



Virtues in Public Relations Education

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Abstract

The rise of fake news and the increasingly polarized dialogue on social media creates what some scholars are naming “echo chambers.” Due to these echo chambers, public relations educators face unique challenges when integrating social media into courses. These challenges are presented both in developing thriving learning communities in social media as well as in equipping future professionals to navigate the increasingly polarized social media environment. Some scholars suggest virtue education can assist in students learning to ethically manage complex situations with a variety of other individuals, such as the ones found in social media. There are few, if any, studies that seek to address the issue of social media in light of virtue education within the public relations discipline. This study addresses that gap by exploring the values students hold related to social media and the role of civility as an ethical guideline. Findings indicate that, while students value civility, personal responsibility, and human dignity, there is a disconnect in how students manifest those values within social media.

Virtue Education, Echo Chambers, and Public Relations Education

The rise of uncivil communication and polarizing dialogue via social media is a growing focus for scholars (Bacile et al., 2018; Kim & Hwang, 2018; Su et al., 2018; Theunissen, 2019). This is a particularly salient issue for public relations educators due to two key considerations. First, social media is a core skillset public relations students are expected to possess upon graduation (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2018). As a result of this expectation, educators adapt curriculum, courses, and assignments to integrate social media into PR education (Kinsky et al., 2016; Kim, 2017a). Second, beyond the use of social media as a tool, public relations education is rooted in an ethical framework that guides the communication and relationship building competencies that students

are expected to use in the professional world (Curtin, Gallicano, & Matthews, 2011; Neill, 2017; Pearson, 2017). This focus on ethics falls into a broader category of virtue education, where scholars are increasingly discussing the role that virtues, ethics, and morality play within education in order to best prepare students for the professional world (Hill & Stewart, 1999; Neill, 2017).

There is significant research that has explored how PR educators can teach social media, often including education for students from other disciplines such as journalism, business, and marketing, who elect to take public relation courses focused on social media (Kim & Freberg, 2016; Freberg & Kim, 2017). For example, scholars have examined a variety of applications for social media in public relations including topics such as teaching analytics (Ewing et al., 2018); how

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to develop engaging visuals for digital platforms (Sisson & Martensen, 2017); and using Twitter in lecture courses (Tatone, Gallicano, & Tegertiller, 2017). Additionally, research has focused on ethical training in public relations for students (Moyer, 2011; Neill & Drumwright, 2012; Neill, 2017) as well as the ethical use of social media in public relations (DiStaso & Bortree, 2014; McCorkindale, 2014).

While many studies address social media and social media ethics, there is limited research that examines the implications for student learning about social media practices in light of virtue education in public relations (Taylor, 2010; Theunissen, 2019). In other words, this study seeks to understand how the virtues that guide public relations as a discipline compliment or intersect with public relations education, particularly within social media. To address this research area, an online survey instrument was used to explore the perceptions of social media among undergraduate and graduate students from a variety of disciplines. This study included a diverse sample of respondents because public relations educators often teach social media courses that include students beyond only public relations majors (Kim & Freberg, 2016; Freberg & Kim, 2017). While there are a variety of students represented in these courses, the core principles of the public relations discipline that undergird the curriculum and the opportunity to better understand ways to develop robust learning environments are particularly salient public relations educators who find themselves teaching social media for their institutions.

Literature Review

Virtue in Public Relations Education: Virtue *pedagogy* has grown over the last several years as scholars focused on the application of virtue ethics into educational settings (Craig & Yousuf, 2018). Virtue ethics stems from Aristotle. It is a perspective that, by pursuing and cultivating core values or virtues, individuals will develop a character that makes ethical choices in a variety of situations (Fawkes, 2012; Craig & Yousuf, 2018). The growth of virtue education aligns with a broader focus among public relations scholars on virtue ethics (Fawkes, 2012; Gregory & Willis, 2013). Virtue education focuses on developing character in students over a particular assignment, course, or program (Craig & Yousuf, 2018). The end goal would be that students develop virtues that serve them as professionals to help navigate complex ethical decisions.

Virtue education defined: Virtues have been defined as “an excellent character trait” (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2016, section 1.1, para. 1). In virtue ethics, the focus is on what makes a person good (Gregory & Willis, 2013, p. 76; Fawkes, 2012, p. 117). This question challenges educators to do more than teach systems or processes for ethical reasoning. Instead, virtue education focuses on cultivating character in students to equip them to face ethical situations (Craig & Yousuf, 2018). Virtue pedagogy is a philosophy that focuses on developing students’ character in such a way that core values are deeply rooted in their identity. The result is that behaviors and decisions will be made based on those virtues, resulting in ethical decisions (Craig & Yousuf, 2018).

Virtue education, for this study, is considered in the broader Aristotelian perspective, which views the development of virtues as a *life-long* endeavor (Wyatt, 2008; Craig & Yousuf, 2018). Thus, the support for virtue education is not a statement that courses or programs will provide the full-scope of character development for an individual. Instead, they provide an additional touch-point in the overall development of a student’s character in order to cultivate values that may be able to grow and change within the context of education (Garver, 1985; Craig & Yousuf, 2018). This cultivation of character has several noticeable applications for educators working in social media.

Echo Chambers in Social Media: The concept of echo chambers has risen primarily due to the growing concerns in fake news (Spohr, 2017; Bakir & McStay, 2018; Stibel, 2018). Echo chambers are ways that social media (the chamber) allows users to isolate themselves into conversations that only verify (echo) ideas they already believe. The conversations continue to “echo” these ideas to others who share the same opinions, thus keeping the dialogue only between people of similar ideas and opinions (Garimella et al., 2018).

Some argue that echo chambers are simply the result of the algorithms many social media platforms employ, which curate content based user interaction. While the goal of these algorithms is to assist in providing the best content for each user (Kim, 2016), they may help create echo chambers (Tufekci, 2016). In the same vein, scholars suggest that there is a natural inclination to insulate ourselves with similar opinions or perspectives and that this tendency contributes to echo chambers. Gillani, Yuan, Saveski, and Vosoughi (2018) described this as *homophily* or “our tendency

to surround ourselves with others who share our perspectives and opinions about the world - is both a part of human nature and an organizing principle underpinning many of our digital social networks" (p. 823).

While concerns about echo chambers have gained notoriety in both the popular press and academic literature, some scholars argue that the effect of echo chambers has been overstated (Debois & Blank, 2018). For example, Shore, Baek, and Dellarcas (2018) found that Twitter users were exposed to a variety of opinions and ideas from across the spectrum, and there was no evidence of an echo chamber phenomenon. Furthering the idea that echo chambers may be overemphasized, Debois and Blank (2018) argued that previous studies have too narrowly examined the construct of an echo chamber, looking only at one media option (such as users on Facebook). They found that in today's "high-choice media environment," users can seek out other ideas and information intentionally. They posit that this is particularly true for users as they curate information from a variety of platforms versus only being active on a single social media platform.

The potential impact of echo chambers presents an interesting challenge for educators who are using virtue pedagogy, particularly in the context of developing personal learning environments in an online learning process.

Personal Learning Environment: Educators can leverage the customization in an educational context by using digital media to create learning environments for students to individually learn, explore, and engage with peers (Kim, 2017b). Using social media as a pedagogical approach to customized learning is known as developing Personal Learning Environments (PLE). Dabbagh and Katsantas (2012) defined the purpose of a PLE as something to "serve as platforms for both integrating formal and informal learning and fostering self-regulated learning in higher education contexts" (p. 3). Dabbagh and Katsantas (2012) advocate for the power of social media to foster the development of a PLE, suggesting that "there is strong evidence that social media can facilitate the creation of PLEs that help learners aggregate and share the results of learning achievements, participate in collective knowledge generation, and manage their own meaning-making" (p. 3). Based on what educators have observed with echo chambers and social media, however, there have been some concerns related to PLEs in social media. The ability to effectively leverage social media as a

PLE rests on whether students would, indeed, be both interacting with ideas and also engaging in knowledge creation beyond the confines of a homogenous group that already agrees with all of their thinking (Gillani et al., 2018). In other words, do PLEs provide the opportunity to engage with ideas that are different, creating an environment similar to what a student encounters in a traditional classroom, or do students see social media PLEs as a place to dialogue among peers who only confirm their own opinions?

Civility and Invitational Rhetoric in Online Dialogue: Scholars suggest that there is a potential link between the growth of echo chambers and the increasingly uncivil dialogue via social media (Dishon & Ben-Porath, 2018). Understandably, one of the potential reasons that people choose to stay in echo chambers, refraining from engaging in dialogue with people who hold other opinions, is the rising levels of incivility online (Pringle, 2018). The concern for adverse interactions with people who hold other views impacts education. Ramifications for the class culture, student learning, and overall PLE development are critical considerations for educators (Swartzwelder, Clements, Holt, & Childs, 2019).

While managing and facilitating classroom dialogue is not a new element to the academy, the dramatic rise of uncivil dialogue due to social media has caused educators to develop strategies to protect a healthy learning community in a digital environment. Invitational Rhetoric (IR) is a theory that can help educators cultivate a robust learning community in digital spheres. Foss and Griffin (1995) define IR as "an invitation to understand as a means to create relationship in equality, immanent value and self-determination" (p. 5). One reason this is a helpful theory is that it focuses on equality and dignity of other perspectives. These values are core components to cultivating civility (Dishon & Ben-Porath, 2018).

Invitational Rhetoric also aligns with the goals of PLE pedagogy as it "involves more a sharing of perspectives than contrasting perspectives as superior to another" (Stewart, 1999, p. 107). In the context of a PLE, the ability to both share meaning and create knowledge together (Debbagh & Katsantas, 2012) rests on a critical requisite: Each student is committed to the value and dignity of others. In discussions that focus on constructs such as civility, the dignity of others, equality in dialogue, and personal obligations to the good of others, virtue becomes a key consideration. **Virtues in Social Media and Public Relations Edu-**

cation: While numerous virtues could be identified as values within public relations, for this study, there appear to be two that are particularly salient in light of the challenges due to echo chambers and the rise of incivility. These values are derived from long-standing principles in public relations scholarship as they connect to the very fabric of the discipline. First, building relationships with others based on politeness and the dignity of individuals is a virtue championed by public relations professionals and academics (Theunissen, 2019). Second, a commitment to civility in society is foundational in developing a dialogue with stakeholders, as it allows the “tolerance of debating different ideas” (Taylor, 2010, p. 7).

Research and education trends seem to indicate that social media as a pedagogical tool will increasingly be used in education (Gerhardt, 2014; Kim, 2017a; 2017b; Commission on Public Relations Education, 2018). This means public relations faculty have a significant opportunity to enhance ethics training and the virtues that support ethical behavior within courses. This comes at an opportune time, as there is a growing call for public relations faculty to integrate ethics into curricula (Neill, 2017; Neill & Weaver, 2017). In the context of social media, faculty are able to model for students how to civilly use social media to both A) foster thriving learning communities where differing viewpoints are welcome and B) model how students can apply that same behavior in a professional setting to cultivate civil conversations with stakeholders (Han, Brazeal & Pennington, 2018).

In order to understand how educators can best cultivate virtues related to public relations and social media, the following research questions were formed.

RQ1: Do students value the virtue of engaging with people who hold different opinions via social media?

In light of the research that suggested that “high-choice media usage” influences echo chambers (Deboise & Blank, 2018), and previous research related to behaviors that foster civil or uncivil communication within social media, as well as behaviors required for PLE development (Kim, 2017b; Garmella et al., 2018; Gillani et al., 2018) the following hypotheses were formed:

H1: Regular use of social media platforms is related to whether students believe social media fosters dialogue between people who disagree.

H2: Regular use of social media platforms is

related to whether students refrain from interacting with people they disagree with on social media.

H3: Regular use of social media platforms is related to whether students believe civil conversations as necessary for people of differing opinions to share their perspectives with others.

H4: Regular use of social media platforms is related to whether students believe people tend to only listen to those they already agree with via social media.

RQ2: Do students believe in the value of personal responsibility for civil dialogue in social media?

As with RQ1, to account for “high-choice media usage,” the following hypotheses were formed were based on previous research that identified elements to civil interactions or potential obstacles to engaging others in civil dialogue (Bacile et al., 2018; Deboise & Bank, 2018; Kim & Hwang, 2018; Su et al., 2018; Theunissen, 2019).

H5: Regular use of social media platforms is related to whether students believe most people are civil in their communication on social media.

H6: Regular use of social media platforms is related to whether students believe most people are uncivil on social media because they do not consider the impact on the people they interact with before posting.

H7: Regular use of social media platforms is related to whether students believe that civility is required for authentic communication.

H8: Regular use of social media platforms is related to whether students believe that social media makes it easier to be disrespectful.

H9: Regular use of social media platforms is related to whether students believe that it is a personal responsibility to ensure communication is respectful.

H10: Regular use of social media platforms is related to whether students believe that all people deserve to be treated respectfully in communication.

RQ3: What do students believe the impact to society is as a result of civil communication in social media?

While many faculty will have students who are non-majors in their public relations courses, research

indicates that ethics training does influence the values and perceptions that students hold (Garver, 1985; Neill, 2017). Therefore, this study also explicitly examined perceptions related to students who had training for professional communication, such as public relations, communication, business, journalism, and advertising majors. The following research questions related to this focus:

RQ4: Do students who are trained in professional communication value a professional's responsibility to ensure civil dialogue?

RQ5: Do students who are trained in professional communication value an organization's responsibility to ensure ethical dialogue?

In light of this final research question relating to students' education as a professional communicator, the following hypothesis statements were also posed to determine further if the amount of education (class rank) influenced perceptions toward civil communication. While class rank does not fully capture the educational path of students, due to those who change majors or transfer in, it can provide a base starting point for the conversation. Those who are more advanced in class rank will have had more college-level education and, typically, more education within the particular major itself.

H11: Class rank will influence whether students who are trained in public communication believe organizations have a responsibility to society to respect individuals.

H12: Class rank will influence whether students who are trained in public communication believe civility is necessary for organizations to truly listen to their stakeholders.

H13: Class rank will influence whether students who are trained in public communication believe organizations should train their social media team on ethical obligations for social media communication.

Method

An online survey was deployed, using Survey Monkey, a well-known survey platform, over the spring 2018 semester in order to address these research questions. Invitations to participate in this study were released on the primary researcher's social media platforms as well as platforms of students in the primary researcher's course. This ensured that more than only one social media profile was focused on recruiting respondents in order to not bias the recruitment sample. There was

no compensation for participation in this study. The sampling was purposeful, as only those who were in higher education programs were asked to participate.

Respondents: There were 225 respondents who completed the survey. Out of those who identified gender, 72.9 percent (n=164) were female, and 26.2 percent (n=59) were male. Out of those who identified an ethnicity, the majority were White/Caucasian (n=117, 52.7%), followed by Asian or Pacific Islander (n=76, 34.2%), Hispanic or Latino (n=35, 15.8%), Middle Eastern (n=9, 4.1%), Black or African American (n=8, 3.6%) and American Indian or Alaskan Native (n=3, 1.4%). There were 33 (14.8%) freshman, 37 (16.6%) sophomores, 69 (30.9%) juniors, 57 (25.6%) seniors, and 27 (12.1%) graduate students who participated. A variety of degrees were represented, including business, communication, education, engineering, journalism, marketing, public relations, nursing, mathematics, sociology, and others.

Instrument: In addition to demographic information, each respondent was asked to identify the platforms they use in social media and the amount of time they spend on social media each day. Likert-scale questions were also used to measure students' engagement with others on social media and perspectives about social media dialogue (Dubois & Blank, 2018; Shore, Baek & Dellarocas, 2018).

These questions, provided in the analysis section, were developed based on previous research in order to examine constructs related to the perception of civility in social media, personal experiences of civil/uncivil behavior online, and beliefs about the impact of civility in social media (Bacile et al., 2018; Kim & Hwang, 2018; Theunissen, 2019). Additionally, students who identified as studying a degree that was geared toward public communication (communication, business, marketing, advertising, public relations, journalism) were asked a series of additional Likert-scale questions related to ethical perspectives and opinions related to communication professionals (Neill & Weaver, 2017; Theunissen, 2019).

Analysis

High Choice Media Usage Among Students: The survey items related to social media platforms and social media use were analyzed in order to understand which platforms respondents most used and whether respondents used more than one social media channel.

Respondents were asked which of the following social media platforms they regularly use: Snapchat,

Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and YouTube. These were selected as they represent platforms with the highest users within the United States, but an additional option was given to identify other platforms they use regularly. Instagram was the most popular platform (n=185, 81.8%), Facebook was the second most popular (n=159, 70.7%) and Snapchat was the third most popular (n=144, 64.0%).

Analysis was also run to see how many respondents used more than one platform regularly. The most significant representation was from those who identified using three platforms regularly (n=67, 29.6%), and the second largest was from those who identified using four platforms regularly (n=50, 22.1%). The third-largest group was those who identified two platforms (n=42, 18.6%) and then those who identified five platforms (n=32, 14.2%). Only 21 respondents (9.3%) identified using a single platform regularly, and just 12 respondents (5.3%) identified using six platforms.

Respondents were also asked to identify how much time they spent on a typical day on social media. The majority of respondents identified 2-4 hours (n=131, 58%), and the second largest group were those who identified spending "less than an hour" on social media (n=48, 21.2%). Only 34 respondents (15%) said they spent 5-6 hours on social media, and 13 respondents (5.8%) said they spent seven hours or more on social media platforms.

RQ1: Do students value the virtue of engaging with people who hold different opinions via social media?

The survey included four items that examined the role of social media dialogue and interacting with people who held different opinions. Using a 5 point Likert-scale, respondents reacted to the following statements:

1) "Social media fosters dialogue between people who disagree." Just over half of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (n=131, 58.2%), with a mean of 3.6.

2) "I usually do not interact with people who disagree with me on social media." Almost half of the respondents (n=112, 49.6%) agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, with a mean of 3.3.

3) "Civil conversations are necessary for people of differing opinions to share their perspectives with others." A majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (n=204, 90.7%), with a mean of 4.3.

4) "People tend to only listen to those they agree

with on social media." A majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this (n= 160, 72.0%), with a mean of 3.8.

In order to address whether the high-choice media environment, as previous research suggested, influenced perspectives, the following hypotheses were analyzed using a one-way ANOVA:

H1: This hypothesis was not supported $F(6, 218)=2.1, p=.058$.

H2: This hypothesis was not supported $F(6, 219)=1.0, p=.422$.

H3: This hypothesis was not supported $F(6, 218)=1.5, p=.189$.

H4: This hypothesis was not supported $F=6,215)=0.4, p=.861$.

RQ2: Do students believe in the value of personal responsibility for civil dialogue on social media?

In order to explore the perceptions of civility online, respondents were given a series of six items related to their perspectives of personal obligation and online civility. Using a 5 point Likert-scale, respondents reacted to the following statements:

1) "Most people are civil in their communication on social media." Only 17.9% (n=40) agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, with a mean of 2.7.

2) "People are uncivil on social media because they do not consider the impact to the people they interact with before posting." A majority agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (n=173, 76.9%), with a mean of 3.9.

3) "Civility is required for authentic communication." A majority agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (n=156, 70.0, with a mean of 3.9.

4) "Social media makes it easier to be disrespectful." A majority agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (n=191, 84.9%), with a mean of 4.2.

5) "It is a personal responsibility to ensure communication is respectful." The majority of respondents (n=207, 92%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, with a mean of 4.2.

6) "All people deserve to be treated respectfully in communication." A majority strongly agreed with this statement (n=157, 69.5%), and an additional 53 respondents (23.5%) agreed with this statement, resulting in a mean of 4.6.

In order to address whether the high-choice media environment, as previous research suggested, influenced perspectives, the following hypotheses

were analyzed using a one-way ANOVA:

H5: This hypothesis was not supported $F(6, 217)=1.5, p=.165$.

H6: This hypothesis was not supported $F(6, 218)=1.5, p=.166$.

H7: This hypothesis was not supported $F(6, 216)=0.6, p=.677$.

H8: This hypothesis was supported $F(6, 218)=(4.3), p=.000$.

H9: This hypothesis was supported $F(6, 218)=(2.5), p=.023$.

H10: This hypothesis was supported $F(6, 219)=(2.8), p=.011$.

RQ3: What do students believe the impact to society is as a result of civil communication in social media?

This research question was addressed using a trio of survey items focused on the implications of civility within society. A majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed ($n=192, 86.1\%, m=4.2$) with the statement: "Civil conversation is necessary for a democratic society to thrive." Additionally, a majority of respondents ($n=156, 70.0\%, m=3.9$) also agreed or strongly agreed that: "civility is required for authentic communication." Lastly, a majority ($n=145, 64.2\%, m=3.7$) agreed or strongly agree that "most people think social media is contributing to the lower civility in our culture."

RQ4: Do students who are trained in professional communication value a professional's personal responsibility to ensure civil dialogue?

To address this research question, respondents reacted to a 5 point Likert-scale statement: "Social media professionals have an ethical responsibility to be civil on social media." Only respondents who had identified themselves as a student in an area that focuses on professional communication (public relations, advertising, marketing, business, communication, and journalism) were asked to respond to this question ($n=64$). A majority of respondents ($n=62, 84.8\%$) agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, with a mean of 4.3.

RQ5: Do students who are trained in professional communication value an organization's responsibility to ensure ethical dialogue?

The final research question was explored using a series of three questions related to the opinions of organizations and civil dialogue. As with RQ4, only those students trained in public communication were selected to respond to these items. A majority of respondents

($n=69, 93.2\%, m=4.4$) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "organizations have a responsibility to society to respect individuals." Additionally, a majority of respondents ($n=66, 89.2\%, m=4.3$) agreed or strongly agreed that "civility is necessary for organizations to truly listen to their stakeholders." A final item that explored this construct was: "organizations should train their social media team on ethical obligations for social media communication." A majority of respondents ($n=72, 97.3\%, m=4.5$) agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

Based on these findings focusing mainly on students who were in majors receiving educational training on professional communication, the following three hypotheses were analyzed using a one-way ANOVA.

H11: This hypothesis was not supported $F(4, 68)=0.4, p=.783$.

H12: This hypothesis was supported. $F(4, 68)=3.4, p=.013$.

H13: This hypothesis was supported. $F(4, 68)=4.4, p=.003$.

Discussion

The Virtue of Civility in Social Media: The first three research questions focused on understanding the perspectives students hold regarding civility in the online environment, their responsibility, and the impact on society. There seemed to be cognitive dissonance when respondents identified believing that social media fosters dialogue between people who hold differing views, while simultaneously identifying a personal avoidance towards engaging people who have differing views on social media. This finding was reinforced when a majority of respondents identified that, while civility is necessary for dialogues between those who disagree, the majority of respondents indicated that they think people on social media only listen to those with whom they already agree.

The Reality of Echo Chambers and PLE: While some scholars have found that echo chambers are not necessarily significant in social media (Dubois & Blank, 2018), this study seems to indicate students may recognize the option to engage with other perspectives but intentionally choose to remain in an echo chamber. It appears that students believe in the value of dialogue within social media among those who disagree, and yet they do not personally engage in fostering dialogue with those who hold other opinions. Despite suggestions related to high-choice

environments removing echo chambers, this study found no significant difference between high-choice media users and their peers. This finding is particularly important for faculty who are working to help students utilize social media as a PLE.

Using social media as a PLE with students who are reticent or resistant towards engaging with ideas outside of their own existing opinions will require additional attention and focus. Faculty will be required to have more intentional strategies in order to develop a truly robust learning environment. Aligning with Gillani et al. (2018) idea that there is a human tendency of homophily, this study seems to indicate that educators may, indeed, have more resistance when trying to develop PLEs and online learning communities in social media. These efforts by faculty to cultivate the virtues required to build these kinds of communities, however, are valued by students. Respondents indicated that they both believe in and value the role of social media in fostering dialogue among people who hold different views. Thus, it seems to be a worthy endeavor for faculty to continue to navigate, helping students learn to engage in social media with other perspectives civilly.

The Virtue of Personal Responsibility and Civil Discourse: Despite the dissonance between the belief in social media's ability to foster dialogue and personal engagement with differing opinions, this study identified that there is a strong belief among students that each individual holds a personal obligation to be civil. Respondents did identify that they recognize social media may make it easier to disregard the dignity or worth of others, therefore facilitating a growing level of uncivil behavior. However, they also indicated that their ethical obligation to civility is vital in making a difference in online discourse. This draws out the importance of faculty modeling practices and approaches to social media communication, particularly around topics with differing viewpoints (Pringle, 2018).

Cultivating Character in Public Relations Education: Moving beyond modeling, however, this study suggests that there is a unique opportunity that educators have when it comes to engaging in the topic of social media and civil discourse. While scholars have identified that faculty need to provide models for civil dialogue online (Han, Brazeal & Pennington, 2018), this study indicates that it is equally essential for educators to discuss with students the ethical obligation toward human dignity that *undergirds* civil discourse. In other words, faculty should address the virtues that

support civil discourse, particularly related to human dignity, equality, and civility. Using Invitational Rhetoric as a theory, educators can extrapolate for students the *reasons* civil discourse facilitates trust and dialogue. This study found that respondents believed in both the value of civility and also respect as a key construct that people deserve. Thus, educators can identify ways that civility and respect can manifest in social media dialogue. Additionally, respondents in this study highly valued civil dialogue and individual human dignity, as well. Thus, there is an opportunity to discuss how echo chambers can limit our capacity to engage with new ideas, minimize other perspectives, and contribute to the uncivil dialogue between people. Public relations faculty have the opportunity to incorporate discipline-specific ethics models as ways to examine the role of human dignity and ethical communication in social media. For example, faculty could analyze the Public Relations Society of America's professional values, including constructs such as advocacy (designed to enhance informed decision making), honesty, and fairness (Public Relations Society of America, n.d.). Using these values, students can explore not only the application of these professional standards in social media but the philosophical reasons behind why values such as these exist within public relations. In other words, what is it about the nature of humans, society, or communication that leads to creating professional values and standards such as these for all public relations professionals to follow? This gives an opportunity for students to connect applied ethical standards to virtues such as human dignity and civility through dialogue.

Future Communication Professionals Perspectives: The final area this study explored was the perceptions held by students who had been trained for public communication. This study found that these students believe there is an individual responsibility among social media professionals to be civil. However, the ethical obligation toward civility and dignity of others does not stop at a personal duty. Respondents indicated that organizations have an *obligation* to society to be civil. In other words, civility is part of the social contract organizations have with society. This is further supported by the fact that respondents felt that civility is necessary for organizations to listen authentically, which is a core value in public relations practice (Place, 2019). This indicates that public relations faculty have opportunities to carry the conversation of civility, virtues, or ethics to a much deeper level with students

by examining how communication professionals fulfill a moral or ethical role in organizations by ensuring civility undergirds communication practices.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study was a step toward understanding virtue education in the context of social media, there are several limitations. First, the sample was for any students in higher education. This was done to get a benchmark of perspectives, that public relations educators could then use to apply to their particular courses. Future research would benefit from building on these findings by having participants who are only public relations majors, or only students who are in public relations courses. Additionally, the cognitive dissonance that was identified among respondents in this study presents a variety of new considerations to frame future studies that wish to explore civility, engagement with others, and online discussion. Future studies that further examine this issue, using both qualitative and quantitative data, would be beneficial.

Conclusion

Civility is a growing issue in today's society, and students are not exempt from the way social media is increasingly polarized. While many students seem to recognize that social media has the power to bridge conversations, few seem to understand how to navigate conversations that have differing views. Beyond teaching tools, practices, and campaigns, public relations faculty should give dedicated attention to the ethical implications and responsibilities that come into play with social media dialogue. This study found that students seem to need additional training and education in the areas of the virtues that support civil practice. This additional education has the potential to shape students' character. This may, in turn, shape their ethical decision-making processes in ways that foster ethical and civil dialogue between people of differing views. By modeling and training students in how to develop a civil dialogue that values others, public relations faculty are poised to make a significant impact on not only future communicators and but also society as a whole.

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