

SOCIAL MEDIA AND STRATEGIC
COMMUNICATIONS: ATTITUDES AND
PERCEPTIONS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

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COMMUNICATION: ATTITUDES AND
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

*Today, after more than a century of electric technology,
we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace,
abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned.*

- *Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media, 1964.*

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Overview

When I started my doctoral coursework in Curriculum and Social Foundations of Education, I was also starting my first semester teaching advertising as an assistant professor in the School of Journalism & Broadcasting. This fairly unique experience of teaching in higher education while being a student of teaching, learning and curriculum was both challenging and beneficial as my dual roles were constantly informing and stimulating one another. As I took evening classes in education, I was often confronted with the negative effects of the media, more specifically the pervasiveness of advertising messages. While earlier in the day, I was teaching students how to think more creatively about how to reach audiences in new and more efficient ways to deliver more persuasive advertising messages.

Although I did experience some cognitive dissonance at times with what I was learning and with what I was teaching, ultimately I was empowered by the criticism and

exposure to media literacy. It helped me to see the power of education. It gave me insight into the realization that people are often oblivious or unaware of the one basic purpose of all traditional media including television, magazine, radio, newspaper and outdoor billboards. These media were created, in large part, to sell products and services. Yet even though people are bombarded with media messages that are flagrantly commercialized and saturated with images and ideas that lead to that one basic purpose, they consume with little concern for all of the research, strategy, and creativity that went into generating and disseminating those messages. Lewis and Jhally (1998) report, “The mass media may be producing art, but they are also producing commerce (p. 1). Lewis and Jhally (1998) maintain media literacy requires more than an analysis of messages, it should raise awareness and understanding of the institutional, cultural, and economic conditions and constraints in which messages are produced. The commercial media system in the United States is often referred to as the “free” media system as the broadcast airwaves are free public access, which is funded through commercial support. According to Lewis and Jhally (1998), “Unlike some of the more public service-oriented broadcasting systems in Europe and elsewhere, the goals of a loosely regulated, commercial media have no educational, cultural, or informational imperatives” (p. 3). People subscribe to, interact with and actively engage in media messages daily throughout their lives, but until they are educated on how the “free” media system in the United States, they rarely understand or think about the complexity of the media and its objectives. Education is the key.

We must teach people to analyze and “deconstruct” media messages in order to better understand its power and influence. With the emergence of the Internet and “social media,” John Q. Public is no longer the passive consumer of media messages; he can now be creator,

publisher, producer and broadcaster. Internet tools such as blogs, YouTube, Flickr, MySpace and Facebook allow the average person to create content that can be shared with a worldwide audience. The interactive nature of these tools has transformed media messages from one-way communication to facilitating a dialogue. Because teens and young adults were among the first to adopt and utilize these easily accessible tools, it is assumed that they are also among the most knowledgeable about how to employ those tools (Auday & Coleman, 2009; Grigg & Johnson, 2008).

Advertising and public relations are a subset under the umbrella of strategic communications, and the emergence of the Internet and social media have had a tremendous impact on the theory and practice of these disciplines. Advertising spending on the Internet has outpaced all other traditional media (Center for Media Research, 2004). In the last two years, the number of social networking tools and the number of people using those tools have exploded. Thus the rules are constantly changing and there is considerable uncertainty on how to employ these tools from a strategic perspective. Professionals in the industry have endured the “trial by fire” method of learning how to effectively use social media as strategic communication for products and businesses, and there is still much to be learned. In advertising and public relations education, it is assumed that our students know as much or more than we as educators do about employing social media as effective communication tools. After all, they were first to move into MySpace, find friends on Facebook, share photos on Flickr, and utilize YouTube. But does that mean they will intuitively know how to use these tools strategically? Do they think about these tools outside of their own personal communication? Do they connect the concepts that they learn in their advertising and public relations classes, such as building relationships and connecting with strategic publics for a

client or business, with social media? Or do they need to be educated? It is these and similar questions that I hope to answer with this dissertation.

Purpose and significance of study

The communication environment has changed significantly during the last two decades. These changes have affected both the theory and practice of all areas of communication. Among these changes include a more integrated approach to marketing communication including, but not limited to, blurring the lines of advertising and public relations. Strategic or integrated marketing communication has emerged as a result of ever-increasing segmented audiences of consumers empowered by options. An integrated campaign means that all communication efforts work together, and result in synergy: “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” (Wells, Burnett, & Moriarty, 2003, p. 552; Belch & Belch, 1998). Don Schultz, professor of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) at Northwestern University in Chicago and the globally-acknowledged founding father of IMC, defines integrated marketing communications as “realigning communications to look at it the way the customer sees it – as a flow of information from indistinguishable sources” (Shultz, Tannebaum & Lauterborn, 1993). According to Blakeman (2007), consumers today are so inundated with commercial messages, it is no longer possible to rely on one-way communication with the consumer that is offered by traditional media such as television, radio, magazines and newspapers. Marketing communications is communication developed and transmitted, usually through paid media sources, to consumers in order to sell goods and services. To be effective in marketing communications in the 21st century, advertising and public relations must be interactive or two-way communication in which the consumer can actually engage with the brand. “IMC, also known as relationship marketing, strives to build

a long-term relationship between buyer and seller by involving the targeted individual in an interactive or two-way exchange of information” (Blakeman, 2007, p. 5).

The different areas of communications were once very compartmentalized in their respective silos. Public relations, advertising, sales promotions, events and personal selling were often separate entities with different communications and objectives. Those areas are merging to unify the messages and communicate more meaningfully with customers on a united front. As the industry has moved to a more integrated approach, advertising and public relations education also has evolved (Larsen & Len Rois, 2006). Many programs have moved to an integrated curriculum, which includes integration of advertising, public relations, and marketing concepts through a strategic communications approach.

The emergence of new digital technologies and social media has also had a dramatic impact on the invariable change in communication. The term, social media, is the new “buzz word” in the communications and marketing industry. It is the current label for digital technologies that allow people to connect, interact, produce and share content. These technologies have donned many labels including: social networking, peer media, new media, digital media, NextGen PR, and Web 2.0. Among the terms associated with these technologies includes an alphabet soup of abbreviations and acronyms: user-generated content (UGC), consumer-generated media (CGM), computer-mediated communication (CMC), and multi-user domains (MUDs). The term, social media, is yet to be defined by Merriam-Webster’s dictionary, but there is an active Web site titled, “Social Media Defined,” which provides a four-paragraph answer to the question: “What is Social Media?” The online encyclopedia Wikipedia provides the following definition:

Social media are media designed to be disseminated through social interaction, created using highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques. Social media supports the human need for social interaction, using Internet- and web-based technologies to transform broadcast media monologues (one to many) into social media dialogues (many to many). It supports the democratization of knowledge and information, transforming people from content consumers into content producers. (“What is Social Media?, n.d.)

Using Wikipedia for the definition of social media is an appropriate source in this particular academic discussion because the online encyclopedia is part of the social media landscape. As indicated on the “About Wikipedia” page, “Wikipedia is a multilingual, Internet-based free-content encyclopedia ... written collaboratively by an international (and mostly anonymous) group of volunteers.” Although Wikipedia is not to be considered an accurate and reliable scholarly source, it is of value to understand how the users of social media are defining social media through social media tools such as Wikipedia. Social media are the creation of platforms that connect people together, provide an opportunity to produce and share content with others, extract and process community knowledge and share it back. Among the most popular social network services include Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, LinkedIn, Flickr, Flixster and Bebo. While these are the most recognized, there are more than 150 social networking Web sites listed on Wikipedia, and the list is not exhaustive. In addition to social network services, there are many other services including social bookmarking tools and news sites, such as Digg, Delicious and Mixx, online platform sites, such as Ning, which allow people to create their own social network, and video-sharing Web sites, such as YouTube, all of which make up the social media landscape. Mobile

telecommunications network technology and “smart phones” equipped with operating system software and Internet capabilities have provided the opportunity to stay “connected” to others and social media networks while on the move.

Social media are used for personal use to connect with old and new friends, build on existing relationships, and gather information and community knowledge. In addition to personal interaction and entertainment value, social media has become a powerful tool in the arsenal of marketers, entrepreneurs, advertisers and public relations professionals. Josh Bernoff (2009) of Forrester Research predicts that advertising dollars will be steadily shifting dollars away from traditional advertising to social media with an increase from \$716 million in 2009 to \$3 billion in five years. To assess the transformation in the communication environment, Wright and Hinson (2009) have examined the impact of social media and new technologies on public relations practice. Since 2006, Wright and Hinson have conducted an annual study among public relations practitioners. The first two annual trend studies concentrated mainly on how employees communicate via blogs and ethical aspects of this communication. Due to the dramatic changes of social media during the past four years, the researchers were driven to make considerable updates to the measuring instrument each year. Thus the most recent two studies have taken a more broad perspective of social media. Their findings indicate social media are dramatically changing public relations and the way it is practiced (Wright & Hinson, 2009).

Statement of the Problem

As Wright and Hinson (2009) have established, it is important to understand industry professionals’ attitudes and perceptions on social media to better understand its impact on communications practice. Social media and its impact on strategic communication is fairly

recent phenomenon, so the empirical research on the topic is somewhat limited. Wright and Hinson's survey instrument, used to measure the impact of social media on public relations among practitioners, was modified and employed with permission of the authors to measure the perceptions of social media among undergraduate college students in this study. In addition to the knowledge gleaned from the survey instrument, face-to-face interviews were conducted to gain a more thorough and descriptive view of college students' uses, understanding and perceptions of social media.

Purpose Statement

This study has two primary objectives. First, it seeks to understand students' attitudes and perceptions of social media. It is important for educators and curriculum leaders to have an appreciation of students' knowledge base of social media and how they employ it in their construction of knowledge and reality. Second, the study seeks to learn the impact of education on college students' attitudes and perceptions of social media as strategic communications tools. Understanding students' attitudes and perceptions of social media are particularly important for educators in marketing, advertising, and public relations or strategic communications because of the impact social media are having on these practices. It is also valuable for professionals in the industry, who are hiring recent college graduates, to gain insight into how students perceive social media in their own lives and as strategic tools.

Hypothesis and Research Questions

Social media have been adopted from its inception by public relations, advertising and marketing practitioners as tools for communicating with strategic publics. Wright and Hinson (2009) have established that public relations professionals perceive social media

positively with respect to strategic communication. Given that social media are having an impact on professionals in the industry, the researcher questions if social media are having a similar impact on college students in general and students studying in the area of public relations and advertising. To address these issues, the researcher posited one hypothesis and four research questions. Because of the integration of public relations and advertising curriculum across the country, known as strategic communications, students majoring in public relations and advertising are grouped and measured together for the purpose of this study.

First, given Wright and Hinson's (2009) research suggesting public relations practitioners' perceive social media positively, one would expect students studying public relations and advertising would demonstrate more positive attitudes toward social media than students not exposed to public relations and advertising curriculum:

H1: Public relations and advertising majors will perceive social media more positively than other majors.

In addition, the following research questions were addressed:

RQ1: How will gender affect college students' attitude toward social media?

RQ2: How does number of years in school impact students' positive perception of social media as strategic communications tools?

RQ3: How will the beliefs of students who use social media as a primary news source be affected regarding whether corporations should consider employing social media as tools in their communication efforts?

RQ4: How will taking a class on social media affect students' perceptions of social media as strategic communications tools?

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions were used.

Media literacy: Although there are numerous definitions and understandings of media literacy, for this study, Alan Rubin's (1998) explanation of media literacy will be used.

Media literacy "is about understanding the sources and technologies of communication, the codes that are used, the messages that are produced, and the selection, interpretation, and impact of those messages" (Rubin, 1998, p. 3).

Traditional media: In this study, traditional media refers to communications outlets, including newspaper, magazine, radio, television and outdoor billboard companies, which are primarily supported through advertising.

Social media: Throughout this study, social media refers to messages created and disseminated through digital, mobile and Internet-based technologies. Social media are the creation of platforms that connect people together, provide an opportunity to produce and share content with others, extract and process community knowledge and share it back.

Social media includes content created and shared through the following: (1) online social networking sites, such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter; (2) Blogs; (3) social bookmarking sites such as Digg; (4) video, photo and music sharing, such as YouTube and Flickr; and crowd-sourcing sites, such as Kiva and Idea Blob.

Social Networking: Communicating and sharing information through online social network services created to bring together people, who share interests and/or activities of others, via Internet-based technologies and platforms. Communication via social networking includes Email, instant messaging, and sharing photos, videos, games and music.

Blog: Contraction for Web log, a type of Web site that is a form of an online journal developed and maintained by an individual or a corporation with regular entries of commentary, description of events, or other material such as photos, graphics or video.

Social Bookmarking: The ability to organize, search, manage, and share “bookmarks” or references of web resources or links to web pages through social bookmark services on the Internet.

Crowd Sourcing: “The phenomenon of corporations creating goods, services and experiences in close cooperation with experienced and creative customers tapping into their intellectual capital, and in exchange giving them a direct say in (and rewarding them for) what actually gets produced, manufactured, developed, designed, serviced, or processed” (Compassion in Politics, 2008, para. 1).

Facebook: One of the most popular social networking services with more than 300 million active users. According to the company overview, Facebook’s mission is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected (Facebook Info, n.d.).

Twitter: Microblogging or a “real-time short messaging service that works over multiple network and devices. People follow the sources most relevant to them and access information via Twitter as it happens – from breaking world news to updates from friends” (Twitter About Us, n.d.). Each microblog posting on Twitter can be no longer than 140 characters and are referred to as “tweets.”

Strategic Communications: Strategic communications involves using corporate or institutional communications to create, strengthen or preserve, among key audiences, opinion favorable to the attainment of institutional/corporate goals (O’Malley, 1996).

Integrated Marketing Communications: (IMC) is a subset of strategic communications. IMC involves the integration of advertising, public relations, and marketing concepts through a strategic communications approach. Blakeman reports, “The goal of IMC is to build a long-term relationship between buyer and seller by involving the targeted member in an interactive or two-way exchange of information” (Blakeman, 2007, p. 257).

Branding: “The process of creating a brand image that engages the hearts and minds of customer. Branding is what separates similar products from each other” (Duncan, 2005, p. 71).

Limitations

The study was limited by the purposive sampling size that decreased generalizability of the findings. The finding in this study can be applied to other universities that possess similar advertising and public relations curriculum. In addition, the study was limited by the relationship of the researcher with one-fourth of the sample set. These participants had prior knowledge of the researcher. The qualitative analysis and findings are not intended to be generalizable, but are rather written in order to allow readers to determine resonance individually.

Organization of the Study

This chapter provided an overview for this study including: the background, rationale, research problem and purpose statement. Also, the hypothesis and research questions were stated. In addition, definitions of terms, limitations and significance of the study were included. Chapter II presents a review of the literature covering theories and empirical findings related to: social learning, situated learning, communities-in-practice, and the impact of social media and new technologies on strategic communication practice. Chapter III

describes the instruments and methodology. Chapter IV presents results of the survey and interview data. In Chapter V, the dissertation concludes with an overall discussion of the study findings, implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Chapter I established the need for understanding the impact of social media on the perceptions and attitudes of college students in general, and college students majoring in advertising and public relations specifically. Chapter II will review relevant literature in the theoretical framework of social learning including situated learning and communities-of-practice as they apply to social media and strategic communications education. The theoretical view of social construction of reality will be introduced to offer a broad view of theoretical foundations for this study. In addition, the concept of media literacy will be examined to establish the basis of the research problem. Literature on social media and strategic communications will also be explored. Finally, the theoretical framework for the present study will be discussed.

Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical perspective, known as the social construction of reality, can help us better understand the influence of the ubiquitous mass media. Under this theoretical view, people create reality based on their individual knowledge and from knowledge gained from social interactions with other people. Social construction of reality has its origins in Walter Lippmann's discussions of stereotypes and propaganda in the mass communications media. He argued that people make decisions based on media-generated stereotypes or the "pictures in their heads." According to Anderson and Taylor (2006), social construction of reality has

its origins in the late fifties with Erving Goffman's (1959) book "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" to the mid-sixties when Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann wrote *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Goffman (1959) provides insight into interpersonal interaction and the institutions in which interaction applies to social thought. In an explanation of Berger's and Luckmann's 1966 work, Pallister (2001) reports that Berger and Luckmann explored the issue of objectivity in understanding a particular area of knowledge when one is a part of a social group who constructed that knowledge. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), institutionalized experiences and aspects of life become real and experienced as objective reality. Pallister (2001) reports individuals communicate with others who share their same reality in order to confirm their own realities.

People view the world and participate in society based on their constructed view of reality. "Opposite to the view that knowledge reflects objective reality, constructionism says knowledge reflects subject society. Culture and history are crucial for determining what we see as reality and understanding the realities of others" (Surette, 1998). Understanding the world is sought by studying its shared meanings. Social realities are constructed by gleaning knowledge from four sources: personal experiences, significant others (peers, family, friends or conversational knowledge) other social groups and institutions (schools, unions, churches, government agencies), and the media. Personal experience is also known as "experienced reality" and it involves one's direct experiences – all the events that happen to a person. Knowledge gained from experienced reality is fairly limited but has powerful influence on one's constructed reality.

The other three sources of knowledge involve “symbolic reality” because knowledge is understood and shared symbolically not through actual experience. Symbolically shared knowledge is governed by language, which allows living someone else’s experienced reality vicariously through language and story. Everything that one believes to be true but didn’t actually witness or experience for oneself helps to construct one’s symbolic reality. For example, I believe that John F. Kennedy was shot in a parade in Dallas, Texas, in the on November 22, 1963. However, I was not born until 1970. It is symbolic reality because I did not witness it for myself. I have a shared knowledge based on history books, conversational knowledge and the media. And because so much of our social knowledge is obtained symbolically, there is cause for concern over the accuracy of that knowledge. The mass media play an enormous role in helping to create symbolic reality. For example, it is a part of my knowledge and reality that an F-5 tornado blew through Moore, Oklahoma on May 3, 1999. I wasn’t in Moore, Oklahoma, on May 3, 1999, so I didn’t experience it. I don’t know anyone who lives in Moore, so I did not obtain the knowledge from significant others. However, I have seen a plethora of video footage showing the actual tornado in addition to the overwhelming destruction and devastation that it caused. Through the mass media, I was able to experience emotions such as sadness and empathy for the people of Moore because the extensive coverage of the event made it so real to me.

According to Surette (1998), “the media dominate the distribution of shared social knowledge” including but not limited to:

Media reports become an essential determination of what is held to be significant as media influence becomes ever more widely known and accepted. Institutions find

they must present their own message and images within the accepted respectability and familiarity of media-determined formats. (p. 8)

Media Literacy

Media literacy literature indicates that even though media and commercial messages are virtually inescapable in American culture, it is still necessary to educate people about the media and its power and influence. Likened to the classic metaphor of fish being unaware that they are wet because they are surrounded by water, we are so immersed in a mediated culture that we fail to understand its effects. According to Elizabeth Thoman, founder of the Center for Media Literacy (CML), and Tessa Jolls, president of the CML, the extent of the impact of media experiences on our understanding of and behaviors in the world is inconclusive, but it is without question that it does have a significant impact (Thoman & Jolls, 2005). Helping individuals separate themselves from their dependencies on the media by helping them understand the influences of media is the foundation of media literacy (Fuller, Damico & Rodgers, 2004).

One of the keys to a better understanding of media influences is to recognize that media images and messages are social constructions. Films and television shows have creative teams who “author” the content. Even the “news” is a product of creation that has been constructed to some degree by reporters and editors. Understanding the difference between advertising messages and entertainment messages is becoming more difficult to comprehend as the line between the two continue to be blurred. Lewis and Jhally (1998) maintain that most messages in the United States media system are “either explicitly or implicitly commercial – either straightforward advertisements or content designed to deliver audiences to advertisers in the most efficient and profitable way” (p. 110).

Media literacy and media education programs emerged in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and the United States as early as the 1970s. In general, curricula focused on a person's ability to analyze and create a wide variety of mediated messages, understand economic or social contexts, and develop aesthetic appreciation (Hobbs, 1998). Thoman and Jolls (2004) maintain, "Media literacy education provides a framework and a pedagogy for the new literacy needed for living, working, and citizenship in the 21st century" (p. 18). Hobbs (1996) reports, "The goal of media literacy is to promote autonomy through the development of analysis, reasoning, communication and self-expressions skills" (p. iii). Lewis and Jhally (1998) argue that media literacy is about more than analysis of messages; it is about an awareness of why those messages are there.

While there are many different views of media literacy that often tend to confuse knowledge and theory of media literacy, more and more scholars in areas of education, communication, media studies, cultural studies and psychology are converging ideas. Rather than define what it means to be media literate, scholars and practitioners identify foundational concepts that provide a structural grounding for teachers who strive to deepen students' media analysis and media production skills. Hobbs (2004) reports that regardless of the approach to media literacy in the classroom, there are five key principles that inform the methods of educators: "1) All messages are constructions; ... 2) Messages are representations of the world; ... 3) Messages have economic and political purposes and contexts; ... 4) Messages use languages and conventions; ... 5) People interpret messages differently. She maintains that media literacy is essentially an extension of semantics, as it "invites us to gain control over our interpretive processes by recognizing the way symbols shape our understanding of ourselves and our lived experience of reality" (Hobbs, 2004, p. 27). But

media literacy can be and is defined in numerous ways. Sonia Livingstone, a professor at the London School of Economics, defines media literacy “as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages across a variety of contexts” (Livingstone, 2004, p. 18). Kalle Lasn, who created the Media Education Foundation, presents a much more dismal picture, “The concern here is with our mental environment, the one which has become so entrenched in our lives that we no longer notice it, let alone think of it as polluted” (McKendy, 1997, p. 19). Whether one sees media literacy as evaluation and creation or about preventing mental pollution, it is without argument that media and new technologies are changing education. The media are so pervasive in our society that it is important to confront that reality and equip people to read the media.

Kevin Maness (2004) argues that the first step in media education is understanding and discerning the students’ media literacy. However, this critical step is more often overlooked and omitted than it is utilized. “When media education is not based on students’ prior experience, it often deteriorates into ‘teaching’ students media literacy skills that they already possess or into futile attempts to impose new, ‘good’ media habits on students who have no interest in relinquishing their old, ‘bad’ habits” (Maness, 2004, p. 46). Maness created a model for media education that involves three stages: Listen, activate and extend. The stages are not to be followed sequentially but often occur simultaneously. The first stage involves *listening* to students to determine their prior understanding and their needs for further understanding. Teachers are often guilty of putting their own agendas first and fail to give voice to their students. *Activate* is the second stage, which involves making students aware of the value of their own media expertise. Students often fail to grasp the importance and usefulness of media skills and knowledge. Teachers should demonstrate the benefits of

media literacy to students both in the classroom and as life-long learners in the world. The final stage is *extend*, which requires teachers to base the media literacy curricula on the students needs. Teachers should help students extend their media knowledge to affect their actions.

Kirsti Aho leads a team of former educators who design and build teaching and learning projects that integrate multimedia into academic subjects. Aho (2005) reports that students are engaged and motivated when they can express themselves through a variety of media. Her team designed effective resources that teach professional design principles and development practices of the World Wide Web. “We found that students were successful communicators when they followed a professional design process and applied career skills such as interviewing, peer review and team collaboration” (Aho, 2005, p. 36). Lessons regarding user experience truly resonated with the students, and they gained an in-depth understanding of audience goals. Technical skills help students live, learn, and work in an information-rich society. Preparing students to communicate more effectively in the digital age involves teaching them the whole communication process from planning the message to testing its usability. These skills must be taught. They are not automatically learned through experiencing the media as a consumer.

Social Media

If people must be educated on the power and influence of traditional media, why would educators assume anything different about social media? Average college students can’t remember a time without cell phones, know more about sharing MP3s than purchasing CDs, have competed in a video game against an opponent living hundreds of miles away, read more blogs than books, gained knowledge about presidential candidates via Google, and

“creeped” a love interest on Facebook (Birnbaum, 2008; Grigg & Johnson, 2008; Loretto, 2009). They have grown up in a world where entertainment, information and communication on a global scale are constantly at their fingertips. There are a number of studies that indicate college students are one of the highest user demographics of mobile phones and the Internet (Jasper & Lan, 1992; Lee, 2006; Morgan & Cotten, 2003; Perry, Perry, & Hosack-Curlin, 1998). Because they have grown up with these technologies and are the primary users of social media, does that mean they automatically know how marketers are using these tools? Is it intuitive to them to use the tools strategically?

As we have learned from traditional media and media literacy literature, being immersed in the media does not equate to understanding its power and influence or how to channel and employ that power. People, particularly young people, experience the world through multimedia such as television, Internet, mobile phones, MP3 players, and video games. The Internet and social media are increasingly capturing the attention of people today. They use it both for entertainment and education. According to Wireless Week, social networking applications, such as Facebook and Twitter, are increasingly driving the growth of the mobile Internet audience, especially young women (Smith, 2009). With more than 300 million active users (Facebook Press Room, 2009), Facebook is the favored online social network of students on many campuses across the United States (Stutzman, 2006). Social networks have become a large part of students’ lives today, both in high school and in college. EDUCAUSE compared social network usage at 44 colleges and universities in 2006, 2007 and 2008. The study revealed that the percentage of students who said they never use social networks has fallen from 25 percent in 2006 to 11 percent in 2008 (College Students Use, 2008). In fact admissions officials at colleges are using social media to reach their target

audience (prospective college students) for recruiting. In a study of hundreds of colleges by the Center for Marketing Research at the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth, findings indicate that 85 percent of colleges are using social media as a recruiting tool, as reported in *USA Today* (Marklein, 2009).

Literature on social networking sites include both quantitative and qualitative studies that explore how students use social networks, and among the top reasons include keeping up with friends, playing games, sharing photos, planning events and as an outlet for self-expression. Facebook is the top used social networking site among college students (Spinks, 2009). Online social networking sites allow individuals to create their own unique Web presence commonly called a social networking profile. Students create an identity online that allows them to explore friendships and relationships with other individuals who also have profiles on the same social networking site. Most social networking profiles are made up of responses to a set of generic questions that prompt an individual to disclose a variety of personal information (Grigg & Johnson, 2006; Stutzman, 2006). In addition to name, age, location and educational and/or professional affiliation, a Facebook profile contains information that categorizes individuals based on interests in music, movies, television and books. The profile allows for individuals to designate political and religious affiliations, sexual preference, marital status and the extent of the relationship they are currently seeking with others. Individuals can use their profiles to self-express through posting text, pictures, videos and games. Also contained on the profile is a list of friends, member groups, fan pages, and a “wall” where individuals can post remarks or statements. In 2006, Facebook added two new features: “News Feed,” which appears on the individual’s Facebook homepage, and “Mini-Feed,” which appears in each person’s profile.

According to Sanghvi (2006) the features provide the following:

News Feed highlights what's happening in your social circles on Facebook. It updates a personalized list of news stories throughout the day, so you'll know when Mark adds Britney Spears to his Favorites or when your crush is single again. Now, whenever you log in, you'll get the latest headlines generated by the activity of your friends and social groups.

Mini-Feed is similar, except that it centers around one person. Each person's Mini-Feed shows what has changed recently in their profile and what content (notes, photos, etc.) they've added. Check out your own Mini-Feed; if there are any stories you don't like, you can remove them from your profile. (para. 2, 3)

Individuals use their social networking sites to self-express and communicate with others, and social networking Web sites use member profiles to cache, sort, and catalog data to share with third-parties including marketers and advertisers. As digital strategy consultant Danny Meadows-Klue (2008) points out to members of the marketing community, the rise of the Web and the explosive growth of online social networks have consequences that marketers need to understand in order to build blossoming relationships with consumers. Social media has the ability to illuminate consensus, and surface all relevant views on an issue (Elgan, 2009). For brands that can persuade their customers to “fall in love and join in the conversation, the picking will be rich” (Meadows-Lue, 2008, p. 250).

Empirical research on college student use of social networking has focused mainly on studying online profile content. Stutzman (2006) studied Facebook profiles of first-year students at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill to examine how students share information. Grigg and Johnson (2006) also examined Facebook profiles of first-year

students. The study employed a qualitative approach using student identity and self-representation as contextual lenses. Dwyer (2006) explored how the users of social networking sites engage in interpersonal relationships. The findings indicate that students use social networking to help them maintain relationships with friends (Dwyer, 2006). Birnbaum (2008) conducted a study to examine the impressions undergraduate college students want others who see their Facebook profile to form of them. The findings indicate that college students create Facebook profiles with two “target” audiences. The first group consists of friends and other students with whom they have face-to-face interactions; in fact, they expect this group to look at their profiles. The secondary audience consisting of individuals with whom they have a more superficial relationship and less face-to-face contact. For example, these individuals may be someone they had in class, met at a party or someone who has similar taste in music. In a study on the impact of social networking activities on evangelical Christian college students, Auday and Coleman (2009) found that 54 percent of participants reported “neglecting important areas of their life” due to spending too much time on social media sites.

Because social networking site usage is so prevalent among college students, there is an assumption that they know how to employ them as strategic tools. For example, a Boston-based men’s accessory company recruited “a blogger and a social media guru” on Craigslist.org. Despite the assumed expertise in the title of the positions, the company was seeking interns. The social media guru job description and responsibilities read: “you will be responsible for utilizing social web tools and outlets to generate awareness and excitement online ... incorporating your own social media strategies into our company’s initiatives” (Social Media Guru, 2009, para. 6). This particular business assumes that qualified college

students would be equipped with their own social media strategies that would be applicable to their marketing communications efforts. Penny Loretto writes an internship blog on About.com, an information, guides and ratings Web site voted People's Choice Winner at the 2009 Webby Awards. Loretto reports, "Since college students have more knowledge and experience with this line of communication [social media], companies are seeking students who can help them learn what they need to do to promote themselves and their companies via social media networks online ... As college students, this stuff comes natural and for professionals it can be a nightmare keeping up with all the benefits of social media" (Loretto, 2009, para. 2, 4).

In contrast, David Spinks (2009), graduating senior at New York University and blogger, maintains college students tend to use the most popular sites such as Facebook and Twitter, but they fail to embrace the great number of other social media tools available to them. He offers a list of "10 must-try social media sites" that he maintains will help college students "network, collaborate, communicate, and make daily college tasks a bit easier" (Spinks, 2009, para. 3). Commando (2009) reports "many college students, if not most, don't understand or appreciate the power of online marketing and branding for their personal success" (para. 4). At the 2009 annual convention for Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, John Moore of Mullen Advertising and PR spoke at a panel session regarding social media practices for advertising and public relations. He expressed disappointment in finding recent graduates and interns who know how to use social media in strategic communications. Despite the fact that recent graduates and interns are heavy users of Facebook and other social media, "their intellectual curiosity and ability to think critically about it is surprisingly disappointing" (Moore, 2009).

This study will examine college students' attitudes and perceptions of social media in order to gain a better understanding of whether using social media strategically comes naturally to college students or if they need to be educated on how to use it strategically.

Social Media and Strategic Communications

Social media have changed the rules for strategic communications (Scott, 2007). Digital media experts Mary Fastenau and Bill Fritsch offered a "big picture" look into how digital has "turned the marketing world upside down" (Fastenau & Fritsch, 2009). The authors presented that branding has become more important with the proliferation of media choices, and offered support from a 2009 study presented in McKinsey Quarterly regarding the Consumer Purchase Journey (Fastenau & Fritsch, 2009).

Consumers are now creating their own sales experiences. As a result, the control of the message is now in the hands of consumers, which is often a scary proposition to most marketing and strategic communications professionals. But smart marketers and "brave clients" embrace this notion and seek to empower consumers with that control. Strategic communications professionals have to find ways to entice customers to engage with their client's brand in an honest and authentic way. To do so involves in depth research and interaction with the community wherein the target audience resides, and the ability to give them what they need. Scott (2007) reports, "Web marketing is about delivering useful content at just the precise moment that a buyer needs it" (p. 15). Engagement with customers and "joining the conversation" has replaced former objectives of exposure and delivering one-way messages. Social media have enabled marketing communication to meet customers where they are and join in the conversation. For example, in a niche social network such as 918moms.com for mothers in the Tulsa, Oklahoma, area, representatives from local

organizations can read and respond to discussions or provide offers based on the opinions of users. In a large, non-niche social network like Facebook, a business may have a profile or fan page for a representative or brand mascot. The business can actively become part of the conversation among its friends or fans and provide information, videos, photos, special offers and more.

The concept of “conversation” is essential to internal marketing in today’s marketplace. Duncan (2005) defines internal marketing as “an ongoing effort to involve employees in the planning process and then communicate the finalized plan back to them to get their buy-in and support” (p. 199). With blogs and social media, essentially every employee has become a company spokesperson. You want employees who believe in your brand and communicate that in their personal communication, which is actually public communication because of blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media. Social media can help organizations build community with all of its stakeholders. Using social media as strategic communications tools involves listening and relating to customers and stakeholders rather than simply getting the marketing message out. Weber (2007) maintains that this requires organizational transparency that will, in turn, build credibility. The importance of social media in strategic communications has been explored; learning theories will be now be examined and applied to the aspect of using social media.

Theoretical Framework

There are many kinds of learning theory including behaviorist, cognitive, constructivist, and social learning theories. Based on John Dewey’s experiential learning (Dewey, 1938), constructivism maintains that learners need to experience and apply concepts and ideas and relate them to their existing knowledge in order to construct meaning.

Constructivist theories recognize that knowledge is highly contextual and situated, and all individuals carry their own unique maps of knowledge and of the world (Siemens, 2005).

Building on the constructivist notion that learners build their own knowledge when interacting with an environment, Lev Vygotsky (1962) maintained that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. Individuals cannot extricate themselves from the society in which they live, and language and culture shape their construction of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978).

Situated Learning Theory

Vygotsky's social development theory is a key component of situated learning theory. The mind emerges through interaction with others and the surroundings, mediated artifacts, signs, and language. Jean Lave (1988) conducted ethnographic studies that highlight apprenticeship, which help reveal the social nature of learning and knowing. She stated, "As these studies partially illustrate, any complex system of work and learning has roots in and interdependencies across its history, technology, developing work activity, careers, and the relations between newcomers and old-timers and among workers and practitioners" (Lave, 1988, p. 61). Lave and Wenger (1991) designate learning as a function of activity, context and culture in which it occurs; learning is "situated." According to Wenger (1998), a social learning theory must integrate four components necessary to characterize social participation, including: (1) Meaning: learning as experience, (2) practice: learning as doing, (3) community: learning as belonging, and (4) identity: learning as becoming (p. 5). Situated learning is framed by the concept that knowledge is best learned and retained in an authentic context (Moore, 2009). Other researchers have further developed the theory of situated learning. Brown, Collins and Duguid's (1989) research concentrated on authentic activities

students engage in and the role of environment. Brown et al. (1989) maintain that learning is part of enculturation into a community. According to Herrington and Oliver (2000), situated learning environments include elements of expert performances and modeling, coaching and scaffolding, multiple perspectives, collaborative construction of knowledge, reflection, authentic context and articulation of learning.

Communities of Practice

Situated learning discussions often refer to the idea of a community of practice. Lave and Wenger coined the term community of practice while studying apprenticeship as a learning model, as reported by Wenger (1999). The term refers to the community that acts as a living curriculum for the apprentice. Through further investigation of the concept, Lave and Wenger realized the existence of the practice of a community went far beyond the formal apprenticeship system (Wenger, 1999). Communities of practice are informal, pervasive and an integral part of our daily lives. Knowledge and skills are obtained by participating in activities that expert members of the community would perform. Learners become involved in a “community of practice” which embodies certain beliefs and behaviors to be acquired (Wenger, 1998). To facilitate learning in education, teachers act as practitioners and expose students to conceptual tools, which they then can employ to wrestle with authentic problems. Enculturation into the cognitive community is fostered through modeling from the teacher and providing authentic activities in an appropriate environment.

Situated Learning and Digital Technologies

It is also established in the literature that mediated elements play a significant role in the situated learning environment. Recent development of mobile technologies and better understanding and application of Web technologies, particularly cognitive tools, is said to

have a profound impact on pedagogy, according to Comas-Quinn, Mardomingo and Valentine (2009). Traxler (2007) reports “mobile, personal and wireless devices are now radically transforming societal notions of discourse and knowledge, and are responsible for new forms of art, employment, language, commerce, deprivation and crime, as well as learning. Most of the current work in mobile and digital learning apply constructivist principles and situated learning assumptions (Jonassen & Land, 2000). This view of learning contradicts the idea that the teacher’s role is to communicate facts and knowledge to students. The concept of communities of practice reveal that teachers can facilitate learning by creating inventive ways of engaging students in meaningful practices, providing access to resources that enhance their participation, opening their horizons so they can put themselves in learning trajectories they can identify with, and involving them in actions, discussions, and reflections that make a difference to the communities that they value. Sharing, collaboration and interaction with other learners and experts from whom the learner can obtain different perspectives on the problem clearly enhance the opportunities for learning (Comas-Quinn et al., 2009).

As digital strategy consultant Danny Meadows-Klue (2008) points out to members of the marketing community, the rise of the Web and the explosive growth of online social networks have consequences that markets need to understand in order to build blossoming relationships with consumers. Social media has the ability to illuminate consensus, and surface all relevant views on an issue (Elgan, 2009). For brands that can persuade their customers to “fall in love and join in the conversation, the picking will be rich” (Meadows-Lue, 2008, p. 250).

Conclusion

This chapter provided a review of the literature that relates to the key concepts of this study. The topics of media literacy, social media, strategic communication and the theoretical framework of the study were each examined. For this study, the definition of media literacy was drawn from the work of Thoman and Hobbs. Social media and its influence among college students and strategic communications practice were examined. Lastly, situated learning theory and communities of practice informs this research and its application to education.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Chapter Overview

This study was designed to provide information about how college students perceive social media and how social media tools are impacting strategic communications, including advertising and public relations practice and education. The study employed a mixed methods research design. Quantitative research in education rests on certain positivistic assumptions of reality. Knowledge about reality is assumed to be objective, deductively reasoned and generalizable, value free and context free (Ridenhour & Newman, 2008). Qualitative research is associated with naturalism, constructivism and interpretivism. Knowledge about reality is socially constructed and accrued subjectively, in natural settings that are value laden and context bound (Ridenhour & Newman, 2008; Rocco, Bliss, Gallagher & Perez-Prado, 2003). More than 40 years ago, quantitative researchers Campbell and Fiske (1959) proposed the use of multiple methods to accurately measure a psychological trait. Postpositivism was the impetus for mixed methods research, according Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998), as postpositivists blur the lines between positivism and naturalist philosophies. Categorized as the third paradigm (Ridenhour & Newman, 2008), mixed methods involve a qualitative-quantitative interactive continuum and procedural steps reminiscent of Denzin and Lincoln's notion of postpositivism (2000), introducing the

“modified dualist” understanding of qualitative and quantitative research that allows multiple methods to be selected based on the purpose of each research study (Ridenhour & Newman, 2008). The mixed methods paradigm includes two positions: the pragmatist and the dialectical (Rocco, et al., 2003). The pragmatist position allows research design and implementation decisions to be made based on which methods best meets the practical demands of the inquiry (Patton, 1998; Rocco, et al., 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). The dialectical position assumes that a fuller understanding of human phenomena is gained by integrating the both positivist and constructivist paradigms and their different understanding of reality, knowledge, and the place of values in research (Greene & Caracelli, 1997; Rocco, et al., 2003).

Mixed methods research is often used to further develop the breadth or range of inquiry by using different methods (Greene, Caracelli & Graham, 1989). Useful research says something important; it’s insightful, and its explanations are plausible. Many researchers find that to conduct useful, insightful research involves mixing methods and perhaps mixing paradigms (Rocco, et al., 2003). Qualitative researchers, including but not limited to Denzin (1989) and Patton (1990), established the conceptual development of triangulation. According to Patton (1989), triangulation includes using multiple data collection and analysis methods, multiple data sources, and multiple theories or perspectives to test for consistency rather than achieve the same result using different data sources or inquiry approaches (Patton, 2002).

The subsequent sections of this chapter will address the basic overview of the philosophical foundation of mixed methods research and support for this particular mode of inquiry in the current study. An overview of survey method, narrative methods, coding

procedures and analytic methods will be included. Also, there will be a discussion of the ethical process for the protection of the rights of the human subjects who participated in this study, including procedures for recruitment.

Research Approach

The research seeks to understand the impact of social media on college students' personal communication behavior as well as their attitudes about social media regarding strategic communication. Students majoring in advertising and public relations are of particular interest in the study. Driven by the research questions and purpose, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to examine college students' attitudes toward social media, both personally and with respect to marketing or strategic communications. A mixed methods triangulation design, which involves collecting both quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously in order to converge the data to make comparisons between detailed contextualized data and normative quantitative data, was used in the current study (Swanson & Holton, 2005). The uses, attitudes and perceptions of social media among college students were explored by analyzing survey data, interviews and online social networking profiles. Triangulation was employed to test for consistency and improve understanding of the phenomenon (Patton, 2002) of social media with respect to general communication and strategic communications. The mixed method approach enabled the researcher to elaborate on the results by employing each method to inform the other.

Quantitative research typically use deductive logic based on statements of theory from which hypotheses are derived. Participants are randomly selected to an acceptable sample size and selected to represent a defined population. In order to examine the attitudes of a generalizable population, a survey instrument was administered to obtain data that allow

quantitative predictions. Replication is invaluable to research, as one single study cannot add to the knowledge base (Ridenhour & Newman, 2008). In order to establish reliability and validity, the quantitative data was collected using a slightly modified version of Wright and Hinson's (2009) survey instrument, which they developed to measure the impact of social media on public relations among practitioners. It is the hope of the researcher that by replicating a previous study with a different population quality of the research will be enhanced (Ridenhour & Newman, 2008).

Interpretive research is sensitive to context and seeks to interpret the participant's stories or data in their social context. Life stories provide an analysis of an individual's interpretation of his or her own experiences. In order to discover contextual, setting factors and description of personal experience to better understand students' use and perceptions of social media, in-depth interviews were conducted among eight students. The participants were selected using a convenient sample of students majoring in advertising and public relations, through recommendations from faculty in the respective areas. In addition, interview participants' social networking sites including Facebook and Twitter were observed and analyzed. The interpretive focus of this research was positioned predominantly with the audience or subject's perceptions of social media with respect to strategic communication.

In addition to the knowledge gleaned from the survey instrument, face-to-face interviews and analysis of the subjects' social media use were conducted with eight students in order to gain a more thorough and descriptive view of college students' uses, understanding and perceptions of social media. For the qualitative portion of the study, the researcher purposefully sampled eight students majoring in advertising or public relations,

and four of whom who have taken a class in social media. Each of the participants recruited for the interviews and online profile analysis agreed to participate.

Selection of Subjects

College student involvement in online social networking has increased considerably since 2004, and for many college students interacting on social networking sites, such as Facebook, is a daily activity. (Bugeja, 2006; Finder, 2006; Marklein, 2009; Spinks, 2009). As a result of their involvement with social media, college students are an appropriate and relevant population for this study. For the purpose of the research, participants must meet certain criteria. They must be currently enrolled at Oklahoma State University (OSU), be members of the online social network Facebook and have listed OSU as their school affiliation or “network.” To qualify as an active member of Facebook, participants must have set up a profile with personal information and photos and must have added at least ten friends to their profile. Recruitment of participants began with students who were enrolled at Oklahoma State University in the spring semester of 2009 and who were members of the online social network Facebook. The original sampling method included a simple random sampling technique utilizing a random number table to choose students listed on the OSU network on Facebook. The researcher planned to recruit subjects via Facebook messaging, which is essentially Email within the Facebook platform. This recruiting technique was discontinued due to Facebook policies. According to Yahoo Answers (2009), the networking site has “several features in place to limit the potential for abusive or annoying behavior on the site. One of these features is a cap on the speed and frequency at which a user sends messages to other users while using the Inbox” (Yahoo Answers, 2009). After sending more than ten recruitment messages for the survey, the researcher was notified by with the

following alert: “Warning! You are engaging in behavior that may be considered annoying or abusive by others. Further misuse of site features may result in a temporary block or your account being permanently disabled.” Thus the recruitment and sampling techniques were modified.

To address the hypothesis and research questions, the researcher purposely selected students in two educational conditions: (a) advertising and public relations majors—those actively enrolled in a journalism degree program with an emphasis in advertising or public relations, and (b) other majors—those actively enrolled in a degree other than advertising or public relations – drawn from Oklahoma State University. In addition, the students had to be active users of Facebook. Because the population of advertising and public relations students was of particular interest to the study, an Email list of all students declared as advertising or public relations major was obtained from the advising office of the School of Journalism and Broadcasting. A recruitment Email including the consent letter and URL link to the survey located on surveymonkey.com was sent to all the students on the list, so all advertising and public relations majors had an equal opportunity to participate. In addition to the online survey and recruitment, the primary investigator visited all advertising and public relations classes offered in the Fall of 2009, and solicited participation for administering the survey to the students attending the classes during the first week of classes, August 17 through 21, 2009. Students were asked to take the survey only once. Students who responded to the online recruitment were asked not to take the survey again. To gain a sample of students who are not advertising or public relations majors, students enrolled in a course with the general education designation in Fall 2009 were recruited. All students at OSU are required to take at least one general education course, so these courses provide a campus-wide set of students.

Two sections of the course Media & Society were selected as the general education course, and subjects were recruited from those classes specifically. As in the case of the advertising and public relations majors, prior to administering the survey in the general education class, an Email was also sent out to all of the students enrolled in the Media & Society course.

Those who had responded to the survey online were asked not to take the survey again. The recruitment yielded 463 completed surveys. Because of the various methods of recruitment and overlap in class enrollments and Facebook, it was difficult to precisely identify response rate. It is estimated that recruitment was solicited among 700 students, yielding a response rate of 66 percent.

A purposive and convenient sample of subjects was recruited for the interviews and online profile analysis data collection. Each of the eight interview participants were students majoring in advertising or public relations in the School of Journalism and Broadcasting, and four of the eight students had completed the Social Media course offered as an upper-division elective in the public relations curriculum in the Spring 2009 semester. The researcher recruited students whom she has had in class or knew through student organization outreach. Interviews were conducted during the months of July and August, 2009.

Procedure for Collection of Data

The research design was developed to provide a better understanding of the research questions by gathering different type of data. A mixed-method design integrating quantitative and qualitative data was used in this study. This design included the collection of different but complementary data on the same topic. Triangulation, collecting and analyzing three types of data, was employed to test for consistency and improve understanding of the phenomenon support emergent themes of the study (Patton, 2002; Tashakkori & Teddlie,

1998). The use of triangulation strengthens a study by using multiple methods to provide cross-data validity checks (Patton, 2002). The uses, attitudes and perceptions of social media among college students were explored by analyzing survey data, interviews and online social networking profiles.

Quantitative Data Collection

The survey instrument used in this study was originally developed and implemented by Wright and Hinson (2009) to evaluate the impact of social media on public relations practice by measuring attitudes among public relations professionals. The survey was modified slightly with the permission of the authors. The modified survey instrument, provided in Appendix A, was administered to college students for the present study. Wright and Hinson (2009) have replicated their study every year since 2006 and established survey reliability and validity. To assess their beliefs about social media, a survey was conducted among 463 college students in the fall of 2009 and measuring their attitudes about social media in general and its role in strategic marketing communications. Attitudes toward social media were measured using 26 five-point Likert-type scale statements ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Additional items collected demographic information, including gender, major, minor, and class standing, and rankings of top three sources for news and current events. Qualitative data collection further explored the research questions increasing the quality of the results by joining the strengths of the different research perspectives (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

Qualitative Data Collection

In-person interviews were conducted with eight participants. Interview questions were designed to emerge topics and allow respondents to construct answers, in collaboration

with listeners, in the ways they find meaningful (Mishler, 1986). An interview guide was created to provide a framework and to encourage participants to focus upon their lived experiences in the hopes of inviting stories (Patton, 2002). The researcher implemented guided conversations, in order to listen for meanings and derive interpretations, more so than extract information (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Warren, 2002). Interview questions (see Appendix B) were structured and grounded in the literature discussed previously (Stutzman, 2006; Wright & Hinson, 2009). Questions were specific, but slightly altered with different participants as a result of actively listening, probing for further clarification, and varying the direction as appropriate (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Warren, 2002). This approach provides rigor and allows for sound practice in conducting interviews, while still promoting researcher flexibility to remain alert for relevant emerging meanings within stories, according to Warren (2002). Member checking was employed after the interviews were conducted. A transcript of the interview was Emailed to each of the respondents, who indicated their responses were reported accurately. In addition to participating in the interviews, the students gave their consent to share the content of their social networking profiles by becoming “friends” with the researcher on Facebook and accepting requests from the researcher to “follow” them on Twitter. The data for this study are kept private. Confidentiality of the participants was protected as pseudonyms were assigned and their responses and social networking profiles cannot be attributed to them. The signed consent letters, survey data, interview transcripts and online profile documents are locked up and stored at the researcher’s office. The consent letters and data are stored separately. After completion of this study, all data will be destroyed. The findings were presented in the form of this dissertation to Oklahoma State University.

Analysis of Data

The data was entered from each of the surveys and a number was written on the survey to designate its location in the Excel spreadsheet where the data was entered then transferred to SPSS statistical software for analysis. In the initial data analysis, descriptive statistics consisting of central tendency measures were computed to confirm that the data was free of entry errors. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the gender, major, class level and ranking of media as news source. To determine the significance of the difference between group means, independent-samples *t*-tests were used for the Likert-type survey questions relating to the impact of social media on college students' communication, in general and with respect to strategic communication. Independent-samples *t*-tests allowed the researcher to compare the mean of the statements in the scale variable across independent groups. According to Wagner (2009), this method of analysis is appropriate when comparing independent groups to determine if there are statistically significant differences. Attitudes toward social media were measured using 26 five-point Likert-type scale statements ranging from strongly disagree (1), agree (2), uncertain (3), disagree (4), to strongly agree (5).

The procedure for analysis of the data of the interviews was handled by analyzing the contents of the discussions as they relate to each of the research questions. A list of open-ended questions was used during individual interviews (see Appendix B) and focused on the use of social media, and attitudes toward social media from a personal usage perspective and a strategic communications perspective. In addition, the subjects were asked to share their social media network information and “become friends ” with the researcher on Facebook. In addition, subjects who were users of Twitter were asked permission for the researcher to “follow” their Twitter account.

Each of the eight interviews was recorded using a laptop with audio recording software in Microsoft Office and handwritten notes. After the interviews were completed, each one was transcribed from the audiotape recordings and researcher's notes. Statements made by the participants in the interviews were documented for each of the research questions. In addition to the interviews, documents regarding the students' social media use were collected and analyzed. The subjects' Facebook profile "news feeds" and Twitter postings were viewed and recorded by copying and pasting the text from the Web sites, during the month of July through September 2009. Check sheets were used in recording the responses/posts of the subjects. The check sheets provided the researcher with a standard format and interpretation of the output of for each subject.

Data were analyzed and categorized according to common themes and differences. Coding techniques were employed to generate support for the hypothesis and research questions. The transcribed interviews and online profile documents were read through several times by the author to identify key emerging areas of interest and to expedite increased familiarity with the data. Thematic analysis was used to employ pattern recognition in the data (Patton, 2002). The transcripts and documents were analyzed by identifying responses and information that were relevant to the key issues or emergent themes. First, the data were coded to organize the responses and online postings. Second, the coding and themes were analyzed and interpreted. Third, the results were represented the research findings herein. The analysis was organized to illuminate key issues.

Summary and Conclusion

The goal of this study was to fill a gap within current research provide information about how college students perceive social media and how social media tools are impacting

strategic communication, including advertising and public relations, education. This chapter discussed how the research was conducted and the methods used to test the hypothesis and answer the research questions. The researcher used a mixed-method approach to gather comprehensive information to examine college students' attitudes and perceptions of social media, in general and with respect to strategic communications. The quantitative data were elaborated upon with interviews and analysis of students' online social networking profile. Chapter IV includes analyses and findings.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

A study of the attitudes and perceptions of social media and strategic communication among college students is worthy of study because limited research is available on the topic. The study was specifically designed to explore one hypothesis and four research questions. Driven by the hypothesis, research questions and purpose, qualitative and quantitative methods were used to examine college students' attitudes toward social media, both personally and with respect to marketing or strategic communications. A mixed methods triangulation design was employed by collecting both quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously in order to converge the data to make comparisons between detailed contextualized data and normative quantitative data (Swanson & Holton, 2005). The uses, attitudes and perceptions of social media among college students were explored by analyzing survey data, interviews and online social networking profiles. Triangulation was employed to test for consistency and improve understanding of the phenomenon (Patton, 2002) of social media with respect to general communication and strategic communications. The findings are presented in two sections: a quantitative description of the findings testing the hypothesis and findings related to the research questions and a qualitative description of the findings related to the hypothesis and research questions:

H1: Public relations and advertising majors will perceive social media more positively than other majors.

In addition, the following research questions were addressed:

RQ1: How will gender affect college students' attitude toward social media?

RQ2: How does number of years in school impact students' positive perception of social media as strategic communications tools?

RQ3: How will the beliefs of students who use social media as a primary news source be affected regarding whether corporations should consider employing social media as tools in their communication efforts?

RQ4: How will taking a class on social media affect students' perceptions of social media as strategic communications tools?

Quantitative Findings

This section will first report the respondent profile of the survey instrument employed in this study. It will then address findings associated with the hypothesis and each of the research questions. Statistical analysis for this study included descriptive statistics and a t-test. Tests were considered significant if $p < .05$.

Characteristics of Respondents

The study participants were 463 undergraduate college students at Oklahoma State University; 58% were females and 37% males. Class level or standing was almost equally distributed among participants with 24.56% ($n = 117$) freshmen, 24.2% ($n = 115$) sophomores, 22.5% ($n = 107$) juniors, and 25.5% ($n = 121$) seniors. Out of the 463 total participants, 457 reported their major, with 47% advertising and public relations majors and 53% other majors. Participants indicated that 78% ($n = 362$) have declared a minor, 10% ($n =$

38) of those students reported seeking a minor in marketing. In order to assess exposure to social media education, participants were asked if they had taken a class on social media. The data showed that 23% of the participants have taken a class on social media. Students were asked to rank their top three media sources for news and current events. The participants top five media sources for news and current events are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

<i>Highest Ranked Media Sources for News and Current Events</i>				
	1	2	3	Total Top 3
Television	46% (214)	28% (129)	12% (57)	86% (400)
Newspaper	8% (39)	19% (89)	20% (91)	47% (220)
Online Newspaper	22% (101)	16% (73)	10% (44)	46% (218)
Social Media	11% (50)	13% (59)	18% (82)	41% (191)
Radio	4% (15)	13% (60)	19% (86)	35% (161)

Television, newspaper, online newspaper and social media were the highest ranked media sources. Television was ranked as the top news source by 46% (n = 214) of the participants. Television was ranked as the second highest news source by 28% (n = 129) and third highest news source by 12% (n = 57) of the participants with a total of 86% (n = 400) of participants ranking TV as one of their top three media sources for news and current events.

Wright and Hinson (2009) have established that public relations professionals perceive social media positively with respect to strategic communication. Given that social media are having an impact on professionals in the public relations industry, the researcher questions if social media are having a similar impact on college students in general and students studying in the area of public relations and advertising. To address these issues, the

researcher posited one hypothesis and four research questions. Because of the integration of public relations and advertising curriculum across the country, known as strategic communications, students majoring in public relations and advertising are grouped and measured together for the purpose of this study.

Survey Findings

The attitude toward social media scale used in this study was virtually identical to the one used in Wright and Hinson's (2009) study. Some language was slightly changed to address the student population, but the meanings of the statements were not affected. The scale consisted of 26 five-point Likert-type scale statements ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) and designed to measure attitude toward social media. Cronbach's alpha coefficient of reliability was used to measure the average inter-correlation of the scale (Alpha = .785). The scale met the requirements of a acceptable measure of .70 or higher. To determine the significance of the difference between group means, Independent t-Tests were used for the 26 Likert-type survey statements relating to the impact of social media on college students' communication, in general and with respect to strategic communication. The findings of this research effort were analyzed according to the hypothesis and the research questions addressed.

Hypothesis One

Wright and Hinson's (2009) research indicates that public relations practitioners' perceive social media positively. As a result, one would expect that students studying public relations and advertising would also demonstrate positive attitudes toward social media. The following hypothesis was posited to test this assumption H1: Public relations and advertising majors will perceive social media more positively than other majors. Consistent with the

prediction, public relations and advertising majors expressed significantly more positive attitudes toward social media than other majors. Overall mean scores among public relations and advertising majors ($M= 3.69\%$, $SD = .34$) were significantly higher than those among other majors ($M = 3.53$, $SD =.28$), $t(456) = 5.42$; $p = .0001$).

As illustrated in Table 2, this hypothesis was supported: public relations and advertising majors reported a significantly more positive attitude toward social media than other majors on more than half of 26 statements assessed. Table 2 includes responses to the statements, which demonstrated statistically significant mean differences among public relations and advertising majors and other majors.

Table 2

Attitudes toward Social Media Means for PR/Ad Majors and Other Majors

	Major		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	PR/Ad	Others		
Changed external comm.	4.19 (.643)	4.02 (.725)	2.67*	456
Complement traditional media	3.60 (.938)	3.34 (1.04)	2.84*	456
Conflict with traditional media	3.10 (1.03)	3.30 (.984)	-2.20*	456
SM Enhance PR	4.34 (.702)	4.00 (.761)	4.94***	456
Blogs Enhance PR	3.90 (.960)	3.52 (.929)	4.28***	456
Respond more quickly to criticism	4.27 (.675)	4.02 (.722)	3.71***	456
Tell the truth	2.86 (.709)	2.67 (8.14)	2.64*	456

Table 2 Continued

Attitudes toward Social Media Means for PR/Ad Majors and Other Majors

	Major		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	PR/Ad	Others		
Advocate ethical culture	3.10 (.876)	2.92 (.849)	2.14*	456
Offer low-cost way to develop relationships	4.19 (.690)	3.94 (.671)	3.87***	456
Impact organizational Transparency	3.90 (.710)	3.65 (.753)	3.70***	455
Mainstream media honest and ethical	4.04 (.838)	3.87 (1.01)	2.01*	456
Measure amount of comm. about organizations	3.92 (.806)	3.52 (.759)	5.44***	456
Analyze content of comm. about organizations	4.16 (.739)	3.84 (.731)	4.56***	456
Measure impact on influentials	4.00 (.701)	3.72 (.658)	4.38***	453
Measure impact on attitudes and behavior	4.08 (.641)	3.76 (.645)	5.38***	452

Note. * = $p < .05$, *** = $p < .001$. Standard Deviations appear in parentheses below means.

Of all 26 survey statements, public relations and advertising majors reported more positive attitudes toward social media than other majors. Public relations and advertising majors held significantly more positive views than other majors in more than half, 15 out of the 26 statements in the scale. Among the highest mean difference, between the two groups include the following four statements: Social media enhances PR ($t = 4.94$; $p = .0001$); and

Blogs enhances PR ($t = 4.28, p = .0001$); Public relations and advertising practitioners should measure: The amount of communication that is being disseminated about their organizations (or client organizations) through blogs and other social media ($t = 5.44, p = .0001$); Public relations and advertising practitioners should measure: The impact information disseminated about an organization through social media has on the formation, change and reinforcement of attitudes, opinions and behavior ($t = 5.38, p = .0001$). The next set of analyses addressed the research questions.

Research Question One

The study compared attitudes toward social media among female students and male students. Results on individual statements suggest that females tend to view social media more positively than males. As illustrated in Table 2, female students held significantly more positive views of social media than males among six of the statements on the scale. Female students agreed most strongly with the statement, “Social media have enhanced the practice of public relations” ($M = 4.31$ on a 5-point scale), and the results of this statement had the highest statistical significance between mean difference among male and female participants ($t = 4.22; p = .0001$).

Table 3

Attitudes toward Social Media Means for Males and Females

	Gender		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	Females	Males		
Enhance PR	4.31 (.657)	4.01 (.832)	4.22***	451
Respond more quickly to criticism	4.21 (.660)	4.06 (.770)	2.18*	451

Table 3 Continued

Attitudes toward Social Media Means for Males and Females

	Gender		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	Females	Males		
Measure amount of comm. about organizations	3.82 (.799)	3.64 (.821)	2.19*	451
Analyze content of comm. about organizations	4.08 (.702)	3.92 (.832)	2.21*	451
Measure impact on influentials	3.93 (.636)	3.78 (.767)	2.36*	448
Measure impact on attitudes and behavior	4.00 (.625)	3.83 (.706)	2.67*	447

Note. * = $p < .05$, *** = $p < .001$. Standard Deviations appear in parentheses below means.

The results indicate that gender does have an impact on the perceptions of social media among college students. However, average mean scores among female students ($M = 3.58\%$, $SD = .36$) were not significantly higher than those among male students ($M = 3.64$, $SD = .30$), $t(451) = 1.79$; $p = .073$). Although the data suggest that gender does have some impact on attitudes to social media, the findings are relatively weak. Table 3 includes responses to the statements, which demonstrated statistically significant mean differences among male and female participants.

Research Question Two

The study addressed the impact of number of years in school on attitudes toward social media. Number of years in school was measured by class standing. Junior and senior students ($M = 3.66\%$, $SD = .35$) expressed significantly more positive attitudes toward social

media than freshman and sophomore students ($M= 3.56\%$, $SD = .28$), $t(457) = 3.23$; $p = .001$). As Table 4 illustrates, an analysis of individual items on the scale also revealed statistically significant differences among groups. Most notably, junior and senior students tended to agree more strongly with the following statements: “Public relations and advertising practitioners should measure the amount of communication that is being disseminated about their organizations (or client organizations) through blogs and other social media” (Jr/Sr $M = 3.89$; Fr/Soph $M = 3.59$; $t = -4.05$; $p = .0001$), and “Public relations and advertising practitioners should measure the impact information disseminated about their organizations (or their clients) through blogs and other social media has on influentials, opinion leaders and members of other strategic audiences” (Jr/Sr $M = 4.00$; Fr/Soph $M = 3.74$; $t = -4.14$; $p = .0001$). Table 4 includes responses to the statements, which demonstrated statistically significant mean differences among students with a class rank of junior or senior and students with a class rank of freshman or sophomore.

Table 4

Attitudes toward Social Media Means for Juniors/Seniors and Freshmen/Sophomores

	Class Standing			
	Fr/Soph	Jrs/Srs	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
Changed how organizations communicate	4.43 (.585)	4.31 (.659)	2.05*	456
Complement traditional media	3.36 (1.05)	3.61 (.920)	-2.77*	457
Conflict with traditional media	3.36 (.963)	3.03 (1.04)	3.51***	457

Table 4 Continued

Attitudes toward Social Media Means for Juniors/Seniors and Freshmen/Sophomores

	Class Standing		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	Fr/Soph	Jrs/Srs		
Blogs Enhance PR	3.61 (.934)	3.84 (.991)	-2.48*	457
SM Enhance Advertising	4.44 (.649)	4.24 (.750)	2.99*	457
Respond more quickly to criticism	4.09 (.699)	4.23 (.703)	-2.16*	457
Tell the truth	2.71 (.797)	2.86 (.734)	-2.09*	457
Offer low-cost way to develop relationships	3.96 (.696)	4.19 (.669)	-3.70***	457
Serve as a watchdog for traditional media	3.42 (.866)	3.65 (.875)	-2.82*	457
Impact organizational transparency	3.66 (.753)	3.91 (.706)	-3.69***	456
Measure amount of comm. about organizations	3.59 (.786)	3.89 (.808)	-4.05***	457
Analyze content of comm. about organizations	3.92 (.756)	4.11 (.738)	-2.69*	457
Measure impact on influentials	3.74 (.694)	4.00 (.668)	-4.14***	454
Measure impact on attitudes and behavior	3.83 (.664)	4.04 (.636)	-3.51***	453

Note. * = $p < .05$, *** = $p < .001$. Standard Deviations appear in parentheses below means.

Junior and senior students expressed more positive attitudes toward social media on all of the 26 statements with the exception of one. Freshman and sophomore students agreed more strongly than junior and senior students with the statement: “The emergence of social media (including blogs) has changed the way organizations communicate” (Fr/Soph $M = 4.43$; Jr/Sr $M = 4.31$; $t = 2.05$; $p = .108$). The statement, social media and traditional mainstream media are in conflict with each other” is actually coded as a negative statement toward social media; therefore, more positive mean scores on that statement indicates freshman and sophomore students view social media less positively than junior and senior students (Fr/Soph Mean = 3.36; Jr/Sr Mean = 3.03; $t=3.51$; $p<.001$). These findings suggest that number of years in college increases student’s attitude toward social media with respect to strategic communication.

Research Question Three

The study compared attitudes toward social media, regarding whether corporations should consider employing social media as tools in their communication efforts, among students who use social media as a primary news source, and those who do not. As Table 5 illustrates, data revealed that students who ranked social media as one of their top two sources for news and current events have more positive attitudes than those students who did not rank social media as their top two sources for news and information. Table 5 includes responses to the statements, which demonstrated statistically significant mean differences among students who ranked social media as one of their top two sources for news and information and those who did not.

Table 5

Attitudes toward Social Media Means for Students ranking SM as Primary News Source

	Top News Source			
	SM	Other	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
Changed how organizations communicate	4.52 (.537)	4.34 (.633)	2.14*	189
Blogs enhance advertising	3.86 (.976)	3.57 (.917)	2.08*	189
Influence traditional media	4.17 (.743)	3.91 (.724)	2.42*	189
Traditional media influence SM	3.94 (.870)	3.62 (.855)	2.56*	189
More accurate than traditional media	2.73 (.765)	2.41 (.845)	2.73*	188
More credible than traditional media	2.50 (.743)	2.23 (.806)	2.38*	189
More trusted information source than traditional media	2.65 (.886)	2.30 (.812)	2.78*	188
Tell the truth	2.98 (.707)	2.70 (.856)	2.53*	189
Offer low-cost way to develop relationships	4.30 (.687)	4.09 (.689)	2.16*	189
Serve as a watchdog for traditional media	3.85 (.826)	3.49 (.878)	2.95*	189
Impact organizational transparency	4.09 (.788)	3.78 (.648)	2.91*	189
Analyze content of comm. about organizations	4.35 (.614)	3.94 (.731)	4.20***	188
Measure impact on influentials	4.13 (.737)	3.77 (.618)	3.60***	187

Table 5 Continued

Attitudes toward Social Media Means for Students ranking SM as Primary News Source

	Top News Source		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	SM	Other		
Measure impact on attitudes and behavior	4.17 (.646)	3.83 (.671)	3.52***	187

Note. * = $p < .05$, *** = $p < .001$. Standard Deviations appear in parentheses below means.

An analysis of individual items revealed significant differences among students who use social media as a top news source and those who do not on more than half of the statements on the scale. Students who use social media as a top news source agreed most strongly with the statement, “public relations and advertising practitioners should measure and/or analyze content of what’s being communicated about their organizations (or their clients) in blogs and other social media” (SM as top source Mean = 4.35; Other as top source Mean = 3.94; $t=4.20$; $p<.001$).

Research Question Four

RQ4. How will taking a class on social media affect students’ perceptions of social media as strategic communications tools? As illustrated in Table 6, the data indicate that taking a class on social media will have a positive impact on students’ perceptions of social media as strategic communications tools. Table 5 includes responses to the statements, which demonstrated statistically significant mean differences among students who reported that they had taken a class on social media and those who reported they had not.

Table 6

Attitudes toward Social Media Means for Students who have and have not taken SM class

	Taken Social Media Class		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	Have	Have Not		
Blogs enhance PR	3.97 (.905)	3.65 (.971)	3.07*	457
More accurate than traditional media	2.70 (.909)	2.39 (.799)	3.36***	457
Offer low-cost way to develop relationships	4.19 (.637)	4.04 (.706)	2.00*	457
Serve as a watchdog for traditional media	3.77 (.838)	3.46 (.881)	3.21***	457
Impact organizational transparency	3.93 (.756)	3.74 (.732)	2.35*	456
Measure amount of comm. about organizations	3.94 (.751)	3.67 (.816)	3.06*	457
Analyze content of comm. about organizations	4.15 (.674)	3.97 (.771)	2.23*	457
Measure impact on influentials	4.00 (.701)	3.83 (.688)	2.27*	454

Note. * = $p < .05$, *** = $p < .001$. Standard Deviations appear in parentheses below means.

An analysis of individual items revealed that students who have taken a class on social media held significantly more positive attitudes than students who have not among seven of the statements on the scale. Social media students believed more strongly that “social media (including blogs) are more accurate than traditional mainstream media” (Have taken class Mean = 2.70; Have not Mean = 2.39; $t=3.21$; $p<.001$) and that “social media

serve as a watch-dog for traditional mainstream media” (Have taken class Mean = 3.77; Have not Mean = 3.46; $t=3.36$; $p<.001$).

The quantitative data supports the findings for the hypothesis and the four research questions. The results suggest that strategic communication education have a positive impact of students’ attitudes toward social media. A discussion of these findings will be presented in Chapter V. The next section presents the qualitative findings.

Qualitative Findings

A more in-depth examination of the research questions was provided through qualitative analysis. This section offers the qualitative findings and emergent themes, in connection with the quantitative data. The researcher purposely selected eight students to participate in the qualitative measures, including in-person interviews and analysis of social networking profiles. The researcher sent a message to the eight potential interviewees via Facebook, and their participation was requested; all eight agreed to participate. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed. A transcript was sent to each of the participants to establish that the transcripts accurately reflected their thoughts during the interview. In addition to participating in the interviews, the eight students agreed to be “friends” with the researcher on Facebook and allow the researcher to “follow” their Titter account, so the researcher could examine and analyze each of the participants’ social networking profiles. Data were analyzed and categorized according to common themes and differences. The transcribed interviews and online profile documents were read through several times by the author to identify key emerging areas of interest and become familiar with the data. Thematic analysis was used to employ pattern recognition in the data (Patton, 2002). The transcripts

and documents were analyzed by identifying responses and information that were relevant to the key issues or emergent themes.

This section will first report the respondent profile of the interview and profile analyses of participants in this study. A brief “snapshot” of each of the participants of the qualitative measures will be presented. It will then explore the three themes that emerged during analysis of the interview transcripts and online profile documents.

Characteristics of Respondents

The interview and profile analysis participants included eight undergraduate college students at Oklahoma State University, all of whom were seniors. Gender representation was evenly split with four female students and four male students. Completion of a social media class was also evenly split among participants.

Shannon

Shannon is a serious soul, but likes to think of herself as a free spirit. She meditated a moment on each interview question, but responded with quick sound bytes. She is beautiful with her long, golden locks and warm smile. She’s comfortable in front of a camera and loves to post pictures of herself. But make no mistake; she is very smart, too. She stands up for what she believes in, eats healthy, drinks coffee and loves music. In her Twitter profile, she reports that she is a full time positive thinker, part time conspiracy theorist, and intern. She found and applied for her internship at the independent Los Angeles film studio through social media.

Trish

Trish has that kind of personality that people are just drawn toward. She’s smart, funny and most of all not afraid to be herself. She’s clever, creative, and loves to scrapbook

and journal “old school style.” As a graduating senior in advertising, Trish has the potential to succeed in any area of the industry, but her people skills have led her to a path in media sales. She plans to spread her wings and move to the city by the bay to get her career started. Her wit comes across loud and clear in her social networking posts. Her Twitter profile indicates that she likes to surprise people.

Connie

Connie is an honest, straightforward lady, who is all business when it comes to schoolwork, projects and accomplishing goals. On the other hand, during leisure time she’s the life of the party, who could fit in anywhere from the Metropolitan Opera to a monster truck rally. She’s a smart dresser with a warm, friendly disposition. Connie is majoring in both advertising and fashion merchandising, which are rarely combined yet make a complementary pair. Connie has an aptitude for leadership that she has not fully realized.

Heather

Heather has a shy quality that reveals her honest, trustworthy nature. She is very expressive with her big blue eyes when talking about something she cares about. She’s dependable with a solid grasp on follow-through that eludes many college students. Heather has a deep Christian faith that she uses as a guide for behavior and decision-making. She is a public relations senior who aspires to work in non-profit PR or educational leadership. According to her Twitter profile her top loves are PR, volunteering, Yoga, learning and Jesus.

Mark

Mark doesn’t take life or himself too seriously. He is passionate about sports. He’s the guy you’ll find at the sports arena shouting for victory at the top of his lungs and painted

from head to toe with his team's school colors. If he's not cheering on his favorite team, you're likely to find him on the golf course or in the gym shooting hoops with friends. Mark was eager to answer questions and happy to share his online profiles. He is a bright, intelligent guy who loves being a fifth year senior and is not in any hurry to get a "real job." His Twitter account identifies him as a public relations senior who is dedicated to collegiate sports.

Brady

Brady is a silly yet intelligent guy who is quick witted and articulate. In his Twitter profile picture, he's sticking out his tongue looking wild-eyed. He's a public relations and international business double major with a minor in Spanish. He has an upscale taste, compared to most college students, including wine, cigars and travel. He likes to share information about his travels with friends and family through social media, including Twitter and a personal blog. In addition, he is an early adopter, using lesser-known social media networks, such as Posterous and Loopt. He uses an iPhone, which allows him to be constantly connected.

Brent

Brent is a serious guy, who gives 110% to everything he does, capitalizes on opportunities and creates new ones. In addition to his coursework as an advertising major, Brent is constantly finding ways to hone his design skills, learn more about the industry and gain practical experience. For example, he sold and designed ads for the university newspaper, competed in a team competition as the production manager laying out the 32-page campaigns book, and currently handles promotions and design for a campus office. His

Twitter account indicates he's interested in Jesus, justice, branding, design, typography, bicycles, sci-fi, and coffee.

Lance

Lance is also an above-average student, striver and achiever. He is a public relations and advertising double major. He demonstrates leadership and excellence in numerous ways through student organizations, competitions, and teaching, while making multi-tasking and time management look easy. In addition to doing things well, Lance likes to dress well; He works at a chain retail store and keeps up with fashion trends. His Twitter account describes him as an OSU student and style czar.

Emergent Themes

Data were analyzed and categorized according to common themes and differences. Coding techniques were employed to generate support for the hypothesis and research questions. The predominate themes that emerged from this analysis included: "Talking the Terms, Calling out Concepts," "Strategies, Recommendations and Inquiries," and "Have SmartPhone, Will Travel." These themes were prevalent throughout the qualitative data, offered support the quantitative data, and helped to inform the hypothesis and four research questions:

H1: Public relations and advertising majors will perceive social media more positively than other majors.

RQ1: How will gender affect college students' attitude toward social media?

RQ2: How does number of years in school impact students' positive perception of social media as strategic communications tools?

RQ3: How will the beliefs of students who use social media as a primary news source be affected regarding whether corporations should consider employing social media as tools in their communication efforts?

RQ4: How will taking a class on social media affect students' perceptions of social media as strategic communications tools?

In addition to the three themes introduced, the theme “keeping up with friends” also emerged. All of the subjects reported that they primarily use social media to stay connected with friends. This theme will not be explored in this study because it does not offer new information to the literature. It is well supported in the literature that college students use social media to keep up with friends and build existing relationships (Birnbaum, 2008; Dwyer, 2006; Grigg & Johnson, 2006; Spinks, 2009; Stutzman, 2006). Thus, this theme does not need to be further explored.

“Talking the Terms, Calling out Concepts”

A shared, evolving language (e.g., special terms or jargon) is an indicator of a community of practice, according to Wenger (1998). Strategic communications, like any industry or profession, has its own shared language among its members. All eight of the subjects responded to the interview questions using terms or concepts associated with marketing, advertising and/or public relations industries. Interview respondents discussed social media in conjunction with the following strategic communications terms: brand identity, building relationships, hyper-targeting, target audience, and two-way communication.

Many of the students discussed the fact that social media was a good way to reach the target audience of college students because they are “always on it.” Heather and Lance

mentioned that they used Facebook to share information or publicize events for student organizations. For example, Connie gave an example of how companies should be using social media to get to know a target audience better. She reported, “Like for a coffee company, I’d be like ‘what’s your favorite drink? What’s your favorite coffee drink? Why do you like that drink?’ That kind of stuff just to find out more about the consumer, so the company can really resonate with the target.”

Participants associated the term *hyper-targeting* with Facebook. Four of the students explained that advertisers and marketers can reach very specific groups or target audiences on Facebook based on what members have reported on their social networking profiles. For example, Mark indicated that he was planning to get married, and as a result the banner ads on his Facebook profile all begin to have something to do with planning a wedding, such as ads for photographers or tuxedo rentals. He mentioned that he hated being *hyper-targeted* based on his upcoming nuptials.

Shannon reported that MySpace was more effective for marketing music than other social networks by building a band’s *brand identity*. Trish mentioned that companies could strengthen their *brand identities* by creating fan pages on Facebook for brand mascots, such as the red M&M or the Geico gecko. Mark indicated that before he had taken a class on social media, the only social media he used was Facebook to keep up with friends.

Before the class, I used Facebook. About three weeks before the class, I had heard about Twitter. And I got on and made one and started exploring it, but didn’t really have a huge grasp on it. From the class, I learned so much about social media in terms of how you can really use it. These tools are really powerful if you know how to use

them correctly. People who don't get it, don't understand how it benefits companies by building relationships with their customers.

Shannon reported, "If I were using it for a business, I would just try to develop a relationship with the people who are also using it."

The concept of *two-way communication* was the most widely discussed strategic communications concept. The participants recognized that social media provide an effective and timely outlet to communicate with customers directly and those customers can communicate back. Several of the participants provided anecdotes or shared stories to support the effective *two-way communication* of Twitter. For example, Brent told a personal story about being engaged in *two-way communication* with a business or brand via Twitter:

One time I tweeted "I'm using this type of pen and I am tired of it, like it doesn't work on this waxy paper." And the guy from Uniball tweeted back to me. He did a search to see who was talking about pens on there. And so he tweeted back to me, "try out this pen, I think it will be perfect for what you are looking for." And I was just like "whoa" that was helpful and timely and I actually wanted the information like I was looking for the pen. I would rather get it from the Uniball guy than from like my roommate who doesn't draw or anything, but I followed him back and the next time I was actually in the aisle at Office Depot, I tweeted and asked him, what kind of pen I should get?

It was also discussed whether using social media for marketing communication falls within the responsibilities of advertising or public relations professionals. As if he were leading a lecture, Mark reported that he felt it would depend on your strategy. He said, "its advertising media in the fact that you're sending out a message. But if you use it for a *two-*

way communication format, such as Twitter, you want that PR person who their job is communicating with the public.” Brady reported that he had read countless blogs about “who should run your social media: marketing or PR?” He went on to say that really the two should work together, which is a basic tenet of strategic communications.

The analysis of the students’ social networking profiles also offered evidence to support this theme. Half of the participants posted information and links to articles about advertising, marketing and engaging the target audience and branding. For example, Heather and Mark both posted: “Strategic and Tactical Ways to Improve Results from Email Marketing <http://twurl.nl/036fqe> #pradvice #nonprofit.” Brent frequently posted about design and social media strategies, including this post: “Diary of a Social Venture Start-up: Design and Branding | GOOD <http://bit.ly/Gr32u> [be sure to watch the kinetic type video link at the end].” He also posted: “Love Target's Up & Up branding. But the shop that did it signed a non-disclosure agreement. Odd. <http://bit.ly/xo3bt>.” After completing a campaign for the Century Council to curb binge drinking among college students as part of a capstone course, Connie shared the following: “Doctors Call for Ban on Alcohol Advertisements in U.K. - International News | News of the World | Middle East News |... <http://shar.es/100KZ>.” The underlined texts indicates the URL link to the article mentioned.

“Strategies, Recommendations and Inquiries”

The data revealed that these advertising and public relations seniors had some level of understanding of how to use social media as part of a strategic communications strategy. The participants recommend using social media to people who want to share information, and they often use social media personally to solicit advice or inquire about products or services.

Strategies

The participants in this study use social media strategically to learn more about the industry, discover information about jobs and internships, and build on the community of knowledge by sharing articles and information regarding topics associated with strategic communication. Connie reports almost disappointingly that her friends only use Twitter for the social aspect and do not post links or search for information about products or companies. “Who really cares if you’re walking to class, you know? People need to wait until they have something to say,” she said. Heather “retweeted” the following post/article regarding job advice: “RT Contest: Get your elevator pitch ready. Read more in today's column: [#JobAdvice](http://tinyurl.com/nezte8).” The term retweet is identified by the letters RT and means to post the content of another person’s post/tweet after finding it on Twitter. Retweeting is a common way to share information and build knowledge about a particular subject.

According to the students’ social networking profiles document analysis, the participants often use social media as a strategic tool. A few of the students reported creating Twitter accounts for agencies as part of their duties as interns. The participants understand the power of multi-person conversation and dialogue through social media. Mark shared a story about having a conversation on Twitter with an analytics professional in Tulsa. Another gentleman joined in the conversation, and he happened to be a recruiter from Washington. Mark enthusiastically reported he would have never made that contact without Twitter. Shannon described finding and applying for internships on MySpace jobs and found

information easily accessible through those tools. Trish indicated that Twitter was a great resource for searching or jobs in a specific city.

Students who completed the social media course tended to share articles of advice on how to use social media. Students who hadn't taken the course offered anecdotes of how they have used or persuaded others to use social media strategically. For example, Brent said that he landed a marketing/advertising internship with a magazine in Orlando, Florida because their advertising director found a draft of an electronic booklet that Brent created and posted online. The introductory paragraph reads:

I've put together this little book to show you what I can do to help you as an intern during the summer. I'd come down there and tell you myself, but I live in Oklahoma and usually ride a bike. I figured this was more efficient.

Brent did not send the booklet to the people at the magazine directly; he intentionally and strategically let them find it on the Internet. He had faith in the power of the technology and its ability to help spread the word.

Recommendations

The students commonly used Facebook and Twitter to recommend or "plug" television shows, movies, music and restaurants. The document analysis suggested that the respondents in this phase of the study were much more likely to share positive experiences via social media than negative and to make recommendations more often than report complaints.

Examples of recommendation posts were prevalent. Shannon posted about local music artists on a late night talk show. "In support of OK and good music, be sure to watch [@tysonritteraar](#), [@nickolaswheeler](#) and [@mikeaar](#) on Conan tonight!" Trish indirectly

recommends a movie: “Dead Poets Society is on TV...this is a good day.” Connie gave a shout out to a cable television show: “Mad Men won best drama last night #obvi it is the #bestshowever.” Brent shared his endorsement for a band: “Just saw #therumor at bricktown live...they were awesome awesome!! Mix between #3oh3 and #lmfao.” Lance recommended a particular item at a specific restaurant: “Just had the best sushi roll... Called the graygasm from In the Raw.” The posts that feature a name with the symbol @ in front of the name represent a Twitter profile. Users can easily navigate to each of the profiles by clicking on the “@name.” The posts that feature a word with the symbol # in front of it is known as a hashtag and often represent a “trending topic” on Twitter. When users click on the “#word,” they will be taken to a page that lists all “tweets” or posts that contains that topic. Hashtags are a way to organize information, construct knowledge on specific topic, and make it easier for users to search, share and access the information within Twitter. The ten most popular trending topics are constantly updated and listed on each user’s Twitter homepage.

Lance presented a success story from when he recommended social media to a friend to help her grow her small business:

A friend of mine recently started her own business, called iRelish. She's a honey farmer, and she uses some of her honey to make zucchini relish. She asked for my help with the Web site design and marketing. Because one of her goals is to teach others about bee keeping and honey farming, I recommended she start a personal Twitter and tweet about her daily interactions with her hive, etc. It took her a month to really start using it. But one day she tweeted about how she was worried about her bees because of all the rain we had been getting. A company in Oregon that is the leading supplier of beekeeping supplies replied to her tweet within minutes, giving

their phone number if she had questions. My friend called and talked with the woman who had replied. The woman was amazed by what my friend is doing and offered to sell the relish in the stores.

Connie shared a story of how her recommendation of social media was effective in a grass roots approach to building community and sharing information for a nonprofit foundation:

I convinced a family friend who started a foundation called Meningioma Mommas to get on Twitter so that she could reach more people. Her foundation has a Web site and forum where people around the world can communicate about Meningiomas, which are a common type of brain tumor, but are not really widely known about. I told her Twitter would help her reach out to people and explained to her that through the use of Twitter people might be searching for where to find information about Meningiomas. She now has more than 100 followers and she is constantly updating and posting links to information about Meningiomas and bringing more focus to her foundation. She tweets more than I do now.

Brady made an unintentional recommendation about a brand of vehicle by simply posting about being involved in car crash. First, he expresses gratitude: “Thank you Land Rover for keeping me alive when my friend slammed into a van last night that was driving the wrong way down a one way.” One minute later, he posts a photograph of the van involved in the collision. And five minutes later, he sent a photo of the Land Rover he was in at the time of the crash: “Here's a pic of our rover. It held up. Built tough <http://twitpic.com/5bxcp>” Brady was simply sharing something eventful in his life with his 125 Twitter followers via his iPhone. But in doing so, he took on the role of photographer,

reporter, publisher and brand ambassador/endorser. By reporting his positive experience with a Land Rover during a scary, traumatic event, he provided the brand with an authentic, positive review that will most likely be much better received than a commercial advertisement touting the safety of Land Rover airing during primetime television. In addition to Brady's followers, anyone who searches the term, Land Rover, on Twitter will have the opportunity to read Brady's indirect recommendation or product review for the safety of a Land Rover.

Inquiries

The occurrence of using social media to solicit advice and request information was also a common phenomenon among the participants. The participants reported that they ask their social media "friends" and "followers" for advice about products, movies, and restaurants. The document analysis also found evidence of more obscure inquiries: Brady used Twitter to find resources for a class project: "Hey! Know any good Web sites to get statistical info for countries and products? Demographics, population etc. Thanks!!" Shannon moved to Los Angeles and inquired about where to attend church: "Does anyone know of a good Bible-based church in LA? I just moved here and I'm looking for one!" Mark made a plea about his living arrangements: "I need a roommate!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" Cassidy used social media to help find a mechanic: "My car is making the loudest, craziest moaning sound. Anyone know of a good mechanic that won't make me sell a kidney?"

"Have SmartPhone, Will Travel"

The participants in this study all discussed the concept of staying "constantly connected." All but one of these students have a "SmartPhone" or specifically a Blackberry

or an iPhone. They each discussed using the social networking applications on their phone and checking them throughout the day. For example, Mark reports:

It [Facebook] sends me messages you know automatically like if someone were to write on my status or wall or something like that, it will flash on me here. So I can get on it and check it if I need to. Um I have all my Email sent to my phone as well, so it's as often as I would get a text message kind of thing. That's my favorite thing about having this phone is that I'm always connected.

Trish also reported that social media was her top source for news. She said, "I follow CNN, Today Show, ET! and all kinds of news to stay up to date. Twitter is actually my first stop when I am looking for breaking information." Lance indicated that he loved having news at his fingertips. Connie discussed that she is constantly checking her Facebook. She said she uses Facebook chat throughout her day at work, in addition to when she is doing her homework. Lance reported that he has Facebook and Twitter on his Blackberry, and he checks it frequently:

Oh, I'm always on my phone. The only time that I will go to more than like fifteen minutes without checking it is when I'm at work and even then, like the first thing I do after I get my stuff out of my locker, is check to see what messages I have.

Brent discussed that he feels guilty about using his iPhone all the time to check Twitter and Facebook: It's like a habit like whenever I'm bored. I'll just pull that out and act like I'm doing something important."

Max fully embraces the idea of being constantly connected and accessible to friends no matter where he is. He discussed using the iPhone application Loopt:

Loopt is amazing. Loopt is a GPS-based social network on your phone. Like my friend will say, “I wonder where Max is?” So she’ll like turn on her phone, click the Loopt application and she’ll go over and she’ll click on me and she’ll *ping* me. And on my phone, I’ll get a text message that says, Lana pinged you, right. Then I’ll click my Loopt application on my phone, and it will *pong* her and it will tell her exactly where I am. So if you’re looking at the map, you can zoom in on the map, it will show little dots where all your friends are located near you who have allowed you to know their location. So, I think it’s fun. Whenever you’re going bar hopping, you don’t have to call and ask where your friends are, you just know.

Analysis of the participants’ social networking profiles provided evidence of using social media at various locations and using smartphone applications to access Facebook and Twitter. In addition to signing directly on to Twitter via the Web, the participants sent “tweets” using the following applications: Twitterberry, Echofon, HootSuite, Tweetdeck, Tweetie, and TwitterFon. Also, a few of the participants have their social media linked, so that if they post something on Twitter, it will automatically be posted on their Facebook as well. Brady uses the Web site, Posterous.com: “It can auto-post anything sent to it in an Email to all your SM networks at the same time. Time saver.”

Trish indicated that companies should be capitalizing on social media for marketing communication. She reported that so many people are really starting to use social media, both online and via smartphones, that companies attempting to market should most definitely take advantage of it. So many people spend significant amounts of their time on social media networks, which means they are “directly reachable.” Finally, participants often posted their

thoughts about an event, movie, or live music show while at the event or as they were leaving. They like to have the ability to “hear” and “be heard” at all times.

Summary

Research involving students’ uses and attitudes toward social media with respect to strategic communication is limited. While several studies have examined college students’ use of social networking sites, they focused mainly on studying Facebook profile content, including as how students share information, engage in interpersonal relationships, use profiles to create impressions (Birnbaum, 2008; Dwyer, 2006; Grigg & Johnson, 2006; Stutzman, 2006). In this mixed methods study, both quantitative and qualitative data supported that students majoring in public relations and advertising are more likely to have positive attitudes and perceptions of social media. Findings also indicate that attitudes toward social media are more positive among students using social media as a top source for news, who have taken a class on social media, and maintain a class ranking of junior or senior. Those students who are active in their majors of advertising and public relations demonstrated strategic use of social media on a personal level, such as finding internships and projecting their skills via social media to prospective employers. Chapter V offers conclusions and recommendations or further research.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

Social media have been employed as strategic communications tools among marketing, advertising and public relations practitioners for nearly a decade and the phenomenon has exploded in the last two years. A growing number of marketers are directly engaging consumers through original content they and their agencies are creating. "The traditional one-way media model has definitely had its day, so agencies are talking to clients about these engagement models much more" said Sam Lucas, chair of U.S. brand marketing at WPP's Burson-Marsteller, as reported in Advertising Age (Bush, 2009, para. 3). With the tremendous impact of social media on strategic communications practice and among its practitioners, it is reasonable to assume that social media are also having an impact on strategic communications curriculum and students.

Overview of the Study

The present study was specifically designed to test one hypothesis and explore four research questions. Driven by the research questions and purpose, qualitative and quantitative methods were used to examine college students' attitudes toward social media, both personally and with respect to marketing or strategic communications. The research methodology for this mixed method study combined the quantitative and qualitative analyses to test the hypothesis and explore the four research questions. First, given Wright and

Hinson's (2009) research suggesting public relations practitioners' perceive social media positively, one would expect students studying public relations and advertising would demonstrate more positive attitudes toward social media than students not exposed to public relations and advertising curriculum:

H1: Public relations and advertising majors will perceive social media more positively than other majors.

In addition, the following research questions were addressed:

RQ1: How will gender affect college students' attitude toward social media?

RQ2: How does number of years in school impact students' positive perception of social media as strategic communications tools?

RQ3: How will the beliefs of students who use social media as a primary news source be affected regarding whether corporations should consider employing social media as tools in their communication efforts?

RQ4: How will taking a class on social media affect students' perceptions of social media as strategic communications tools?

Quantitative data were collected through a survey of 463 college students. Attitudes toward social media were analyzed using 26 five-point Likert-type scale statements ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). To determine the significance of the difference between group means, independent-samples *t*-tests were used for the Likert-type survey questions relating to the impact of social media on college students' communication, in general and with respect to strategic communication. Qualitative data were collected and analyzed through interviews and examination of participants' social networking profiles. A

list of open-ended questions was used during individual interviews (see Appendix B). Interview participants' online social networking profiles were also analyzed.

Qualitative measures provided a more in-depth examination of the research questions. This section offers the qualitative findings and emergent themes, in connection with the quantitative data. The researcher purposely selected eight students to participate in the qualitative measures, including in-person interviews and analysis of social networking profiles. Each student was interviewed for forty-five minutes to one-hour. An interview protocol was followed, and member checks were conducted by the interview participants via Email. Participants reported that the transcript accurately represented their thoughts during the interview. Data from the participants' social networking profiles were collected and recorded. The interview and online profile data provided rich description of the students' perceptions of social media for their own personal use, as well as strategic communications tools. The qualitative findings corroborated the quantitative findings and together supported the hypothesis and research questions.

Discussion, Implications and Conclusions

The attitudes and perceptions of the participants in the study revealed common elements reported in the findings. The mixed method approach enabled the researcher to elaborate on the results by employing quantitative and qualitative analyses together to inform the other. Triangulation was employed to test for consistency and improve understanding of the phenomenon (Patton, 2002) of social media with respect to general communication and strategic communications.

The survey of college students indicated that attitude toward social media were more likely to be positive among public relations and advertising majors, which offered support for

the hypothesis. The qualitative results also provided support for the positive relationship between public relations and advertising majors and attitude social media. Advertising and public relations majors view social media more positively than other majors because they understand how it fits in to the industry in which they are being educated. In their descriptions of how to use social media, they used a shared language or terms associated with strategic communications. They provided similar stories to how they have used social media as strategic communication to gain internships, collect information, share knowledge and build relationships. These stories were supported by the analyses of their social networking profiles.

The survey findings for question one offered some support that gender affects college students' attitude toward social media. Results on individual statements suggest that females tend to view social media more positively than males. Female students held significantly more positive views of social media than males among six of the statements on the scale. Students majoring in public relations tend to be predominantly female, so this could have an impact on the findings. However, average mean scores among female students were not significantly higher than those among male students. The qualitative findings in this study did not offer support that gender has an impact on social media. The male and female students who participated in the interviews and profile analysis demonstrated similar attitudes toward social media.

For question two, how does number of years in school impact students' positive perception of social media as strategic communications tools?, the results indicated a significant relationship. Junior and senior students expressed significantly more positive attitudes toward social media than freshman and sophomore students. Students do not usually

take the core courses of their major until they reach the junior and senior level, which could have an impact on these results. Participants in the qualitative portion of the study were all seniors and all expressed positive perceptions of social media, as they stay constantly connected to their digital world of communication with their “smartphones” ever at their side. The students indicated that they have used social media more strategically as they learned about concepts such as two-way communication in their classes. These findings suggest that number of years in college increases student’s attitude toward social media with respect to strategic communications, which is likely a result of the fact that students are more likely to have taken courses in their major.

For question three, a significant relationship was determined between students who use social media as a primary news source and positive attitude toward social media as strategic communications tools. All of the public relations and advertising students, who participated in the interviews and profile analysis, embraced social media as a news source. For example, they discussed gaining news of Michael Jackson’s death, sports scores and the healthcare reform through social media. Profile analysis indicated that they frequently posted news and articles that they discovered through social media.

Results for the final research question, how will taking a class on social media affect students’ perceptions of social media as strategic communications tools?, indicate that taking a class on social media will have a positive impact on students’ perceptions of social media as strategic communications tools. Participants who reported taking a social media class had significantly higher attitudes toward social media than those who did not. Qualitative results demonstrated that the participants who had taken the social media class were more enthusiastic and energized by the topic of social media as they shared stories of its power and

their abilities to employ social media as tools to gain knowledge and build relationships with people in the field of strategic communications or their communities of practice.

It is important for educators and curriculum leaders to have an appreciation of students' knowledge base of social media and how they employ it in their construction of knowledge and reality. It is also valuable for professionals in the industry, who are hiring recent college graduates, to gain insight into how students perceive social media in their own lives and as strategic tools. This study is a step in determining that knowledge and insight. In this study, the mixing of the quantitative methodologies resulted in various types of data being collected that were then analyzed by the researcher. The results of the statistical analysis were able to test the hypothesis and answer the research questions, but it was the rich description of qualitative data that provided the in depth understanding of the findings. This results provided in this study are more trustworthy as a result of this integration. The findings suggest that public relations and students are developing a strong sense of identity tied to the community of practice through understanding of common tools common concepts, and shared language.

This study provides support for the notion of incorporating social media into strategic communications curriculum. The work of Wright and Hinson (2009) has established that social media is gaining significance among public relations practice, and practitioners are developing more positive attitudes about employing social media in their strategic communications efforts. The present study is similar to those findings in that public relations and advertising majors also perceive social media positively. The findings indicate that positive attitude toward social media increases when students are exposed to coursework that

includes using social media strategically. All college students use social media, but advertising and public relations majors view it more positively than non-majors.

As indicated in the situated learning theory and communities of practice, teachers must act as practitioners and expose students to conceptual tools, which they then can employ to wrestle with authentic problems to facilitate learning in education. Thus, strategic communications educators must expose students using social media as tools to solve authentic problems for actual clients to create participatory learning experiences. The concept of communities of practice reveal that teachers can facilitate learning by creating inventive ways of engaging students in meaningful practices, providing access to resources that enhance their participation, opening their horizons so they can put themselves in learning trajectories they can identify with, and involving them in actions, discussions, and reflections that make a difference to the communities that they value. By including social media as a tool that students can use and see actual results in real time, they will become more engaged and better educated in the tools and knowledge of communicating strategically.

As indicated in popular literature, employers are expecting interns and recent college graduate to be “experts” in social media due to their high consumption (Bush, 2009; eMarketer, 2008; Loretto, 2009). By teaching advertising and public relations students how to effectively use social media strategically, educators are helping students become more marketable in the job market and more effective in the work force by helping them provide what employers are expecting.

Limitations

The study was limited by the purposive sampling size that decreased generalizability of the findings. The finding in this study can be applied to other universities that possess

similar advertising and public relations curriculum. In addition, the study was limited by the relationship of the researcher with one-fourth of the sample set. These participants had prior knowledge of the researcher. The qualitative analysis and findings are not intended to be generalizable, but are rather written in order to allow readers to determine resonance individually.

The study compared attitudes and perceptions for two educational conditions – students majoring in public relations and advertising vs. those majoring in other areas. The students majoring in other areas were primarily sampled from the general education course, Media and Society, which is offered in the School of Journalism and Broadcasting. This may be a limitation because these students may be more prone to become communications majors including advertising and public relations, than a different general education course. However, since the findings indicate such significant difference between the two groups, the fact that the groups are more similar than dissimilar could offer more weight to the findings that education has an impact on attitudes and perceptions of social media.

The sample was also chosen among students who were active on Facebook, which could have had an impact on the results. If the study would have included students who were not users of social media, the results could be significantly different.

Recommendations

The findings provided in this research have left more questions to be answered. Consequently, further research could be conducted in a number of areas. While it has been established in public relations literature that blogs have had a tremendous impact on journalism and public relations practice (Chung, et al., 2007; Scoble & Israel, 2006; Wright & Hinson, 2009), very little research has examined student use of blogs, particularly with respect to strategic communications. The potential impact of blogs on today's media

landscape and strategic communications is phenomenal (Wright & Hinson, 2009). Thus, strategic communication education must echo the importance of blogs and reveal how they tie back to goals, objectives and strategies.

Social networking sites offer considerable audience and advertising potential for the future (Maul, 2009). In an article in *USA Today*, Swartz (2008) reports, young audiences are turning attention to their computer and smartphone screens to engage in social networking more often than they are turning to the television screen, movie screen or gaming screen combined. As this study suggests students are looking to social media among their top sources for news and information. Social media are not only changing the way people communicate with one another, but also with how people are communicating with traditional media and gathering information. As a result, social media are having an enormous impact on advertising media planning in particular. Social media requires a radically different mindset from traditional media planning. Many studies have addressed curricular implications of the changing media landscape with respect to training creative people and account-planners (Blakeman & Haley, 2005; Kendrick et al., 1996; Robb B. & Lloyd, C.; 2008; Slater et. al., 2002). Yet, there is a gap in the literature regarding how social media are affecting advertising media planning practice and education. In fact, very little scholarly research has examined social media with respect to media planning. Research should examine advertising media planning trends in leveraging the mass use of social media.

The tremendous impact of social media on public relations and advertising bring up numerous ethical considerations. Gale and Bunton (2005) conducted a study that assessed the impact of ethics instruction on advertising and public relations graduates. Their findings indicate that media ethics instruction corresponds with ethical awareness and ethical

leadership (Gale & Bunton, 2005). It would be interesting to examine how social media have impacted ethics and education in strategic communication.

The findings in this study indicate that public relations and advertising students demonstrated media literacy in terms of social media, as evidenced by their own media production as well as their expressed understandings. Even though the current study did a good job exploring the contextual explanations of social media use and attitudes among students majoring in public relations and advertising, it would have made sense to explore those explanations among other majors for comparison. Future media literacy research could involve more in-depth analysis of students social media use and their ability to analyze and create messages, understand economic or social contexts, and recognize the way social media “shape our understanding of ourselves and our lived experience of reality” (Hobbs, 2004, p. 27).

Concluding Remarks

Digital technologies are advancing at ever-increasing rates. As a result, the communications and media are constantly evolving. Social media are currently at the forefront of that evolution. Wright and Hinson (2009) have demonstrated that social media affected public relations practitioners and practice. This study used quantitative and qualitative methods to explore social media’s impact on students majoring in public relations and advertising, which is often integrated into a strategic communications curriculum. The research found that education affects students’ understanding and attitudes toward social media. Even though most college students use social media in their daily personal communication, they do not automatically make the connection of how to use it strategically. Strategic communications curriculum needs to address the power and influence of social

media and help students make the connection with social media as strategic tools of communication.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: SOCIAL MEDIA SURVEY QUESTIONS

Please tell us whether you agree or disagree that the emergence of social media (including blogs) has changed the way organizations:

1. Communicate?

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

2. Handle external communications?

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

3. Handle internal communications?

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

Do you agree or disagree that social media (including blogs) and mainstream traditional media (newspapers, magazines, radio and television:

4. Complement each other

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

5. Are in conflict with each other?

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

Do you agree or disagree that ...

6. Social media have enhanced the practice of public relations?

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

7. Blogs have enhanced the practice of public relations?

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

8. Social media have enhanced the practice of advertising?

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

9. Blogs have enhanced the practice of advertising?

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

10. Social media (including blogs) influence traditional mainstream media?

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

11. Traditional mainstream media influence social media (including blogs)?

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

12. Since social media (including blogs) have made communications more instantaneous they have forced organizations to respond more quickly to criticism?

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

Do you agree or disagree that social media (including blogs) ...

13. Are more accurate than traditional mainstream media?

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

14. Are more credible than traditional mainstream media?

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

15. Are a more trusted information source than traditional mainstream media?

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

16. Tell the truth?

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

17. Advocate a transparent and ethical culture?

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

18. Offer organizations a low-cost way to develop relationships with members of various strategic publics?

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

19. Serve as a watch-dog for traditional mainstream media?

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

20. Are impacting corporate and organizational transparency?

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

21. Do you agree or disagree that people who receive information from mainstream media expect these news outlets to be honest, tell the truth and advocate a transparent and ethical culture?

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

22. Do you agree or disagree that people who receive information from blogs and other social media expect these outlets tell the truth and advocate a transparent and ethical culture?

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

23. Do you agree or disagree that public relations practitioners should measure:

“The amount of communication that is being disseminated about their organizations (or client organizations) through blogs and other social media.”

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

24. Do you agree or disagree that public relations practitioners should measure:

And/or analyze content of what’s being communicated about their organizations (or their clients) in blogs and other social media.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

25. The impact information disseminated about their organizations (or their clients) through

blogs and other social media has on influentials, opinion leaders and members of other strategic audiences.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

26. The impact information disseminated about their organizations (or their clients) through blogs and other social media has on the formation, change and reinforcement of attitudes, opinions and behavior.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

27. Please rank your top three sources for news and current events:

_____ Newspaper	_____ Online Newspaper
_____ Television	_____ Online Television
_____ Radio	_____ Online Radio
_____ Magazine	_____ Online Magazine
_____ Social Media	_____ Other: _____

Major: _____ Minor: _____

Classification: Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior Graduate

Gender: Male Female

Have you taken a class on Social Media? Yes No

APPENDIX B: SOCIAL MEDIA INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What social media do you use?
2. How often do you visit [those sites]? [Will ask about the specific sites the interviewee mentions.]
3. Why do you use social networking sites?
4. Do you write a blog? If so, what kinds of things do you write about?
5. Do you use social media to gather information? If so, what kinds of things?
6. Do you find social media outlets to be more credible than traditional mainstream media?
7. Do you find social media outlets to be more honest than traditional mainstream media?
8. Have you ever heard about or used a product or service after hearing about it via social media?
9. Have you ever stopped using a brand because you heard negative things about it via social media?
10. How can social media be effective for marketing a product or service?
11. Have you had any classes that talk about social media?
12. Major?
13. Minor?
14. Classification?

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT LETTER FOR SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

Impact of Social Media on Marketing Communications Consent Letter for Adult Participants

July 2009

Dear Student:

You have been selected for possible participation in a study of social media. Your participation in this study will help educators and professionals better understand the impact of social media on marketing communication. As a part of my research as doctoral candidate in the College of Education at Oklahoma State University, I am conducting a study of how social media, such as social networking sites including but not limited to Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and blogs, have had an impact on marketing communication such as public relations and advertising.

Participation in this study includes answering the following 22-question survey, which will take approximately 15 minutes complete. Participation is completely anonymous. Your survey answers will not be connected to you or your name in any way. You will not be asked to give your name or any identifying characteristics. Only the researcher will have access to the data, which will be stored on a personal computer with password access. The data will be destroyed immediately after statistical testing and analysis, approximately 6 months. Participants must have an active Facebook account including at least one friend.

The analysis of this study may result in published articles, dissertations, and presentations at professional conferences.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you choose to participate in the study, you are free to withdraw permission at any time. You may also decline to participate. You will not be penalized for withdrawing or declining permission at any time. You may also decline to participate. You will not be penalized for withdrawing or declining. If you have any questions concerning the research project, interviews or observation, please contact Bobbi Kay Lewis or Dr. Pamela U. Brown at the following addresses and telephone numbers.

Bobbi Kay Lewis, Doctoral Candidate
College of Education, Oklahoma State University
206A Paul Miller Building, Stillwater, OK 74078, (405) 744-2970

Dr. Pamela U. Brown, Associate Professor
College of Education, Oklahoma State University
237 Willard Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078, (405) 744-8004

If at any time during this study you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may contact:

Dr. Shelia Kennison, Chair, Institutional Review Board
219 Cordell North, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078, (405) 744-1676 or irb@okstate.edu.

Thank you for participating in the study.

Sincerely yours,

Bobbi Kay Lewis

Please indicate that you have read the consent letter and whether you wish to participate in this study by pressing the "I Agree" button, which will take you to the survey. Please print out a copy of this consent form for your records.

Please press the "I Decline" button if you do not wish participate in this study.

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT LETTER FOR INTERVIEW
AND ONLINE OBSERVATION PARTICIPANTS

**Impact of Social Media on Marketing Communications
Consent Letter for Adult Participants**

July 2009

Dear Participant:

You have been selected for possible participation in a study of social media. Your participation in this study will help educators and professionals better understand the impact of social media on marketing communication. As a part of my research as doctoral candidate in the College of Education at Oklahoma State University, I am conducting a study of how social media, such as social networking sites including but not limited to Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and blogs, have had an impact on marketing communication such as public relations and advertising.

Participation in this study involves in-depth interviews with the researcher. The interviews will be approximately one hour in length, and two to five interviews will be required. The interviews will take place in a public place, such as Panera Bread, Aspen Coffee or IHOP. The interviews will be tape-recorded for the researcher's use only. The tapes will be erased after the data has been collected. Your confidentiality will be protected because names will not be used. You will be assigned a pseudonym and your responses will not be attributed to you. In addition to the interviews, the participant will also include observation of your social networking sites in which you actively participate. Participants must have an active Facebook account including at least one friend. The researcher will observe and record how you utilize the social networking sites. For example, you post information about your social life and interaction with friend, you post information about specific hobbies, you post information about your classes and studying, or you post information about your career path, communicate with potential employers or colleagues. The observation field notes will use the assigned pseudonym and your responses will not be attributed to you.

The analysis of this study may result in published articles, dissertations, and presentations at professional conferences.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you choose to participate in the study, you are free to withdraw permission at any time. You may also decline to participate. You will not be penalized for withdrawing or declining. If you have any questions concerning the research project, interviews or observation, please contact Bobbi Kay Lewis or Dr. Pamela U. Brown at the following addresses and telephone numbers.

Bobbi Kay Lewis, Doctoral Candidate, College of Education, Oklahoma State University
206A Paul Miller Building, Stillwater, OK 74078, (405) 744-2970

Dr. Pamela U. Brown, Associate Professor, College of Education, Oklahoma State University
237 Willard Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078, (405) 744-8004

If at any time during this study you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may contact:

Dr. Shelia Kennison, Chair, Institutional Review Board
219 Cordell North, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078, (405) 744-1676 or irb@okstate.edu.

Thank you for participating in the study.

Sincerely yours,

Bobbi Kay Lewis

Please indicate whether or not you wish to participate in this study by checking a statement and signing your name. Please sign both copies of this consent form and keep one copy.

_____ I wish to participate in the study of Social Media and have read this consent form.

APPENDIX C: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date: Tuesday, June 30, 2009
IRB Application No ED0984
Proposal Title: Social Media Pwns: Impact of Social Media on Marketing Communication

Reviewed and Processed as: Exempt

Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved Protocol Expires: 6/29/2010

Principal Investigator(s):

Bobbi Kay Hooper Lewis 206A Paul Miller Stillwater, OK 74078	Pamela Brown 237 Willard Stillwater, OK 74078
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The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46.

The final versions of any printed recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are attached to this letter. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be submitted with the appropriate signatures for IRB approval.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period of one calendar year. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any adverse events to the IRB Chair promptly. Adverse events are those which are unanticipated and impact the subjects during the course of this research; and
4. Notify the IRB office in writing when your research project is complete.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact Beth McTernan in 219 Cordell North (phone: 405-744-5700, beth.mcternan@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,



Sheila Kennison, Chair
Institutional Review Board

VITA

Bobbi Kay Hooper Lewis

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Dissertation: SOCIAL MEDIA AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS: ATTITUDES
AND PERCEPTIONS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

Major Field: Education: Curriculum and Social Foundations

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in Education at
Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in December, 2009.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Science in Mass Communications at
Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in August, 2003.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Science in Journalism at Oklahoma
State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in May, 1994.

Experience:

Assistant Professor, Fall 2004 to present

School of Journalism and Broadcasting, Oklahoma State University

Supervisor: Dr. Derina Holtzhausen

Courses: Media Sales and Marketing, Advertising Media and Markets
Integrated Marketing Communications, Advertising
Copywriting and E*Media Advertising

Professional Memberships:

Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication
2009 Ad Division Vice Head

Association for Women in Communications
2009 National Outstanding Faculty Adviser

Name: Bobbi Kay Hooper Lewis

Date of Degree: December, 2009

Institution: Oklahoma State University

Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: SOCIAL MEDIA AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS:
ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

Pages in Study: 110

Candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major Field: Education: Curriculum and Social Foundation

Scope and Method of Study: Social media have been adopted from its inception by public relations, advertising and marketing practitioners as tools for communicating with strategic publics. Wright and Hinson (2009) have established that public relations professionals perceive social media positively with respect to strategic communication. Given that social media are having an impact on professionals in the industry, the current study examined if social media are having a similar impact on college students in general and students studying in the area of public relations and advertising. The uses, attitudes and perceptions of social media among college students were explored by mixing quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitatively, independent samples *t*-tests were used to analyze data. Qualitatively, data were analyzed and categorized according to common themes and differences. Analyzing and triangulating the data from survey instruments, interviews and online social networking profiles, validated the findings. Qualitative findings supported survey results.

Findings and Conclusions: The research found that education affects students' understanding and attitudes toward social media. It is important for educators and curriculum leaders to have an appreciation of students' knowledge base of social media and how they employ it in their construction of knowledge and reality. It is also valuable for professionals in the industry, who are hiring recent college graduates, to gain insight into how students perceive social media in their own lives and as strategic tools. Findings suggest that college students majoring advertising and public relations view social media more positively than other majors because they understand how it fits in to the industry in which they are being educated. Because of these findings, social media should be incorporated into strategic communications curriculum to better prepare students for the current media climate.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: Dr. Pamela U. Brown
