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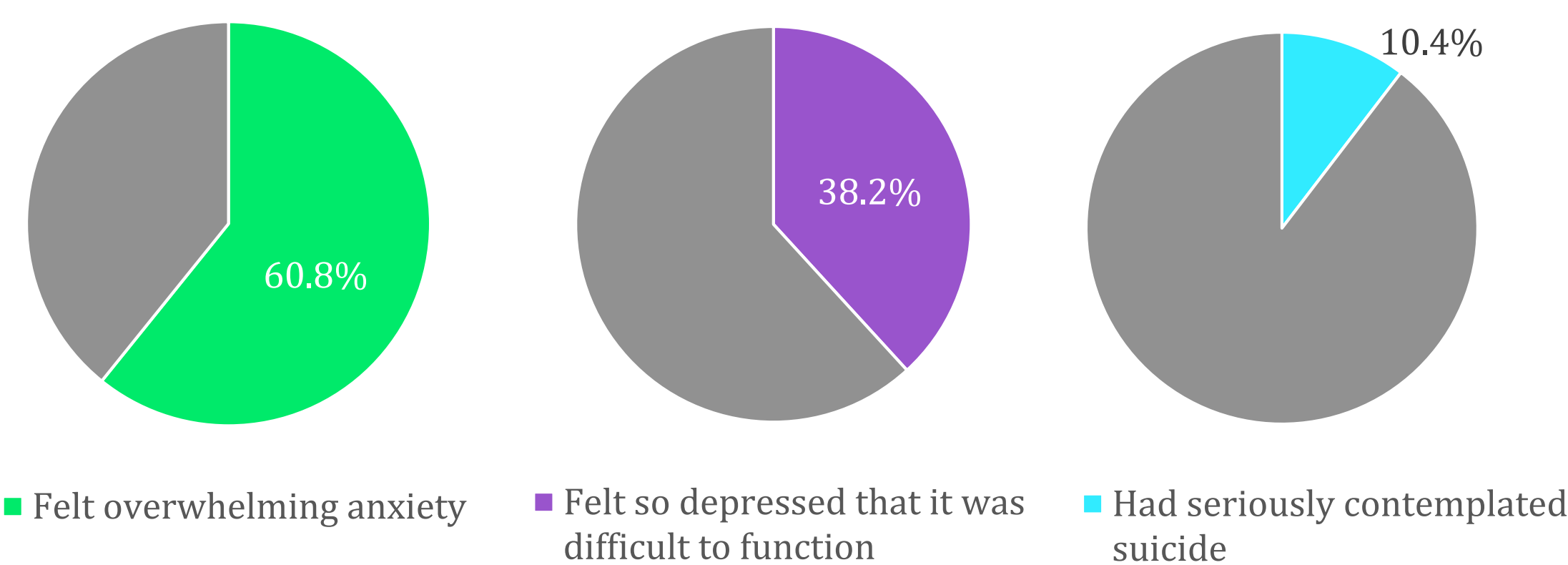


# College Students in Distress: Can Social Media be a Source of Social Support?

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## Background

- Depression, anxiety, and other forms of mental illness often emerge during early adulthood.
- College is a huge transition for young adults:
  - Managing workload and finances
  - Adapting to living on their own
  - Balancing conflicting social and academic demands
  - Reduced support from established connections (e.g., high school friends).
- Some college students are coping not only with adjustment issues, but with severe psychological distress, as well.
- Recent statistics from a U.S. survey of 33,512 students from 51 institutions showed that in the past 12 months:



- Perceived social support can be a protective factor for those facing psychological distress such as loneliness, depression, and/or anxiety and it can also help students adjust to university life.<sup>23,45</sup>

## Objective

- Our objectives were to: (1) examine college students' social support sources, including social media (SM) sources, and their preferences for SM features (i.e., anonymity and similar-peer communities) for social support; and (2) determine the extent to which at-risk students (e.g., those with depression or anxiety symptoms) differ from those not at risk in their support network preferences.

## Participants

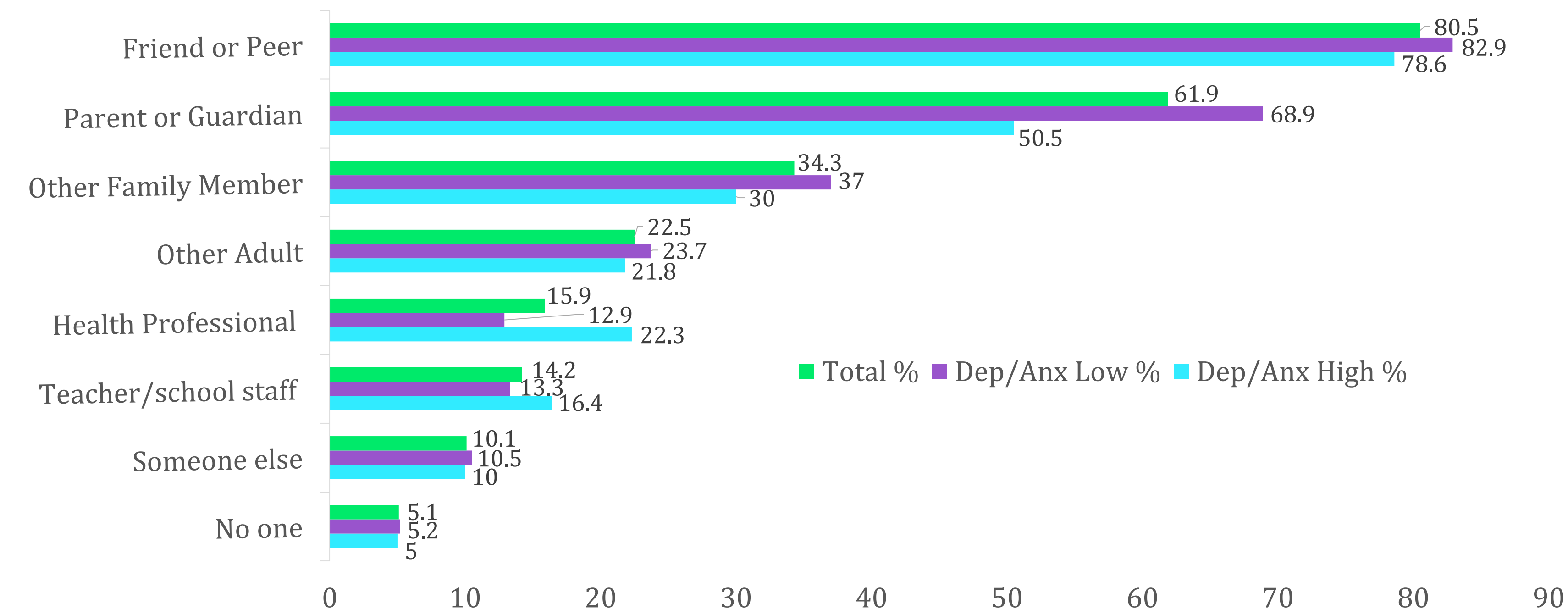
- Participants were 662 undergraduates (438 women) from two Midwestern colleges who completed an online survey in Spring 2017.

## Methods

Participants completed (via SurveyMonkey) a demographic survey as well as the following measures:

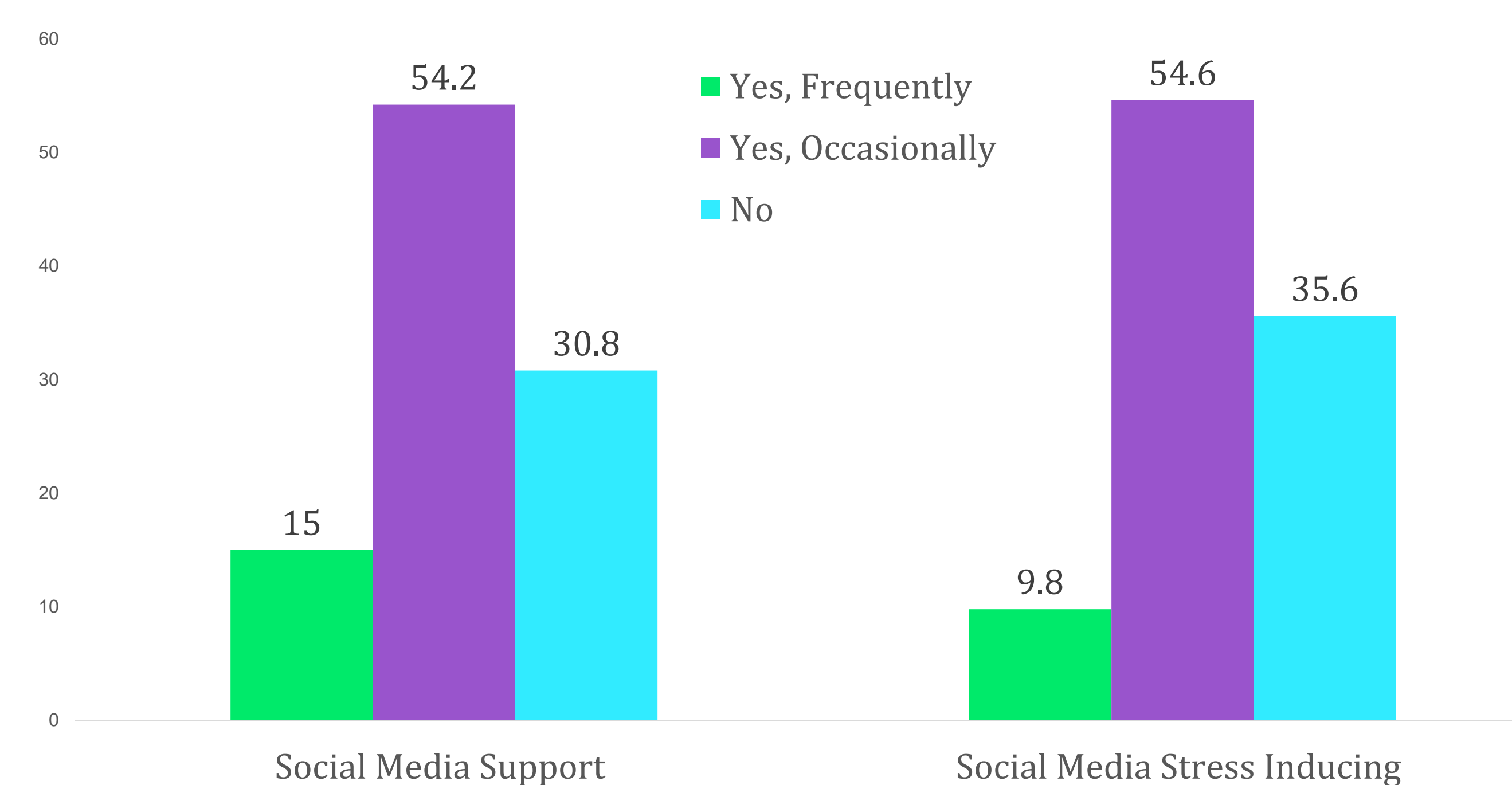
- **Depression/anxiety screener<sup>6</sup>**--Participants were asked how often (0 = *not at all*, 3 = *nearly every day*) in the last two weeks they had experienced depression and anxiety. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the subscales were depression  $\alpha = .76$ , anxiety  $\alpha = .82$ , and PHQ total  $\alpha = .82$ .
- **Sources of social support in times of distress**--Participants were asked to indicate (from a list provided) who they turn to in times of stress (e.g., parent(s), friends, etc.).
- **Social Support from Social Media**--Participants were asked about whether they had received social support from social media in past (1 = *yes, frequently*, 2 = *yes, occasionally*, 3 = *no*).
- **Social Media Inducing Stress**--Participants indicated whether social media contributed to their stress (1 = *yes, frequently*, 2 = *yes, occasionally*, 3 = *no*).
- **Preferences for SM features for sharing stress** was measured with two items about whether they preferred to share problems with someone with similar experiences and whether they preferred to be anonymous (1 = *yes*, 2 = *maybe*, 3 = *no*).

## Percentage of college students who stated they could talk honestly and openly about stress/problems with different people in their lives, by depression/anxiety scores



**Figure 1.** Note. <sup>a</sup>Teacher or professor, school counselor, or other school staff. Three participants were excluded for not providing answers for all PHQ-4 questions. Total  $N = 650$ . Dep/Anx Low  $N = 427$ . Dep/Anx High  $N = 220$ .

## Percentages of college students who have received support from social media and perceived social media to be stress inducing



**Figure 2.** Note. Total  $N = 650$ .

**Table 1. Logistic regression model results predicting receiving social support from social media and social media inducing stress**

	Social Support from Social Media			Social Media Inducing Stress		
	B	SE	OR	B	SE	OR
Intercept	-0.00	1.12	.	-1.17	1.09	.
Age	0.02	0.05	1.02	0.06	0.05	1.06
Race (White)	0.21*	0.11	1.51	0.10	0.11	1.23
Gender						
(Female)	0.32**	0.09	1.89	0.19*	0.09	1.48
PHQ total	0.05	0.03	1.05	0.12***	0.03	1.12

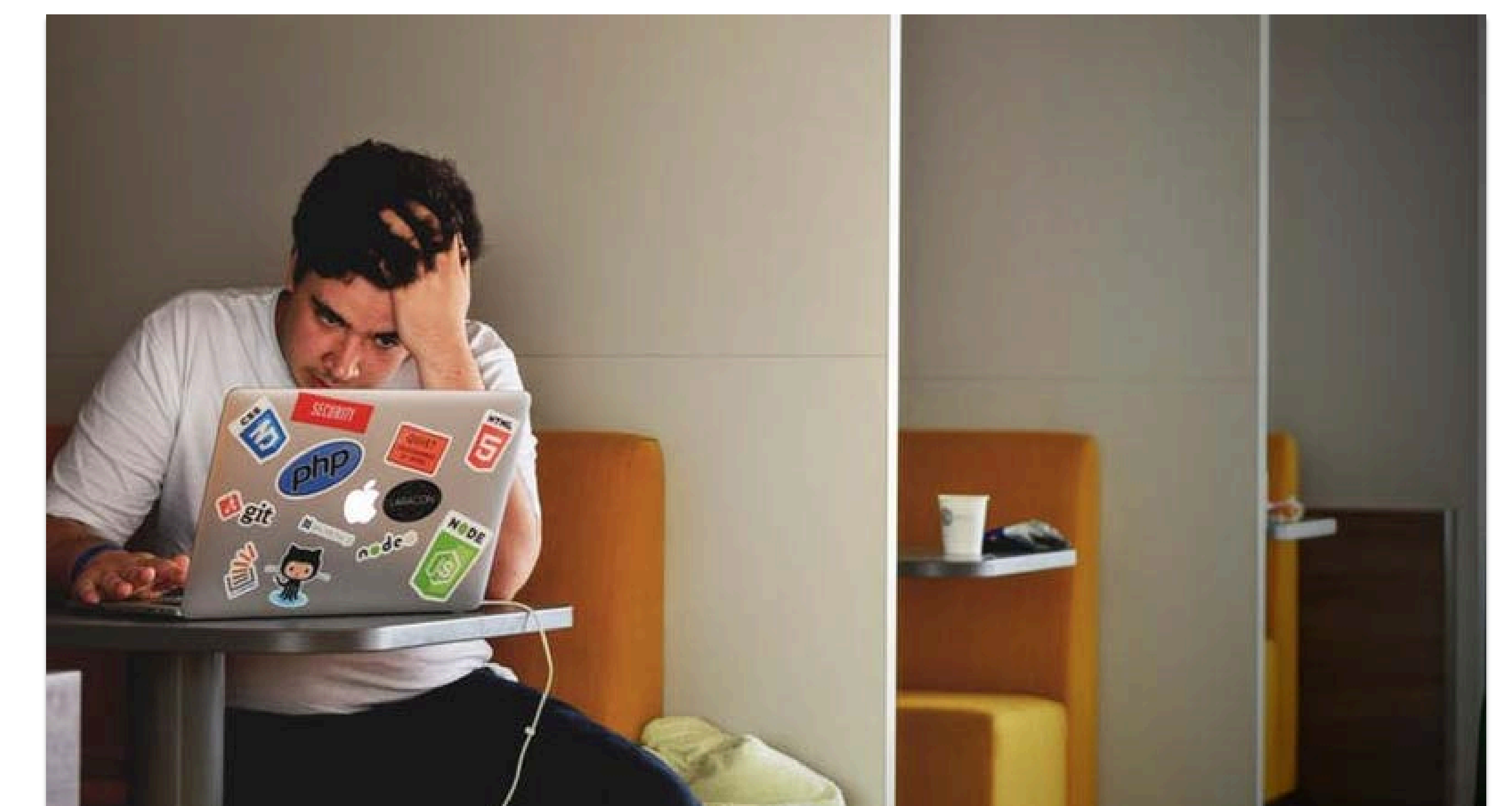
$B$  = unstandardized parameter estimate,  $SE$  = standard error,  $OR$  = odds ratio, \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

## Results

- Overall, 34% of students were at risk for depression and/or anxiety –measured by scoring moderate to high on the depression/anxiety screener.
- Students reported reaching out most to peers and then parents. Students rarely reached out to school personnel. **See Figure 1.**
- More than half of all students (69%) had received support from social media; however, an almost equal percentage (64.4%) had found social media stress inducing. **See Figure 2.**
- White and female students were more likely to have experienced social support through SM. Meanwhile, female students and those who scored high on the depression/anxiety screener were more likely to identify SM as a stress inducer. **See Table 1.**
- Overall, 68.4% of students indicated they want to share their problems with people with the same problems, and 61.5% of students indicated that discussing their problems online would be easier if it were anonymous.
- Females with high depression/anxiety were more likely to indicate they would prefer speaking to someone with similar problems; however, anonymity was desired equally by all groups.

## Discussion

- Social media may be a **non-redundant source of support** for college students.
- Results suggest that anonymous SM groups targeting different types of psychological issues (e.g., stress, anxiety, or depression) or different situational stressors (e.g., romantic relationship issues, academic stress, financial strain) might be the most promising route for providing online social support for both at-risk and non-at-risk college students.



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