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Colleges' and Universities' Use of Twitter: A Content Analysis

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Abstract

This study explored how colleges and universities are employing Twitter, a popular micro-blogging tool. Using Kent and Taylor's principles of dialogic communication, a content analysis was performed on individual tweets (n=1130) from 113 colleges and universities. Tweets were coded for whether or not they met each principle of dialogical communication and why. It was found that institutions are not employing Twitter in a dialogic way and they are, instead, employing it primarily as an institutional news feed to a general audience. The implications of this finding are discussed.

Keywords:

Twitter

Dialogic communication

Social Media

University Public Relations

1.1 Introduction

Kent and Taylor's (2002) dialogic public relations theory provides a foundation for public relation practitioners to successfully exchange and maintain conversations with their publics. Recent research, however, suggests organizations are not successfully utilizing social media to conduct dialogic communication (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010) and questions the real world potential of social media to be an effective relationship building tool (Taylor & Kent, 2010). Further research is required to explore how organizations are employing various social media and if any such media are being employed in a dialogic manner.

Research has shown that colleges and universities are relatively poor at using dialogic features in their websites (Gordon & Berhow, 2009). No research has explored their use of social media in a dialogic context, however. Twitter, a popular microblogging tool, is a social media platform employed by many colleges and universities. Twitter users create messages known as "tweets," of 140 characters or less, which are posted on their profiles as well as to a live-streaming feed for the users' followers. A user has the option to attach media content to each tweet. Other users have the opportunity to forward or respond to a user's tweets. Twitter describes its own dialogic potential, saying "businesses use Twitter to quickly share information with people interested in their products and services, gather real-time market intelligence and feedback, and build relationships with customers, partners and influential people" (*About Twitter*, 2012, ¶ 4). This study explored how universities employed Twitter as a communication tool using Kent and Taylor's (2002) five principles of dialogic communication: (a) the dialogic loop, (b) the

usefulness of information, (c) generation of return visits, (d) ease of interface, and (e) conservation of visitors.

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: Which dialogic principles are present in the individual tweets of colleges and universities in the United States?

RQ2: Which publics are targeted in the individual tweets of major universities and colleges in the United States?

RQ3: Do universities employ the principles of dialogic communication to a different degree than do liberal arts colleges?

2.1 Method

A content analysis of university tweets was conducted. The sample institutions were chosen from *U.S. News and World Report's* 2012 rankings of best colleges and universities (College Rankings and Lists, 2012). Every third institution listed in the national university rankings as well as the liberal arts college rankings was chosen for possible inclusion in the study. This resulted in a total of 133 institutions. Researchers then visited Twitter.com to see if each of these institutions had an active Twitter profile. Profiles were considered active if they had tweeted within one week of October 13, 2011. This criterion gave a final sample of 113 institutions (60 national universities and 53 liberal arts colleges). The ten most recent tweets for each of these institutions posted on or before October 13, 2011, were then sampled for inclusion in the study

for a total of 1130 tweets. The date was chosen in an attempt to represent a typical week on Twitter for a college or university.

A coding scheme was developed to operationalize Kent and Taylor's (2002) principles based on the work of Rybalko and Seltzer's (2010). As with Rybalko and Seltzer, *Ease of Interface* was omitted from the analysis as features of Twitter's interface are the same across profiles and are designed for simplicity. Two authors of this study coded all 1130 individual tweets. Each tweet was first coded for its target audience: *Perspective Student*, *Student*, *Faculty*, *Alumni*, or *Parents*. Individual tweets could be coded for multiple target audiences. If a target audience was not identified the audience was coded as *General*. Each dialogic principle was then coded as either present or not present. If present, a category was noted for what qualified that principle as present. The two coders began with a sub-sample of 100 common tweets. Reliability testing was performed for each principle using Cohen's kappa and ranged between .66 (*conservation of visitors*) and 1.0 (*usefulness of information*).

3.1 Results

The first research question asked which dialogic principles are present in the individual tweets of major universities and colleges in the United States. Of the 1130 tweets sampled, 944 (83.5%) were coded as containing *useful information*. *Generation of visitors* was the second most common feature with 629 (55.7%) tweets. There were 590 (52.2%) tweets coded for *conservation of visitors*. Finally, 334 (29.6%) of the sampled tweets contained dialogic loop

features. Of the tweets that were classified as meeting the principle of dialogic loop, 269 (80.5%) were so classified because they were a retweet.

The second research question asked which publics are targeted in the individual tweets of colleges and universities in the United States. Results indicate that the majority of universities' Twitter accounts are directed towards a general audience. Out of 1130 tweets, 1007 (89.1%) were directed toward a general audience, 54 (4.8%) were directed towards prospective students, 69 (6.1%) were directed towards students, 18 (1.6%) towards faculty, 19 (1.7%) towards alumni and 54 (4.8%) towards parents.

The third research question asked if national universities employ the principles of dialogic communication to a different degree than do liberal arts colleges. An independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the use of each of the four dialogic principles by both national universities ($n = 60$) and liberal arts colleges ($n = 53$). Three of the four principles were employed by national universities to a greater extent than they were by liberal arts colleges. The principle of *usefulness of information* showed a small but significant difference in the results for university ($M=.84$, $SD=.35$) and liberal arts colleges ($M=.82$, $SD=.38$); $t=1.25$, $p=.013$. The principle of *generation of return visits* showed a significant difference in the results for university ($M=.63$, $SD=.48$) and liberal arts colleges ($M=.46$, $SD=.49$); $t=5.71$, $p=.000$. Finally, the principle of *dialogic loop* showed a significant difference in the results for university ($M=.39$, $SD=.49$) and liberal arts colleges ($M=.18$, $SD=.39$); $t=7.56$, $p=.000$.

4.1 Discussion

The small significant difference found between universities' and liberal arts colleges' use of the principle of *usefulness of information* and the larger difference in their use of the principle of *generation of return visits* may be explained by the size and resources available to these institutions. Tweets that met both of these principles included links to outside sources. Larger institutions often have more events on campus, more successful sports teams, and greater capacity for faculty research and awards. This may lead to more media coverage and more opportunities to tweet links to outside sources. Also, it should be noted, many institutions had multiple Twitter profiles, with profiles appearing for departments such as the athletic department or student services in addition to the general institutional profile. It may be that the existence of these alternate profiles skewed what appeared on the general profile.

Our findings indicate that colleges and universities primarily employed Twitter as an institutional news feed to a general population. In our sample, 790 (69.9%) of the 1130 tweets contained links; 587 (51.9%) of these were links to other parts of the institutions' Internet presence. Twitter promotes an open exchange of information and real-time connections that can be employed in a dialogic manner. Our finding that 29.5% of tweets met the dialogic loop principle, primarily through retweets, indicates that universities are not successfully using this tool in the way it is promoted. Further research will need to address the reasons for this finding and if social media tools such as Twitter can function in a dialogical manner.

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