Virtues In Social Care and Public Relations Education: Connecting Student Values to Professional Practice

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Abstract:

Virtue education focuses on developing students' character to equip them to act ethically in complex and changing environments (Craig & Yousug, 2018). This pedagogical approach is effective for faculty who teach social media. They seek to develop a curriculum that builds competencies in technology and character formation to make ethical choices when leading social media on behalf of organizations. This study builds on previous recommendations to integrate virtue pedagogy into public relations curriculum (Theunissen, 2019), specifically examining how the model of social care connects virtues students hold to relational outcomes for organizations. By examining the public's perceptions of social care and organizational loyalty, educators are better prepared to bridge the virtues students value with implications for professional practice as social media professionals. Findings suggest that students' values for social media related to human dignity, trust, and authentic dialogue layer well with social care's relational outcomes. Thus, recommendations are given to the industry and opportunities to introduce this bridge using virtue pedagogy to social media education.

Over the last several years, debate has increased around whether social media facilitates genuine dialogue and connection. One reason for this debate stems from the concept of echo chambers, which are ways that "social media (the chamber) allows users to isolate themselves into conversations that only verify (echo) ideas they already believe" (Kim, 2019, p. 23). Some suggest that the growth of echo chambers has come primarily from fake news (Spohr, 2017; Stibel, 2018). There is disagreement among people with whether social media echo chambers exist primarily because of "our tendency to surround ourselves with others who share our perspectives and opinions about the world" (Gillani *et al.,* 2018, p. 832) or whether it is a natural result of the social media algorithms, as these are optimizing people's social media feeds for content that users are most likely to interact with regularly (Tufekci, 2016). Still, others posit that the

entire concept of echo chambers is overstated. For example, Deboise and Blank (2018) suggest previous research searches for echo chambers by only examining one platform instead of accounting for the high-choice media environment where social media users engage with content across various platforms. This debate creates interesting times for faculty who teach social media.

Higher education students, who often are in the primary target market for social media, often adopt technology faster than other demographics. Additionally, increased job opportunity has led to growth in curricula embedding social media courses, particularly in public relations and journalism (Kingsky *et al.,* 2016). In social media's complex environment, which often requires quick responses and changes, virtue pedagogy can help prepare students to make ethical choices as social media professionals. To use virtue pedagogy in social media education, a starting point is identifying the virtues (or values) that students hold as individuals to examine how those apply to the professional context of social media. Kim (2019) found that students using social media have a high value for human dignity, conversations across ideologies, and the belief that social media can facilitate authentic communication. This study seeks to provide new insight into virtue pedagogy in social media by integrating previous research on virtue education and student values into an educational context. The aim is that this will be accomplished by examining how using social care enacts virtuous behaviors for brands, resulting in fulfilling public relations' goal of cultivating mutually beneficial relationships.

Literature Review

Virtue Education in PR Curriculum: Educators have long suggested that a robust educational environment is more than just informing the mind – it is about shaping students' character. This philosophy has given rise to virtue pedagogy, which primarily explores how education intersects with the application of virtue ethics and development (Craig & Yousug, 2018). Many suggest that virtue pedagogy helps equip students not simply to memorize ethical standards but to truly internalize how those apply in particular contexts, situations, and events in order to be able to navigate the complex environment they will face beyond the classroom (Garver, 1985; Craig & Yousuf, 2018; Kim 2019). This pedagogical approach is particularly relevant when examining public relations

pedagogy. So much of the discipline focuses not simply on *how* to do public relations but also on the ethics that guide the practice's motivation, application, and implications (Moyer, 2011; Neill & Drumwright, 2012; Neill, 2017). Building on this research focused on PR ethical education, scholars have suggested a need for increased attention to opportunities to integrate virtue pedagogy into public relations curriculum (Taylor, 2010; Theunissen, 2019). Particularly as we examine the context of social media curriculum, the concept of virtue pedagogy has interesting applications for faculty.

Virtues for PR Students in Social Media Courses: To the authors' knowledge, only one study has explored the perceived virtues (or values) of students related to social media civility and dialogue (Kim, 2019). In this study, students shared their perspectives on the values around civility and dialogue in social media. Essential virtues such as respect for human dignity, dedication to transparent communication, and a commitment to listening beyond one's perspectives all seem to be paramount in the minds of students (Kim, 2019). In the context of virtue education, helping students first identify their own values is helpful in the sense that virtue ethics look at developing a "good" person (Gregory & Willis, 2013, p. 76; Fawkes, 2012, p. 117). Laying the foundation for what students perceive as "good" allows an educator to use those constructs to examine a discipline (such as PR), tools (such as social media), and implications for a society based on ethical choices.

The values Kim (2019) identified among students create a prime opportunity to help structure the curriculum so that students can understand the organizational values at play in social media. Additionally, based on the philosophy of what virtue pedagogy is designed to accomplish, it would allow students to understand how to apply these virtues in ethical ways in the ever-changing landscape they encounter as social media professionals (Craig & Yousuf, 2018). However, to make that bridge from a pedagogical perspective, educators rely on the bedrock values in public relations related to engagement and communication. A helpful background for social care, virtue ethics, and social media can be found in developing the constructs of "engagement" in public relations scholarship.

Engagement in Public Relations: Engagement has been a core part of public relations research and theory development over the years, and it has contin-

ued to evolve as channels and technology tools have developed. In 1984, Grunig and Hunt proposed four models of public relations. The first was press agentry, followed by public information, then two-way asymmetrical, and lastly, the current recommended model of two-way symmetrical. In the two-way symmetrical communication model, "understanding is the principal objective of public relations" (Grunig & Grunig, 1992, p. 289). In the years that followed, scholars expanded public relations theory to consider public relations' other nuances. Theories such as Organizational-Public Relations (OPR) emerged, focusing on "The state which exists between an organization and its key publics" (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, p. 62). In addition to looking at the state between organizations and publics, scholars who study OPR have identified dimensions and antecedents to the construct, including trust, commitment, satisfaction, openness, investment, and control mutuality (Grunig & Huang, 2000).

While engagement is often used by scholars looking at new media, "the concept of engagement has been central to the discussion of dialogue in public relations" for decades (Taylor & Kent, 2014, p. 385). To operationalize the term engagement, which has been used in a variety of contexts throughout previous public relations literature, Taylor and Kent (2014) suggested that "engagement is an acknowledgment that interactants are willing to give their whole selves to the encounters. Engagement assumes accessibility, presentness, and a willingness to interact" (p. 387). They further recommended that engagement be considered as part of the more extensive theory of dialogue within public relations because it rested on "both an orientation that influences interactions and the approach that guides the process of interactions" (Taylor & Kent, 2014, p. 284).

Applying this construct to public relations and new media, Kent and Taylor (1998) used dialogue theory in public relations when looking at the World Wide Web. This study influenced the following decades as public relations scholars explored social media and digital technology using dialogue theory (Taylor & Kent, 2014). An underlying opportunity in continuing to extend an examination of new media in public relations scholarships through the lens of dialogue theory is the argument that "dialogue is considered one of the most ethical forms of communication because it serves to mitigate power in relationships" (Taylor & Kent, 2014, p. 388). When examining

virtue pedagogy, introducing ideas such as power in relationships and human dignity gives a platform to discuss methods used in social media to give stakeholders a voice, build collaboration between organizations and the public, and elevate the relationship between stakeholders and the organization.

Dialogue and Power in Social Media: Understanding Human Dignity & Collaboration

Just as dialogue focuses on mitigating power dynamics in relationships (Taylor & Kent, 2014), social media have shifted the flow in power for communications from being organizationally controlled to stakeholders' control (Men & Tsai, 2014). The "open and user-centric environment of social media" fosters a radical transformation in both communication and power dynamics for public relations (Men & Tsai, 2014, p.417).

The collaborative nature of communication on social media leads to engaged stakeholders being "co-creators of meaning and communication" within the conversations online (Botan & Taylor, 2004, p. 652). Men & Tsai (2014) pointed out that dialogue on social media dialogue is not simply like traditional media. Instead, conversations are "participatory, collaborative, personal, and simultaneously communal, thus allowing organizations to engage publics in constant conversations" (p. 418). These constant conversations and interactions with publics have increased public relations scholarship focused on engagement as a part of relationship management (Stoker & Tusinki, 2006; Men & Tsai, 2014). Recently, the concept of social care as a unique commitment from organizations to interact with the public has grown in prominence. This concept is a strong opportunity to introduce virtues, using virtue pedagogy, for educators.

Social Care in Social Media: Social care is defined as "Stakeholder engagement on social media channels that bolsters an organization's credibility and reputation in order to develop loyalty and commitment from the public" (Kim & Freberg, 2020, p. 14). This type of focus and philosophy of using social media includes not only those who are customers (which would be simply "customer service" but extends to include all those who may engage in social media with the brand. This includes negative interactions, other comments related to interests or questions, or any number of other multiple stakeholder profiles with which public relations professionals are responsible for interacting. Thus, engagement via social care creates a "two-way,

relational, give-and-take between organizations and stakeholders" (Taylor & Kent, 2014, p. 389).

In one of the first studies to examine social care values in public relations, Kim & Freberg (2020) identified six codes of conduct: transparency, respectfulness and empathy, immediacy, privacy, responsiveness, and being public-centric. These values that are central to the model of social care have intersections with the virtues (values) and personal beliefs students hold toward social media use (Kim, 2019). In order to develop a framework for virtue pedagogy in social media curriculum, however, educators need to bridge the personal values and virtues of students to the virtues and values of social care in social media. One approach could be to examine the stakeholder relational outcomes in public relations. As identified above, if "dialogue is considered one of the most ethical forms of communication" (Taylor & Kent, 2014, p. 388), then, ideally, publics would resonate more strongly with organizations that employ social care as a framework on social media due to the perceptions of ethicality. These outcomes can give students tangible concepts of what organizations, and the professionals who run their social media, are capable of producing when employing virtues in social care.

Stakeholder Relational Outcomes in Social Care: A growing body of research indicates that public relations strategies and tactics via digital media can develop credibility (Kim & Brown, 2015;), trust (Auger, 2014), and authenticity (Men & Tsai, 2014). New research, however, is needed to understand how the formation of social care teams and structures within organizations may influence these constructs. While particular tactics and strategies have been examined in isolation, social care's growth as a holistic, dialogue approach in organizations is mainly unexplored. Thus, there are challenges for educators who want to connect social care and the outcomes of this approach in social media to the virtues and values students hold.

Trust: The role of trust has continued to gain attention among scholars and practitioners due to recent global and political events that have resulted in damage to the trust publics have in institutions. The loss of trust has been so severe that Edelman (2018a) coined the term "crisis of trust" to clarify a dramatic drop in confidence between stakeholders and organizations globally. Fake news and the resulting damage to organizational reputations have only heightened the impact of lost trust between organizations and stakeholders (Ewing & Lambert, 2019). Trust is defined as "one party's lev-el of confidence in and willingness to open oneself to the other party" (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 19). Trust represents an essential dimension for dialogue theory, as it is impossible to sustain dialogue without trust from all parties involved (Taylor & Kent, 2014). That is why dialogue is "the product of a particular type of relational interaction, not just any communicative interaction" (Taylor & Kent, 2014, p. 390).

Authenticity: Scholars from a variety of fields have examined the construct of authenticity to explain its dimensions and applications. Some have suggested that organizational authenticity is being true to the organization and stakeholders (Men & Tsai, 2014). Significant to authenticity is the difference between *being* authentic and being *perceived* as authentic (Shen & Kim, 2012). Shen and Kim (2012) suggest that merely being authentic does not address the way publics may *perceive* an organization. They identified three dimensions for perceived authenticity: truthfulness, transparency, and consistency. This finding aligns with Bowen's (2010) understanding of organizational authenticity dimensions: transparency, genuineness, and truthfulness.

Credibility: Public relations scholars have examined the idea of credibility from several lenses, including looking at the credibility of sources (Hovland et al., 1953; McCroskey, 1966), mediums or channels (Meyer, 1998), and messages themselves (Flanigan & Metzger, 2007). Organizational credibility is thought to be composed of two core dimensions: expertise and trustworthiness (Newell & Goldsmith, 2001). As with perceptions of trust or authenticity, credibility is a fluid construct since an individual stakeholder composes it as they evaluate the organization (Kim & Brown, 2015). In other words, credibility is a perception held by the public.

Although there is a foundation for virtue pedagogy overall, and a growing body of research calling for further examination in public relations, there is limited understanding of how virtue pedagogy interacts with social media education. Using the model of social care can bolster ethical conversations. However, a gap exists in helping students understand not just what values are at play (the ethics of social care or their personal ethics) but how those virtues manifest in outcomes from their professional choices and behaviors. Examining stakeholder perceptions of social care and the behavioral outcomes of those perceptions allows educators to advance virtue education beyond a concept of *naming* virtues and into a space that al-

lows students to comprehend implications from ethical choices. Thus, to explore this bridge, the authors posed the following hypotheses:

H1: Stakeholders will hold a perception that there is an increased expectation for more access to social care dialogue.

H2: The perceptions of authenticity due to social care initiatives by an organization (honesty, accessibility, believability, and likelihood to fulfill obligations to stakeholders) influence stakeholders' perception that there will be a long-term organizational/public relationship.

H3: The perceptions of trust due to social care initiatives by an organization (transparency, truthfulness, and likelihood of keeping promises to stakeholders) influence stakeholders' perception that there will be a long-term organizational/public relationship.

H4: The combined perceptions of trust and authenticity due to social care initiatives by an organization influence stakeholders' perception that there will be a long-term Organizational Public Relationship.

H5: Using social care to increase credibility helps build relationships with key stakeholders.

Method

Participants: In total, there were 703 respondents from across the United States. The goal was to a get a general population sample of people who regularly interact with brands through social media. There were 69.6% female participants (n = 489) and 30.4% were male (n = 214). While respondent participation was strong, an imbalance in gender was still identified. It may relate to participants who chose to interact being influenced by the title of the survey, perhaps appearing more feminine, or by those who self-identified more as interacting with brands online. Respondents were recruited from every state in the United States of America, with the largest percentages coming from California (n = 63, 9.0%), Florida (n = 62, 8.8%), New York (n = 57, 8.1%) and Texas (n = 42, 6.0%). The largest age group was 25-34 years old (n = 216, 30.7%), followed by 35-44 years old (n = 177, 25.2%), 45-54 years old (n = 104, 14.8%), 55-64 years old (n = 86, 12.2%), 18-24 years old (n = 88, 12.5%) with 65-74 years old (n = 29, 4.1%) and 75 or older (n = 3, 0.4%) representing the smallest participation.

Instruments: The instrument informed all respondents about the topic of the study. Additionally, all respondents received a definition of social care before responding to the survey items. The definition and description read as follows: "Thank you for participating in this study. The focus is on social care, which is a communication method established with the belief that key audiences desire and expect to have the ability to interact with brands, receiving customized responses and care personally. It can be defined as: Stakeholder engagement on social media channels that bolsters an organization's credibility and reputation in order to develop loyalty and commitment from the public." Recognizing that the concept is unclear and not regularly used in the general public, the authors believed providing a definition that respondents could have in mind throughout the survey would help with the responses' validity and reliability. After confirming that respondents understood the definition of social care and the purpose of the study, they continued the survey.

The survey instrument included categorical, demographic information such as gender, age, and geographic location. Additionally, the survey included several Likert scale questions related to relational outcomes due to social care perceptions. These items were based on previous research related to these constructs discussed earlier.

Procedure: To address the research questions and hypotheses, the authors launched a national survey. The panel respondents were from the general public to provide a broad perspective of stakeholders toward organizations. Participants were compensated, and the study went through approval through the university IRB. Although the panel was designed to mirror the participants' demographics, gender skewed female. Upon examination, this skew could be related to the disqualifications and drop-out through the survey, potentially indicating a gender influence in participants engaging with social care or being invested in social care enough to complete the survey.

Results

H1: Stakeholders will hold a perception that there is an increased expectation for more access to social care dialogue.

Responding to a five-point Likert scale with one being "strongly disagree" and five being "strongly agree," the majority of respondents indicated that they agree or strongly agree with the idea that "the public expects organizations to have social care available" (*M* = 3.89, *SD* = 0.97). Additionally, the majority of participants

also indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I expect organizations to provide social care initiatives on their social media accounts" (*M* = 3.83, *SD* = 0.94). Lastly, the majority of participants also indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that "Social care will be a growing focus over the next year" (*M* = 3.93, *SD* = 0.90). Finally, to gauge the public's perception about social media professionals, the following item was included in the survey: "Social media professionals expect social care to be a key part of social media or public relations initiatives." The majority agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (*M* = 3.74, *SD* = 0.96).

Trust: The majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed that social care initiatives made organizations more honest with their stakeholders (*M* = 3.78, *SD* = 0.98); more accessible to their stakeholders (*M* = 3.78, *SD* = 0.95), more believable to stakeholders (*M* = 3.74, *SD* = 0.97) and that they were more likely to keep promises to their key stakeholders (*M* = 3.76, *SD* = 0.97).

Authenticity: The majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed that social care initiatives made organizations more transparent (*M* = 3.66, *SD* = 1.01), truthful (*M* = 3.88, *SD* = 0.80) and likely to fulfill their long-term obligations to stakeholders (*M* = 3.82, *SD* = 0.95).

> *H2: Perceptions of authenticity due to social care initiatives by an organization (honesty, accessibility, believability, and likelihood to fulfill obligations to stakeholders) influences the perception among stakeholders that there will be a long-term organizational public relationship.*

First, to ensure that the items measured the same construct (authenticity), a reliability analysis was conducted. The Cronbach's alpha of .86 indicated that the items reached acceptable reliability. Each item was worthy of retention, as the alpha decreased if any of the four items were deleted. Next, due to the high number of female respondents, a hierarchical, multiple regression was run to predict long-term relationships with key stakeholders. The first stage of the hierarchical relationship included items from the survey for honesty, accessibility, believability, and the likelihood to fulfill obligations (authenticity). These were items used to compose the dimension of authenticity from the survey instrument. The second stage included gender in determining whether it impacted the overall model and results. These first-stage indicated that the variables statistically predicted long-

term relationships with key stakeholders, $F_{(4, 674)}$ = 213.91, $p < .001$, R^2 = 0.56. All four of the variables added significantly to the prediction: more honest with their key stakeholders ($p = .002$), more accessible to their key stakeholders ($p < .001$), more believable to their key stakeholders ($p < .001$), and more likely to fulfill their obligations to their key stakeholders ($p < .001$). Additionally, no variables were highly correlated ($r > .70$) (Williams & Monge, 2001, p. 133). The introduction of gender, in stage two of the hierarchical multiple regression, did not provide a significant change to the model. With gender included, the model explained 56% of the variance, $F_{(5, 673)}$ = 170.89, R^2 = 0.56. In stage two, the four independent variables from stage one continued to be significant predictors on the model, but gender did not add to the predictive model ($p = .877$).

> *H3: The perceptions of trust due to social care initiatives by an organization (transparency, truthfulness, and likelihood of keeping promises to stakeholders) influence stakeholders' perception that there will be a long-term organizational/public relationship.*

First, to ensure that the items measured the same construct (trust), a reliability analysis was conducted. Cronbach's alpha indicated the items reached acceptable reliability, $\alpha = .84$. Each item was worthy of retention, as the alpha decreased if any of the three items were deleted. Next, as before, due to the high number of female respondents, a hierarchical, multiple regression was run to predict long-term relationships with key stakeholders. Stage one of the hierarchical, multiple regression included items related to the construct of trust from the survey: transparency, truthfulness, and the likelihood of keeping promises (dependable). The first stage indicated that the variables statistically predicted long-term relationships with key stakeholders, $F_{(3, 675)}$ = 219.11, $p < .001$, R^2 = 0.49. All three of the variables added significantly to the prediction: Transparency ($p < .001$), truthful ($p < .001$), and likely to keep promises to stakeholders ($p < .001$). The introduction of gender, in stage two of the hierarchical multiple regression, did not provide a significant change to the model. Two variables were highly correlated. The two were organizations who use social care initiatives that are "more truthful with their stakeholders" and "more likely to keep their promises to their key stakeholders" ($r = .70$, p < .001) (Williams & Monge, 2001, p. 133). When these were examined further, the *analysis showed the R²=*

0.49. This may be because believing an organization is truthful (one of the variables) would theoretically relate to believing an organization will keep promises (the other variable). With gender included, the model fit was $F(4, 674) = 164.46$, $R^2 = 0.49$. In stage two, the three independent variables from stage one continued to be significant predictors on the model, but gender did not add to the predictive model ($p = .386$).

> *H4: The combined perceptions of trust and authenticity due to social care initiatives by an organization influence stakeholders' perception that there will be a long-term Organizational Public Relationship.*

As before, a hierarchical, multiple regression was run to predict long term relationships with key stakeholders from perceptions of authenticity (honesty, accessibility, believability, and the likelihood to fulfill obligations) and trust (transparency, truthfulness, and the likelihood of keeping promises), controlling for gender in stage two. These variables statistically predicted long-term relationships with key stakeholders, $F(7, 671) = 137.07$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.58$. Out of the variables, the four items that added significantly to the prediction were "more likely to keep their promises" ($p < .001$), "more accessible to stakeholders" ($p < .001$), "more believable to their stakeholders" ($p = .013$), and "more likely to fulfill obligations" ($p < .001$). There were no high correlations, except for the one between being truthful and keeping promises, which was analyzed in H2. The introduction of gender, in stage two of the hierarchal multiple regression, did not provide a significant change to the model. With gender included, the model fit was $F(8, 670) = 119.83$, $R^2 = 0.58$. In stage two, the same four independent variables from stage one continued to be significant predictors on the model, but gender did not add to the predictive model ($p = .625$).

> *H5: Using social care to increase credibility helps build relationships with key stakeholders.*

A simple regression was run to analyze the influence of believing that "social care initiatives are valuable to build credibility" on the perspective that using social care "will help build relationships with key stakeholders." The variable statistically significantly predicted relationship-building $F(1, 677) = 674.80$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.50$. To control for gender, as previously done, a hierarchical regression analysis was run. In stage two, where gender was included, there was no change to the predictability of the model $F(2, 676) = 337.162$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.50$. Gender was not a significant contributor to the statistical predictability of this model ($p = .607$).

Discussion

Social Care Public Perspectives: This study found that respondents generally have strong agreement with the growth, expectation, and perspectives of social care. Nearly 70% of respondents indicated that they believe that social care will be a growing focus and become an expectation by the general public. Interestingly, slightly fewer respondents identified a personal expectation that organizations would offer social care initiatives.

Trust and Authenticity Due to Social Care: Previous research identified that authenticity and trust are critical to organizational relationships (Shen & Kim, 2012; Bowen *et al.,* 2016). However, there was no existing examination of the influence of social care initiatives related to these dimensions. This study shows that social care does influence dimensions related to trust, specifically transparency and truthfulness. Social care, by its nature, provides two-way communication and access that many stakeholders now expect via social media. When organizations utilize social care strategies, their perceived integrity increases as publics are more likely to believe the organization's communication.

Additionally, this study found that people perceive organizations are more likely to fulfill their obligations to stakeholders when engaging in social care strategies. Another interesting finding from this study is that participants seemed to indicate that the public views social care as more than a tool that organizations can use to build relationships. Stakeholders may see social care as a litmus test for whether organizations will be the kind of brand with ongoing interaction with people. In other words, when an organization is engaged in social care, the public believes that it represents increased access, honesty, truthfulness, and authenticity. Moreover, because of a brand's willingness to manifest those qualities, this study indicated a corresponding belief that organizations with social care will have longer-term relationships with stakeholders than others.

Credibility Due to Social Care: A further finding from this study is that participants believed social care influences dimensions of trust and authenticity and dimensions of credibility. As previous research has found, credibility is bolstered through particular behaviors and social media strategies (Kim & Brown, 2015). This study builds on strategies that

may enhance credibility by identifying the public's confidence in social care. This study seems to indicate that by integrating social care as an element to an organization, brands have the opportunity to bolster perceptions of trustworthiness and expertise. Respondents also identified that this perception gives a foundation to develop or initiate relationships, which is often a goal that social media activities have for brands. Because stakeholders perceive brands that employ social care initiatives as more credible, there is a related perception that these organizations will also be more likely to cultivate and build new relationships in digital spaces.

Implications for Virtue Pedagogy in Public Relations and Social Media

This study provides a bridge for educators seeking to connect students' personal values and commitment to virtues into a social media curriculum. These findings support the idea that values such as respectfulness and empathy, transparency, and engagement in rapid and public-centered ways do much more than produce more significant brand engagement metrics. The public seems to find that brands that engage in social care hold a high value for things like human dignity and trust, which bolsters credibility. When skepticism and trust are so broken, students are looking for careers that can inspire and build a better future. There is an incredible opportunity to integrate the virtues of human dignity, transparency, and authentic dialogue into social media curriculum. This represents an opportunity to capture students' attention and deeply integrate their ethics training into a framework that will, ideally, be easier to apply in multiple contexts. In addition, it also represents an opportunity to use virtue education to continue to bolster the ethics in our discipline through the character formation of future practitioners, which is precisely what Taylor (2010) and Theunissen (2019) suggest as important steps for the future of public relations.

Practically speaking, educators can introduce these concepts, have students explore the long-term benefits for the public, society, and brand when these virtues are applied through social care, and even encourage students to develop their own stated virtues to guide their professional social media practice. Having open discussions, analyzing the challenges and outcomes, and thinking through applying these virtues would all be powerful ways to integrate these findings into a course, curriculum, or a particular assignment.

This important finding moves virtue pedagogy in social media beyond simply allowing students to know and identify virtues (or values). With this study, educators can point to specific outcomes of ethical behavior based on virtues in social media using the social care construct. This pedagogy creates a more rounded educational experience as students understand the implications of making personal and professional ethical choices in social media and the implications for organizations who opt to embody those values. This experience can potentially embolden students to make more ethical choices in the future as they are familiar with the potential outcomes of those choices.

Limitations & Future Research

There are several limitations to this study that future research can address or expand. First, there were significantly more females who participated in this study as compared to males. A future study would benefit from controlling gender to ensure there is no effect. Additionally, future research could expand by providing a more robust scale of authenticity, trust, and credibility to confirm or enhance this study's findings. Additionally, future research would benefit from building on this study to understand students' perceptions when these constructs are introduced into the curriculum to better refine and adjust components to applying virtue pedagogy in social media.

Conclusion

As educators integrate this study's findings into the curriculum to emphasize virtue pedagogy, there is a strong opportunity to inspire and motivate students to act for the public good by applying critical values that are intrinsic to the construct of social care. This study indicates that when those values are enacted, the relational outcomes for stakeholders are quite positive. This can bolster students' confidence in recommending virtuous and ethical choices in social media campaigns and guiding behaviors in the on-the-spot challenges that social media professionals encounter. Overall, social media educators are poised to directly engage critical things students value – trust, human dignity, authentic conversation – and to link those specifically to course content, assignments, and the discipline.

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