

Social Media and Strategic Communication: A two-year study of attitudes and perceptions
about social media among college students

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Abstract: Social media have been adopted from its inception by public relations, advertising and marketing practitioners as tools for communicating with strategic publics. Wright and Hinson (2009) have established that public relations professionals perceive social media positively with respect to strategic communication. Given that social media are having an impact on professionals in the industry, the current study examined if social media are having a similar impact on college students in general and students studying in the area of public relations and advertising. The uses, attitudes and perceptions of social media among college students were explored through survey data over a 2-year period. The researchers found that education affects students' understanding and attitudes towards social media. It is important for educators and curriculum leaders to have an appreciation of students' knowledge base of social media and how they employ it in their construction of knowledge and reality. It is also valuable for professionals in the industry, who are hiring recent college graduates, to gain insight into how students perceive social media in their own lives and as strategic tools. Findings suggest that college students majoring advertising and public relations view social media more positively than other majors because they understand how it fits in to the industry in which they are being educated. These findings suggest that social media should be incorporated into strategic communications curriculum to better prepare students for the current media climate.

It is impossible to ignore the influence of social media on our society. While it took traditional media—such as radio and television—more than a decade to reach 50 million users, it took Facebook less than nine months to reach 100 million users (Patel, 2010). Mobile technologies including laptops, tablets, and smart-phones allow us to be constantly connected, which has had a dramatic impact on our daily lives. Social media has changed the way society communicates, learns, and conducts business. This paper seeks to examine social media and its impact on college students, particularly with respect to strategic communications. The study will compare responses among subjects from 2009 and 2010.

Social Media and Strategic Communications

Strategic communications, as defined by Hallahan, Holtzhasusen, van Ruker, Veri and Sriramesh (2007), is the “purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission” (p.4). In many cases, strategic communications is aligned with an organization’s overall strategy and includes advertising, public relations and marketing as disciplines under its umbrella (Hallahan et al., 2007). The emergence of the Internet and social media has had a tremendous impact on the theory and practice of advertising, public relations and marketing disciplines (Chung, Kim, Trammell & Porter, 2007; Pavlik, 2007; Scoble & Israel, 2006; Scott, 2010; Wright & Hinson, 2010). Marketing, advertising and public relations programs were once developed well in advance and released on the practitioners’ timetable, but social media have created a demand for real-time, two-way communication programs that engage publics and evolve based on the conversation (Scott, 2010). Because of its ability to organically connect people, social media have become essential to public relations, advertising and marketing practitioners (also commonly known as strategic communicators) as tools for communicating with strategic publics. Social media allow marketers to communicate with segmented markets virtually automatically. By learning consumers’ interests and

lifestyles, as represented in their social networking profiles, marketers can deliver messages and information that is customized to the individual. The rise in this type of social media advertising marks a continued trend to establish more intimate relationships with customers (Wright, Khanfar, Harrington, & Kizer, 2010). Many strategic communicators also have embraced social media as an important tool to enhance issues management, environmental monitoring, and two-way communication (Wright & Hinson, 2009). The rules for doing so are constantly changing, and there is considerable uncertainty on how to employ these tools from a strategic perspective. According to Pavlik (2007), public relations practitioners have had to adapt their strategies and tactics as media have evolved. Some of these adaptations have been strategic and intentional—designed to improve effectiveness and efficiency; however, other changes have been unintentional—possibly having negative effects on PR practices. It has been established that public relations professionals perceive social media positively with respect to strategic communications (Wright & Hinson, 2010). However, few studies have examined how business professionals (i.e., those outside the field of public relations) perceive the same types of social media.

Social Media and College Students

Teens and young adults were among the first to adopt and utilize social networking tools as ways to facilitate dialogue and develop online communities. Because social networking site usage is so prevalent among college students, there is an assumption by many professionals and organizations that they know how to employ them as strategic tools (Loretto, 2009). In fact, many organizations are looking to college students to fill their social media deficit, and are posting jobs on websites, such as *Craigslist.org*, that seek out social media gurus and social media managers. Despite the assumed expertise in the title of the positions, these companies are often seeking interns, yet expecting them to be able to incorporate advanced social media strategies into the organization's

initiatives. This particular business strategy assumes that college students would be equipped with their own social media strategies that could be applicable to the business' strategic communications efforts.

This logic begs the question: *Does merely having a Facebook page and Twitter account make one an expert in social media? Or, do students need to be emerged in learning situations that demonstrate how social media can be used strategically?* Media literacy and media education literature suggests that even though media and commercial messages are virtually inescapable in Western culture, it is still necessary to educate people about the media, its power and influence, and how to effectively craft and disseminate mediated messages.

In previous research of college students' attitudes and perceptions of social media, Lewis (2010) found that major, class standing or number of years in school, using social media as a top news source, and social media coursework have a significant impact on college students' attitudes and perceptions of social media. The purpose of this current study was to expand the understanding of the impact of social media on college students, and whether students' opinions about social media are changing over time. The uses, attitudes, and perceptions of social media among students were explored through survey data. College students were surveyed over a two-year period to investigate how certain factors, such as class in school, social media habits, and major, can affect understanding and attitudes toward social media. Through situated learning theory and Communities of Practice, this study discuss how it is important for students, educators, and curriculum leaders to have an appreciation of social media and how to employ it strategically in the construction of knowledge and reality.

Conceptual Framework

Situated Learning and Communities of Practice. Largely based on the educational philosophy of John Dewey (1938) who maintained the importance of the

processes of actual experience on learning, contemporary learning theories lean heavily on constructivist notions based on learning through inquiry, experience, social interaction and reflection (Friere, 1970; Kolb, & Fry, 1975; Rogers & Freiberg, 1993; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). Lave and Wenger (1991) designate learning as a function of activity, context, and culture in which it occurs; learning is “situated.” According to Wenger (1998), a social learning theory must integrate four components necessary to characterize social participation, including: “(1) Meaning: learning as experience, (2) practice: learning as doing, (3) community: learning as belonging, and (4) identity: learning as becoming” (p. 5). Situated learning discussions often refer to the idea of a community of practice. Lave and Wenger coined the term “community of practice” while studying apprenticeship as a learning model, as reported by Wenger (1999). The term refers to the community that acts as a living curriculum for the apprentice. Through further investigation of the concept, Lave and Wenger realized the existence of the practice of a community went far beyond the formal apprenticeship system (Wenger, 1999). Communities of Practice (CoP) are informal, pervasive, and an integral part of our daily lives. Knowledge and skills are obtained by participating in activities that expert members of the community would perform. Learners become involved in a community of practice, which embodies that certain beliefs and behaviors be acquired (Wenger, 1998). For example, to facilitate learning in education, teachers act as practitioners and expose students to conceptual tools, which they then can employ to wrestle with authentic problems. Enculturation into the cognitive community is fostered through modeling from the teacher and providing authentic activities in an appropriate environment. As Wenger (1998) points out social learning theory is not purely an academic enterprise. Social learning not only informs our academic investigations, but also it influences our policies, and the technical and organizational systems we design and work within.

It is also established in the literature that mediated elements play a significant role in the situated learning environment. In fact, most of the current work in mobile and digital learning theory apply constructivist principles and situated learning assumptions (Jonassen & Land, 2000). The concept of constructivist learning and situated learning is that learners interact with the physical and social world rather than passively receive knowledge (Yukawa, 2010). This can also describe the difference between traditional media and social media. People are no longer viewers or passive audience members receiving information; social media provides the opportunity to interact and contribute to the knowledge being created and disseminated. The recent development of mobile technologies and better understanding and application of Web technologies—particularly cognitive tools—is said to have a profound impact on pedagogy, according to Comas-Quinn, Mardomingo, and Valentine (2009). Technological development is affecting other areas of society as well. Traxler (2007) reports new forms of art, employment, language, commerce, deprivation and crime, as well as learning, are emerging from the transformed discourse and knowledge created by mobile, personal and wireless devices. Situated learning involves engaging students in meaningful practices, providing access to resources that enhance their participation, opening their horizons so they can put themselves in learning trajectories they can identify with, and involving them in actions, discussions, and reflections that make a difference to the communities that they value. Sharing, collaboration and interaction with other learners and experts from whom the learner can obtain different perspectives on the problem clearly enhance the opportunities for learning (Comas-Quinn et al., 2009). Wenger (1998) explains that theories of social practice “are concerned with everyday activity and real-life settings, but with an emphasis on the social systems of shared resources by which groups organize and coordinate their activities, mutual relationships, and interpretations of the world” (p. 13). Social media are part of our society’s everyday activity and emphasize the sharing

of resources by which like-minded groups organize and coordinate their activities, maintain relationships, and interpret the world.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

In order to grasp social media's impact on the communications practice, it is important to understand strategic communications professionals' (Wright and Hinson, 2009) and students' (Lewis, 2010) attitudes and perceptions on social media. Therefore, this research seeks to understand how and if college students (strategic communications majors and non) have the same attitudes and perceptions toward social media as they have in the past. Social media and its impact on strategic communications is a fairly recent phenomenon, so the empirical research on the topic is somewhat limited. Wright and Hinson's (2009) survey instrument was used to measure the impact of social media on public relations among practitioners, was modified and employed with permission of the authors to measure the perceptions of social media in this study. Driven by the following hypothesis, research questions and purpose, the uses, attitudes and perceptions of social media among college students were explored by analyzing survey data collected in 2009 and 2010.

H1: Public relations and advertising majors will perceive social media more positively than other college students.

In addition, the following research questions were addressed:

RQ1: How will time influence responses to attitudes about social media?

RQ2: How will gender affect college students' and attitudes toward social media?

RQ3: How does number of years in school affect student's attitude toward social media?

RQ4: How will taking a class on social media affect students' perceptions of social media as strategic communications tools?

RQ5: How will using social media as a primary news source affect attitude toward

social media?

Method

In many ways, social media have changed the way individuals and corporations communicate. Blogs, websites, mobile applications (apps), and a variety of developing technology not only give people the ability to tell a story, but also have the potential to educate, inspire, and engage others. The ability to do so is unlike anything communications professionals have encountered before, and its power and popularity have increased every year since its inception. The purpose of this study is to examine whether college students attitudes toward social media are affected by their major and educational experiences, and to see if their attitudes are more or less favorable over time. The study compares students' attitudes and perceptions of social media during a two-year period. The following section explains the measures used in the study as well as the data collection process.

Procedures

To measure the attitudes of the college students toward social media, quantitative data ($N = 862$) was collected over a two-year period. Year 1 data was collected in the Fall of 2009 and Year 2 data was collected in the Fall of 2010. Forty-three unusable surveys were thrown out, and the remaining 819 were included in this analysis. Students in Year 1 ($n = 463$) and Year 2 ($n = 365$) enrolled in communications and general studies courses at a large Midwestern University were administered a paper survey. Before beginning the survey, participants completed an informed consent form that the University's institutional review board approved.

Measurement Scale. Attitudes toward social media were analyzed using a 40-question scale designed to examine perception of social media with respect to strategic communications (Wright and Hinson, 2009). In this scale, 5-point Likert-type statements regarding attitudes toward social media ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly

agree (5). Within the survey instrument, some of the questions focused on negative associations to social media. Because of this, some of the scores were reverse-coded in order to have all positive answers associated with a “5” and all negative answers associated with a “1”—thus, the higher the score, the greater the agreement. Some language in the survey was slightly changed to address the student population; however, the meanings of the statements were not affected. Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of reliability was used to measure the average inter-correlation of the scale (Alpha = .889), which met the requirements of an acceptable measure of .70 or higher. To determine the significance of the difference between group means, ANOVAS, t-tests, and simple linear regression were used for the Likert-type survey questions relating to the impact of social media on college students’ communication, in general and with respect to strategic communications. The findings of this research were analyzed according to the hypotheses and the research questions addressed.

Results

Similar to previous research of this nature, a majority (61.6%) of participants were women ($n = 496$). However, more than a third of the participants ($n = 309$) participants were male. In 2009, there were 177 male participants and 277 female; whereas in 2010, 132 males and 219 females participated in the study. Overall, 29.8% ($n = 240$) of the college students who participated were classified as freshman, 27.8% ($n = 224$) as sophomores, 19.2 % ($n = 155$) as juniors, 21.8% ($n = 176$) as seniors, and 1.4% ($n = 11$) were classified as graduate students. The first year of the study had a more even distribution between the classes than they second year. In 2009, 116 freshman, 115 sophomores, 107 juniors, and 122 seniors participated. In 2010, 124 freshman, 109 sophomores, 48 juniors, 54 seniors, and 11 graduate students participated.

College students who participated also had a wide variety of majors, including ones that did not have any emphasis on social media. Because of the integration of public relations and advertising in university curriculum across the country, students majoring in public relations and advertising were grouped and measured together. Overall, 40.8% of students ($n = 309$) had majors directly dealing with strategic communications (e.g., public relations, advertising, etc.), and 54.7% ($n = 448$) did not. The first year of the study had a relatively even distribution between majors and non-majors, with 225 students majoring in strategic communications, and 238 not. However, 2010 did not have the same distribution; only 103 of the students were strategic communication majors and 210 were not. It is important to note that 43 of the year-two participants did not indicate a major.

First, the authors tested the stated hypothesis, which hypothesis expected public relations and advertising majors to perceive social media more positively than other college students. This expectation arose from Wright and Hinson's (2010) five-year study among public relations professionals and the Lewis (2010) study among college students. The one-way ANOVA resulted in significant findings supporting the first hypothesis. Strategic communications majors' ($n = 316$) opinions on social media significantly differed from students of other majors ($n = 431$), $F(1, 745) = 27.728$, $p < .001$. Students who were classified as a strategic communications major ($M = 3.72$, $SD = .36$) rated social media more positively than other students ($M = 3.58$, $SD = .35$).

The authors then explored the longitudinal aspects of the study. A 2 (year) x 2 (major) between-subjects factorial ANOVA was calculated comparing the attitudes of subjects in both years with those who were and were not strategic communications majors. A significant main effect for year ($F(1, 743) = 21.816$, $p < .001$) and major were found ($F(1, 743) = 30.647$, $p < .001$). All participants from 2009, regardless of major, ($M = 3.60$, $SD = .016$) had opinions on social media that were significantly more positive

than students in 2010 ($M = 3.72$, $SD = .022$). However, there were no significant interaction effects between year and major to influence attitudes on social media ($F(1, 743) = 1.374$, $p < .241$). Strategic communications majors in 2009 ($M = 3.69$, $SD = .024$) reported the most favorable opinions about social media, followed by 2009 non-majors ($M = 3.51$, $SD = .023$), 2010 non-majors ($M = 3.79$, $SD = .036$), and 2010 majors ($M = 3.67$, $SD = .025$).

The authors then explored the influence of gender on opinions and attitudes toward social media. Overall findings indicated there were significant differences between male ($M = 3.60$, $SD = .369$) and female ($M = 3.68$, $SD = .354$) opinions on social media $F(1, 771) = 9.064$, $p < .003$. To explore this from a longitudinal perspective, the authors ran a 2 (year) x 2 (gender) between-subjects factorial ANOVA. Results indicated that year and gender did not interact to have significant impact on attitudes toward social media ($F(1, 769) = 1.211$, $p > .272$), with female participants in 2010 ($M = 3.76$, $SD = .025$) having the most favorable opinion about social media, followed by 2010 males ($M = 3.64$, $SD = .032$), 2009 females ($M = 3.61$, $SD = .022$), and 2009 males ($M = 3.56$, $SD = .027$).

To further explore these, a one-way ANCOVA was calculated to examine the interaction that gender, major, and year had on college students' attitudes. Results indicated that gender and major significantly interacted to influence student's attitudes toward social media. Results also indicated that all three variables interacted to have a significant impact on college student's attitudes toward social media, $F(1, 727) = 14.370$, $p < .001$. ($F(1, 727) = 10.075$, $p < .002$). Female majors in 2010 had the most positive attitude toward social media ($M = 3.88$, $SD = .042$), followed by male majors in 2010 ($M = 3.69$, $SD = .045$), female majors in 2009 ($M = 3.68$, $SD = .028$), and male majors in 2009 ($M = 3.64$, $SD = .045$). See the Table 1 for a breakdown. Thus, answering RQ2 and RQ1.

--Insert Table 1 about here--

Additionally, a one-way ANOVA comparing the mean scores of attitudes between the school classifications (i.e., freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, grad student) indicated significant differences were found among the groups, $F(1, 770) = 3.969, p < .003$. The results indicated that seniors had attitudes toward social media ($M = 3.74, SD = .383$), that were significantly more positive than that of sophomores ($M = 3.60, SD = .349$) and freshmen ($M = 3.61, SD = .339$). However, there were no significant differences in the attitudes of juniors ($M = 3.66, SD = .377$) and graduate students ($M = 3.65, SD = .286$). Thus, answering RQ3. Next, to explore the relationship between students' attitudes toward social media, time, and years in school (RQ3), a between-subjects factorial ANOVA was calculated. Results indicated no significant changes in the attitudes of freshman, sophomores, juniors, and seniors between 2009 and 2010 ($F(1, 766) = .340, p > .797$), thus, answering RQ3 and RQ1.

Since many universities are incorporating courses about social media into the curriculum, the fourth research question examined the effect taking such a course had on students' attitudes toward social media. A one-way ANOVA examining the impact that a course in social media might have on students attitudes indicated significant differences existing between the groups, $F(1, 772) = 32.070, p < .001$. Students who had not taken a course rated social media less positively ($M = 3.61, SD = .015, n = 564$) than those who had taken a course in social media ($M = 3.76, SD = .353, n = 210$). Results also indicated no significant changes in the attitudes of students who had taken a course in social media and those who had not between 2009 and 2010 ($F(1, 770) = .051, p > .521$). Thus, answering RQ4.

The final research question (RQ5) examined how using social media as a primary news source can influence participants' attitude toward social media. A one-way ANOVA examining the impact of this indicated significant differences existing between

the groups, $F(1, 784) = 58.006, p < .001$. Participants that used social media as a primary source of information ($n = 369$) rated social media more positively ($M = 3.75, SD = .360$) than those who did not ($n = 417$) use social media as a primary source of information ($M = 3.55, SD = .341$). To further explore this, a 2 (year) x 2 (SM as a primary source) factorial ANOVA was calculated to examine the interaction that time and using social media as a primary news source had on participants' attitudes on social media. Results indicated no significant interaction between year and social media as primary resource on participants' attitudes toward social media, $F(1, 782) = 1.58, p > .209$. Participants who used social media as a primary source for news in 2010 had the most positive attitudes toward social media ($M = 3.81, SD = .026$), followed by 2009 participants using social media as a primary resource ($M = 3.69, SD = .025$), 2010 participants not using social media ($M = 3.60, SD = .028$), and 2009 participants not using social media ($M = 3.54, SD = .021$). Thus answering RQ5 and RQ1.

Discussion and Conclusions

The aim of this study was to examine whether college students' attitudes and perceptions of social media are affected by curriculum and whether their attitudes have changed over time. The findings in this study suggest that strategic communications curriculum does have an impact on college students' attitudes and perceptions of social media. As the data indicated, students majoring in strategic communications had significantly more positive attitudes toward social media than other majors. However, positive attitudes toward social media decreased among college students from 2009 to 2010. In fact, the findings indicate that in 2010 strategic communications majors had the least favorable attitudes toward social media. This finding could be affected by the sample sizes. In 2009, the sample sizes of major and non-majors, as well as year in

school were fairly evenly distributed in the 2009 data collection. However, majors were out-numbered by more than 100 non-majors in the 2010 study. In addition, more than 100 more underclassmen than upperclassmen were represented in the 2010 sample. Most students do not take their major courses until late into their sophomore years or the beginning of their junior years, thus the underclassmen who have declared strategic communications as their major are not as likely to have been exposed to using social media strategically in their course work. When taken as a whole, strategic communications majors report more positive attitudes toward social media than students majoring in other areas. Furthermore, positive attitudes increased overall students, regardless of major, from 2009 to 2010, which suggests that attitudes toward social media are becoming more favorable over time. Our findings echo Wright and Hinson's (2010, 2009) longitudinal studies, which indicate that PR professionals' positive attitudes are increasing over time.

According to the results, gender had an impact on attitudes toward social media. In general, women rated social media more positively than men. Numerous studies have identified measurable differences in how men and women perceive and use new technology; however, Gerlich, Browning, and Westerman (2010) found no significant differences between male and female college students in their Internet usage, social media usage, or beliefs about social media sites in general. Our findings support the literature with exception of Gerlich et. al (2010). Although the findings were not statistically significant, there was a positive increase of attitudes toward social media from 2009 to 2010. Both females and males reported more favorable attitudes toward social media in 2010 than males and females in 2009, which also suggests that positive attitudes toward social media among college students are increasing over time.

Although a significant interaction was not found between gender and year, or major and year, there was a significant interaction when gender, major and year were

analyzed together. Female majors in 2010 reported the most favorable attitudes toward social media, followed by male majors in 2010. This interaction helps to explain that positive attitudes not only increase with education, but also they are increasing over time as well. The interaction further supports that gender does have an impact on attitudes toward social media.

Year in school was also found to have an impact on attitudes toward social media among college students. Seniors reported the most favorable attitudes toward social media, which also supports that education plays a role in students' ability to see the value of social media as a strategic communications tool. In addition, students who had taken a course on social media reported significantly more favorable attitudes toward attitudes than students who had not taken a social media course. The impact of educational classification and exposure to a social media course did not change significantly over time.

Participants in this study who use social media as a primary news source rated social media significantly more positively than those who do not use social media as a primary news source. This finding can be explained by the communities of practice theory that maintains engagement "implies a sustained intensity and relations of mutuality" (Wenger, 1999, p. 184). The more engaged with social media that students become—particularly from a strategic perspective—the more likely they are to see the value in it. Although the results were not statistically significant, findings also indicate that this increasing with time. Students who used social media as a primary news source in 2010 reported more favorable attitudes to social media than students who used social media as a primary news source in 2009.

In his book *Communities of Practice*, Wenger (1998) maintains that we not only know who we *are* by what is familiar, but also we know who we *are not* by what is unfamiliar. Our identities are produced through the practices we engage in, but we also

define ourselves through practices we do not engage in. This notion of identity helps to explain the findings in the current study. The mix of participation and non-participation through which we define our identities is better understood through the concepts of peripherality and marginality (Wenger, 1998). With peripherality, nonparticipation is an opportunity for learning. For example, newcomers' participation in the community of practice may be peripheral, but the expectation of full participation is not a goal or an expectation in this stage as a newcomer. In this study, participation is defined as actively using social media, and the community of practice is strategic communications. Because students' participation and non-participation is peripheral, they are open to the opportunity for learning.

These findings suggest by providing situated learning environments that engage students in meaningful strategic communications practices, students will likely be excited to see how they can use social media tools—that they have adopted for personal use and entertainment—in their careers. For example, utilizing a blog/social network platform for teaching enables collaborative learning in a real world environment while improving student's writing and communication skills. Social media cannot be avoided; they are tools to be leveraged in education and in practice. Since social media are having a tremendous impact on strategic communications practice, educators in strategic communications need to determine the appropriate methods to generate enthusiasm, maximize learning, and leverage the power of social media tools both in and out of the classroom in order to help our students prepare for their careers.

As with any research, this study has several limitations. As mentioned earlier, the difference in sample sizes from 2009 to 2010 were a limitation in this study. The researchers were able to collect a larger sample in 2009. And while respondents in 2009 were relatively even distributed among major and school classification, this was not the case in the 2010 sample. There were more non-majors than majors, as well as more

freshman and sophomores than juniors and seniors, in the 2010 study. This could have had an impact on the longitudinal findings. The 2010 survey instrument was improved slightly because the instrument used in 2009 included two questions that were “double-barreled” thus making the question difficult to answer using a Likert-type scale. As a result in the change of the survey instrument two questions from the 2009 data were discarded and four questions from the 2010 data were omitted.

Despite the limitations this study further supports Lewis' 2009 study that maintains that education is the key to students appreciation for social media as a tool in the strategic communications toolbox. In addition, this study echoes Wright and Hinson's research that demonstrates that attitudes toward social media among PR professionals are becoming more positive over time as social media are becoming more prolific in general and utilized more often in the communications field.

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Table 1

Interaction Of Gender, Year, and Major on Attitudes Toward Social Media

		<u>2009</u>			<u>2010</u>		
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Male	Major	3.64	0.045	60	3.69	0.045	25
	Non-Major	3.50	0.033	111	3.52	0.037	86
Female	Major	3.68	0.028	157	3.88	0.042	69
	Non-Major	3.53	0.032	117	3.65	0.033	110

Note. $p < .05$.