Social Media and Strategic Communication: Attitudes and Perceptions Among College Students

Bobbi Kay Lewis, Ph.D.

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 through survey data. 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. These finding suggest that social media should be incorporated into strategic communications curriculum to better prepare students for the current media climate.

INTRODUCTION

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. 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 (Loretto, 2009).

_____

Bobbi Kay Lewis, Ph.D is Assistant Professor at Oklahoma State University,
  bobbikay.lewis@okstate.edu.

The emergence of the Internet and social media has had a tremendous impact on the theory and practice of advertising, public relations and marketing 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. 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 organizational communication including, but not limited to, blurring the lines of advertising and public relations. The different areas of communications were once very compartmentalized in their respective silos. Marketing, public relations, advertising, sales promotions, events and personal selling were often separate entities with different communications and objectives. Those areas are merging to consolidate 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. Strategic communications, as defined by Hallahan et al. (2007), is "purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission" (p.4).

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. The term, social media, is yet to be defined by Merriam-Webster's dictionary, but there is an active website titled, "Social Media Defined" which provides a four-paragraph answer to the question: "What is Social Media?" The site indicates 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, and FourSquare. While these are the most recognized, there are more than 150 social networking websites 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 websites, 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 dollars in 2009 to $3 billion dollars 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 ((Wright & Hinson, 2008). Due to the dramatic changes of social media over 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).

LITERATURE REVIEW

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. 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. Individuals use their social networking sites to self-express and communicate with others, and social networking websites 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 participant 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 strategic 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 considerable 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).

The purpose of this study is to assess college students' attitudes and perceptions of social media in regard to strategic communications. The study will compare advertising and public relations major with non-majors which will offer insight into the importance of education and curriculum on students understanding of social media and its application to strategic communications, including advertising and public relations.

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). Fritsch 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 (Court, et. al, 2007).

The consumer is now creating his/her own sales experience. 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 clients' brands 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 strategic communications to meet customers and strategic publics 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 their friends or fans and provide information, videos, photos, special offers and more.

The concept of "conversation" is essential to internal and external 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. Therefore, effective internal marketing can result in external marketing or marketing to the public through employees and stakeholders using social media. 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).

Communities of Practice

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 Wegner (1991) designate learning as a function of activity, context and culture in which occurs; learning

is "situated." 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). 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).

Situated Learning and Digital Technologies

It is 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 set 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" (p. 10). Most of the current work in mobile and digital learning apply constructivist principals and situated learning assumptions (Jonassen & Land, 2000). This view for 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).

METHOD

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 communications is a 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. Driven by the following hypothesis, research questions and purpose, the uses, attitudes and perceptions of social media among college students were explored by analyzing survey data.

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 communications.

Data Analysis

Statistical analysis for this study included descriptive statistics and a t-test. Tests were considered significant if $p < .05$. 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

Highest Ranked Media Sources for News and Current Events

	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 communications. 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.

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 communications. The findings of this research effort were analyzed according to the hypothesis and the research questions addressed.

Findings

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			
	PR/Ad	Others	*t*	*df*
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
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.

Gender

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. Female students held significantly more positive views of social media than males among six of the statements on the 26-statement 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). 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.

Class standing

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 3 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 3

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

| | Class Standing | | | |
	Fr/Soph	Jrs/Srs	*t*	*df*
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
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 communications.

Social Media as Primary News Source

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 4 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 4

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

	Top News Source			
	SM	Other	*t*	*df*
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
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).

Social Media Class

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 5

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

	Taken Social Media Class			
	Have	Have Not	*t*	*df*
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).

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this investigation was to understand the relationship between strategic communications curriculum including advertising and public relations coursework on students' attitudes and perceptions of social media. The results of the study suggest that major, class standing or number of years in school, using social media as a top news source, and social media coursework have a significant impact on college students' attitudes and perceptions of social media. Gender was considered as a determinant of positive attitudes toward social media, but there was little support to argue that gender is a key factor. Results on six out of 26 of the individual statements suggest that females tend to view social media more positively than males. However, average mean scores among female students were not significantly higher than those among male students.

The findings from this study provide insight for both public relations educators and public relations practitioners. Although college students in general are early adopters and heavy users of social media, it does not mean that they make the connections of how to employ social media strategically, either to further their own careers or to benefit a brand or an organization. Education is the key. 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. Junior and senior students expressed significantly more positive attitudes toward social media than freshman and sophomore students. 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. Public relations and advertising majors were more likely to use social media as a news source, which also indicates their coursework and education is having an impact on their behavior. Finally, results 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.

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. This study provides evidence for instructors who are weighing the pros and cons of taking on the challenge of incorporating social media in their classrooms. Just as students' learning of and appreciation for advertising and public relations are often increased by experiential learning and service learning techniques

such working with a "real" client (Zwarun, 2007), students benefit from gaining knowledge and hands-on application of social media. If students are exposed to the benefits of social media as strategic communications tools, they can become active members of the community of practice in the field of strategic communications by using social media in experiential learning environments for clients and gain a deeper understanding of the impact of strategic communications by examining the real-time results afforded by social media. Public relations and advertising students can also learn how to leverage social media to develop an identity in the field or digital footprint that demonstrates their skills in the field, which may result in employers seeking them out to hire.

This study also provides valuable insight for professionals in the industry, who are hiring recent college graduates. The findings reveal how students perceive social media in their own lives and as strategic tools. The findings suggest that public relations and advertising students are developing a strong sense of identity tied to the community of practice through understanding of common tools common concepts, and shared language. Professionals cannot assume that any college student, no matter the field of study or number of years in school, will be able to use social media strategically. Professional should seek out interns and new employees who earned degrees in programs that engage students in meaningful practices, providing access to resources that enhance their participation including social media, 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. These findings also provide insight for professionals who are reluctant to use social media or see its benefits for their clients. They too can be educated of its benefits as strategic communications tools. They can become more marketable and more effective in their jobs if they take the time to learn and become familiar with social media.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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.

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 education. 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, objective 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. 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. 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 communications.

REFERENCES

Anderson, M.L. & Taylor, H.F. (2006). *Sociology: Understanding a diverse society*. (4th Ed.) Bellmont, CA: Thomson Learning, Inc.

Auday, B.C. & Coleman, S. (2009, April). Pulling off the mask: The impact of social networking activities on evangelical Christian college students. Religion Newswriters Association Conference: Minneapolis.

Bernoff, J. (2009, July 20). Advertising Will Change Forever. Message posted to http://adage.com/digitalnext/post.php?article_id=138023.

Birnbaum, M.G. (2008). *Taking Goffman on a tour of Facebook: College students and the presentation of self in a mediated digital environment*. Retreived from ProQuest Digital Dissertations. (AAT 3320071).

Blakeman, R. (2007). *Integrated Marketing Communication: Creative Strategy From Idea to Implementation*. Lanham, Maryland; Rowman & Littldfield Publishers, Inc.

Blakeman, R. & Haley, E. (2005). Tales of portfolio schools and universities: Working creatives' views on preparing students for entry-level jobs in advertising. *Journal of Advertising Education*, Fall, 5-13.

Bush, M. (2009, Oct. 26). As Media Market Shrinks, PR Passes Up Reporter, Pitches Directly to Consumers. *Advertising Age.* Retrieved from http://adage.com/article?article_id=139864.

Chung, D.S., Kim, E., Trammell, K.D. & Porter, L.V. (2007). Uses and Perceptions of Blogs: A Report on Professionals and Journalism Educators. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator,* 62 (3), 305-322.

Comas-Quinn, A., Mardomingo, R. & Valentine, C. (2009). Mobile blogs in language learning: making the most of informal and situated learning opportunities. *ReCALL,* 21 (1), 96-112.

College Students Use of Social Networking (2008, Sept. 22). Retrieved from http://www.emarketer.com/Article.aspx?R=1006557

Dewey, J. (1938). *Education and experience.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

Duncan, T. (2005). Principles of Advertising & IMC. (2nd ed.) New York, NY: McGraw Hill.

Elgan, M. (2009, Feb. 17). Why social media is killing (bad) TV. Retrieved from
    http://www.internetnews.com/commentary/article.php/3803556/Why+Social+Medi
    a+is+Killing+Bad+TV+News.htm

Facebook Press Room: Statistics. (2009). Retrieved on Oct. 2, 2009, from
    http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics

Fritsch, B. & Fastenau, M. (2009, October). *The New Advertising Paradigm –
    Connecting with Customers in an Online World.* Presented at the
    Association for Women in Communications Annual Conference, Seattle, WA.

Gale, K. & Bunton, K. (2005). Assessing the Impact of Ethics Instruction on Advertising
    and Public Relations Graduates. *Journalism & Mass
    Communication Educator*, 60 (3), 272-285.

Grigg, J.A., & Johnson, J. (2006). Student self-representation in web-based social
    networks: University freshmen and thefacebook.com. *A paper prepared for the
    discussion at the 2006 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research
    Association*, San Francisco, CA, April 9, 2006.

Hallahan, K., Holtzhausen, D., van Ruler, B., Veri, D., & Sriramesh, K. (2007). Defining
    Strategic Communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 1
    (1), 3-35.

Jonassen, D. & Land, S.M. (2000). *Theoretical foundations of learning environments.*
    Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Kendrick, A., Slayden, D. & Broyles, S. (1996). Real Worlds and Ivory Towers: A Survey
    of Top Creative Directors. *Journalism and Mass Communications Educator,*
    Summer, 63-74.

Larsen, P.V. & Len-Rios, M.E. (2006). Integration of Advertising and Public Relations
    Curricula: A 2005 Status Report of Educator Perceptions. *Journalism & Mass
    Communication Editor, 61 (1),* 33-47.

Lave, J. (1988). Cognition in Practice: Mind, mathematics, and culture in everyday life.
    Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation.*
    Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Loretto, P. (2009, Oct. 3). Employers seek college students to assist with social
    media. Message posted to http://internships.about.com/b/2009/10/03/emploters-
    seek-college-students-to-assist-with-social-media/

Maul, K. (2009, Mar. 2). Survey shows optimism for social media, digital in 2009. *PR Week*. p. 2.

Marklein, M.B. (2009, April 29). College recruiters are Twittering, too. *USA Today*, pp. 6D.

Meadows-Klue, D. (2008). Falling in love 2.0: Relationship marketing for the Facebook generation. *Journal of Direct, Data and Digital Marketing Practice*, 9 (3), 245-250.

Moore, J. (2009, August). *Working social media before it works you: Best practices in advertising and public relations.* Presented at the Association for Education in Mass Communication Annual Convention, Boston, MA.

Moore, M.S. (2009). *Written communication in an online learning environment.* Retrieved from ProQuest Digital Dissertations. (AAT 3367076).

Sanghvi, R. (2006, Sept. 5). Facebook gets a facelift. Message posted to http://blog.facebook.com/blog.php?post=2207967130

Scott, D.M. (2007). The New Rules of Marketing & PR. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Siemens, G. (2005). Connectivism – A Learning Theory for the Digital Age. *International Journal of Instructional Technology & Distance Learning* 2(1). Retrieved Sept. 4, 2009, from http://itdl.org/Journal/Jan_05/article01.htm

Spinks, D. (2009, April 16). Ten must-try social media sites for college students. Retrieved from http://mashable.com/2009/04/16/social-media-colege/

Stutzman, F. (2006). An evaluation of identity-sharing behavior in social network communities. *International Digital and Media Arts Journal,* 3 (1).

Swartz, J. (2008). Social-networking sites work to turn users into profits. *USA Today.* May 11. Available at http://www.usatoday.com/tech/techinvestor /industry/2008-05-11-socialnetworking_N.htm.

Traxler, J. (2007). Defining, Discussing and Evaluating Mobile Learning: The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 8 (2) 1-12.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1962). *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The development of higher psychological processes.* Edited Cambridge MA, London: Harvard University Press.

Wales, J., & Sanger, L. (2001). *History of Wikipedia*. Retrieved May 7, 2008, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:About#About_Wikipedia

Weber, L. (2007). *Marketing to the Social Web: How digital customer communities build your business*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Wenger, E. (1999). Communities of practice: the key to a knowledge strategy. *Knowledge Directions, 1 (2)*, pp. 48-63.

What is social media? Retrieved Aug. 9, 2009, from http://www.socialmediadefined.com /what-is-social-media/

Wright, D.K. & Hinson, M.D. (2009). An analysis of the Increasing Impact of Social and Other New Media on Public Relations Practice. *International Public Relations Research Conference.* Miami, FL. Retrieved from: http://www.instituteforpr.org/research_single/wright_hinson_social__media_miami

Wright, D.K. & Hinson, M.D. (2008). How Blogs and Social Media are Changing Public Relations and the Way it is Practiced. *Public Relations Journal*, 2 (2).

Yahoo Answers. (2009, July). *Facebook has a cap on inbox messages?!?* Retrieved from http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid= 20090706054157AAE0uZk