

***Social Media and Strategic Communication:  
A Three-Year Study of Attitudes and Perceptions about  
Social Media among College Students***

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## **Introduction**

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. Internet and social media usage is increasingly taking place on mobile devices, particularly on smartphones. In fact, according to research firms Nielsen and McKinsey, share of internet time on social media spent on smartphones is reported as 31 percent compared to only 18 percent on PCs (Perez, 2012). 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, 2010 and 2012.

## **Social Media and Strategic Communications**

Strategic communications, as defined by Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, 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. In a study examining the fast growing phenomenon of brand communities established on social media, Lorach, Habibi, Richard and Sankaranarayanan (2013) found that brand communities established on social media enhance feelings of community among members and contribute to creating value for both members and the company. 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. Traditional media relations strategies (e.g., news release and media kit preparation and distribution) are shifting to practices that are more relevant to a social media environment (Waters, Tindall & Morton, 2010). 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 is established in the literature that significant gaps remain in knowledge of how organizations are using social media and how these important new channels of communication can and should be utilized in the context of public relations and corporate communication (Cornelissen, 2011; Fitch, 2009; Kent, 2010; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Wright & Hinson, 2009).

### **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. In a study of nonprofit organizations and engaging stakeholders through social networking, Waters, Burnett, Lamm and Lucas (2009) found college interns and volunteers are often in charge of managing nonprofits' Facebook presence because they have knowledge on appropriate uses of the site and are often already personally invested into social networking. This particular communication 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? Can college students establish themselves as members of the strategic communications community of practice through their use of social media?* 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 in 2009, 2010 and 2012 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 explores the importance of social media and how to employ it strategically in the construction of knowledge and reality for students, educators, and curriculum leaders.

### **Conceptual Framework**

*Situated Learning and Communities of Practice.* 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," which was coined by Lave and Wenger 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 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, 2010 and 2012.

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 four-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 ( $N = 1015$ ) was collected over a period of four years. Year 1 data was

collected in the Fall of 2009, Year 2 data was collected in the Fall of 2010, and Year 3 data was collected in the Fall of 2012. Students in Year 1 ( $n = 462$ ) and Year 2 ( $n = 334$ ) and Year 3 ( $n = 219$ ) 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 modified 26-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 = .932), 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 (59.5%) of participants were women ( $n = 610$ ) with 40.5% ( $n = 415$ ) male participants. In 2009, there were 177 male participants and 277 female; in 2010, 132 males and 219 females participated in the study; whereas a more equal distribution of male ( $n = 106$ ) to female ( $n = 115$ ) participants existed. Overall, 29.3% ( $n = 300$ ) of the college students who participated were classified as freshman, 27.8% ( $n = 285$ ) as sophomores, 21.7% ( $n = 222$ ) as juniors, 20.0% ( $n = 205$ ) as seniors, and 1.1% ( $n = 12$ ) were classified as graduate students. Each year of the study had a relatively even distribution of participants between college classes. However, a less even distribution existed between the amount of surveys collected in each year as the 44.8% ( $n = 459$ ) of data was collected in 2009, 33.8% ( $n = 346$ ) in 2010 and 21.4% ( $n = 219$ ) in 2012.

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, advertising, and strategic communications were grouped

and measured together. Overall, 40.3% of students ( $n = 409$ ) had majors directly dealing with strategic communications (e.g., public relations, advertising, etc.), and 59.7% ( $n = 606$ ) did not. Despite the fact that the data was collected in the same classes over a four-year period, the distribution in majors and non-majors varies. The first year of the study had a relatively even distribution between majors and non-majors, with 48.5% ( $n = 224$ ) students majoring in strategic communications, and 51.5% ( $n = 238$ ) not. However, 2010 and 2012 did not have the same distribution. In 2010, more than two-thirds (66.8%) of the students were strategic communication majors. In 2012, this distribution of majors reversed and only 36.5% of participants were majoring in strategic communications.

First, the authors tested the stated hypothesis, which expected majors in strategic communications 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. Attitudes on social media were analyzed by means of a two-way between-subjects factorial ANOVA with three levels of year and two levels of major. All effects were found to be statistically significant. The main effect of major showed that strategic communication majors ( $\mu = 3.72$ ,  $SD = .017$ ) had a more positive attitude on social media than non-majors ( $\mu = 3.60$ ,  $SD = .013$ ), ( $F(1, 978) = 31.703$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .031$ ), thus supporting H1. The main effect of year ( $F(2, 978) = 23.325$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .046$ ) showed that 2009 participants ( $\mu = 3.60$ ,  $SD = .338$ ), 2010 participants ( $\mu =$

3.74,  $SD = .288$ ), and 2012 participants ( $\mu = 3.61$ ,  $SD = .299$ ), all had significantly differing attitudes on social media. The interaction effect between year and major, ( $F(2, 978) = 2.761$ ,  $p < .046$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .006$ ), was analyzed using simple effects analysis and the Tukey HSD test. The relevant means can be seen in Table 1. The statistically significant interaction was a function of majors indicating a higher social media score than non-majors in all three years.

Table 1  
*Interaction of Year and Major on Attitudes Toward Social Media*

	2009			2010			2012		
	$\mu$	$SD$	$N$	$\mu$	$SD$	$N$	$\mu$	$SD$	$N$
Major (1)	3.69	.348	219	3.80	.279	97	3.67	.323	79
Non-Major (2)	3.51	.302	233	3.72	.288	217	3.58	.305	139

Note.  $p < .05$ .

The authors then explored the influence of gender on attitudes toward social media by means of a two-way between-subjects factorial ANOVA with three levels of year and two levels of gender. Overall main effects indicated there were significant differences between male ( $\mu = 3.62$ ,  $SD = .339$ ) and female ( $\mu = 3.67$ ,  $SD = .302$ ) opinions on social media ( $F(1, 988) = 5.795$ ,  $p < .016$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .006$ ). However, results indicated that year and gender did not interact to have significant impact on attitudes toward social media ( $F(1, 988) = .056$ ,  $p > .946$ ), with female participants in 2010 ( $\mu = 3.76$ ,  $SD = .285$ ) having the most favorable opinion about social media, followed by 2010 males ( $\mu = 3.70$ ,  $SD = .287$ ), 2012 females ( $\mu = 3.67$ ,  $SD = .303$ ), 2009 females ( $\mu = 3.62$ ,  $SD = .370$ ), 2012 males ( $\mu = 3.61$ ,  $SD = .339$ ), and 2009 males ( $\mu = 3.56$ ,  $SD = .370$ ).

To explore the interaction of gender, major and year a 2 x 2 x 3 factorial ANOVA indicated wasted to examine the interaction that gender, major, and year had on college students' attitudes. Results also indicated that all three variables interacted to have a significant impact on college student's attitudes toward social media,  $F(1, 957) = 4.486$ ,  $p < .012$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .009$ . Female majors in 2010 had the most positive attitude toward social media ( $\mu = 3.85$ ,  $SD = .359$ ), with male non-majors in 2009 having the least positive attitude ( $\mu = 3.49$ ,  $SD = .322$ ). See the Table 2 for a breakdown. Thus, answering RQ2 and RQ1.

Table 2  
*Interaction Of Gender, Major and Year on Social Media Attitudes*

		<u>2009</u>			<u>2010</u>			<u>2012</u>		
		$\mu$	$SD$	$N$	$\mu$	$SD$	$N$	$\mu$	$SD$	$N$
Male	Majors	3.69	.419	60	3.64	.307	21	3.73	.330	18
	Non-majors	3.49	.322	111	3.73	.288	93	3.56	.326	85
Female	Majors	3.69	.318	156	3.85	.359	74	3.65	.265	61
	Non-majors	3.53	.288	273	3.70	.291	122	3.62	.269	51

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,  $F(1, 989) = 3.464$ ,  $p < .008$ . See Table 3 for breakdown of relevant means. The results indicated that seniors had attitudes toward social media ( $\mu = 3.72$ ,  $SD = .383$ ), that were significantly more positive than that of sophomores ( $\mu = 3.61$ ,  $SD = .349$ ). However, there were no significant differences in the attitudes of juniors ( $\mu = 3.65$ ,  $SD = .377$ ), freshmen ( $\mu = 3.64$ ,  $SD = .339$ ), or graduate students ( $\mu = 3.63$ ,  $SD = .286$ ). 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, 2010, and 2012 ( $F(1, 980) = 1004., p > .427$ ), thus, answering RQ3 and RQ1.

Table 3

*Interaction of Year and School Class on Attitudes Toward Social Media*

	<u>2009</u>			<u>2010</u>			<u>2012</u>		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Freshman	3.55	.303	115	3.73	.305	120	3.64	.259	60
Sophomores	3.53	.296	112	3.71	.264	103	3.58	.297	61
Junior	3.61	.357	104	3.80	.271	49	3.61	.293	66
Senior	3.71	.366	119	3.80	.297	48	3.62	.389	30
Grad Students	-	-	0	3.66	.234	11	3.63	.236	12

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. An independent samples t-Test indicated no overall significant differences ( $t(631) = 1.843, p > .066$ ) between those who have not taken a class ( $\mu = 3.67, SD = .300$ ) and those who have ( $\mu = 3.72, SD = .312$ ). When this was examined through a 3 (year) x 2 (social media class) factorial ANOVA examining the impact that a course in social media might have on students' attitudes, all effects were found to be statistically significant. The main effect of social media class showed that those who have taken classes ( $\mu = 3.72, SD = .312$ ) had a more positive attitude on social media than those who had not ( $\mu = 3.63, SD = .254$ ), ( $F(1, 985) = 5.800, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .023$ ). The main effect of year ( $F(2, 985) = 4.796, p < .008$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .010$ ) showed

that 2009 participants ( $\mu = 3.60, SD = .338$ ), 2010 participants ( $\mu = 3.74, SD = .286$ ), and 2012 participants ( $\mu = 3.61, SD = .299$ ), all had significantly differing attitudes on social media. The interaction effect between year and social media class, ( $F(2, 985) = 4.582, p < .010$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .009$ ), was analyzed using simple effects analysis and the Tukey HSD test. The relevant means can be seen in Table 4. The statistically significant interaction was a function of those in a social media class indicating a higher social media score than those who have not in all three years. Thus, answering RQ4.

Table 4  
*Interaction of Year and Social Media Class on Attitudes Toward Social Media*

	2009			2010			2012		
	$\mu$	$SD$	$N$	$\mu$	$SD$	$N$	$\mu$	$SD$	$N$
SM Class	3.70	.336	110	3.84	.263	98	3.61	.284	101
No Class	3.57	.332	340	3.69	.263	218	3.63	.320	106

Note.  $p < .05$ .

The final research question (RQ5) examined how using social media as a primary news source can influence participants' attitude toward social media. A 3 (year) x 2 (Social Media as Primary News Source) factorial ANOVA examining the interaction of variable indicated significant main effects with year and news source, but no interaction effects. Overall main effect of social media class ( $F(2, 1005) = 31.191, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .030$ ) indicated there were significant differences between those who use SM as a primary news source ( $\mu = 3.70, SD = .306$ ) and those who don't ( $\mu = 3.58, SD = .319$ ). The main effect of year ( $F(2, 1005) = 19.430, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .037$ ) showed that 2009

participants ( $\mu = 3.60$ ,  $SD = .338$ ), 2010 participants ( $\mu = 3.74$ ,  $SD = .286$ ), and 2012 participants ( $\mu = 3.61$ ,  $SD = .299$ ), all had significantly differing attitudes on social media. Results indicated no significant interaction between year and social media as primary resource on participants' attitudes toward social media, ( $F(2, 1005) = .512$ ,  $p < .599$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .001$ ). Participants who used social media as a primary source for news in 2010 had the most positive attitudes toward social media ( $\mu = 3.79$ ,  $SD = .272$ ), followed by 2009 participants using social media as a primary resource ( $\mu = 3.69$ ,  $SD = .337$ ), 2010 participants not using social media ( $\mu = 3.60$ ,  $SD = .287$ ), 2012 participants using social media ( $\mu = 3.60$ ,  $SD = .285$ ), 2009 participants not using social media ( $\mu = 3.54$ ,  $SD = .325$ ), and 2012 participants not using social media as a primary news source ( $\mu = 3.58$ ,  $SD = .319$ ). 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 in all three years surveyed. When taken as a whole, strategic communications majors report more positive attitudes toward social media than students majoring in other areas. These

findings indicate that education and communities of practice have an impact on opinions of social media, which suggest that majors have a better understanding of using social media as a tool.

As with the previous two studies, the results indicate gender had a significant impact on attitudes toward social media. Overall, females appear to have a more positive attitude toward social media than males. Attitudes toward social media were the highest among both females and males in 2010 and the lowest in 2009, suggesting that the novelty of social media is starting to wane and the excitement is leveling off. Wright and Hinson (2012) report that mean scores have increased each year between 2008 and 2012 in their longitudinal study of public relations practitioners' attitudes toward social media. It will be interesting to see if this will start to level off among practitioners as the results from the current study suggest they have among college students.

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.

Similar to the first two studies, overall main effects suggest 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. As with gender, attitudes toward social media in 2010 were overall more positive than in 2009 and 2012 whether the participant had taken classes in social media or not. This suggests that positive attitudes may have peaked in 2010 among college students, but obviously more research is necessary to fully support the notion.

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 to 2012 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 and 2012 studies. This could have had an impact on the longitudinal findings.

Despite the limitations this study further supports Lewis' 2009 study and Lewis and Nichols' 2010 study, which both maintain 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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