

COMMUNICATING WITH MILLENNIALS

Exploring the Impact of New Media on Out-of-Class Communication in Public Relations Education

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INTRODUCTION

The public relations student-instructor relationship involves a great deal of interaction inside and outside the classroom. Instructors find themselves interacting with students on topics ranging from campaign development and strategies to working with clients. Students who are apprehensive to approach and interact with instructors lose a richness of the education experience that results from this dialogue. By offering alternative channels for communication, instructors may be able to engage apprehensive students resulting in a more positive experience for both student and instructor.

New technologies have changed the nature of student-instructor communication outside of the classroom (Russell, Bebell, O'Dwyer & O'Connor, 2003) and offer more channels for communicating course-related information (Hassini, 2006). Millennial generation college students, who spend a great deal of time with multiple communication channels, would likely find benefit in the use of new technology for out-of-class communication (Lenhart & Madden, 2005). New media may offer the ability to increase engagement with students, which would be considerably beneficial for students who are most apprehensive about communicating with professors through face-to-face channels. The purpose of this study is to explore how new media channels might be used to encourage out-of-class communication between the public relations students and instructors and specifically to examine whether apprehensive students might prefer these new channels to existing channels.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Millennial generation students spend more time with communication technology than prior generations. Research has advocated that new technologies be used in the classroom since it is increasingly prevalent in the industry (Miller Russell, 2007; Waters & Robinson, 2008). In addition to teaching valuable skills, engagement between instructors and students via new media technologies has the potential to increase out-of-class communication between instructors and students. Out-of-class communication is a critical dimension in any subject, but even more so for the public relations curriculum in the upper level division classes, which often relies on group projects to facilitate the learning process.

Out of class communication. The importance of the student-instructor relationship is well-established in the literature (e.g., Frymier & Houser, 2000) including communication that occurs outside of the classroom (e.g., Dobransky & Frymier, 2004). New technologies are allowing instructors to use multiple channels to connect with the Millennial generation, including office hours, e-mail, web-based software programs, instant messaging and social networking sites. OOC communication leads to greater student retention (Pascarella, 1980), improved personal and intellectual development, and better performance in the classroom (Chickering & McCormick, 1973).

One of the traditional channels of out-of-class communication is the office visit by students during instructor office hours. In the new media environment, more channels of communication have opened up for engagement between students and instructors, including e-mail and web-based software programs and even instant messaging and social networking. Given the varieties of channels available to Millennial generation students, the following research questions sought to determine which channels were most often used by current public relations students:

RQ1: To what degree are out-of-class communication methods used by Millennial public relations students?

The interaction that stems from OOC communication is critical in the public relations curriculum. Students, who do not seek guidance from instructors because of their apprehensions, fail to take advantage of the knowledge that instructors bring from their career experiences and relationships with current practitioners and former students. Research on the Millennial generation has documented an increase in the level of parental involvement in higher education. Often labeled

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as helicopter parents, parents of Millennial students have been more involved in their children's education than previous generations to the point of making decisions for their college-aged students and even contacting professors with questions about projects and complaints about course grades. It has been suggested that these high levels of parental involvement may foster a student's apprehension toward communicating with professors (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

Student-Instructor Communication Apprehension.

Students with higher feelings of communication apprehension are more likely to avoid contacting professors outside the classroom (Proctor, Douglas, Garera-Izquierdo, & Wartman, 1994) and will experience less satisfaction with their learning environment (Ericson & Gardner, 1992). Jordan and Powers (2007) found that high levels of apprehension prevent students from seeking out assistance through interpersonal communication channels.

New media technologies offer channels of communication that could bridge the communication gaps between instructors and apprehensive students. Papacharissi (2000) found that those with higher communication avoidance sought to engage in online relationships more than individuals with low communication avoidance. It stands to reason that online channels may be more appealing to students with higher apprehension levels in terms of communicating with instructors. Based on previous research, three hypotheses were created to determine how public relations students' levels of communication apprehension impacted their usage of OOC methods:

- H1: Students with higher levels of communication apprehension are less likely to communicate with instructors outside of the classroom.
- H2: Students with higher levels of communication apprehension are more likely to use new media technologies to communicate with instructors outside of the classroom than low apprehensive students.
- H3: Students with higher levels of communication apprehension are more likely to perceive greater value in communicating with instructors through new media technologies than low apprehensive students.

METHODOLOGY

To measure OOC communication practices and apprehension of Millennials, public relations classes were chosen at random at three Southeastern universities. Students in the class were given extra credit for participating in the survey. Of all students informed about the project, 361 students participated, resulting in a 74 percent response rate.

Communication apprehension was measured using Jordan and Powers' (2007) scale, which measures nervousness experienced when communicating with instructors, hesitancy to develop casual and in-depth conversations with instructors, reluctance to seek out assistance, and comfort with talking with professors. This index was found to be reliable ($\alpha = .83$).

Use of OOC communication channels was assessed by asking students how frequently they communicated with professors through five potential OOC communication channels: office hours, e-mail, Web-based software (such as Blackboard or WebCT), instant messaging, and social networking sites. Responses were

given on a 5-point scale, with one indicating low frequency and five indicating high frequency.

Potential educational benefit of the five OOC communication channels was assessed with the "Impact on the Learning Process" indices, created by using four questions that have been used in previous studies (Clark, Walker, & Keith, 2002; Dobransky & Frymier, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977). Examples of measures included "Office hours aid the learning process," "Office hours are useful for clarifying course-related topics," "Office hours are convenient," and "Office hours encourage personal interaction." These indices were found to be reliable as their Cronbach alpha values ranged from a low for e-mail ($\alpha = .82$) to a high for instant messaging ($\alpha = .92$). Finally, demographic variables, such as gender, race, grade point average, and grade level, were asked for further data analysis.

RESULTS

Female students represented the majority of students (73 percent) who completed the survey. The students reflected the diversity of the three institutions. Caucasians made up the largest segment of students (58 percent), and they were followed by Hispanics/Latinos (25 percent), African-American/Black (8 percent), and Asian (6 percent). Middle Easterners, Native Americans, and the "Other" category each represented 1 percent of the participants.

Most participants were juniors (40 percent) while a significant number of participants were seniors (31 percent) or sophomores (23 percent). Only 6 percent of those studied were freshmen. These numbers reflect previous studies on public relations education, which indicate that students take the majority of their public relations courses in their final years of college education and take basic liberal arts courses during their first two years of college (Commission on Public Relations Education, 1999).

The research question sought to determine how frequently public relations students use the five forms of OOC communication with their professors. As Table 1 shows, students primarily use e-mail to communicate with professors. This method was the only one evaluated above the mid-point on the 5-point scale. Instant messaging and social networking sites were the least used channels to communicate with professors. Face-to-face conversations during office hours were used less frequently than computer-mediated communication involving Web-based instructional sites and email.

	FREQUENCY OF USAGE MEAN*	SD
Office hours	2.36	1.13
E-mail	3.77	1.17
Web-based software.....	2.74	1.36
Instant messaging.....	1.20	0.62
Social networking sites.....	1.19	0.64

*1 = infrequently and 5=frequently

Students with higher levels of communication apprehension are less likely to communicate with instructors outside of the classroom.

An assessment of apprehension towards communicating with instructors among public relations

students' found a midrange mean score ($m = 2.59$, $SD = .89$). An independent t-test revealed that female public relations students ($m = 2.64$, $SD = .91$) were more apprehensive than their male counterparts ($m = 2.40$, $SD = .79$) at a statistical significant level ($t = 2.26$, $df = 221$, $p = .02$). The first hypoth-

As shown in Table 3, the third hypothesis also found mixed support for the perceived value of new media strategies by highly apprehensive students. As expected, less apprehensive students perceived a significantly greater value in office hours communication ($t = 2.94$, $df = 221$, $p = .004$)

than highly apprehensive students. However, on the remaining four channels, there were no statistical differences even though highly apprehensive students reported a greater value of Web-based software and social networking sites for communicating with instructors.

Table 2. Differences in Usage of Out-of-Class Communication Channels by Apprehension Levels

	HIGH APPREHENSION GROUP Mean (Standard Deviation)	LOW APPREHENSION GROUP Mean (Standard Deviation)	t-value (df=221)	p-value
Office hours	2.14 (1.13)	2.52 (1.16)	2.46	.02
E-mail.....	3.62 (1.11)	3.92 (1.20)	1.97	.05
Web-based software	2.72 (1.38)	2.74 (1.43)	.115	.91
Instant messaging	1.27 (0.82)	1.13 (0.45)	-1.62	.11
Social networking sites	1.30 (0.85)	1.08 (0.38)	-2.55	.01

esis sought to determine if students with higher levels of apprehension about talking with instructors were less likely to use OOC strategies. To conduct independent t-tests, the groups were first divided into roughly equal groups (high, medium, and low) based on their apprehension mean scores.

Table 3. Differences in Perceived Educational Benefit of Out-of-Class Communication Channels by Apprehension Levels

	HIGH APPREHENSION GROUP Mean (Standard Deviation)	LOW APPREHENSION GROUP Mean (Standard Deviation)	t-value (df=221)	p-value
Office hours	3.63 (0.70)	3.92 (0.76)	2.94	.004
E-mail.....	3.81 (0.57)	3.82 (0.82)	0.16	0.87
Web-based software	3.14 (0.87)	3.13 (1.03)	-.077	0.94
Instant messaging	3.10 (1.11)	3.15 (1.17)	.355	0.72
Social networking sites	2.59 (1.15)	2.49 (1.16)	-.664	0.51

Table 2 shows that the first hypothesis received mixed support as the students with the highest levels of communication apprehension did report using office hours ($t = 2.46$, $df = 221$, $p < .05$) and e-mail ($t = 1.97$, $df = 221$, $p < .05$) with less frequency than students with low levels of apprehension. There were no statistical differences in how often they used Internet-based educational software ($t = 0.12$, $df = 221$, $p = .91$) and instant messaging ($t = -1.62$, $df = 221$, $p = .11$). However, students with high levels of apprehension used social networking sites to communicate with professors more often than those with low levels of apprehension ($t = -2.55$, $df = 221$, $p < .05$).

The study's second hypothesis tested whether students with high levels of apprehension were more likely to use new media channels to communicate with instructors. As shown in Table 2, the communication patterns of apprehensive students were similar to that of their less apprehensive peers. The two top strategies were virtual channels, e-mail ($m = 3.62$, $sd = 1.11$) and Web-based software ($m = 2.72$, $sd = 1.38$). However, the new media channels explored in this study, instant messaging ($m = 1.27$, $sd = 0.82$) and social networking sites ($m = 1.30$, $sd = 0.85$) were used less often than traditional visits to an instructor's office hours ($m = 2.14$, $sd = 1.13$). To determine if these mean scores were statistically significant across each individual, a repeated measures ANOVA was conducted. Statistical tests revealed that e-mail and Web-based software were used more often than the remaining channels and that office hours were used more than instant messaging and social networking sites ($F(2.94) = 126.87$, $p < .001$). However, the second hypothesis only received partial support as two of the new media channels were the ones least used by apprehensive students.

DISCUSSION

Through surveying public relations students, the study found that new media communication channels did not significantly impact the way apprehensive students interacted with instructors outside the classroom. While students with higher levels of communication apprehension are less likely to engage in face-to-face OOC communication with instructors, their communication patterns with instructors were very similar to their less apprehensive counterparts. E-mail and Web-based software were most often used followed by office hours, instant messaging, and social networking sites.

Papacharissi (2000) found that students who were apprehensive communicators were more likely to relate to others online. However, this study found that students with lower apprehension levels more frequently used e-mail. The high apprehension group did report using instant messaging and social networking sites more than the rest of the participants. However, these strategies were not often utilized despite perceived value scores that neared the middle of the Likert scale.

Overall, the perceived educational benefit of instant messaging for both groups was scored similarly to the benefits of Web-based software programs. Likewise, students reported that social networking sites had more benefit to the educational process when they use these channels to communicate with instructors. Wilson (2004) states that instructors who use these new media channels to communicate can help students overcome their apprehension. Creating social networking profiles gives instructors the ability to personalize themselves and offer insights into their lives outside the classroom. By demonstrating a more personal side, professors can reduce the nervousness many students feel when approaching authoritative figures.

But, professors do not have to use social networking sites to reduce the levels of apprehension among their students. Simply by expanding the range of communication channels, professors can demonstrate their willingness to interact with students. Holding virtual office hours and being available through instant messaging gives students an additional social media outlet to reach their professors. This willingness to interact in physical and virtual environments allows students to see that instructors truly are there to help them succeed.

Providing virtual office hours also benefits the educator in that they can be conducted from any location. No longer are instructors required to sit in their office waiting for students to visit. Students can ask questions about projects and assignments through instant messaging, social networking sites, and e-mail, depending on student preferences.

Despite the suggestions for virtual office hours, educators should interpret these with caution since the results cannot be generalized to all Millennial students even though the public relations classrooms were randomly chosen to participate in this study. However, these findings offer several new fields of study for public relations educators who are interested in exploring the impact of new media strategies in the classroom. Future studies will not only allow us to better understand how Millennial students communicate, but they will allow educators to create comforting environments that allow students to overcome any apprehension they may experience in the public relations classroom.

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