spaces (which typically provide informational support) and those scoped to a particular identity facet (which typically provide emotional support) [9, 45].

Importantly, social media platforms such as Instagram, Reddit, and Discord not only serve as social transition machinery but also as social transition disruptors. Many participants reported experiencing stigmatization in response to their identity disclosures, particularly on the r/ApplyingtoCollege subreddit, which they reported stifled their ability to effectively self-present their whole selves in this space. While some participants noted that they still sometimes disclosed strategically to obtain necessary information, they also described engaging in more narrow disclosures in the general college-related subreddits (e.g., disclosing only the requisite information about themselves needed to obtain relevant information about college). Conversely, they reported feeling more comfortable presenting their FGLI identities in insular Discord communities and described more robust and frequent disclosures that helped them receive college-related social support. These findings suggest

that stigmatization is emotionally harmful and directly and indirectly affects students' ability to disclose their identities and accrue the support necessary to become part of the privileged poor. Stigma sowed seeds of self-doubt for participants who questioned their sense of belonging in post-secondary institutions, which could impact their ability to persist within them. Moreover, stigmatization likely indirectly influenced the accrual of social support necessary for students to familiarize themselves with institutions because stigmatizing reactions to identity disclosures pushed students away from using certain online support spaces. These findings resonate with prior work in online health contexts (e.g., [6, 98]), which suggests that "supportive" spaces online do not support members equitably and that these spaces can even be harmful and invalidating. Moreover, our findings provide empirical support for the notion [39] that expecting marginalized communities to completely opt out of social media if they experience harm can be problematic insofar as it neglects the reality that these platforms often house the kinds of resources that community members, including participants in our study, do not possess in their offline networks and ignores the nuances of social media practices, especially across multiple platforms.

Taken together, the dual role of social media platforms such as Instagram, Reddit, and Discord (and the online communities that emerge within them) as both social transition machinery and social transition disruptors aligns with arguments of technology broadly and social media specifically, as "double-edged swords" [48, 111, 120]. As this work shows, the context of FGLI students preparing for the transition to college exemplifies the dual benefits and harms that social media use can bring. Importantly, though, it also suggests (in accordance with [65]) that positive interactions around identity disclosures on Instagram, Reddit, and Discord have the potential to serve a social transition machinery function. In contrast, negative interactions around these disclosures tend to serve a social transition disruptor function. Understanding social media as a social transition disruptor questions how platform design and affordances can influence which role a platform plays in an individual's upwardly mobile social transition. As such, these findings may also be representative of social media and social support dynamics for other populations experiencing life transitions.

## 5.2 Affirmative Action Stigma and Online Support Space Abandonment

Participants reported experiencing both enacted and anticipated stigmatization in response to their FGLI identity disclosures, primarily on Reddit. Much of this stigmatization occurred in the form of comments about affirmative action (e.g., "*you only got in because you're first-gen, low-income*" described by P5). Anti-affirmative action rhetoric, espoused since the 1960s by those opposing affirmative action policies, including organized labor advocates and groups (i.e., Students for Fair Admissions) interested in higher education administration and policy, frequently invokes assumptions of "reverse discrimination" and colorblind ideologies [47]. Politicians, some higher education staff, and community members alike balked, and continue to balk, at the idea of racial "quotas" for higher education admissions. However, these mechanistic quotas were jettisoned in response to decisions in Supreme Court cases like *Gratz v. Bollinger* [107]. More specifically, *Gratz v. Bollinger* ceased admissions practices that relied on a points system to determine admission and granted underrepresented minorities points for their underrepresented racial/ethnic identities, as this mechanism of affirmative action was not considered narrowly tailored enough to be considered constitutional [107]. Nevertheless, our findings suggest that discourse that associates marginalized social identities with "quotas" can be found on social media, particularly pseudonymous platforms like Reddit. This discourse is problematic because it suggests that students who embody marginalized identities are admitted to universities because of these identities instead of their achievements. By crediting their successes to their identities rather than their determination, these students struggle to feel like they deserve to be on a university campus and belong there, as reflected in our findings about hostile experiences on a college-related subreddit.

Stigmatizing comments referencing (often incorrectly) information about affirmative action policy was not only immediately disruptive to participants' psychological well-being but also carried implications for the ways they anticipated using (or not using) online support spaces as sources of college-related social support in the future. Many participants reported either considering support space abandonment or actually abandoning support spaces on Reddit where they reported experiencing the most stigma in response to their identity disclosures. Abandoning support spaces on Reddit, where nearly all participants described experiencing the most stigmatization, could effectively curb some of the emotional hardships associated with these experiences. However, we argue that support space abandonment can also prevent FGLI students from accessing college-related social support, which many participants described as valuable outcomes of their experiences on college-specific subreddits.

Prior work on social media discontinuance and non-use suggests that social media abandonment practices take multiple forms, such as disengagement, disconnection, distancing, and departure [34], can be temporary or permanent [114], and can signify enactments of personal agency [17, 34]. Some scholars argue that marginalized populations also enact agency over their (non-)use decisions, but that these groups can nevertheless experience negative outcomes resulting from their (non-)use decisions [34]. Along these lines, Chib and colleagues [34] advanced the Mobile Media (Non-)use Typology, which conceives of (non-)use decisions along the dimensions of a) contextual vs. absolute and b) invisible vs. visible (non-)use. Our findings, similarly situated in the context of a marginalized group, highlight the former dimension by articulating how FGLI students engaged in contextual (non-)use by forgoing participation in college-related support spaces on Reddit. Yet, in contrast with Chib et al. [34], who consider disconnection and departure to be absolute (as opposed to contextual) non-use strategies, FGLI participants engaged in disconnection and departure as a contextual non-use strategy by abandoning specific support spaces within larger platforms (i.e., college-going subreddits) as opposed to abandoning platforms (i.e., Reddit) as a whole.

Additionally, while (non-)use decisions themselves may be agentic responses to harm, they may ultimately be undesired since they involve giving up the benefits that can be reaped through engagement with a platform and/or a particular support space. For instance, while P5 reported experiencing stigmatization and engaging in support space abandonment, she also acknowledged the informational support available within college-related subreddits. Still, even agentic (non-)use decisions can culminate in negative outcomes for marginalized groups [34]. While not explicitly examined in the scope of the present study, it is possible that support space abandonment could have long-term impacts on students' ability to harness college-related social support throughout their transition to college.

### 5.3 Implications for Design

In this section, we describe how designers may consider content moderation strategies such as content warnings to curb FGLI stigmatization and ensuing involuntary platform abandonment on Reddit. We note that future work can and should explicitly investigate issues of content moderation within college-related subreddits by eliciting experiences and perceptions of (in)effective moderation from FGLI students directly.

It is important to note that stigmatization of FGLI students, sometimes with references to affirmative action, exists offline in conversations with peers or overheard by students on campus. Warnock & Hurst's [138] ethnographic study revealed that FGLI students experience alienation and isolation both due to comments from others and the difficulty of finding other FGLI students on campus. Additionally, Sarcedo et al. [110] documented various microaggressions and microinvalidations that FGLI students of color experienced, such as counselors discouraging these students from pursuing graduate education or other students laughing at FGLI students for not knowing about

office hours or about graduate school. Meanwhile, canonical experimental work has shown a stigma of (perceived) incompetence wielded against those thought to benefit from affirmative action [72].

Yet, key differences between offline stigmatization and stigmatization on Reddit make it important to address stigmatization that impacts this population within college-related subreddits. Two differences relate to the affordances of social media as opposed to face-to-face communication. While FGLI students can and do experience stigma offline, Reddit affords scale, pseudonymity, and persistence, which can influence the degree to which stigmatizing comments remain visible and harmful to students. For instance, students may encounter a handful of students scapegoating FGLI students in their dormitories or classroom discussions. In contrast, on Reddit, they can be exposed to many students who espouse similar ideas. Moreover, these comments are typically persistent on platforms like Reddit, where they are visible over time. Conversely, passing conversations in dormitories and classrooms are ephemeral (although students can ruminate on them). Additionally, pseudonymity on Reddit can potentially encourage “disinhibition” [123], facilitating the declaration of more negative and stigmatizing comments than one might share in face-to-face settings.

The present study demonstrates that FGLI students experienced stigmatization in college-related subreddits despite existing community moderation and that they did not see content removal as a promising moderation strategy, likening it to censorship. Existing mechanisms for content moderation, particularly those that rely on content removal, may be insufficient for marginalized groups like FGLI students since marginalized social media users are disproportionately impacted by content removal [69, 125]. Furthermore, those who have the intention to share harmful content on social media can respond to content removals by reposting content or posting in a different online space [74, 96].

Alternatives to content removal-based moderation approaches often consist of reducing the visibility of potentially harmful content [61] and nudging users away from this content [96]. Content warnings, or labels placed on digital content, can be used to nudge users away from potentially harmful content [96] and/or enable users to express greater agency over whether or not to view or engage with potentially harmful content [67]. Typologies of content warnings [31] suggest that content warnings can include warnings for common triggers such as violence and sex but can also include warnings of potential race and class-based stigma and sociopolitical content related to class, both of which are relevant to the current inquiry.

We argue that content warnings represent one means by which designers can help curb socioeconomic stigmatization on Reddit and render subreddits safer spaces for FGLI college-related social support exchanges while avoiding censorship and enabling FGLI students to enact agency and potentially build resilience to stigmatization. While some work suggests that the beneficial impacts of trigger warnings, a specific type of content warning, are questionable in face-to-face contexts, the efficacy of broader social media content warnings is less known. Promisingly, prior work has found success in deploying crowdsourced moderation in social media contexts [22, 90].

Deploying content warnings in college-related subreddits requires a mechanism for labeling content as potentially harmful. Content warning labels may be applied to subreddits via technological interventions, human (commercial) moderators, and/or users, including volunteer moderators. AI-enabled tools are increasingly being developed to automatically label and add content warnings to so-called “sensitive posts” [96, 121] as well as crowd-sourced labeling to determine which posts to accompany with which kinds of content warnings. While other forms of identity-based harassment can be more readily apparent or overtly toxic (i.e., when the harasser uses commonly recognized slurs), the circulation of anti-affirmative action rhetoric is more difficult to circumvent as it exemplifies “covertly toxic content” including microaggressions that necessitate subjective, contextualized judgment [87]. Without keywords and phrases to identify, AI-enabled content labeling tools may not be well poised to engage in the kinds of content moderation that can cultivate safer subreddits

for FGLI students. Thus, designers may wish to turn to human-centered forms of moderation. Sometimes, this involves teams of centralized commercial content moderators adjudicating what counts as harmful or toxic content. However, this approach can lack scalability, and commercial moderators may similarly lack a nuanced understanding of the context in which “covertly toxic content” is created and circulated [87].

Given the tension between automated and human-based approaches, “crowdsourcing” or “group-sourcing” is an increasingly popular approach for overcoming the various limitations of both automatic and centralized human-based approaches to content labeling and content warnings [96]. This may take the form of crowdsourced, voluntary labeling of content on Reddit wherein subreddit members and volunteer moderators can work together to classify content [96]. While this approach has primarily been applied to trust and credibility ratings in the context of misinformation detection (e.g., [100]), it may be similarly feasible in labeling content for potential triggers on Reddit.

It is important to note that there may be obstacles in implementing crowdsourced labeling of harmful content or the collaborative deployment of content warnings. First, those who are the least harmed by stigmatization on college-related subreddits (i.e., middle-class and affluent, continuing-generation students who are not a racial minority) may be the least inclined to contribute to crowdsourced labeling processes, creating a sort of “free-rider problem.” One way to combat this is to incorporate some of the gamification features that are already integrated into Reddit, like “karma” and badges. Currently, users receive karma for upvoting and downvoting content, which is already a form of collaborative content moderation by way of filtering. Users could also gain “karma” for labeling harmful content and could even receive badges to display next to their posts as a reward for their pro-social contributions. FGLI students would likely be more inclined to label content for their fellow FGLI students who receive the most harm, but this would place an additional burden on them to remedy harms that they did not create in the first place.

In sum, Reddit could focus on content moderation efforts that balance the need to avoid censorship, promote user agency, and curb FGLI-directed stigmatization in college-related support spaces online. Crowdsourced content warnings may represent one means of balancing these needs, given that much of the stigmatizing comments participants referenced receiving and/or observing were “covertly toxic” microaggressions that both automatic AI-enabled tools and commercial moderators may not pick up on. Moreover, the emphasis on content warnings as opposed to removal avoids the kinds of censorship that participants remarked being weary of and which has been shown to disproportionately affect marginalized groups [69]. Finally, crowdsourced content moderation can render moderation work more visible, which is important because visible moderation can increase users’ awareness of injustice and oppression [125], potentially leading to pro-social behavior change. These ideas may also apply to other contexts where apparently innocuous terms can be harmful, but simple strategies for banning or hiding specific words are not productive.

## 5.4 Limitations and Opportunities

This study focuses on U.S.-based students and their experiences with social media disclosures of their FGLI identities as they applied to and selected a college to attend. Because college application experiences differ from country to country, focusing on U.S.-based FGLI students provided a consistent context in which to analyze their experiences using social media during the college application process. Future work could explore national and cultural differences in disclosure practices on social media during this process. In addition, we focus on social media-based FGLI identity disclosure behaviors, not face-to-face identity disclosures, to properly scope our study. Future work may ask questions that seek to compare face-to-face and online disclosures since responses to face-to-face disclosures may relate to FGLI students’ decisions to disclose or not disclose their identities online or vice versa. Furthermore, we did not systematically gather or analyze data



on which types of support students *deliberately* sought out as this was outside the scope of our research questions, so we cannot make claims about whether support received matched support sought. Future work can gather data that speaks more explicitly to the (mis)matches in support sought versus support received on social media for FGLI students, per optimal matching theory [42]. Moreover, this study was conducted amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This informed our decision to recruit via social media as well as our decision to conduct interviews virtually via Zoom, which may have shaped our findings. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically shifted how education is delivered to students and how students are able to find information about colleges. Thus, the results of this study may not be generalizable across space and time. Similarly, our qualitative interview-based approach is exploratory, and we do not make claims about the generalizability of our findings to larger groups of FGLI students. Subsequent research could explore how these findings and their implications may shift over time and how they may (or may not) be applicable to a “post-pandemic” world. Finally, our recruitment routes could have influenced our findings. While we opted to recruit via social media platforms like Instagram and Discord to recruit a variety of students living across the U.S. and embodying diverse social identities, these recruitment routes could explain the kinds of platforms (namely Discord) emphasized in interviews. Moreover, while stigmatizing discourses around “quotas” were referenced by participants with respect to Reddit, it is possible that this discourse is prevalent on other platforms but was not surfaced in our data in part because of our recruitment routes. Future work on this topic can recruit using other methods or examine online data to provide a more comprehensive picture of “quota” discourse. Finally, scholars may consider using alternative methods in related future work, such as surveys and appropriate sampling techniques to confirm the generalizability of our findings or participatory design sessions to elicit more granular understandings of participants’ ideal social media spaces for college-related support-seeking.

## 6 CONCLUSION

We investigated how first-generation, low-income students’ identity disclosures on social media could serve as a conduit or barrier to college-related support seeking during the college application process. Our findings suggest that FGLI students’ identity disclosures within college-related online communities housed within popular social media platforms could facilitate and disrupt their access to college-related social support. While supportive exchanges made in response to identity disclosures could prepare students academically, logistically, and emotionally for what they would experience in post-secondary environments, stigmatizing responses (e.g., those related to affirmative action) to FGLI students’ identity disclosures call into question the ways that platforms can (or should) intervene to promote the safety of these marginalized adolescents. We argue that 1) identity disclosures in college-related communities on social media can facilitate or disrupt students’ access to college-related social support, 2) that researchers can and should study social media interactions across multiple platforms to more deeply understand college access and persistence for FGLI students, and 3) that social media design can play a role in promoting supportive interactions and disrupting stigmatizing interactions on social media, ultimately curbing the undesired abandonment of online support spaces and allowing FGLI students to more safely use these spaces to accrue support that may be integral to their access and persistence in post-secondary environments.

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## 7 APPENDIX A

### 7.1 Screening Survey

- (1) Do you use social media?
  - Yes
    - If 'Yes': List your three most used social media platforms [open-ended text box]
  - No (if No, not eligible)
    - If 'No': Not eligible
- (2) Are you a first-generation student?
  - Yes
    - if 'Yes': How important is being FG to your identity?
      - \* Extremely Important
      - \* Very Important
      - \* Moderately Important
      - \* Slightly Important
      - \* Not at all Important
    - if 'Yes': Have you ever felt judged for being a first-generation student?
      - \* Yes
      - \* No
  - No
    - if 'No', not eligible
- (3) When did you most recently apply to college?
  - 2020 or 2021
    - If '2020 or 2021': Have you been accepted to a college?
      - \* Yes
      - \* No
    - If '2020 or 2021': Have you made a decision about which college to attend?
      - \* Yes
      - \* No
    - If '2020 or 2021': How did you learn about college? Check all that apply.
      - \* Parents
      - \* Extended Family
      - \* Siblings
      - \* Friends
      - \* School
      - \* Athletic Coaches

- \* Club Participation
  - \* Religious Leaders
  - Before 2020 (if Before 2020, not eligible)
- (4) What is your gender? Check all that apply.
- Man
  - Woman
  - Non-Binary
  - Prefer Not to Say
  - Other [please describe]
- (5) What is your race? Check all that apply.
- African-American/Black
  - Latino/a/x
  - Asian
  - Middle Eastern
  - Indigenous
  - White
  - Prefer not to say
  - Other [please describe]
- (6) How old are you? [open-ended text box]
- (7) How would you describe the town in which you currently reside?
- Rural (below 50k residents)
  - Urban (more than 50k residents)
  - Prefer not to say
- (8) Do you identify as low-income?
- Yes
  - Maybe or Not Sure
  - No
  - Prefer Not to Say
- (9) What is your email address? [open-ended text box]
- (10) Please confirm your email address. [open-ended text box]

## 7.2 Interview Protocol

### 7.2.1 Warm-Up Questions.

- (1) Tell me where you're at in terms of the college admissions and enrollment process.
- (2) What kinds of places did you apply to? How many?
- (3) What made you choose those places to apply to?
- (4) Have you selected where to attend? If so, what made you choose that school?

### 7.2.2 First-Generation Identity Disclosure Online.

- (1) 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.?
    - (a) If 'Yes': Could you describe that/those experience(s)?
    - (b) If 'Yes': On what platform(s) did you share?
    - (c) If 'Yes': What made you want to share this aspect of your identity?
    - (d) If 'Yes': Were there any other reasons you shared?
    - (e) If 'Yes': Who did you share with?

- (f) If 'Yes': What made you choose to share with them?
- (g) If 'Yes': When you shared, was it anonymous or connected with your real name?
- (h) If 'Yes': What made you choose to share in that way?
- (i) If 'Yes': Who do you think saw you share that?
- (j) If 'Yes': Why do you think that?
- (k) If 'Yes': Was there anything about [platform] that encouraged you to tell people this?
  - If 'Yes': What was it?
  - If 'Yes': How did it encourage you?
- (l) If 'Yes': What kinds of responses did you expect when you shared about being first-generation online?
- (m) If 'Yes': 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?
- (n) If 'Yes': What did helpful or supportive responses look like?
- (o) If 'Yes': 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?
- (p) If 'Yes': Did anything else happen as a result of you telling people online that you're first-generation?
- (q) If 'No': Have there been times you wanted to or considered sharing about being first-generation but did not?
- (r) If 'No': What reactions would you expect to get if you did share this?
- (s) If 'No': Was there anything about [online platform(s)] that discouraged you from sharing this?
- (t) If 'No': Is there anything about [online platform(s)] that would encourage you to share this?
- (u) If 'No': Did not sharing about being first-generation online impact you in any way?
- (v) If 'No': Have you ever seen any content online that made you feel like you might be judged for being first-generation?
- (w) If 'No': Have you seen any content online that made you feel like you might be supported for being first-gen?
- (x) If 'No': Have you seen other people post online about being first-generation?
- (y) If 'No': Do you see yourself ever talking about being first-generation online in the future? Why or why not?
- (2) Did anyone online already know that you're first-generation?
  - If 'Yes': How do you think they knew?
- (3) 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?
  - If 'Yes': What made you want to hint at this aspect of your identity?
  - If 'Yes': Were there any other reasons you hinted at this aspect of your identity?
  - If 'Yes': When you hinted about being first-generation, who was your audience?
  - If 'Yes': What made you choose to share with them?
  - If 'Yes': When you hinted at being first-generation, was it anonymous or connected with your real name?
  - If 'Yes': What made you choose to share this way?
  - Was there anything about [platform] that encouraged you to hint at the fact that you're first-generation?



- If ‘Yes’: What was it?
- If ‘Yes’: How did it encourage you?
- (4) Have you seen other people post online about being first-generation?
  - If ‘Yes’: What did you think of that?
  - If ‘Yes’: Why do you think those people posted about that?
  - If ‘Yes’: Did that influence you to post or not post about being first-generation?
    - If ‘Yes’: Was it the specific post that influenced you, or seeing content in general about being first-generation?
    - If ‘Yes’: What did responses to those posts look like?
    - If ‘Yes’: Did you ever like, comment, or engage in any way with those posts? Why or why not?
    - If ‘No’: Can you think of reasons why other people might not want to tell people about being first-generation in online spaces?
- (5) Have you ever seen any content online that made you feel like you might be judged for being first-generation?
  - If ‘Yes’: What was that content like?
  - If ‘Yes’: Who posted that content? (Someone you knew of or not?)
  - Did that influence you to post or not post about being first-generation?
  - Why do you think that content was posted?

### 7.2.3 *Applying to and Selecting a College.*

- (1) 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.
- (2) How would you describe your high school environment?
- (3) Was it expected that you would go to college?
- (4) What kinds of schools did you end up applying to?
- (5) How did you decide to apply to those?
- (6) What school did you select?
- (7) What made you select that one?
- (8) What kinds of obstacles did you face, if any, as you applied to and selected a college?
  - How did you respond to those obstacles?
- (9) What kinds of help did you need as you applied to college and selected which college to go to? These could be things like financial aid information or reassurance.
  - Were you able to get what you needed?
    - If ‘Yes’: How?
  - Did any of the online platforms you mentioned in the screening survey help?
    - If ‘Yes’: How did they help?
    - If ‘No’: Why do you think you were unable to get what you needed? How did that make you feel?
    - If ‘No’: Were any of the online platforms you mentioned in the screening survey unhelpful?
      - \* If ‘Yes’: What made them unhelpful?

### 7.2.4 *Identity.*

- (1) 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-generation identity: Is your first-generation identity important? Why or why not?
- (2) Did any identities (like race or gender) impact your application/selection process in any way?
  - If ‘Yes’: How? Could you give me an example?
- (3) Which of these identities was most important to your application/selection process?
- (4) Did your identities impact your use of [online platform(s)] while applying to or selecting a college?
  - If ‘Yes’: How? Could you give me an example?
- (5) Are there ways you think online spaces could have been more helpful to you during this process?

#### 7.2.5 *Closing.*

- (1) Is there anything else you would like to share about being first-generation?
- (2) 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?
- (3) Is there anything you’d like to mention that hasn’t come up yet?

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