

# Will You Be My Friend?

## How Public Relations Professors Engage with Students on Social Networking Sites

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### INTRODUCTION

As the importance of social media has increased in public relations, many professors are integrating social networking sites (SNSs) into their courses and using sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn to interact with students. Public relations professors are also using SNSs to demonstrate emerging communication techniques and strategies that are becoming essential to the day-to-day practice of public relations. One challenge for some professors may be determining the appropriate level of interaction with students on SNSs. Balancing personal and professional use is important because professors may represent best practices for their students.

While some professors may be hesitant to jump on the social media bandwagon, researchers tout its benefits to higher education (Rinaldo, Tapp, & Laverie, 2011). However, some professors have been criticized because of their social media content even though few universities have guidelines regarding social media's use (Young, 2009). Maranto and Barton (2010) suggested, "As teachers, we must embrace the paradox embodied by social networking, rather than opt for panic and place yellow police tape around an entire realm that promises to have impacts on the workplace and the polis" (p. 44).

This study sought to explore the relationships that public relations professors have with students on SNSs such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, and determine the factors and philosophies that affect their relationships.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

While some professors may be opposed to interacting with students on SNSs, others allow students unfettered access into their online lives. As more and more students are compelled to join social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, and use the sites to build relationships, professors may set certain guidelines for themselves for building these online relationships.

Three of the most important platforms to public relations professionals are Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn (Swallow, 2010). Concerning college professors, a 2010 survey indicated more than 80 percent have at least one social networking account while nearly 60 percent had more than one (Kolowich, 2010).

### STUDENTS AND PROFESSORS ON SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

More academics are using social media and networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter to communicate with students, create engaging coursework, and participate in scholarly dialogue with other academics. Due to the nature of the sites, professors may choose to reveal more information about themselves than they would in a work-related setting because of the breadth of their social network, which may not be limited only to professional contacts. Students may be exposed to personal information that they would not be privy to unless they were members of the social network.

Research has examined the pedagogical outcomes of SNSs with most research focused on Facebook. One study found teachers' self-disclosure on Facebook positively affected undergraduate student motivation, affective learning, and classroom climate (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007). Similarly, students perceived professors to be more credible than those low in self-disclosure on SNSs (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2009). Research has also found using SNSs in the classroom increases student engagement and

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improves grades (Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2010). However, students seemed much more open to the idea of using Facebook for class purposes than faculty (Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010). Due to the open nature of SNSs, faculty may be reluctant to share public relationships with students.

## PRIVACY

One of the biggest issues on SNSs is privacy. In Lewis and West's (2009) interviews with students who are active on Facebook, one user mentioned professors looking at profiles may be an invasion of privacy. The challenge is the "flattening effect," where a user's different social circles meld together online.

Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory explains how individuals reveal and conceal private information depending on the criteria and conditions they perceive as salient (Child, Petronio, Agyeman-Budu, & Westermann, 2011). CPM theory "describes the state of privacy turbulence as incidents where privacy breakdowns occur because the management of private information becomes unstable or confused, leading to disruptions that require revising, changing, or repairing privacy rules guiding privacy protection and access" (Child et al., p. 2018). In terms of social media, there is a dialectical tension between disclosing information and a user's need for privacy. Petronio (2002) asserts online self-disclosure can be risky when information is disclosed at the wrong time or to the wrong people, or if the information is too personal.

In 2007, Catlett interviewed college students on Facebook and found there appears to be a privacy paradox, which means users who know about privacy controls do not necessarily have a "thicker boundary" around their information than users who are unaware. Most of the respondents made a conscious decision to post some, but not all, revealing information on their page.

With the differences in the use of social media as well as the pedagogical and privacy issues, discussed in the literature, the following research questions were posed:

RQ1: **What relationships do professors have with students on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn?**

RQ2: **What are professors' philosophies of interacting with students on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn?**

## METHOD

**Participants** – After IRB approval was received, an online survey was sent to several academic listservs, including the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) Public Relations Division, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) Educators Academy, and CRTnet. In addition, links were posted on Twitter and Facebook. The participants were 304 college professors, and represented various academic ranks, including assistant professors (31%), associate professors (20.4%), graduate students who teach

(18.2%), professors (14.5%), instructors (8.6%), and adjuncts (7.4%).

## RESULTS

**Quantitative Analysis** – One interesting overall finding related to the degree to which professors think about what they posted on SNSs. Overwhelmingly, nearly three-quarters of respondents (n=212) agreed to some degree with the statement that they "think about what they post on a social media site in case a student might see it."

**Facebook.** The majority of respondents (91%, n=257) had Facebook accounts, and 30% (n=77) of those incorporated Facebook into their classes. Only 8% (n=20) rejected friend requests from all students, both past and present. Sixty-two percent (n=146) of professors accepted some friend requests from current students, with 40% (n=59) of those respondents accepting all friend requests from current students. Nearly half (48%, n=83) accepted friend requests from students only after they graduated. Regarding whether professors ever initiated friend requests of current students, only 15% (n=34) did this, while more professors (38%, n=87) were comfortable initiating friend requests after the students had graduated.

**Twitter.** Two-thirds (66%, n=202) of respondents were on Twitter and slightly more than one-third (n=71) used Twitter in their courses. More than half (57%, n=112) of those on Twitter followed students, while half (n=56) of those only followed certain students. Of those who followed students, 41% (n=43) followed all students who followed them or followed students only when they graduated (6%, n=6).

In an open-ended question, participants indicated why they did not follow students on Twitter:

- Rarely used Twitter
- Did not use Twitter for class
- Wanted to maintain personal and professional boundaries
- Were not interested in students' personal lives
- Thought students would not have anything to contribute
- Were not allowed to connect because of university policies

**LinkedIn.** Seventy-two percent (n=198) of respondents were members of LinkedIn. Of those, 75% (n=147) accepted invitations from current students while nearly all (95%, n=187) accepted invitations from past students. Sixty percent (n=111) reported writing endorsements or recommendations for past or present students to be visibly posted on LinkedIn.

## QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

For each SNS studied, an open-ended item asked participants to discuss their philosophy regarding their relationships with students on the SNS.

**Facebook.** Two-hundred and forty-seven respondents commented about their philosophy regarding relationships with students on

Facebook. Compared to Twitter, respondents drew the line more between student and professor relationships because they saw Facebook as more of a personal outlet. Some participants were dogmatic that students should never be friends with professors on Facebook while others said they would accept a student-initiated friend request. One wrote, "I never initiate the friend requests because I don't want to put them in an awkward position." Only a couple respondents indicated that they had created groups for their classes, and a couple professors had created a group for their Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) chapter.

Some respondents indicated they would accept friend requests only after the student has graduated. Others were open to accepting friend requests of any and all students, past or present. In fact, a couple reported accepting all friend requests as opposed to selecting some friend requests so as not to appear as favoring certain students over others. One respondent even included a Facebook acceptance policy in his/her syllabus. Another respondent wrote, "My philosophy is generally complete openness on my Facebook page, although I generally do not post very personal information on Facebook."

Some respondents also pointed out that students were not their "friends." One respondent wrote, "I do not feel that is appropriate beyond the instruction" and another said friending a student could be grounds for termination at his/her university. Others thought allowing their students to be their friends on Facebook would affect their ability to be themselves or post personal information. One respondent wrote, "I share more personal information on Facebook (kids' pics, beliefs, etc.) therefore, I don't friend current students. I prefer to be choosy about who I share personal info with."

One respondent had a bad experience with a student posting inappropriate things about the professor's grading and teaching style, and then tagging the professor in the post. He/She said they would still be Facebook friends with students but only after a student graduates.

**Twitter.** One-hundred eighty respondents answered an open-ended question regarding their philosophy of engaging with students on Twitter. While there were a wide range of responses, two primary ones emerged. Either respondents did not want to connect with students on Twitter, or they did not mind connecting with students as long as the relationship was professional. For those who were open to connecting online, they used the microblog as a way to keep in touch while some respondents used it only for pedagogical purposes to share articles and the like.

Others saw Twitter as an opportunity to teach students more about the public relations profession, especially because many students will use SNSs in their jobs. One respondent said, "[Twitter] is essential to providing a model for students who are interested in a career that involves social media."

Some professors indicated that due to the public nature of Twitter, they expected

students to see their tweets even if the students did not follow them so they were careful about what to tweet. One respondent wrote, "It's a free country. They are free to read my views. I try to keep social distance from them so I do not introduce bias in my classroom relationships to any student." It should be noted that some respondents said they unfollowed their students after the class in which they used Twitter ended.

Some respondents were very private and adamant about not connecting with students on Twitter. Two common ways respondents protected their accounts from students was to lock their accounts so only those designated would have access, or they maintained two separate accounts: personal and professional.

**LinkedIn.** Two-hundred and seventy-one respondents discussed their philosophy regarding their relationships with students on LinkedIn. Several even reported they were unsure what LinkedIn was. Compared to Twitter and Facebook, several respondents thought the site was "pointless" or a "waste of time."

Several respondents referenced the "recommendation" function on LinkedIn, and said they would feel comfortable writing a recommendation for "exceptional" students while others said they would rather provide specific recommendations offline. Respondents also said the site was useful for connecting with alumni. One respondent wrote he/she does not link to current students because practitioners "troll" for unpaid interns, and he/she wishes to protect students.

However, of the three sites, respondents commented more about the professional nature of LinkedIn compared to Twitter and Facebook. One professor emphasized this importance:

I think it's an essential part of our students' public presence that they need for getting a job and building relationships in their field for future opportunities...I see it as a FANTASTIC way to keep up with students professionally, to contact them regarding job opportunities and to use to recommend them to others.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

There appeared to be a continuum in terms of how much access professors were willing to give students to their online lives. On the one end, professors were guarded and took extra steps to protect their personal identity such as manipulating privacy settings, removing pictures from profiles, and refusing to accept students into their social media world. On the other end, professors were open to connecting with any students on any SNS. Frequently, those professors mentioned the word "professional" to describe their relationships with students on these sites. Regardless of where the professors fell on the continuum, most were reflective and cognizant of their representation in the social media space, and had a personal strategy for student interaction.

Lewis and West (1999)'s flattening effect was partially upheld as some professors were consistent across all three outlets in terms of their philosophy of connecting with students regardless of the

privacy issues. Others had different standards depending on the site, which supports communication privacy management theory. As evidenced in this study, there appears to be a dialectical tension between information disclosure and the need for privacy. To combat this, most professors screened what they posted on the sites, refused to accept any current students depending on the site, or invited all students to join because they felt they would not put anything online that they would not feel comfortable exposing publicly.

Overwhelmingly, professors thought about what they posted on social media sites before they did so for fear of who would view it. These “impression management triggers” lead to hesitation or modification of a post based on the trust an individual has in the site’s privacy. Professors appear to take active steps in managing their online profiles. Some set privacy restrictions while others allowed anyone to see their information (Facebook was more of the exception to this as most set privacy restrictions). While some regarded their online profile as private and the “last bastion” where students should not be allowed, others saw SNSs as a natural extension to their offline relationship.

On Facebook, only a small portion rejected friend requests from past or present students, and others were amenable to accepting requests after the students graduated because they did not want students to feel vulnerable or pressured in the relationship because of the professor’s ability to reward or punish through grades. In several cases, Facebook “friends” was regarded as a literal term as some professors remarked students were not their friends. Others considered students to be “acquaintances,” which supports Parks’s (2010) research into the composition of Facebook friends.

Surprisingly, several respondents mentioned their university policy restricts interaction with students on SNSs. These types of policies prevent faculty members from choosing on their own whether SNSs would be beneficial for modeling behavior or interacting with students on these sites. In addition, these policies ignore the beneficial pedagogical outcomes found in previous research (Junco et al., 2010; Mazer et al., 2007; Mazer et al., 2009; Rinaldo et al., 2011). Some relationships between students and professors, though, were not without consequences. A couple professors provided examples of how relationships with students or even what they posted on SNSs had backfired.

Limitations to this study included the nature of the sample; the survey was sent to listservs, and does not represent all professors who teach public relations classes. With the ever-changing nature of social media especially in the field of public relations, future studies need to explore student and professor relationships on Facebook, as well as pedagogical uses on the three sites.

In conclusion, SNSs are not going away any time soon and public relations students will increasingly be required to use these sites in the workplace. As time will tell, the boundaries of student-professor relationships will be tested as more students and professors join and use SNSs. As evidenced by the wide range of responses, there is not a clear line as to how faculty should engage. However, professors who were engaged seemed to echo Mazur et al.’s (2009) three themes: be professional, be yourself, and respect privacy. As this relationship and privacy continuum continues to be researched, social media will play a vital part in the lives of not only students, but professors as well.

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