

VOLUME 44

2021



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It is. It isn't. It is.

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The Nurse-Family Connection: Exploring Verbal and Nonverbal Immediacy

"The Most Beautiful Thing in the World": A Rhetorical Analysis of Relational Dialectics and Friendship in the Musical Kinky Boots

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Stereotyping: An Open Conversation on the Establishment, Nature, and Impact of Stereotypes on Society

An Active Approach to Listening: The Coin Drop Activity

**COMMUNICATION AND THEATER ASSOCIATION
OF MINNESOTA JOURNAL**

Volume 44

2021

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CTAM JOURNAL MISSION STATEMENT

The *Communication and Theater Association of Minnesota Journal (CTAMJ)* is the scholarly journal of the Communication and Theater Association of Minnesota (CTAM). The journal is an outlet for articles related to issues of discipline-related importance including articles discussing innovative teaching methods. All theoretical and methodological approaches are welcome.

CTAMJ encourages contributions from scholars and practitioners, who comprise all segments of the journal's readership, including K-12 educators, graduate school, community college, and college or university groups. The journal welcomes theoretical and applied articles from both the theater and communication disciplines. Capable scholars in the appropriate field will blindly review all general manuscripts.

No work will be accepted or rejected purely on the basis of its methodology or subject. Author sex, race, ethnic background, geographical location, or work affiliation (secondary/college level, department, etc.) of the author(s) are never considered in making editorial judgments. The demands of the disciplines of speech communication and theater are key factors in the editorial judgments made. All editorial decisions attempt to balance these demands with the needs and interests of the journal's readers.

The journal is guided by three key principles:

- *To provide an outlet for the expression of diverse ideas.*
- *To publish high quality scholarship in the disciplines of Speech Communication and Theater.*
- *To meet the journal-related needs of CTAM and its members.*

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Authors should submit an electronic copy of their work as a Word document by e-mail to the editor. A separate, electronic title page should include a 100-125 word abstract of the article, author's name and professional title, job title, the school or institutional affiliation of the author/s, a mailing address, and an e-mail address. Care should be taken that author identification has been removed from the manuscript itself for review purposes. **All manuscripts should be prepared according to current APA or MLA guidelines.**

All articles are read anonymously by at least two associate editors. All author identification markings are removed from the articles and no editor reads the work of a colleague. Associate editors may submit articles to the journal, but their work must go through the process of blind review, just as any other submitter. The journal editor facilitates the process and makes final decisions based on the associate editors' recommendations and comments. If there are any questions about the process, please direct them to the journal editor.

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FROM THE EDITOR

It is summer in Minnesota. The radishes have come and gone, the tomatoes and peppers are setting fruit, and the marigolds are going about their business without a care in the world. This is how I measure things now. Like many, I hopped on the gardening bandwagon in 2020. With travel plans delayed indefinitely, I knew I would be home to water and tend. I knew I would be home a *lot*. I also knew I needed something to mark the passage of time, to provide purpose and hope, and to feed my stomach and soul.

And so, I started with one raised bed, tucked over the hill behind our home. Growing up, my family always had a garden, so I had a fairly solid foundation of knowledge. Nevertheless, I felt like a novice and found comfort in research. I came to enjoy it, especially in the snowy early months of the pandemic. Watching garden tours and tutorials while the March winds blew was a reminder of warm sunny days ahead, of how much there was to learn. It was through this research that I began to reconsider my own possibilities as a gardener. I found a community of growers happy to share wisdom, who joyfully explain lessons that took them years to learn through trial and error while adamantly reminding fellow gardeners that we might all apply these lessons in unique ways and with different results. In other words, they share their insights freely so that we may learn, build on their lessons, pay that knowledge forward, and—in more ways than one—grow together.

I share this because gardening has had an unexpectedly profound impact on my life during the past 16 months. During this time, my gardening space has more than quadrupled. I began starting vegetable seeds indoors this past February and maintain spreadsheets to track the performance of dozens of varieties of plants. Gardening has been a hopeful highlight and welcome distraction in a year of uncertainty and near-constant concern. Moreover, the lessons I have learned have infused my thoughts, my conversations, and my values. In fact, it is difficult for me to reflect on the gardening process without drawing parallels to my job as an educator: preparing a timeline for sowing seeds indoors reinforces the importance of thoughtful planning. The magic of watching life stem from a tiny dried out seed, each of which has unique requirements for success, reminds me to focus on potential. The patient process of separating seedlings into individual pots so they have space to grow is a metaphor deserving of its own book. And the process of hardening plants off by gradually exposing them to direct sunlight, wind, rain, and fluctuating temperatures is a reminder that growth requires challenge, but not all at once or more than one can handle.

*

I see these lessons and more reflected in this issue of the *CTAM Journal*, and I am grateful for the wisdom of each contributor. I appreciate the glimpses we get into their research, their musings, and their classrooms. Unique to this issue, we begin with three “Covid Shorts.” These pieces set the stage by reminding us this issue was not created in a vacuum by folks going about “business as usual.” It came together despite the challenges of the moment. I hope these snapshots will remind us of the inextricable link between the personal and the professional, especially in disciplines as human-centered as our own. Our scholarship cannot—and should not—be divorced from the realities of our lived experiences as educators, scholars, and individuals with rich lives that extend well beyond our chosen vocations.

In addition to our wonderful contributors, I would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to the individuals who made time to review submissions and provide thoughtful feedback that helped shape them into the excellent articles in the pages that follow. You have been an incredible team of associate editors. I would like to offer an additional line of thanks to my husband Chad Kuyper, whose front row seat to this process means he is frequently asked—and happily agrees—to provide an additional set of eyes or ears. Despite the additional challenges of the past year, the time, expertise, and diligence of these individuals made this issue possible. I appreciate you all.

As a final note, this will be my last issue as editor of the *CTAM Journal*. I am grateful to have had this opportunity to serve our organization, and I am equally grateful for Dr. Bradley Wolfe's willingness to take over as the new journal editor. He has excellent ideas for future issues of the journal, and I have no doubt he will be exceptional in this role. May we all answer his calls and keep his inbox fully stocked with quality manuscripts!

*

As we move forward, I encourage you to look back on the last year. While there is certainly much about the pandemic we are eager to leave behind, I hope you will be inspired to reflect on things you would like to bring with you into the new normal. Regardless of whether that includes flowers and vegetables, I hope you will find new opportunities—both professionally and personally—that inspire you to grow.

Happy reading,



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COVID SHORTS

Reflections on Writer's Block

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An earlier version of this essay appeared on the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee's website as part of the Rhetoric Society of America student chapter page for their spring RSA Series.

When I finished the MA program at Northern Illinois University in 2010, I initially had no intention of returning for a PhD. I felt burned out on academics and was itching to get into my own classroom to teach. Despite the intense pressures of a tightening job market, I was fortunate. I found a permanent, full-time faculty position at a small, rural university in the southwest corner of Minnesota. Deciding to leave that wonderful and supportive community was difficult, but after three years there, I realized that I had more to say (and more to learn) and I wanted to return to get my PhD as a way of amplifying my voice.

Finding such a robust and supportive program at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee felt (and still feels) like kismet; successfully completing that program felt (and still feels) like an extraordinary privilege. In that community, I found a handful of the best people on the planet. I continue to cherish their friendship and mentorship, and I am deeply grateful for my place in that family.

As a rhetorician, I have found myself exploring new avenues of expression in the age of COVID. An introvert at heart, part of me feels as though I was built for a global pandemic. I don't have to be "with" people to feel close to them and I have found comfort in the ways I've been forced to turn inward. I bought books and managed to read most of a few of them. I've tended plants and they are still alive. My dog and I are now co-dependent. I've also invested more time and space in my life for my marriage and, a few bumpy moments notwithstanding, my relationship with my partner is thriving. I am healthy. My family is healthy.

Once again, I find myself feeling extraordinarily, acutely, lucky. Wholly lucky. One-in-a-million lucky. This, for me, has been my truest experience of isolation during this pandemic and it has been the greatest obstacle to my ability to connect with others (and my research) over the past year. My privilege has been rendered palpable – I can almost feel it sitting heavy in my bones – and I feel a sense of Imposter Syndrome whenever I sit down to write about what is going on in the world. From my positionality, what could I possibly say that folks would want or need to hear; what wisdom is there in my lack of struggle? Why would I opt to center my own voice

when so many other people seem to be directly experiencing any social issue or object of rhetorical inquiry that might catch my interest?

I don't have answers to those questions; I continue to grapple with them and after working for so long to find my voice, I now find it burdensome. The internal tension that punctuates those questions is also a big reason I struggled to write even this brief set of paragraphs. However, I also believe that we receive from the world what we invite. If we desire truth, we have to tell it. If we hope to build a better world, we have to amplify what is better about each of us.

My experience during the pandemic has reshaped my approach to rhetorical scholarship and helped me to formulate a commitment to call attention to our collective voids – the ideological gulfs that separate us, the holes that dot our social safety nets and exacerbate inequity, the leadership vacuum that plagues our politics, the material and immaterial cavities that are left when access to community has been disrupted, etc. These are the voids that mark isolation and the absent 'ties that bind.' My main touchstone throughout the past year has been the experience of my own isolation and it has moved me to reconsider what counts as constitutive. I have begun to wonder whether centering the affective experience of isolation may be a productive place to begin rebuilding a sense of togetherness.

It is. It isn't. It is.

Chad Kuyper

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This piece was written in late July 2020. Stay-at-home orders had been lifted a couple months prior in Minnesota, but both the state and the country were seeing a steep rise in COVID-19 infections. No viable vaccine was on the horizon.

I wanted to play with chronology in this piece. Spending fourteen months inside the same set of walls makes both time – and memory – slippery. Hard to wrestle into a recognizable shape. So the events of these two days are told in a chronological jumble that more closely resembles how I recall events of the last year. And while Zoom, in its pandemic ubiquity, doesn't make an appearance, the electronic communication channels – texting, social media – that we all leaned on even more than usual in our year of isolation play a central role here. Hopefully this piece serves as a tiny record of the communication strategies and rocky interpersonal contexts so many of us navigated in the pandemic.

All names have been changed.

*

A thin branch on the tree next to our porch – the room where I have spent 80% of my waking moments in quarantine – has grown sideways into the side of the house. When the wind blows just right, it makes a cartoonish, haunted-house sound as it scrapes against the siding: *Creeeeeeeeeeee. Creeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.*

My sister texted me last week. *How would you feel about some distanced hangs this weekend?* She lives fifteen minutes away. We usually see her and her husband James once or twice a month, but I have only seen her twice since March 16. *James is making dinner! Saturday? Sit and sweat in the backyard?*

OK. This offer fits the guides my husband and I have set for seeing people socially, something we've done...twice now? They are:

1) No seeing anyone who is being a dummy about this, under any circumstances. I see you, Facebook friends who post an unending stream of house party and restaurant selfies.

2) Outside only. Zero seconds sharing air with anyone in an indoor space, even if the windows are open.

3) Lawn chairs are plunked in the grass six feet apart from other households.

Masks are for indoor spaces with other people: grocery stores, doctor's offices. My husband and I have based these thresholds on what we've read, checked in with each other about them, decided we're OK with them. Setting them is like plunging a grappling hook into a cloud. We are keenly aware they're based on current understanding of a virus that has never appeared in the history of the planet, understanding that could shift like sand with one Washington Post story.

I reply to my sister. *Sounds good!*

My friend Trevor texts me. *When can we see you before we leave?* Trevor is my oldest friend. 28 years, 6th grade. Three years ago, Trevor was diagnosed with esophageal cancer and underwent a full gastrectomy. His esophagus now connects directly to his intestines, and he eats between four and six small meals a day. If he drinks beer too fast, he'll go from hammered to hungover to square one in the space of two hours. Trevor's cancer diagnosis was revised a year ago to Stage IV after it metastasized to his liver. His type of chemo allows him to keep his hair, but he will have a monthly infusion of it the rest of his life. Sometimes the chemo makes red-hot blisters bloom on his palms and soles. Trevor is music faculty in western Wisconsin, and after five years of a 192-mile daily commute from Minneapolis, he and his wife and kids are moving to a place minutes from his campus. *We can grill. Disposable, individual everything. What do you say?* Trevor has been vocal about COVID on Facebook. Angry. As someone with an immune system in tatters, he posts nearly every day, excoriating people who don't wear masks. He reserved some extra-profanity for the lieutenant governor of Texas, who argued the elderly and immunocompromised are a suitable sacrifice for the re-opening of the American economy, as they cost more to maintain anyway.

I reply, *We'll be there.*

All right. My sister on Saturday and Trevor on Sunday. This is good. A nice little weekend. It will be good to see people. Will it? It will. Of course it will. And we'll be safe. We're being smart about this. But safest of all would be to stay home. Everyone agrees on that. So what are we doing? We have FaceTime. We have Zoom. Isn't that what we should be doing? No, that's no way to live. Fauci says outside is fine. Osterholm says it's fine. Fine-ish. But not totally safe. But what is totally safe? Not rollercoasters. Not swimming in a lake. And certainly not driving, even before the pandemic, and I never thought twice about doing any of those things. So this is fine. It's fine. It's fine.

Creeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.

Saturday afternoon. A text from my sister dings into my phone, and then my husband's. *Uuuuuugh it's supposed to thunderstorm this evening. Inside with masks on?* My husband and I look at each other, and there's no discussion, just a simultaneous sag of our shoulders. I text, *Sorry. We're not there yet,* and then try to find the appropriate emoji. My sister is far from

careless, but her perspective is just different from ours: having been deemed essential employees (food shelf non-profit), she and her husband have gone to work, masked, five days a week in an indoor office since the beginning of the pandemic. I continue: *What about a happy hour in a couple hours, before the rain? Cocktails? Backyard?*

The reply comes in a couple minutes later. *Blugh. That won't work.*

Creeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.

We show up at Trevor's with some cheese, crackers, pickles, and cherry tomatoes from the garden. We ignore the house and walk around to the back where the chairs are set up, six feet apart. Trevor comes out of the house with a HA HA HA HA WHAT and points to his chest. We're wearing the same damn shirt, red plaid short-sleeved button-down, Mossimo collection, Target, circa 2014. Their daughter (7) is full of opinions about constellations, the color of her new bedroom, and Mary Berry and Paul Hollywood's Masterclass on Netflix. Their son (3) runs out of the house, tears around with the dog for a bit, and then stands next to me in my chair and puts his hand on the crook of my arm. Um. I look up, needing guidance from anyone: *what now, guys? How do we play this?* I pull away, but Elton is, well, three, so he grabs my arm and pulls it back on to the armrest, laughing. His mom smiles. Trevor does too. *OK. OK OK OK. They're fine with this. I'm going to take my cue from them. Wait wait wait wait wait. Trevor's white blood cells are shot. This is dumb. I'm getting up. This was a mistake. But Trevor's family knows his immune system is weak. Plus, they both work from home, and they talk about how they go literally nowhere, getting groceries delivered. And they know my husband and I have been working from home for over four months, doing basically the same thing. So they're fine, and we're fine, and this is fine. Is it? It's not. It is. I-*

Elton smooths the hair on my arms, then pushes it back the other direction, then smooths it again. He mashes his fingertip into two moles on my arm.

“Are those BOO-BOOS??”

“Nope! Just moles.”

“Oh. Oh! Yeah! I got some of those, too!”

Elton looks back up at me, mopy quarantine hair falling over his eyes. He grins, plops his head on my shoulder, and goes back to stroking my arm. A fishhook tugs inside me, and I say to the group, “This is the most affectionately someone I'm not married to has touched me in four months.” Knowing nods.

Creeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.

6 PM Saturday. My sister texts, *OK James is so proud of this dinner he wants to send some with you in a to-go box. Want to come pick some up?* James texts, *Cocktail on the front porch when you get here?* Jesus, the front porch. We're idiots. We could have had dinner out there in our laps if we wanted, well over six feet apart. We're not used to thinking of our houses like this, of

spaces where air will be most likely to blow a deadly, poorly understood virus away from us. We push our chairs far apart on the porch, and hey: James was not wrong. Dinner is delicious and a thunderstorm shatters overhead, the lightning purple and jagged.

*

We wrap up at Trevor's, the heat of the day receding. My husband takes a picture of the family on their back steps, in their final week in Minnesota. We re-pack the snacks we brought. Then, we stand in the backyard. A pause. I have the same thought I've had every time I've said goodbye to Trevor in the last three years, and I'm sure you don't need me to tell you what it is. It hits even harder now that they're moving. I say "Well..." and Trevor responds, "My son's already touched you today, Chad." And then he takes two long steps forward and hugs me. A hug with purpose. Meaning. I squeeze back, fiercely. We stay like that for a beat longer than most guys from Minnesota hug. One last wave to the kids, and we leave.

Creeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.

We're not even home yet when Trevor's wife Hannah posts pictures from the afternoon on Facebook. I see them in the car. The picture of Trevor and me is a good one. It's a really good one, actually. Our matching shirts, me with my jokey, open-mouthed, too-big-smile and my hand under my chin, senior-picture style, and Trevor looking at the camera sideways with a wry smirk that's genuine but has seen some shit.

And we are definitely not six feet apart.

And the rat-a-tat-tat record cranks up again: Jesus shit shit shit how irresponsible Trevor is immunocompromised was it really worth it to take that chance for one afternoon wait wait when Hannah held her phone up for a picture Trevor plopped down in front of me and then got right back up again when the photo was taken and went back to his chair which was six feet from mine and we're all outside anyway but shouldn't we have masked up Trevor's cells Trevor's cells Trevor's cells but how can you eat with a mask on and besides we've been good and they have too like actually good like really really good and I was taking my cues from them but shouldn't I have held the line and isn't this what a collective slide into carelessness looks like one barbecue one photo and then months on a ventilator and brain damage the rest of your life but we're dealing with things we were never designed to deal with and aren't we just doing our best but shouldn't your best be even better Chad and you can do better but there's no use in trying to do better and

My husband pulls into the garage and we're back home.

*

The New York Times's red line graph of new American cases of COVID-19 reaches back to March. No smooth, European bell curve for us. Ours twists upwards, like a bent coat hanger.

Pandemics are long and fraught, but they end. Pandemics end. They end. They end. They have to.

They have to.

Creeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.

Creeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.

As Your Writing and Reading Teacher

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AS YOUR WRITING & READING TEACHER,

and as a poetry enthusiast (fangirl), I was thinking about you yesterday as I watched Amanda Gorman perform her poem at Biden's inauguration, and then I was really thinking about you, students, as I watched Anderson Cooper interview her last night. I hope so much that you heard the poem, and I would truly love for you to watch the interview: she talks about the task to write a poem, the feel of words over images, the research she did from history and culture to pull this poem together. It is a feat that seems impossible. And she's 22 years old. She said Yes let's do this, she said This is a job for poetry.

I will admit—and I *bate* to admit this—that after I watched political pundits talk about her poem I chuckled at them a bit. I thought "um, okay, stay in your lane, folks, you don't know how to talk about poetry," and I am so embarrassed at the knee-jerk response. Students, I was a snob, and I wish I could click the Undo Arrow about it. It was the exact opposite person than I want to be, and I share this with you in case you've once been the same. We're human, it's okay, now we fix it: luckily, I pulled myself out of that negativity right and quick. I think the last year or so, and especially the last three weeks, has trained us in negativity, and it is our responsibility to identify it and then smash it down. If you can't turn negativity into action, then what's the point? Positive is possible without toxic-positive.

I also thought about how Dr. Jill Biden, an English professor, recognized the talent in Gorman and felt the impulse to put her on stage for the entire world to see. Make no mistake in glossing over the fact that Amanda Gorman is a Black woman, and that Black voices have been marginalized since the founding of—let me catch myself, *before* the founding of—this nation. This is a step into a moment. I feel Dr. Biden's choice, the desire to say "everyone, you need to feel this, this young person has something to say." No matter your political beliefs, believe in poetry.

It's a little funny how English teachers' phones and Twitter feeds blew up after Gorman delivered the poem. We were dying to share it with you. Immediately, lesson plans flooded the internet as though we'd been pregnant with apathy for too long and finally our waters collectively broke. (I won't develop that metaphor any further, because I don't know how to do so without mentioning placenta.)

Instead of a lesson plan, though, I simply want to share it with you and invite you to sit with it, because teachers have this habit of turning everything into a lesson—I could not be more guilty of this, folks, and no shade to any teacher who is going to process this with you at all—but I honestly don't have the energy to turn this into an academic learning experience. Instead, I want you to celebrate this poem as that moment I mentioned above. It's a moment for our country and it's a moment for you. It's a moment I remembered that poetry is for everyone (literally millions and

millions of Americans), not just your teachers and not just in the classroom. Poetry is academic but mostly not academic; when we analyze it, we do so because we want to feel an experience again and again to make sure we got this “being a human” right. Poetry is a flashbulb of humanity. Last night, I paused, put my phone down for once, and watched news channels talk about *literature*. On the news! And for, collectively, hours! And still this morning, even. The entire tone of the industrial news complex changed in a wind gust moment: like that cliché back-to-life enchanted rose in *Beauty and the Beast*.

In the interview, Anderson Cooper admits he doesn't know much about poetry, but his eyes tear up as he talks to Gorman. Van Jones, another CNN anchor, said yesterday that “literature is an empathy machine.” The English teachers at home said “my dudes, my dudes! We have been telling you this since the beginning.” Jones said the poem made him wonder how many other young people were out there with such powerful things to say. And all of the teachers in all of the disciplines in all of the land said, “my [clap emoji] dudes [clap emoji] they [clap emoji] are [clap emoji] in [clap emoji] my [clap emoji] classroom [clap emoji].” They're right here.

GENERAL INTEREST ARTICLES

Geographically Dispersed Community Networks: Exploring Social Networking Site Experiences and Relationships in the Intercollegiate Forensics Community

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Abstract

A survey administered to current intercollegiate forensics competitors indicated members of the geographically dispersed forensics community extend existing community spaces using social networking sites (SNS). Results indicate participants connected and interacted with team members, fellow competitors, and judges using multiple SNS about forensics and non-forensics related topics. Participants reported differing levels of self-monitoring behaviors, which manifested in emphasizing or stifling particular personality attributes. Emphasized attributes included the participant's education level, professionalism, or consistency with perceived community values. Stifled content included competitive secrets, politics, profanity, and other negative personal images. Experienced competitors noted the overwhelmingly positive impacts on competitive success of networking with judges, both in person and using SNS. Finally, participants noted online interactions impacted offline interactions and identity portrayals within forensics.

This paper was presented at the 2017 National Communication Association annual conference.

Keywords: *Forensics, Social Networking Sites, Online Community Building*

Social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram provide spaces where people can deepen and maintain connections online (Boase et al., 2006; boyd & Ellison, 2007;

Ellison et al., 2007; Yang et al., 2014). As a communication tool, social networking sites can help maintain and deepen relationships for geographically dispersed individuals (Gentile & Edwards, 2014; Johnson et al., 2008; Tillema et al., 2010). Intercollegiate forensics is a semi-transient, geographically dispersed community built around competitive speaking tournaments. While individual teams often have shared physical spaces (Carmack & Holm, 2005), the forensics community at large does not occupy physically exclusive, dedicated spaces. Tournament competitions require borrowing building spaces (e.g., classrooms) intended for purposes other than competition. Through signage and arrangements of furniture, physical spaces are transformed to meet needs of the competitions (Paine, 2005). However, when the tournament is over, participants relinquish the borrowed physical space. Social networking sites (SNS) provide intercollegiate forensics community members a physically unbounded opportunity to build connections, continue discussions, and facilitate relationships.

The forensics community encompasses competitors, judges, coaches, administrators, and alumni. Each group plays a unique role in the community, but competitors face complex and sometimes challenging relationships. Forensic teams often utilize physical spaces on their own campus, such as team rooms; these physical spaces create opportunities to develop beneficial relationships between the students. Beyond interpersonal benefits, the affiliation with a particular team may benefit individual competitors. Team success may add credibility to individual competitor performance choices. For example, a student may receive a judge's "benefit of the doubt" about the purposefulness of a performance choice (e.g., structure of a persuasive speech) if the student is affiliated with a typically successful team (e.g., if the team routinely earns top spots at national tournaments). Competitive and interpersonal benefits aside, team members who

share physical spaces (i.e., are geographically close) may maintain close ties, even if interpersonal conflict makes relationships less desirable.

Long-distance relationships maintained with competitors from other teams, program alumni, and judges represent important networks for competitive success. Students compete for many reasons, but competitive success (à la trophies and recognition) motivates many students (Burnett et al., 2003). As they develop performances, students may supplement the written feedback judges provide via ballots through direct conversation with the judges. During dyadic communication during or immediately following a tournament while still sharing the physical space, students can ask clarifying questions, and judges may offer nuanced additions to ballot feedback. These dyads, of course, are easier to form when students and judges maintain close relationships. Additional and clarified feedback may help students achieve more competitive success. Some judges extend additional availability for students (e.g., adding an email address to a ballot), but not all judges are available to the same degrees for all competitors. Competitors balance maintaining friendships with fellow competitors, building team cohesion, and maintaining friendships/professional relationships with those whose favor could advantage their competitive success (even if that is not the intended outcome of the relationship).

Many scholars explore SNS relationship maintenance, but the implications of a competition-focused network have not been explored. Many scholars limit their research to a single SNS (e.g., Marwick & boyd, 2011; Taylor et al., 2014). Notably, the process of conducting, submitting, and revising academic articles means research often lags behind SNS popularity trends and development (e.g., TikTok). Therefore, my study attempts to answer the following research questions:

RQ1) Through which, if any, SNS are forensics competitors connecting with team members, competitors from other teams, and judges?

RQ2) Are forensics SNS connections focused exclusively on forensics-related topics?

RQ3) How do forensics competitors monitor self-presentation when they are connected online with team members, competitors from other teams, and judges?

Self-Presentation Online

Ugh. I dropped him in a round and now all of a sudden he's trying to follow me on Instagram.



Scholars conceptualizing online relationships look to Goffman's (1959, 1979) dramaturgical analyses of self-presentation as one of the ways to characterize the online behaviors. To Goffman, self-presentation is both conscious (*cues given*) and unconscious (*cues given off*). Self-presentation behaviors include revealing values, experiences, and other information pertinent to personal identity. Toma and Carlson (2012) constrained self-presentation in SNS through four factors: self-description, co-construction with network members, performing for a large number of people making up multiple audiences, and accrual over time. Self-description may take many forms depending upon the type of social media used. Smock (2010) described Facebook self-description on a profile as encompassing the individual's "sex, birthday, hometown, relationship status, sexual orientation, political views, religious views, activities, interests, favorite music, favorite TV shows, favorite movies, favorite books, favorite quotations, an 'about me' blurb, and group memberships" (p. 4). Smith and Sanderson (2015) evaluated self-presentations of professional athletes through the photographs and captions posted on Instagram. Marwick and boyd (2011) identified text-based public posts, pictures, followers, and retweets as self-presentation methods on Twitter, though profiles share information as well. Pinterest users present the self through items they pin and the names of the boards organizing the

items (such as the difference between naming a board “Crochet Patterns” or “Darling You Stay, Crochet Away”). SNS create a unique space with multiple communication methods through which to perform, but the messages are not contextually-situated as they would be offline (Hogan, 2010). In essence, all contacts interact with one, unified self-presentation.

One major difference between face-to-face and online self-presentation is the increased ability to control self-revealed information. Gradinaru (2013) explained online self-presentation occurs through editable posts; a caption may undergo several rewrites prior to release on a platform (unlike a spontaneously spoken comment in conversation). Dunn (2008) highlighted how text-based posts allow the user time to evaluate and edit messages before sharing with others. While in-person interactants may see contradictions between self-descriptors and behaviors, online users may present a version of what Hogan (2010) called an idealized front. Online idealized fronts are versions of ourselves (grounded in offline identities) exemplifying how we would like to be seen. For instance, someone cannot claim online to lose 150 pounds if pictures, posts from other people, and offline relationships contradict the claim. Toma and Carlson (2012) found people portray themselves in flattering manners with slight enhancements to their presentations, emphasizing traits like physical attractiveness, friendliness, likeability, outgoingness, humor, and easy-goingness.

The posts and comments of others validate (or dispute) the accuracy of self-presentations in SNS. Warranting theory (Walther & Parks, 2002; Walther, et al., 2009) suggests other-provided information is more trustworthy than self-provided information because others have less reason to manipulate (or idealize) presentations. Therefore, while information presented on SNS is likely embellished, information conveyed through images and captions is more likely based in verifiable offline truths than complete fabrications.

SNS audiences are made up of innumerable relationships, from acquaintances to what Boase et al. (2006) described as more important connections like core ties (e.g., family members, romantic partners) and significant ties (e.g., colleagues). Although SNS provide the ability to edit and control self-presentation behaviors, online individuals face a collapsed audience (Binder et al., 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Vitak, 2012). Collapsed audiences refer to the multiple groups of people consuming SNS self-presentations simultaneously. The heterogeneous audiences observing an individual's profile may become "challenging as users attempt to balance these varied audience expectations" (Rui & Stefanone, 2013, p. 1292). Consider sharing undergraduate homecoming weekend stories with a grandparent, a boss, a student, or a friend; the self-presentation would likely change based on the dyad. In SNS, the grandparent, boss, student, and friend could hear the same version of the same story, posing potential self-presentation problems. The collapsed audience is also able to view archived versions of online self-presentations.

Hogan (2010) argued SNS users manage collapsed audiences by self-presenting more neutrally. Often, neutral self-presentation occurs by composing messages using an idealized manner based on the audiences most likely to find the post problematic. Rui and Stefanone (2013) noted, SNS users create posts that are "neutral and uncommitted, but acceptable to all social spheres" to fit the communication needs of more audiences (p. 20). Archived self-presentation further encourages neutral online posting. Kirmayer et al. (2013) compared the scattered and less accessible paper trails of the past to the Internet's indelible memory. The digital access to "past indiscretions, childish mistakes, and other errancies can come back to haunt us endlessly" (Kirmayer et al., 2013, p. 169). Gradinaru (2013) observed archived versions of the self passively maintain previous identity formations, which help individuals differentiate from (but have explicit access to) previous identities. Depending upon the individual's identity

saliency over time, the archived versions of self may be unwelcome. Stryker and Burke (2000) defined identity saliency as “the probability that an identity will be invoked across a variety of situations, or alternatively across persons in a given situation” (p. 286). The saliency spectrum ranges from consistent self-presentation regardless of the context or audience to people who tailor self-presentations closely to situations, foregoing consistent identity performances. Further complicating the impact of archived selves is the performer’s level of self-monitoring.

Rui and Stefanone (2013) described high self-monitors as those who protect their public images due to high concern for social appropriateness, leading to what Smock (2010) described as strategic control of the self-presentation. Smock delineated several online self-presentation methods: attribution (emphasizing characteristics), repudiation (denying characteristics), and subtraction (removing damaging information). Weinstein (2014) suggested omission also presents strategic self-presentation opportunities. In a study of those engaged in political activism, Weinstein found “nearly 20% of participants—all of whom describe robust civic participation and identities offline—refrain entirely from expressing civic views on SNS” due to, in part, their “perceptions of their audience(s) as uninterested or hostile” (p. 227). Fox and Warber (2015) suggested high self-monitoring people may employ privacy settings to manage SNS collapsed audiences. However, frequent changes to privacy settings and the easy ability to screenshot or save online content mean, without careful attention to privacy settings, this type of management may not be the most effective self-presentation strategy.

Outside of the ever-changing privacy options through social media, some users opt for more low-tech methods. Some individuals have tacit (or explicit) agreements that no one may post content including the person’s name and/or image online. For instance, some high school teachers request friends do not post pictures of them consuming alcohol online. Even if not

tagged, high school teachers risk their job security if students see and circulate an “inappropriate” photo. While less technologically taxing, requesting discretion relies on someone else’s evaluation standards and a continued positive relationship. Online acts of denigration, like revenge porn, illustrate the power of other-posted content and the potential impact it may have on online image management. Crampton (2015) described revenge porn as when people post intimate pictures of someone else without the express consent of the person pictured. The prevalence of revenge porn has prompted laws criminalizing the act in over 46 states and the District of Columbia (Crampton). Given the existing literature, the following extends Toma and Carlson’s (2012) description of Facebook profiles as “complex and highly tactical creations where aspects of self are strategically emphasized, deemphasized, or accurately portrayed” (p. 21) to SNS more broadly. Moreover, the research attempts to discern the ways (un)consciously curated online content impacts face-to-face relationships.

Forensics, SNS, and Self-Presentation

Julie: “Ugh! I hate what she posts! She’s so narcissistic”

Ben: “Just unfriend her.”

Julie: “No, I can’t. She’s a forensics person.”



The complex nature of balancing multiple self-presentations with in-person behavior at tournaments and in team spaces deepens with the collapsed audiences in SNS environments. Geographically distant competitors and judges do not see one another except in tournament settings (usually), so SNS may help maintain relationships. SNS provide networking opportunities, but collapsed online audiences combine forensics relationships with completely separate communities. Once networks are established (online and/or offline), some network members may have expectations about relationship longevity. When network connections are

offered (e.g., “following” a competitor on Twitter) some SNS etiquette norms require reciprocation or acknowledgement; failing to follow etiquette norms online impacts offline relationships. For instance, after unfollowing a competitor’s social media page, I received a direct question from the competitor seeking justification for why the online relationship changed. The online relationship alteration led to in-person relationship consequences.

Managing relationships in networked communities where networking hubs create important opportunities for social capital is complex; added SNS maintenance can be both fruitful and frustrating (Ellison et al., 2007). Students benefit from network connections, but they may feel stifled from conveying certain identities the forensic community typically does not reward (such as conservative political beliefs). Offline networks impact online identity and self-presentation, but the present study explores the relationship between the offline and online network interactions and the impacts each have on one another. The impact of online behavior impacting offline identity has been documented (Aarsand, 2008; Ellison et al., 2007), but little research explores how offline community membership in highly networked communities impacts online self-presentation. Therefore, the present study sought to explore the ways community membership, specifically in a competitive focused community where networking is important to success, might impact online and offline self-presentation.

Method

She always posts the same stuff to Instagram, Twitter, AND Facebook. I don't need to see your foodporn in three different places. Guess we're just Facebook friends now. Unfollow.



To better understand SNS use of intercollegiate forensic competitors, I created (and received IRB approval to distribute) an online survey. The questions gathered data regarding team makeup, current SNS use, the ways and types of connections made with fellow competitors

and judges, the ways participants control their self-presentations online, and participants' overall experiences with SNS and the forensics community. Participants were recruited from forensics teams spanning the United States using nonprobability convenience sampling. Calls sent through SNS, forensics listservs, and via direct email requests to forensics coaches sought participants in all competition regions. Inclusionary criteria required individuals to be: (a) at least 18 years old and (b) current forensics competitors at the time of taking the survey. No compensation was offered for participation.

Qualitative data analysis utilized Tracy's (2013) method. Tracy et al. (2015) described a seven-step process: 1) organize and prepare the data, 2) immerse yourself in the data, 3) conduct a primary coding cycle, 4) create a codebook, 5) conduct a secondary coding cycle, 6) synthesize data, 7) analyze for data significance and saturation. After grouping the data, I (re)read the information several times and completed the primary coding cycle. I assigned gerunds and adjectives to pare down open-ended question answers into basic chunks, and I created a codebook encompassing emergent themes. Based on the final codebook, I then recoded the data to find emergent and relevant themes to the research questions. Finally, I synthesized the data into major codes to answer the research questions.

Results

It's so cool that she is posting about her persuasion topic. She must actually care about it.



The online survey garnered 48 participants. Of these, 47 individuals fit study criteria and thus resulted in the total number of completed surveys¹. Participants represented five of the eight

NOTES:

¹ Community size estimates (pre-COVID-19) offered by coaches and administrators involved in national tournament administration differ significantly, ranging from 1,200 to 8,000 total competitors in any given year. They estimated roughly 1,600 student competitors actively

active competition districts in the forensics community, though a disproportionate number of participants (77%) represent teams from the Midwest (North and South Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Nebraska). Participant experience level competing in forensics at the collegiate level also varied, with 35% (n=17) competing for 1-2 semesters, 33% (n=16) competing for 3-4 semesters, 8% (n=4) competing for 5-6 semesters, and 23% (n=11) competing for 7 or more semesters². SNS usage for connecting with community members relies on participants to first use a social medium, and then connect with others. Participants initially indicated SNS usage and frequency before relating the usage to their community member connections. The following sections describe general SNS usage, media connections, and rationale for usage.

General Social Media Usage

Participants began by describing SNS usage in broad terms to establish which SNS channels participants used. Because SNS can be passively consumed (e.g., reading posts, watching videos, looking at photos) and/or actively created (e.g., posting photos, posting captions), participants were asked to specifically note their usage of nine SNS popular at the time of data collection: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, Tumblr, Reddit, LinkedIn, YikYak, and Vine. Nearly all participants (93%, n=43) consumed Facebook information at least once per day, while the amount each participant posted varied more significantly (see Table 1). Over half of the participants (65%, n=29) noted consuming Instagram information at least once per day,

competing (meaning attending four or more tournaments each year) as an appropriate estimate for total community participation, so while 46 participants is fairly small, compared to the number of active community members the percentage taking the survey is likely an adequate representation.

² Providing data regarding the median or mean age of competitors is fruitful because competitor experiences differ significantly between 1 semester and 7 semesters competing.

though 35% (n=16) noted they consumed information less than once per month. Posting on Instagram was also significantly lower than posting to Facebook, with 32% (n=14) of participants posting only once or twice per week and 46% (n=21) noting they posted less than once per month. Slightly fewer participants (59%, n=26) reported reading Twitter posts at least once per day, but similar to Instagram, most participants (57%, n=25) posted once per month or less frequently. Notable decreases in the frequency of each SNS were found for Tumblr, Reddit, YikYak, Pinterest, LinkedIn, and Vine (see Table 1)³.

Facebook represented the highest average percentage of connections between team members (μ =connection with 85% of team) with Instagram (μ =35% of team) and Twitter following (μ =34% of team). Likewise Facebook (μ =interacting with 67% of team), Instagram (μ =23% of team), and Twitter (μ =18% of team) showed the largest numbers of actual interactions with teammates. For community member connections and interactions, Facebook again showed the highest average connections, and was followed by Instagram and Twitter.

³ Obviously based on the SNS listed in the study, the data collection occurred prior to 2019 when Vine discontinued service. The data here provide a snapshot in the ever-changing landscape of SNS use, so they still hold value for analysis.

Table 1
Participant Consumption and Posting on SNS

Medium	Multiple Times per Day		Once per Day		Twice per week		Once per week		Once per month		Less than once per month	
<u>Facebook</u>												
Consuming	40	87%	3	7%	0	0%	1	2%	0	0%	2	4%
Posting	3	6%	6	13%	10	22%	8	17%	9	20%	10	22%
<u>Instagram</u>												
Consuming	19	43%	10	22%	0	0%	1	2%	0	0%	16	35%
Posting	0	0%	3	6%	7	16%	7	16%	7	16%	21	46%
<u>Twitter</u>												
Consuming	19	43%	7	16%	5	11%	0	0%	2	5%	11	25%
Posting	7	16%	3	7%	4	9%	5	11%	6	14%	19	43%
<u>Tumblr</u>												
Consuming	9	20%	3	7%	4	9%	2	4%	1	2%	26	58%
Posting	8	19%	1	2%	1	2%	0	0%	3	7%	29	70%
<u>Reddit</u>												
Consuming	6	14%	0	0%	0	0%	1	2%	1	2%	37	82%
Posting	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	1	2%	0	0%	40	98%
<u>YikYak</u>												
Consuming	3	7%	2	5%	3	7%	1	2%	2	5%	31	74%
Posting	0	0%	0	0%	2	5%	2	5%	0	0%	37	90%
<u>Pinterest</u>												
Consuming	2	4%	3	7%	5	11%	5	11%	5	11%	25	56%
Posting	3	7%	0	0%	0	0%	3	7%	5	12%	31	74%
<u>LinkedIn</u>												
Consuming	1	3%	0	0%	2	5%	6	14%	3	7%	30	71%
Posting	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	3	7%	38	97%
<u>Vine</u>												
Consuming	0	0%	0	0%	3	7%	4	9%	2	5%	33	79%
Posting	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	1	2%	40	98%

The number of team connections and community member connections established through Tumblr, Reddit, Pinterest, LinkedIn, and Vine⁴ were overwhelmingly small percentages

⁴ YikYak could not be studied for specific connections because the nature of the medium includes anonymous posting. However, competitors could conceivably interact with other competitors on YikYak when at tournaments (the medium depends upon location proximity), which is why YikYak was included in the survey.

of team members connected, and the number of participants actually interacting with team and community members was even smaller (see Tables 2 and 3). Therefore, in response to RQ1, at the time of data collection forensic competitors primarily connected with team members, competitors from other teams, judges, and coaches through Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The remaining results sections focus on connections built through Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter since they represented the primary SNS connections and interactions for participants within the forensics community.

Table 2
Connecting/Interacting With Forensics Team Members

	75%-100% of team		25%-50% of team		0% of team	
	Connect With	Interact With	Connect With	Interact With	Connect With	Interact With
Facebook	81%	67%	13%	24%	6%	9%
Instagram	31%	16%	28%	28%	41%	56%
Twitter	24%	7%	42%	40%	34%	53%
Tumblr	0%	0%	16%	14%	84%	86%
Reddit	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%	100%
Pinterest	0%	0%	9%	2%	91%	98%
LinkedIn	2%	2%	14%	2%	84%	96%
Vine	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%	100%

Note. Percentages of team member connection and interaction were used rather than the number of team members since the number of team member connections and interactions is subject to the team size.

Table 3
Connecting/Interacting With Forensics Community Members

	30 or more		5-30		Less than 5	
	Connect With	Interact With	Connect With	Interact With	Connect With	Interact with
Facebook	43%	20%	35%	28%	22%	52%
Instagram	19%	7%	22%	12%	59%	81%
Twitter	22%	9%	17%	18%	61%	73%
Tumblr	0%	0%	7%	0%	93%	100%
Reddit	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%	100%
Pinterest	0%	0%	4%	0%	96%	100%
LinkedIn	5%	0%	14%	2%	81%	98%
Vine	0%	0%	2%	0%	98%	100%

Content and Rationale for Interacting with Community Members

RQ2 inquired about SNS interaction content. Participants described interactions with fellow competitors (students competing on teams from different universities) and judges (coaches and other individuals charged with adjudicating the highly subjective speech competition rounds). Interactions were separated into forensic-related (e.g., asking questions about ballot comments, offering encouragement regarding performances) and not forensic-related (e.g., sharing photos of food, asking questions about personal lives). Table 4 shows participant interaction subjects broken down by population. The results demonstrate SNS connections are not solely focused on competition-related topics.

Table 4

Participant Interaction Content Summary

	<u>Fellow Competitors</u>		<u>Judges</u>	
	Forensics	Non-Forensics	Forensics	Non-Forensics
Facebook	67%	67%	33%	41%
Instagram	35%	30%	7%	16%
Twitter	29%	29%	7%	16%

Finally, RQ3 sought to understand how competitors used self-monitoring behaviors for SNS presentations. Participants differed in opinions on if and how they altered their online images in relation to their participation in forensics. Some, like Participant 35, explicitly answered, “[t]he image I have on Facebook is manipulated and meant to look a certain way,” whereas Participant 39 wrote, “[m]y social life is independent of my Forensics participation.” Others, like Participant 4, noted, “I always try to put my best person out on social media for professional reasons not just forensics,” or Participant 1 who expressed, “[b]ecause I tailor my ‘friends lists’ to my online presence, rather than the other way around, I don’t feel pressure to change what I post or share.” While many participants indicated they did not alter their online

identity performances to impact the forensics community, some indicated they emphasized some personality aspects while stifling others.

Emphasizing Personality Attributes

Participants noted emphasizing team membership had potential benefits. For instance, Participant 23 wrote, “[s]ometimes I share pictures of my team because I know that people will like it,” and Participant 19 shared, “[t]eam pictures are meant to intimidate from my perspective. We are gorgeous.” Participant 7 noted increasing awareness of “grammar, spelling, and punctuation” to enhance the appearance of being educated, and Participant 15 acknowledged maintaining a “good image” to avoid appearing to be “an idiot” or a “drunk.” Participant 23 admitted posting “feelings on specific topics” knowing community members may react positively in response. Participant 1 described emphasizing success through images:

I will always post an image of me in a suit at any tournament I go to, as well as an image with anything that I’ve won. It shows that I am an active presence in the community (and sometimes maybe even a successful one).

Showing a different perspective, Participant 4 noted, “I am more hesitant to share these wins...for fear of coming off as pompous.” Fearing retribution was one issue leading participants to stifle identity performances.

Stifling Personality Attributes

Participants noted several ways they stifled aspects of their online identity portrayals on SNS, specifically recognizing competition-focused rationale. Participants 4 and 7 noted not sharing the title of their literature or the topics of their speeches until after the speech had been “claimed” during a competition. Participant 7 wrote, “I won’t make a status or tweet with the title of my speech piece until I have taken it out to at least one tournament. It’s a competitive edge

sort of thing.” Avoiding politics was mentioned numerous times. Politics may be avoided for many reasons, but Participant 31 shared, “I refrain from posting anything about political correctness or involving my political views because I am afraid they will not be agreed with by many forensic involved people.” Many other participants noted behaviors to control the image community members and judges may have of them, such as those who control the profanity they use online. Participant 12 described avoiding “swearing and foul language.” Participant 27 mentioned a team-based initiative to avoid swearing: “As a team, we try to refrain from postings/reposting anything profain [sic] so we don't make ourselves look bad to our coaches, other coaches or the region.” While some participants limited profanity, others like Participant 21 reported avoidance of posting “drinking at tournament selfies.”

Ultimately, the rationale for stifling or downplaying certain identity characteristics or behaviors resulted from the desire to manage presence for competitive purposes. Participant 28 noted the self-portrayal online through SNS had the ability to affect perceived credibility. Participant 3 avoided sharing personal details “because I don't want others to see me for that.” Participant 10 stated bluntly

I don't interact with judges on social media but I do keep my social media presentable in the event someone begins viewing it during the competition. Any potential discoveries might produce positive or negative bias, and I don't want that to happen, so I won't post about much aside from forensics in the day leading up to a tournament.

A competitive rationale for self-monitoring may develop based on the potential impacts SNS relationships have on face-to-face relationships.

Two thirds (66%, n=29) of competitors indicated they felt online SNS relationships impacted in-person relationships with competitors and judges, while 25% (n=11) reported no

impact. Others (9%, n=4) described not connecting with forensics community members online, the impact being minor, or, as Participant 35 suggested, “I think in some ways it does, maybe not overtly, but that information exchanged on the platform does have an impact.”

Participants answered an open-ended question about the impacts online relationships have on in-person interactions. A few individuals noted face-to-face interactions were not impacted by online connections (e.g., Participant 22: “No matter where we're talking, it's the same connection despite the fact if it's in person or not” or Participant 23: “I think it doesn't because I like to keep the people that I meet in speech in a very business-esque relationship”). The vast majority of respondents noted positive relationship results. Most frequently cited were ways online interactions changed the nature of the face-to-face relationship, such as Participant 1 who shared, “I feel people I interact with online have a better/different understanding of my entire personality, rather than just the persona I wear at forensics tournaments.” Participant 14 described online interactions as “more friendly,” and Participant 10 suggested “interaction advances our relationship.” Participant 27 noted the ability to “share funny things when we're not together.”

The changing relationship likely occurs in conjunction with the increased discussion frequency noted by many participants. Participant 5 noted online interactions occur between “people you do not see everyday [sic],” noting the transient nature of the forensic community. The chance for “more frequent discussion” (Participant 39) may be the key to the relationship. Increased conversation provides opportunities to, as Participant 12 noted, “have more conversation topics” and, as Participant 43 wrote, make “them seem more like ‘real’ people.” Performance benefits included competitors feeling “more comfortable performing for” people they know (Participant 37), getting an “idea of [judges’] politics” (Participant 19), and

conversations can “help build credibility” (Participant 3). The competition benefits extended beyond comfort and credibility, though the extent of the perceived benefits differed depending on the participant.

When asked if networking with judges affected competitive success, 49% (n=22) responded yes and 47% (n=21) responded no. Participants responding “other” noted, “I wouldn't doubt that some would be more favorable if they knew you through social networking but I could also see some judging harder because they think you can do more” (Participant 45) and “it's important to not over network with judges, otherwise you'll come off as a schmoozer” (Participant 15). Interestingly, when the responses were broken down by years spent competing, the results were noticeably different. Less experienced competitors (in the first half of their competitive years) less frequently felt judge-competitor networking affected competition than more experienced competitors (see Table 5).

Table 5
Judge-Competitor Networking Impact Broken Down by Experience

	1-4 Semesters		5 or more semesters	
Yes	10	32%	12	86%
No	19	61%	2	14%
Other	2	7%	0	0%

A similar divide occurred when comparing responses for the impact of networking with judges specifically on social media sites. Eighty-four percent of less experienced competitors did not see networking on social media as impacting success, whereas 69% of experienced competitors saying online networking *did* have an impact on success (see Table 6). Despite the emphasis or downplaying of identity characteristics and performances for competitive reasons, the impacts of improved face-to-face relationships were augmented by community benefits.

Table 6
Judge-Competitor Networking through Social Media Affect Broken Down by Experience

	1-4 Semesters		5 or more semesters	
Yes	3	10%	9	69%
No	26	84%	3	23%
Other	2	6%	1	8%

Community Benefits

Participants noted that the geographically dispersed nature of the forensics community is augmented by SNS relationship maintenance. Participants noted the geographical differences are decreased through the use of social media. Participant 36 wrote, “I think social media-use [sic] has been a bridge to making the national circuit closer and stronger,” and Participant 19 stressed, “I think the social media experience in forensics is an overall very positive community.” Participant 1 observed the forensic community is “using social media to keep the community alive, even in the off season.” Participant 1 went on to explain the role social media plays in advocacy for the forensics community: “I think social media is becoming a large part of the forensics community. From pages like ‘Save RC Forensics’ that raised awareness of their team's struggles (and eventually helped save them).” To answer RQ3, while not all competitors self-monitor when communicating through SNS, many do for a number of reasons.

Discussion

I would never have been able to make the friends I've had in speech without Facebook. Who they are online is so much more whole than the way they perform their identities at tournaments.



The current study explored SNS use by current competitors in the intercollegiate forensics community. Participants used Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter as their primary SNS consumption and posting platforms (as well as the primary SNS through which they connected and interacted with teammates and the larger community). Participants reported more

consumption than posting on all SNS, indicating participants fit the category of SNS lurkers (Badzin, 2012). Interactions with fellow competitors equally included forensics and non-forensics based content on Facebook and Twitter, and competitors interacted more about forensics than non-forensics topics on Instagram. Interestingly, competitors focused more on non-forensics related topics when interacting with judges on SNS than forensics related topics.

Participants noted self-image manipulations on SNS, but most manipulations corresponded with Toma and Carlson's (2012) suggestion that online self-portrayals are slightly enhanced in flattering ways. Smock's (2010) online self-presentation attribution method was primarily enacted by emphasizing team membership, education level, values perceived to be held by the forensics community, and individual competitive success. Participants deemphasized competition-based information (e.g., topic or literature choice), political affiliation or statements, and profanity to avoid being perceived negatively by the community.

Participants noted offline relationships are changed by online relationships based on the frequency of communication. Participants noted seeing the interactant in new environments (i.e., outside the competition context) made interactants seem like more full or real people. The relationship changes were generally seen as competitive advantages. More experienced competitors noted benefits to networking with judges, including networking using SNS. Less experienced competitors did not perceive benefits associated with networking with judges. Participants asserted SNS connections provide additional communication opportunities across the nationally dispersed forensics community and increased opportunities to advocate for the forensics community.

Three implications come from the data shared by participants. First, competitor relationships online with forensic community members demonstrate the use of SNS to extend the

tournament space beyond the physical weekend locations. Using multiple SNS creates online community spaces for geographically dispersed communities. The online spaces provide the opportunity to extend relationships developed during limited face-to-face interactions.

Individuals have the opportunity to feel more connected to community members.

Second, extended community relationships may stifle individual identity performances. Because as Rui and Stefanone (2013) pointed out, high self-monitoring individuals recognize the power of their personal performances, they may be more apt to tailor identity performances to specific audiences, potentially creating disingenuous portrayals of who they are. The cognitive dissonance caused by the disingenuous portrayals may negatively affect the individual. Moreover, if identity stifling becomes an expected norm, the community's image may appear duplicitous. As is true within any community space, an individual's self-monitoring level depends on constructs like concern for social appropriateness, observation of social cues given off by others, desire to be seen positively in interactions, and ability to actually change behaviors in relation to cues (Snyder, 1974; Snyder & Gangestad, 1986). Just as in face-to-face dyads, the present study demonstrates individuals vary in self-presentation monitoring behaviors during interactions. Future research should explore the individual self-monitoring behavior differences in face-to-face versus online spaces.

Third, online interactions impact offline interactions and identity portrayals. When individual A interacts with individual B and sees B beyond the context of a competitive situation (like a workplace or a forensics competition), animosity may be more difficult to maintain. If a highly successful competitor B is seen only in competition contexts, a moderately successful competitor A may feel animosity toward B based on a number of potential rationale (e.g., B's performances did not warrant a higher ranking). When A sees B in non-competition situations

(e.g., walking a dog, volunteering, posing with friends), B becomes more than the winning competitor; B becomes a full person with a life outside of the community. The increased ability to see fellow competitors as humans with lives outside of forensics may impact the way individuals interact in competition spaces.

As with any survey, several limitations were present. First, the geographical diversity of participants disproportionately represented Midwestern forensics competitors. Only 23% of respondents were from outside the Midwest, which may skew the SNS use and experiences and limit the overall generalizability of the study. Second, while data were gathered regarding community membership (e.g., team size, years competing), no demographics were gathered regarding race, sex, sexuality, or other identity markers. Third, because the study explored multiple SNS (each bearing unique consumption and posting norms), participants may have differing opinions about what constitutes “posting” to an SNS. For instance, Facebook posting could include “liking” a post, sending a private message, posting content to your or a friend’s wall, poking an individual, or sharing an emotional response to a post (Roses, 2016). Comparing the engagement of “liking” a Facebook status, retweeting on Twitter, or commenting on an Instagram picture may need further exploration. The care individuals use dependent upon the perceived significance of interaction methods may impact how closely they monitor the secondary messages sent through the media. Fourth, participants recorded SNS consumption and posting primarily regarding currently popular SNS. An open-ended question regarding additional SNS used found participants also used YouTube, SnapChat, GroupMe, and several other SNS. Future research should explore if additional SNS should be studied for the ways participants interact with one another, including potential identity manipulations and interaction content. Additionally, the year the data was collected impacts the replicability of the survey data. Since

the data collection, major changes have happened to SNS. For instance, Vine was purchased and transformed into TikTok, and YikYak is no longer functional. As was noted earlier, the quick-paced alterations of SNS mean the process of collecting, analyzing, and publishing scholarly articles does not keep pace. As such, future research would need to adjust platforms addressed in data collection.

Finally, the forensic community faced significant disruptions during the COVID-19 global pandemic. The already geographically-dispersed community could no longer gather safely for in-person tournaments from mid-March 2020 to the time this article was published. SNS connections may have been altered by the virtual tournament structures. Because of the recency of the COVID-19 disruptions on forensics, the impacts for SNS identity performances are not recorded in the current analysis.

Future research should explore if identity manipulations and relationship benefits exist in related fields, like geographically-dispersed businesses teams. Cultural cohesiveness in dispersed teams may benefit from SNS connections and interactions, both about work- and non-work-related topics. SNS interactions may strengthen the sense of community and desire to advocate for community goals to outside parties. Additionally, following the massive changes to online interactions with the COVID-19 global pandemic, research should continue to explore the ways relationships form in-person and virtually.

Despite limitations, participants demonstrated the ways identity is emphasized or downplayed when attempting to portray a specific image through SNS. Participants illustrated how differences between high and low self-monitoring behaviors extend into online interactions. The forensics community showed SNS has the potential to build connections, and through online

groups and pages, build spaces for discussion and relationships otherwise difficult in geographically dispersed communities.

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The Nurse-Family Connection: Exploring Verbal and Nonverbal Immediacy

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Abstract

Immediacy is the key to developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, each relationship has a unique set of rules and patterns of communication that help maintain the trust and continue the process of relational development. What is not unique about interpersonal relationships is the foundation of trust, a bond, that can be established through the use of immediacy. This study examines not only if nurses believe effective communication with family members is necessary, but how and in what ways nurses have forged a care connection with family members using verbal and nonverbal immediacy.

Keywords: *Interpersonal Communication, Health Communication, Verbal Immediacy, Nonverbal Immediacy, Family, Caregivers*

In 2011, my family faced two serious health situations that required extended hospital stays and daily family visits—a rotating stream of family descended upon the hospitals. What stood out the most about these two experiences was the nurses I encountered at these hospitals. The nurses were the rocks. The nurses provided me with all the information about what was happening, answering questions clearly while showing me that they cared about me, the family member. They made sure I was comfortable as I and others spent time keeping watch over my grandma and my father. As Eggenberger and Regan (2010) contend, "Caring for families during an illness experiences is a vital aspect of nursing practice" (p. 550). However, even with this

knowledge, there continue to be "deficiencies in the current state of family nursing practice" and "these deficiencies are rooted in a lack of formal education about family nursing in curricula" (p. 550).

Immediacy is the key to developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, each relationship has a unique set of rules and patterns of communication that help maintain the trust and continue the process of relational development. What is not unique about interpersonal relationships is the foundation of trust, a bond, that can be established through the use of immediacy. This study examines not only if nurses believe effective communication with family members is necessary, but how and in what ways nurses have forged a care connection with family members.

Immediacy

Beginning with Mehrabian's (1967, 1971) seminal works on immediacy in relationships, scholars have found a positive relationship between liking and closeness. Robinson and Richmond (1995) explain, "Mehrabian suggests that people tend to be drawn toward people they perceive positively (like) and avoid people they perceive negatively (dislike). This principle of approach and avoidance, based on perceptions of others, provides the basis for the nonverbal immediacy construct" (p. 80). Baringer and McCroskey (2009) explain, "While the social psychological perspective of Mehrabian viewed immediacy primarily as a manifestation of liking, writers in communication viewed immediacy as a potential tool to get others to like the communicator—to increase 'affinity'" (p. 178). In what follows, the construct of immediacy, both verbal and nonverbal, will be explored in the field of instructional communication and the nursing field.

Immediacy in Instructional Communication

Nursing and teaching are similar endeavors in terms of how we use communication—specifically, how immediacy plays a role in connecting to our audiences. For a teacher, the audience is the student. For a nurse, the audience is the patient and the patient’s family. The construct of immediacy has been given significant attention by instructional communication scholars (e.g., Booth-Butterfield et al., 1992; Christensen & Menzel, 1998; Frymier, 1994; Gorham & Christophel, 1990, 1992; Kelley & Gorham, 1988; Pogue & AhYun, 2006; Titsworth, 2001; Witt & Wheelless, 2001). Mehrabian’s work on immediacy suggests “people approach things they like and that appeal to them, and avoid things that they dislike, do not appeal to them, or which induce fear” (Frymier, 1994, p. 134), which led instructional communication scholars to investigate how and in what ways immediacy behaviors function in the classroom. Communicating closeness and warmth in the classroom setting can be achieved through both verbal and nonverbal communicative behaviors. Myers and Knox (2001) explain verbal immediacy behaviors employed by teachers include “using personal examples, asking questions, initiating conversations with students, addressing students by name, praising student work, and encouraging student expressions of opinions” (p. 346). Furthermore, Frymier and Houser (2000) argue nonverbal immediacy is displayed by teachers through the use of “smiling at students, making eye contact, moving about the classroom, and using vocal variety” (p. 209). While the above-mentioned verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors are not exhaustive, they have been repeatedly found to promote increased affective and cognitive learning in the classroom (Andersen, 1979; Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001; Christensen & Menzel, 1998; Gorham & Christophel, 1990, 1992; Kelley & Gorham; 1988; Pogue & AhYun, 2006; Titsworth, 2001; Witt & Wheelless, 2001). So, what explanations underlie this relationship?

Communication scholars have found a positive relationship between a teacher's use of immediacy behaviors and student learning outcomes in the classroom (Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001; Witt et al., 2004). Booth-Butterfield et al. (1992) provide affective and cognitive explanations, respectively, to describe how immediacy impacts learning outcomes. Booth-Butterfield et al. (1992) argue immediacy acts as an affective cue in the classroom that prompts teacher likability among students. This claim resonates with Mehrabian's original conceptualization that immediacy behaviors prompt attraction and that teachers can use immediacy behaviors to encourage students to associate liking and interest in course material. In the same year, Booth-Butterfield et al. (1992) investigated the influence of dual process models of persuasion (c.f., Elaboration Likelihood Model, Heuristic Systematic Model) on cognition via student attitude change in the classroom (p. 13). Booth-Butterfield et al. (1992) predicted an "interaction between teacher immediacy and elaboration likelihood such that immediacy will have more impact under low rather than high elaboration likelihood" (p. 15) and found evidence that teacher immediacy behaviors can function as a persuasion cue in the classroom (p. 19). The findings imply that even as higher levels of involvement begin to diminish the effects of immediacy on cognition, immediacy displays still have a dominant effect on student cognitive elaboration and learning. This point is especially salient if traditional-aged college students really do harbor expectations reflecting instant gratification, consumerism, and entitlement in the classroom, attitudes that require teachers to have specific strategies for engaging and maintaining student interest in course material. In a meta-analysis of 81 studies, Witt et al. (2004) found "teacher immediacy has a substantial relationship with certain attitudes and perceptions of students in relation to their learning, but a modest relationship with cognitive learning performance," and suggest that "even though students like more highly immediate teachers and

think they learn more from their courses, actual cognitive learning is not affected as much as they think it is” (p. 201).

Immediacy in the Field of Nursing

While the nurse-patient relationship and the teacher-student relationship are different, both relationships call for a degree of connection in order to be effective. Just as a teacher must establish trust with her/his students to improve learning, a nurse must establish trust to ensure the needs of her/his patient are met. Establishing and building trust happens through verbal and nonverbal communication. Without effective communication, the nurse may lose an important connection to their patients which is imperative when providing for those who are suffering and relying on the expertise of their care providers for physical and emotional comfort.

Bartlett Ellis et al. (2016) examined 149 articles in social relational research in order to provide the role immediacy could and should play in patient-provider relationships. In particular, these researchers were interested in the ways in which immediacy could be used to promote successful medication management by patients. The results of their analysis are not surprising to communication scholars whom are familiar with verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors.

Immediacy behaviors are approach behaviors and include the following:

- 1) reciprocal in nature and 2) reflected in communicator's attitude toward the receiver and the message, 3) conveys approachability, 4) respectfulness, 5) and connectedness between communications, and 6) promotes receiver engagement. Immediacy is associated with affective learning, cognitive learner, greater recall, enhanced relationships, satisfaction, motivation, sharing, and perceptions of mutual value in social relationships.

Bartlett Ellis et al. (2016) contend "poor provider-patient communication often distances patients from participation in their care" and increases their risk for non-adherence to treatment (p. 9).

Nortvedt (2001) explains the nurse-patient relationship is a unique interpersonal relationship with its own set of issues in terms of the balance between nursing obligations and patients' needs. For example, "the normative force of professional duties in nursing is generated from closeness to the need and suffering of others, thereby creating relational ties and responsibility" (p. 115).

Patient-centered care and the central role of face-to-face interaction (both verbal and nonverbal) have been well-documented (Frankel et al., 2003; Haskard-Zolnieriek & DiMatteo, 2009; Jones & LeBaron, 2002; Mead & Bower, 2002; Roter & Hall, 2006; Williams & Weinman, 1998). Sheldon et al. (2008) argue "patient-provider communication in oncology affects patient outcomes such as mental health and well-being" (p. 63). Therefore, their study examined nurse responses to oncology patients expressing emotion. Seventy-two female and two male nurses participated in this study—a sample "similar to the demographic of nurses in the United States, reported by the American Nurses Association" (p. 67). The researchers found

Those nurses who are more skillful acknowledge patient concerns, view an emotion-laden interaction from multiple qualitative and emotional perspectives, and arrive at more effective responses...How nurses respond to patient cues such as expressions of emotion affects further patient disclosure of concerns. The overuse of instrumental and task-oriented behaviors, while necessary for medical care, may be the result of lack of provider attention to patient socio-emotional concerns and/or the use of distracting behaviors. (p. 69)

Henry et al. (2011) reviewed 26 studies that examined the relationship between nonverbal communication and patient satisfaction. Nonverbal communication included, but was not limited

to eye contact, facial expression, body language, gestures, touch, voice tone, and laughter (p. 298). In their meta-analysis, the researchers found greater clinician warmth, less nurse negativity, and greater clinician listening were associated with greater patient satisfaction. Henry et al. (2011) argue additional studies are needed to evaluate the impact of nonverbal communication on patients' mental and physical health (pg. 308). Gorawar-Bhat and Cook (2010) looked specifically at eye contact during physician elder-patient communication. Based on the analysis of 22 videotapes of physician elder-patient interaction, the researchers discovered the "total duration of eye contact does not adequately capture details of interaction," however, "eye contact is an integral component of patient-centered communication that becomes interwoven with verbal communication at critical junctures over the duration of the clinical visit" (p. 446). Both of the studies discussed suggest further observational studies should be conducted to understand the implications of nonverbal communication in caregiver-patient interactions.

While studies have explored the use of immediate behaviors for effective communication between caregivers and patients, few studies have examined the ways in which nurses form a connection to the families of patients. Carman et al. (2013) argue that "patient engagement has been called a critical part of a continuously learning healthy system" (p. 223). With a wealth of definitions for what it means to engage patients, the researchers suggest that "patient and family-centered care" is a broader term that conveys a vision of what health care should be:

a partnership among practitioners, patients, and their families (when appropriate) to ensure the decisions respect patients' wants, needs, and preferences that patient have the education and support they need to make decisions and participate in their own care. (p. 223-224)

The authors present a three-pronged framework to illustrate whether patients are able to engage in their care. The framework includes three categories: the patient, the organization, and society. Within each prong, “policies and practices that positively influence patients engaged in direct care” are offered (227). Carman et al. (2013) implore researchers to further explore factors that motivate the greatest influence on patient engagement.

While connecting to a patient is imperative for caregivers, the skills needed to engage in effective interactions are rarely taught in nursing programs beyond an introductory, general education communication course (Eggenberger et al., 2015, p. 1). Eggenberger et al. (2015) assert that “opportunities to gain interactive skill competencies are often slim” and “communication areas are often taught by nursing faculty...most have not had formal education in this area and largely teach from the textbook” (p. 1). An integral part of the nurse-patient communication process is the family. Eggenberger et al. (2015) argue, the “family is the core social environment and the primary social support for the family members during health and illness. Therefore, families are always involved in health and illness” (p. 7). Essential to helping a family member become a part of the care process is the need for student nurses to have “opportunities to reflect upon the meaning of family unit attachments and what occurs when a member is threatened by a disease or illness” (p. 7). Eggenberger et al. (2015) contend “thinking family” is crucial to help families experiencing “stressful situations” and ensure that the family units are “always included in conversations when individuals have health or illness needs” (p. 9).

As the review of literature shows, effective communication is necessary in all settings, from the personal to the professional. Immediacy studies both in and out of the care setting have found verbal (using personal examples, encouraging questions) and nonverbal strategies (eye contact, tone of voice, reducing distance) create trust and encourage interest and engagement.

While a wealth of studies have investigated the connection between immediacy and provider-patient relationships, far less is known about the importance of verbal and nonverbal immediacy in patient-family centered care. Therefore, this study explores the following research questions:

RQ 1: How do nurses come to understand the importance of the connection a patient has with their family?

RQ 2: In what ways do nurses use verbal and nonverbal immediacy to connect with the family members of their patients?

Method

Because the review of literature led me to research questions that were exploratory in nature, this study utilized a qualitative content analysis. A qualitative approach seeks "to arrive at an understanding of a particular phenomenon from the perspective of those experiencing it" (Vaismoradi et al., 2013, p. 398). Content analysis, as opposed to grounded theory, "is suitable for researchers who wish to employ a relatively low level of interpretation" (Vaismoradi et al., 2013, p. 399). Qualitative content analysis is "employed to answer questions such as what, why and how, and the common patterns in the data are searched for by using a consistent set of codes to organize text with similar content" (Cho & Lee, 2014, p. 6). One unique characteristic of qualitative content analysis is the flexibility of using inductive or deductive approaches, or a combination of both approaches, in data analysis. Second is the ability to extract manifest and latent content meaning. Cho and Lee (2014) explain, "First, qualitative content analysis is flexible in the use of inductive and deductive analysis of data depending on the purpose of one's studies" (p. 4). The key difference between the two approaches centers on how initial codes or categories are developed. An inductive approach is appropriate when prior knowledge regarding the phenomenon under investigation is limited or fragmented (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). In the

inductive approach, codes, categories, or themes are directly drawn from the data, whereas the deductive approach starts with preconceived codes or categories derived from prior relevant theory, research, or literature (Cavanaugh, 1997; Kondracki et al., 2002). According to Cho and Lee (2014), “The deductive approach is appropriate when the objective of the study is to test existing theory or retest existing data in a new context” (p. 4).

For this study, I interviewed 10 White female nurses living and working in the Midwest. In order to find a diverse pool of participants, a call was posted to Facebook and shared publicly by various Facebook users. Approximately 25 people expressed interest in participating in this study; however, only 10 White female participants committed to being interviewed. The participants ranged in age from 27 to 60 years old. The nurses had between five and 35 years of experience in a variety of nursing roles from mental health to pediatrics. Of the 10 interviews, four were held face-to-face, three interviews were conducted over Skype, and three interviews were conducted over FaceTime. The participants were selected among those who

- a) earned, at minimum, a bachelor's degree in nursing and
- b) who have practiced in their field for at least 5 years

Interviews were used to explore the ideas, opinions, and experiences of the participants. A semi-structured interview protocol was utilized with the participants. Semi-structured interviews worked well for this study as participants were encouraged to expand upon their stories as they answered the questions. The interview began by collecting background data on the participants as well as information on nursing background. Next, the participants were asked about the ways in which they make connections with their patients. These questions acted as a "warm up" to having the participants consider how they work to make connections with family members of their patients, successes and failures they've experienced while attempting to make verbal and

nonverbal connections, and also when the participants knew it was important to not only make their patients feel comfortable, but also when they began to realize that the family members were an important part of the care connection (see Appendix A for the Interview Protocol).

Analysis

After conducting and transcribing the interviews, the qualitative analysis led to the emergence of two themes from the interviews that were relevant to the research questions: How do nurses come to understand the importance of the connection a patient has with their family, and in what ways do nurses use verbal and nonverbal strategies to connect with the family members of their patients? First, participants believed that creating a connection with patients' family members was as natural as forging a connection with their patients. Second, participants overwhelmingly expressed that it is important to decrease the physical distance between themselves and their patients' family members to begin creating a connection, as well as establishing a connection through finding commonalities or a common bond.

The Role of the Family in the Nurse-Patient Relationship

Unanimously, the nurses believed the family was an integral part of the care process. However, the ways in which these nurses became aware of the importance of the family were unique. Nicole, who has been a nurse for 10 years and is currently a care coordinator for a clinic, explained it was within the first year of nursing "when you are settling in and everything kind of settles, you truly realize the importance of having the family members at the bedside" (Interview, September 26, 2016). A terminally ill patient taught Nikki Marie, who has been a nurse for 10 years, the importance of the family in the nurse-patient relationship. She explained:

It was super tough for [the patient's] family and [she] "shooed" her family out to get dinner. Lots of tears for family...I was hanging my bag when they left and I finally asked

[the patient]. She said I am fine, but I need you to help me deal with my family. They need you more than me. If I could take myself out of the bed and put my whole family in, that's what I'd do. (Interview, September 16, 2016)

Carlos has been a nurse for nearly seven years. She is a firm believer in the nurse-family connection. The realization of the important role of the family in the care connection came very early in her training. She recounts:

A woman, married for 52 years, had a double mastectomy and her husband was there [when the bandages were being removed]. I was a student and I was supposed to be doing the care, but I didn't have a fracking [sic] clue. I'm like, maybe I just should watch how you do this bandage change... it was hard for me, I was 20, and I was admitting it. I stood back in my MSU scrubs next to the man, the husband. All the sudden, boom, he's going down. He caught himself, sat there, and just started crying. At first, I am, like, what the fuck, you lost your boobs, I mean big deal. But, I'm kind of like, get over it buddy. But, then, he just sits there and cries and he looks so different. Then I realize this man has known this woman, her body for their entire life... for three of my lifetimes they've known each other... the family is just important and we never took the time to think of the family, to let him know what she was going to look like and what was about to happen. (Interview, September 15, 2017)

This moment, for Carlos, marked the integral part family members play in the nurse-patient connection. While the patient must come first, Carlos expresses the need for nurses to also find a way to connect and care for patients' family members in order to help them have agency in the process.

As a nurse for 32 years, Karla had many family members who would come to her with questions after visiting their own doctor. She began realizing the importance in creating a connection with family members when it became clear that her own family members were not asking the important questions about their own medical conditions and medical care. She explains:

So, because I love to teach, I love to teach family members because the more knowledge they know about their family member... That is where the liaison person comes in (nurse). So, it's important to educate these families because, unfortunately, the doctors don't have time... if you don't educate the family, they can get lost in this... they need a voice.

Interestingly, beyond educating the family members, Karla points to the powerlessness the family can feel and how imperative it is for family members to feel empowered – to give agency through “voice.”

Immediacy Strategies in the Nurse-Family Connection

Decreasing the physical distance between communicators is one way to create immediacy. This may be physical or psychological distance. The notion of closeness can be used as a nonverbal strategy to increase affinity between nurses and patients' family members. Nikki, who currently works with stroke patients, explained how she works to connect with family members by decreasing the physical distance between herself and the family members:

I usually pull up a chair and I try to find a book about stroke and give it to the family. I ask if they've looked at the book, have you had an opportunity? How are you? How are things going? Can you tell me what happened? How are you doing through this process? They trust you and they, um, respect you and value your opinion and believe what you

have to say. When you connect—to gain their trust, that’s huge because you have their lives in your hands. To have them trust you and know that they are comfortable, that anxiety is at ease. It helps improve outcomes and assist in the healing process. (Interview, September 26, 2016)

The nurses in this study expressed the need to get on the same physical level as the patients’ family member(s)—whether that was by pulling up a chair, standing close to the family member when advising or offering support, or offering the family member a caring touch. These attempts to bring one physically closer show care and understanding, offering the family member someone to lean on during trying times.

Clearly, creating physical closeness is key to establishing a connection to a patient's family members; however, creating psychological closeness can also close the distance between a family member and nursing staff—a key relationship to help motivate family members to take part in the education and care of the patient. Karla, who has been a nurse educator and a practicing nurse for 32 years, is adamant about the integral role a nurse has in closing the distance between a nurse and a patient's family. She expressed:

I had a patient that had cancer and he came in and it was very, very quick. And the family, after talking to them and listening to them. The wife was so exhausted. So, exhausted and you could see that. And, um, I knew that it was ok and I had done a good job when she trusted me enough that she could take a nap. (Interview, September 20, 2016)

What Karla illustrates above is how important it is that her patient’s family trusts her as their caregiver. Karla was able to close the psychological distance between herself and the family by listening and engaging with the family. Nikki Marie further emphasized the importance of

psychological closeness when working with patients going through alcohol withdrawal. Nikki Marie explained the importance of talking with and listening to family members, so they understood that what the patient is going through is not their fault. She explained that it was a slow process of listening to the wife of her alcoholic patient and talking to her as a means of support that allowed for an affinity to be built:

We built trust over seven days. At first, [the patient's wife] didn't come. And, the second day she came crying because she was sad she didn't come the first day because she was angry with him. And, when he was going through withdrawal she was worried. Um, she wasn't real open to sharing those experiences right away. So, it was taking that in tid-bit strides. (Interview, September 17, 2016)

In the above quotation, Nikki Marie presents how the process of building a psychological bond begins with a patient's family member. As noted above, Nikki Marie had to work slowly on this connection. She would ask the wife how her day was, what she was going to be doing the rest of the day, little things to begin building toward more meaningful conversations—conversations that helped Nikki Marie understand how the patient's wife was feeling and what the patient's wife was needing to feel comfortable. As a connection was built through caring conversations (and with the patient's permission), Nikki Marie was able to take the wife aside separately. The wife was able to say anything she needed to say so it would not offend her husband. This was an important moment as it allowed the wife to work through feelings of guilt and responsibility and clarify that her husband's alcoholism had nothing to do with her and her love for the patient.

(Interview, September 17, 2016)

Willow struggled a bit with describing how she connects with family members, but did so by explaining what the “reverse” feels like:

Make good eye contact. You just feel comfortable with them. You can talk about anything. I think about the times when I haven't had that... I go in, do what I have to do. And, I'm anxious to get out of the room. You know, I don't look at them... I mean, I look at them, but it's not that connection; talking and making eye contact, nodding your head. All the things you would do if you are having that conversation with someone. So, I know you go in and do what you have to do and talk minimally, and—you are still doing your job, it is just not the same. (Interview, October 6, 2016)

Later, in the interview, Willow was able to articulate how she made the connection with a patient's wife. This patient came in at least once a month with his wife because of his respiratory issues:

He often needed his IV and antibiotic, so he always needed the same thing and he and his wife didn't need any new education on how to care for him. So, when they came in, I remembered where she lived, what she did—she was always going to the casino, you know? Small talk, just trying to use what we had in common... which is often the patient, but she didn't need information on him, so we just talked. (Interview, October 6, 2016)

Willow provides an example of the ways one can use small details about people to help close the psychological distance between the nurse and the patient's family members. Even in times of a quick or unexpected death for a family, Willow explained how she worked to create immediacy with family members by getting them involved and communicating with them immediately:

I was on the medical floor and there was a patient that came in and he was [long pause] critical. He was in hospice care and the family couldn't do it anymore. The wife and the daughter were there and I was with him for his last minutes. The connection the wife and daughter and I had was so good. They were so thankful for what I did... I just tried to

make them as comfortable as I could. I sat with them, we got coffee, we talked. You know? I just tried to involve them in what was going on and why we were doing things. Just involving them in the decisions. (Interview, October 6, 2016).

Karla, Willow, and Nikki Marie all point to the importance of establishing rapport and building trust with family members to encourage them to become actively involved in the caregiving process. Closing the physical distance between nurse and family is one clear strategy to increase affinity between a nurse and the patient's family. Importantly, nurses can also begin to build rapport and strengthen trust with the family members by using verbal immediacy strategies such as small talk and trying to find similar interests in order to build a common bond.

Discussion and Conclusion

Throughout the interviews for this study, I became increasingly aware that nurses, in general, are not taught in their programs to consider the role of the family in the nurse-patient interaction. The needs of the patient, for obvious reasons, is the focus of their training. However, as the nurses articulated in this study, the family becomes an integral part of the care process. Furthermore, the majority of the nurses in this study were not provided with specific training in implementing immediacy with patients or the patients' family members and, therefore, were learning on the job the best way to create a care connection with these individuals. Immediacy with the family members served a variety of purposes and manifested itself in several ways depending upon the needs of the patient. For example, immediacy helped the nurses create an atmosphere of care which, in turn, led family members to trust their care providers and feel empowered to participate in the care process for their loved ones.

This study was not without its limitations. The participants were all White women from the Midwest. The experiences of these nurses cannot be generalized to all practicing nurses.

However, their experiences can be used to learn more about the ways in which nursing programs might teach about the family-nurse connection and the ways in which immediacy strategies could be taught to nursing students. With an earlier introduction, nursing students could begin to understand the important role that family members play in the education and care of the patient. Furthermore, nursing programs may begin to consider implementing simulations that include practicing nonverbal and verbal strategies to help nursing students understand the implications of their communication on the nurse-family bond. An exciting outcome of this study is the potential for collaborative research between nursing/health care and communication studies in the area of immediacy. The foundations of immediacy research are found in the discipline of communication. Nursing involves enacting those communicative behaviors daily with patients and families. Future collaborations between the two fields could offer unique and important insights from theoretical and practical perspectives.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol for Immediacy and Nursing Study

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. We will be starting with some general questions about you and move to some more specific questions about being a nurse. As a reminder, you signed a consent form before we started, and, because this interview is voluntary, you may withdraw from this interview at any time.

1. Tell me about your background (age, race, degree, etc.) These prompts will be used should the interviewee need some focus to get started.
2. Tell me about why you chose nursing as your career? How long have you been a nurse and in what departments you have worked?
3. Tell me about the ways in which you connect with your patients while they are in your care?
4. Can you share a story about a time you felt successful with your patient – a comfortable connection as made? Can you share a story about a time when you believe you failed or you just could not make a connection with your patient?
5. How did the scenario in Questions 5 & 6 “feel” and “look” different? What was your part? What was the patient's part?
6. In what ways do you interact with the family members of your patients?
7. What specific verbal strategies do you use to connect with the family members of your patients? To what degree?
8. What specific nonverbal strategies do you use to connect to the family members of your patients? To what degree?
9. Tell me about a time when you felt like you had a connection with the family of one of your patients – how did you know you had made a successful connection?
10. Tell me about a time when you did not feel as though you had made a connection with the family members of one of your patients – how did you know it was unsuccessful?
11. What was the moment when you knew it was important to not only care for the patient, but also care for the family members?
12. What are the benefits of focusing on family members as well as the patient?
13. What are the costs of focusing on the family members as well as the patient?
14. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about the role of family in the care connection? Another story? An important moment in your career?

Again, thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. I appreciate your help with this study.

“The Most Beautiful Thing in the World”: A Rhetorical Analysis of Relational Dialectics and Friendship in the Musical *Kinky Boots*

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Abstract

In this article, we examine Kinky Boots, a musical that won the Tony Award for Best Musical in 2013 and continues to win over audiences with its positive message about acceptance, as a rhetorical text through William K. Rawlins' theoretical construct of relational dialectics regarding friendship. Through rhetorical criticism as a research method, we apply Rawlins' concepts of political and personal friendships, as well as the dialectics of affection and instrumentality, expressiveness and protectiveness, judgment and acceptance, and the ideal and the real to examine notable relationships between characters in the musical. Specifically, we examine the relationships between Charlie and Nicola, Charlie and Lola, and Don and Lola. Through this analysis, we suggest that when participants in the musical's relationships fail to negotiate dialectic tensions, their relationships can resultantly cease to exist. We also note that the balance of relational dialectics appears to be conducive to healthy relationships. We posit that Kinky Boots provides theatre-goers with life lessons regarding relational dialectics that they can apply to their own real-life relationships, and that Kinky Boots may serve as an effective teaching tool for undergraduate students learning about relational dialectics.

Keywords: *Relational Dialectics, Friendship, Kinky Boots, Musical Theatre*

Introduction

Kinky Boots, a popular 2013 musical written by Harvey Fierstein and featuring music and lyrics by Cyndi Lauper, addresses themes of acceptance between two very different communities. It was based off a 2005 film of the same title, which was inspired by true events (“Kinky Boots Broadway,” n.d.). The musical debuted on Broadway at the Al Hirschfeld Theatre on April 3, 2013, where it remained until April 7, 2019, and received generally positive critical reviews. Ben Brantley (2013, April 4) of the *New York Times* offered glowing praise of Lauper’s lyrics, even though he criticized the show’s penchant for clichés. Thom Geier (2013, April 9) of *Entertainment Weekly* commended *Kinky Boots*, calling its debut “cause for celebration.” Marilyn Stasio (2013, April 4) of *Variety* praised Lauper’s “sequined score,” Jerry Mitchell’s choreography, and many of the performances, despite her critiques of the show’s “cheerfully inane book.” *Kinky Boots* was also successful at both the Tony Awards and the Olivier Awards. In 2013, *Kinky Boots* received six Tony Awards: Best Actor in a Musical (Billy Porter), Best Choreography, Best Orchestrations, Best Original Score, Best Sound Design of a Musical, and Best Musical (“Kinky Boots,” n.d.). In 2016, the British production received three Olivier Awards for Best New Musical, Best Actor in a Musical (Matt Henry), and Best Costume Design (Shenton, 2016, April 3). The show continues to be a fan favorite even after closing on Broadway in 2019 (“Kinky Boots,” n.d.), with many professional regional theatres looking to obtain the rights from Music Theatre International to produce their own productions once the Covid-19 pandemic ends.

The musical tells the story of Charlie Price, who inherits his family’s failing shoe factory in Northampton after his father’s death. Charlie returns to Northampton from London, where he lives with his fiancée Nicola and works in real estate, in an attempt to save the factory. While in

London, Charlie meets Lola, a flamboyant drag queen with a talent for designing footwear, and realizes that he may be able to save the factory by servicing the niche market of sturdy-yet-sexy footwear for drag queens. Charlie recruits Lola to design boots for the factory, but she is not readily accepted by the factory's employees, especially Don, who challenges Lola to a boxing match. Lola allows Don to win, and in exchange for sparing Don the embarrassment of losing, Lola challenges him to "accept someone for who they really are." As the factory employees plan to showcase their "kinky boots" at a fashion show in Milan, Charlie becomes increasingly demanding. He argues with Nicola, who ends their engagement, and he humiliates Lola in front of his staff, causing her to storm off. Don, who has accepted Lola's challenge to accept Charlie, convinces his team to work overtime and sacrifice a week's pay in preparation for the fashion show. Charlie apologizes to Lola via voicemail and travels to Milan. He is forced to walk the Milan runway by himself, but is redeemed by the arrival of Lola and her troupe, as well as the factory employees, who all model the footwear. At the end of the musical, the characters celebrate the success of their enterprise, their own uniqueness, and their ability to "change the world when [they] change [their] mind[s]."

In this article, we apply Rawlins' theoretical construct of relational dialectics and note how these dialectics relate to friendship in order to analyze relationships in *Kinky Boots*. For this study, we used the musical's 2013 Broadway script and the November 2018 recorded performance at the Adelphi Theatre as streamed on Broadway HD as our rhetorical text. *Kinky Boots* features a number of examples of political and personal friendships, as well as examples of the dialectic of the private and public, the dialectic of the ideal and real, the dialectic of the freedom to be independent and the freedom to be dependent, the dialectic of affection and instrumentality, the dialectic of judgment and acceptance, and the dialectic of expressiveness and

protectiveness. We specifically examine the relationships between Charlie and Nicola, Charlie and Lola, and Lola and Don. We suggest that *Kinky Boots* provides its audiences with lessons that can be applied to real-life relationships. By experiencing relational dialectics in fictional relationships in a musical, theatre-goers can introspectively examine how relational dialectics pertain to their own relationships. Furthermore, we posit that *Kinky Boots* may serve a pedagogical function in communication courses for students learning about relational dialectics. Due to the musical's popularity and ability to connect with young adults, *Kinky Boots* is well-suited to be a classroom teaching tool. We suggest that undergraduate students may be more inclined to discuss relational dialectics through a text like *Kinky Boots*, as it has the potential to minimize some of the discomfort they may feel in applying these concepts to their personal lives in a public setting.

Literature Review

This study utilizes the theoretical construct of relational dialectics as presented in two books by communication scholar William K. Rawlins: *Friendship Matters: Communication, Dialectics, and the Life Course* (1992) and *The Compass of Friendship: Narratives, Identities, and Dialogues* (2009). In the former book, Rawlins (1992) defines the relational dialectics of friendship. The latter book focuses on the dialectic of individuation and participation and classifies personal and political friendships (Rawlins, 2009).

We would be remiss not to mention the work of Leslie A. Baxter and Barbara M. Montgomery, who also studied relational dialectics. The dialectics Baxter and Montgomery (1996) describe include the dialectic of routine and novelty, the dialectic of connection and autonomy, and the dialectic of openness and privacy (pp. 3-17). Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) definitions are generally used to examine romantic relationships, while Rawlins' (1992;

2009) definitions are applied in the context of friendships. Although there are romantic relationships that develop in *Kinky Boots*, the relationships that we are studying in the musical are friendships (with the exception of the relationship between Charlie and Nicola), and for this reason, we chose to focus on the text's friendships using Rawlins' relational dialectics.

Rawlins (1992) introduces the concept of relational dialectics as a means of the "communicative management of friendship" (p. 7). He distinguishes between contextual relational dialectics and interactional relational dialectics. The dialectic of the private and the public and the dialectic of the ideal and real are classified as contextual dialectics, while the dialectic of the freedom to be independent and the freedom to be dependent, the dialectic of affection and instrumentality, the dialectic of judgment and acceptance, and the dialectic of expressiveness and protectiveness are classified as interactional dialectics (Rawlins, 1992, p. 7). Contextual relational dialectics stem from western cultural standards of communicating within friendships. The dialectic of the private and the public "articulates the tensions produced as experiences and behaviors of friendship transcend private and public realms" (Rawlins, 1992, p. 9). Rawlins (1992) states that friendship has a "marginal position" in relationships, as friendship does not possess the same legalities and intimacies as kinship and marriage (p. 9). He posits that friendships must be negotiated privately and cannot be forced. Although these negotiations are generally held in good faith, they can carry sinister notions, as in his example of suicide pacts (Rawlins, 1992, p. 9). The dialectic of the ideal and the real intersects expectation-versus-reality in friendships. Rawlins (1992) states that friendships can result in otherwise unanticipated communication situations, positive or negative (p. 11).

In his discussion of interactional dialectics, Rawlins (1992) defines codification as "the relationships among self's and others' behaviors and the meanings self and others assign to those

behaviors” (p. 15). He establishes that codification has a pivotal role in private negotiations of friendship. The relational dialectic of affection and instrumentality examines the “nature of caring for a friend as an end-in-itself and/or as a means-to-an-end” (Rawlins, 1992, p. 17). The relational dialectic of judgment and acceptance describes how friends examine which quirks make a friend endearing or repellent (Rawlins, 1992, p. 20). The relational dialectic of expressiveness and protectiveness explains the role of trust in communication between friends, specifically when friends withhold the truth to preserve feelings (Rawlins, 1992, p. 22).

In *The Compass of Friendship*, Rawlins (2009) acknowledges that we find comfort in friendships, and that sharing stories – which creates “co-knowledge” – encourages the development of friendships (p. 1). Rawlins (2009) notes the fluidity of friendships, stating that “friendships are questions of degree” (p. 13). He discusses the impact of communication on personal development and elaborates on contradictions in communication, such as the clashing of multiple possibilities during social interactions (p. 16). He acknowledges how participants in a friendship pick up on similarities and differences between each other, noting that “the similarities and differences that we select are inherently relational propositions” (Rawlins, 2009, p. 20).

Communication scholars have utilized Rawlins’ relational dialectics in their research in many different sub-disciplines of communication studies, particularly in health communication (Amati & Hannawa, 2013; Dean & Oetzel, 2014; Oetzel et al., 2015; Ohs et al., 2015; Toller, 2005) and instructional communication (O’Boyle, 2014; Striley, 2014). However, relational dialectics as a theoretical framework has rarely been used to study fictional texts. While a number of scholars have explored rhetorical messages in musical theatre (Brooks, 2018; Edney, 2007; Krasner, 1995; Morra, 2009; Symonds, 2009; Wolf, 2018), to date, few scholars have examined how relational dialectics are portrayed in musicals, the impact these portrayals may

have on theatre-goers, and how musicals may serve as teaching tools in communication courses. In 2013, Schrader used Rawlins' relational dialectics to study the musical *Wicked* to analyze the relationship between the musical's two main characters, Elphaba and G(a)linda. Schrader (2013) observed that although this is a fictional friendship, Elphaba and G(a)linda's participation in the relational dialectic of judgment and acceptance and their resultant loyalty to each other serves as a lesson for how audience members may wish to conduct their own friendships. Schrader (2013) further posits that upon applying Rawlins' relational dialectics to a text, we can see how friendships are sometimes more impactful than romantic relationships. Bachert and Schrader (2017) applied relational dialectics to the musical *Ragtime*, studying four of the text's fictional relationships before discussing discernable takeaways from the portrayal of these relationships, notably the pivotal role of the relational dialectic of dependence and independence.

Furthermore, there have been few studies that have examined how the connections between communication theories and musical theatre may serve a pedagogical function. In their article applying Burkean dramatism to the musical *Little Women*, Beasley & Beasley (2016) suggested that dramatism can be used for character analysis to help students understand their characters better in theatre courses. Similarly, in her article applying social constructionism to the song "Wonderful" in the musical *Wicked*, Schrader (2011) proposed that the song be used to teach social constructionism in communication theory courses. Our study aims to contribute to the body of literature on relational dialectics as they pertain to rhetorical analysis of fictional relationships; we also seek to contribute to the body of literature on how theatre may serve as a pedagogical tool for teaching communication theories to undergraduate students.

Analysis

This analysis observes instances of Rawlins' relational dialectics, as well as political and personal friendships, as seen in the relationships between the characters in the musical *Kinky Boots*. We specifically analyze the relationships between Charlie and Nicola, Charlie and Lola, and Don and Lola to observe instances in which the partners must manage or negotiate relational dialectics. We selected these three relationships because they experience the most conflict in the musical, and because they represent different types of relationships: a longstanding romantic relationship, a new friendship, and an antagonistic relationship that later becomes a friendship through open-mindedness and understanding.

Charlie and Nicola

Of the three relationships we observe in *Kinky Boots*, the only one that is a romantic relationship is that of Charlie and Nicola. Charlie's relationship with Nicola presumably began as personal, but we see their relationship shift to become more political, ultimately resulting in their separation. Though the audience is made aware that Nicola and Charlie have been together for quite a while, it seems that the characters want different things from the moment they are introduced on stage. When Nicola is introduced, she is swooning over a pair of shoes said by Charlie to cost "three month's rent" (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 8). Nicola tells Charlie, "If you want to slip a ring on my finger, you'll first slip these shoes on my feet" (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 7). Here we see the relational dialectic of affection and instrumentality introduced. Nicola's statement references both oppositions of the dialectic, as she expects Charlie's instrumentality in paying an exorbitant price for her shoes while also offering affection in their upcoming marriage. Her statement foreshadows that this dialectic will be one that the characters will struggle with later in the musical.

In the following scene, Nicola and Charlie find themselves in a “dirty and small and dreary” flat in London (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 11). Nicola is delighted because they are in London, but Charlie is less than enthusiastic. The relational dialectic of expressiveness and protectiveness can be observed as Charlie feigns excitement for his new metropolitan lifestyle. In the script, the stage directions suggest Charlie’s dissatisfaction, instructing the actor who plays him to deliver his lines “meekly” (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 11). In the Adelphi Theatre performance we observed on Broadway HD, Killian Donnelly, who plays Charlie, uses facial expressions to convey his discomfort in the flat, making it clear that Charlie is only staying in London for Nicola. Additionally, Charlie tells Nicola, “I’m happy if you’re happy,” despite evidence that Charlie feels regret in abandoning his family’s legacy, the shoe factory (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 11). Charlie is practicing protectiveness by withholding his true feelings regarding his new situation, whereas Nicola coaxes expressiveness with loaded questions like, “I’m ecstatic! Aren’t you?” (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 11). It isn’t until the very end of the musical that Charlie is finally expressive to Nicola. When Charlie mortgages the flat without telling Nicola, she angrily confronts him and accuses him of trying to be a hero. Charlie finally acknowledges that he wants to stay in his hometown and run the shoe factory, admitting to Nicola that “London was for you” (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 82).

The relational dialectic of judgment and acceptance also plays a pivotal role in the interactions between Charlie and Nicola. Nicola exhibits far more judgment than acceptance when presented with the notion of using the factory to produce shoes for drag queens rather than selling the factory to be converted into apartments. Nicola explains to Charlie that his father had approached a realtor months prior to his death to discuss the sale of the factory (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 55), and by revealing this painful truth, Nicola rejects Charlie’s plan, which he

presents for her acceptance. When he attempts to make the case for his own plan for the factory, Nicola snaps, “Are you deaf? Your father was cashing out! You owe him nothing. The prison door is open. You’re free, Charlie. All you need to do is walk away” (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 56). In the performance observed for this article, Cordelia Farnworth, who plays Nicola, delivers her lines with such vitriol that it makes it clear to the audience that Nicola’s view has no room for acceptance of Charlie’s new idea.

Additionally, the relational dialectic of judgment and acceptance can be observed when Nicola and Charlie separate. Nicola initially expresses acceptance in their terminal interaction, stating, “No one can ever say I didn’t stand by my man. And I’ll stand by you still if you give me but one reason” (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 82). In turn, Charlie expresses judgment, revealing that he has always disapproved of the London plan, which, in turn, is met with more judgment from Nicola. Nicola chides Charlie for “hankering to be a hero,” which is judgmental of his staunch position that he has an obligation to provide for his employees (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 83). The two ultimately favor judgment over acceptance, as Nicola returns to London and Charlie remains in Northampton to prepare for the Milan Fashion Show.

From this relationship, the audience can see that when one opposition in a dialectic is favored over another, the relationship can cease to exist. When used as an example in a communication studies course, students may recognize that Nicola and Charlie’s choice to favor one opposition in each dialectic over the other leaves little room for negotiation. Students may make connections between this relationship and personal relationships they have seen in real life, noting that negotiating tensions in a dialectic is essential to the survival of a relationship.

Charlie and Lola

The primary relationship in *Kinky Boots* is the unlikely friendship between Charlie and Lola, and there are elements of both personal and political friendship in their relationship. Initially, it appears that their friendship was only political; Charlie needed a way to save his factory and Lola wanted an opportunity for fame. The two saw their alliance as mutually beneficial, but not necessarily a friendship based on affection and caring for each other's well-being. The relational dialectic of affection and instrumentality can be observed in several instances throughout the development of Charlie's friendship with Lola. When Lola first comes to the factory in Northampton, she is only interested in a pair of shoes, and Charlie is only interested in creating a new product to keep his company afloat. At this point, there is no affection in their friendship, only instrumentality. Charlie crafts a burgundy boot for Lola, much to her chagrin, and she demonstrates a passion for designing her own boots (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, pp. 35-40). Charlie displays affection for Lola by praising her knack for design, dispelling her self-deprecation by telling her, "You are passionate about shoes. I haven't heard anyone talk about a heel that way since... not since my father" (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 42). At this point, Charlie's affection is only to solicit Lola's cooperation. If Charlie can persuade Lola, she will potentially save the factory by designing desirable boots. The friendship begins as a political friendship rooted in mutual instrumentality, but later morphs into a personal friendship that illustrates and negotiates the dialectic of affection and instrumentality.

At the end of Act 1, Charlie and Lola are able to develop a more personal friendship by commiserating over feelings of reproach from their fathers through the song "I'm Not My Father's Son." In this song, they learn that they have more in common than they thought, and this shared experience creates a bond, which forms a personal friendship. The interweaving of their

voices illustrates this connection: Lola begins the song as a solo, with Charlie coming in towards the end, and the two swap voice parts so that each character takes a turn as the tenor and the bass. The switching of voice parts suggests that the characters are intertwined, both as friends and because of their shared experiences. As Lola notes, “We’re the same, Charlie boy, you and me” (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 53). By finding common ground with one another, Charlie and Lola’s political friendship becomes a personal one.

Throughout the musical, we can see examples of the relational dialectic of judgment and acceptance between Charlie and Lola. The previously mentioned number “I’m Not My Father’s Son” highlights the moment that Lola and Charlie opt for acceptance over judgment. Prior to this, in their first encounter, Charlie is uncomfortable when he finds himself the employer and potential friend of a drag queen. According to the musical’s script, he recoils at Lola’s touch and flees when she winks at him (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, pp. 24-26). In the Adelphi Theatre performance, Killian Donnelly’s body language makes it clear that Charlie is uncomfortable in the presence of Lola; he turns away from her and jerks at her touch.

Later, Charlie becomes especially judgmental of Lola’s decisions and rationality. In Act 2, he is outraged when she goes over his head to cancel the professional models and replace them with her troupe of drag performers (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, pp. 83-84). Charlie, who is stressed about the Milan fashion show and still reeling from his breakup with Nicola, lashes out at the Price and Son employees, including Lola. His judgment ultimately drives Lola away, as he refers to her and her troupe as “misfits” (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 85). In the end, Charlie is fully accepting of Lola and the drag community after they rescue him from humiliation at the Milan Fashion Show (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, pp. 97-104). The musical’s final number, “Raise You Up,” is a deliberate message about acceptance.

The relational dialectics in Charlie and Lola's relationship emphasize the benefits of balancing both contradictions in a dialectic. By dispelling judgment and fostering an environment of acceptance, both participants in this relationship acquire the rewards they sought. Theatre-goers and students alike may apply this lesson to their own relationships, noting that successful friendships require careful negotiation and balance of both oppositions of each dialectic.

Don and Lola

The third relationship we examined is the friendship that develops from the antagonistic relationship between Don and Lola. The most obvious relational dialectic that can be observed in interactions between Don and Lola is the relational dialectic of judgment and acceptance. Don is outspokenly bigoted towards Lola throughout the duration of the musical. When they first meet, Don mistakes Lola for a cis-gendered woman, calls her "sweetheart," and gets her to sit on his knee. When Lola makes it clear that she is a man in drag, Don reacts with horror. Don judges Lola, imploring her to "try dressing like a bloke" (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 63). Lola is also judgmental of Don, but in a less discriminatory, upfront manner. At first, she appears to enjoy shocking him, but she later cites Don as her reason for initially refusing Charlie's offer to be his designer, stating that Don is "just like every other man in Northampton" and "a stellar reminder why" she started a new life in London in the first place (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 41). Both characters are highly judgmental of each other, and there is little room for acceptance until the fight scene in Act 2, when Don challenges Lola to a fight after they argue over what it takes to be a "real man."

The fight scene changes the relationship between Don and Lola. Lola, whose father had trained her to be a professional boxer, has an advantage, but this is an advantage of which Don is

unaware. Though Lola initially begins to win, she allows Don to win the fight in order for him to save face and avoid ridicule from his coworkers. By doing so, Lola expresses what could be construed as affection for Don. Afterwards, Lola and Don have a drink at the pub, where Don acknowledges that Lola let him win. She explains her motives and presents her own challenge for him: to “accept someone for who they are” (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 91). Just as Lola expressed affection for Don by allowing him to win the fight, Don, in turn, expresses affection for Lola by accepting her challenge: Don chooses to accept Charlie, forgiving him for his outbursts and persuading his fellow workers to work overtime and give up a week’s pay in order to create the “kinky boots” that Charlie believes will save the business. Through Don and Lola’s negotiation of the dialectic of judgment and acceptance, *Kinky Boots* emphasizes its message about the value of accepting oneself and others.

The relational dialectic of the ideal and the real can also be observed in Don and Lola’s interactions. Don has clearly defined notions of how men and women ideally present themselves, whereas Lola challenges him with the reality that drag queens coexist with people who adhere to strict conservative societal norms. This debate comes to fruition in the tango dance number “What a Woman Wants.” As a tango, which is a rather combative dance style, the song illustrates the conflict between Don and Lola. Lola tangoes with the female factory employees while wearing the “kinky boots,” and she emphasizes that what women want is sensitivity, rather than the traditional masculinity for which Don advocates. Through “What a Woman Wants,” the female factory workers convey that the reality of what they want differs significantly from Don’s ideals (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, pp. 62-68). This contradiction of Don’s ideal with Lola’s real results in a strain on their relationship, as Don is humiliated by being proven wrong by Lola. This relationship stresses the fact that imbalances in the relational dialectics of the ideal and the

real can cause significant tension between individuals. In the case of Don and Lola at this point in the musical, this contradiction prevents a relationship beyond mere tolerance of one another.

The final scene of the musical illustrates the dialectic of judgment and acceptance in order to emphasize the musical's message of acceptance. At the end of the musical, Don, who has struggled with this dialectic in his relationship with Lola throughout the show, joins his fellow factory employees, Charlie, Lola, and Lola's troupe of drag performers on stage at the Milan fashion show. In the performance observed for this analysis, Sean Needham as Don sports the "kinky boots," jeans, a plaid shirt and a puffy vest, and he sings his solo with a growl: "Look out Milan/Here comes Don/And Don has brought some friends along/When you're stuck inside uncertainty/The ones you love/Can set you free" (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 100). At the end of his solo, Don hits a high D in falsetto on the word "free," symbolically blending his traditionally masculine sound with his newly-acquired sensitivity. At the end of the song, the company presents the musical's overall message in six steps, and Don delivers the final step: "you change the world when you change your mind" (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 103).

Don's appearance, lyrics, and sound all illustrate his new acceptance of Lola, showing audience members how people learn from their friends. Don and Lola's relationship may also provide a relatable example for students learning about relational dialectics in communication classes. The characters' struggle with the dialectic of judgment and acceptance is likely one that many students have experienced in their own lives with friends, family, and acquaintances.

Conclusion

In addition to contributing to interpersonal communication studies, Rawlins' relational dialectics can be useful for rhetoricians who study popular culture texts to examine the idiosyncratic push and pull factors in fictional relationships. The relationships between

characters in the musical *Kinky Boots* can serve as examples for the audience of what makes a relationship healthy or unhealthy. In *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Kenneth Burke (1967) suggests that “art forms...be treated as *equipment for living*, that size up situations in various ways and in keeping with correspondingly various attitudes” (p. 304). When we relate to characters in fictional texts, we are really analyzing our own relationships. In this way, musicals like *Kinky Boots* can serve as “equipment for living,” as they provide their audiences with life lessons.

Using *Kinky Boots* as an example of Burke’s (1967) “equipment for living,” we suggest that the musical offers learning opportunities for theatre-goers and students alike. As theatre-goers watch a performance of *Kinky Boots*, they learn important life lessons about friendships, judgment and acceptance, and affection and instrumentality. The relationship between Charlie and Nicola illustrates how favoring one opposition within a dialectic can strain a relationship. Audience members can learn from this relationship that failure to attempt to negotiate tensions in a relationship may cause a relationship to fail. Through Lola and Charlie’s relationship, audience members can see how political friendships may morph into personal friendships, as well as how balancing the dialectic of judgment and acceptance and the dialectic of affection and instrumentality is important in establishing and maintaining friendships. Finally, in Don and Lola’s relationship, audience members can learn that by negotiating the dialectics of the ideal and the real, as well as the dialectic of judgment and acceptance, relationships can improve. These lessons can be applied to audience members’ own relationships, and because of these lessons, they may be more inclined to forgive friends or to “accept someone for who they are” (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 91).

Similarly, *Kinky Boots* can be used as a teaching tool to help undergraduate communication students learn and apply relational dialectics. Musical theatre has been used as an effective means of teaching communication concepts to undergraduate students in both the communication and theatre disciplines, as noted by Beasley and Beasley (2016) in their study of dramatism in *Little Women* and by Schrader (2011) in her study of social constructionism in the song “Wonderful” in *Wicked*. We suggest that *Kinky Boots* can serve a similar function in teaching students about relational dialectics due to both the popularity of the show and because students may find it more comfortable to apply theoretical concepts to a fictional text before applying them to their own lives. Instructors may choose to utilize the musical in their teaching in various ways, including using it as a class example, incorporating it as a class project, or even organizing a field trip for students to attend a performance of the production.

First, *Kinky Boots*’ popularity allows it to connect with students. The message of living your truth and accepting others for who they are is one that many students will likely appreciate. The flashy costumes, upbeat music, and large dance numbers may also create interest among students. Furthermore, they may identify with characters in the musical; for example, a student who has felt rejection or disconnect from a parent may relate to Charlie or Lola. This identification may contribute to taking an interest in *Kinky Boots*. Interest is a key motivating factor in student learning (Harackiewicz et al., 2016; Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000), and it can lead to better engagement and more effective information processing (Renninger & Hidi, 2016). Because *Kinky Boots* is a text that attracts and maintains student interest, it is well-suited as a teaching tool for the classroom.

Second, *Kinky Boots*, as a fictional but relatable text, may allow students to apply relational dialectics in a way that is more comfortable to them than immediately applying it to

their everyday lives. Some students are reluctant to share personal stories in class, and certain dialectics, such as the dialectic of judgment and acceptance and the dialectic of affection and instrumentality, may be particularly uncomfortable for students to discuss in relation to their own lives, as it can be difficult to admit when one has used a friend for personal gain, when one has judged a friend unfairly, or when one has accepted a choice made by a friend that is ethically, morally, or legally questionable or unsound. Students may find it easier to learn about these dialectics and how they exist in friendships in a fictional text like *Kinky Boots* before applying them to their own real-life examples, which they may do privately or in an assignment that is only shared with an instructor and not the entire class. Using *Kinky Boots* as a teaching tool for learning about relational dialectics minimizes some of the discomfort students may have in applying these concepts to their personal lives in a public setting. Future research may involve studying classroom use of the musical in teaching relational dialectics in order to further support this conclusion.

The use of relational dialectics as a lens to study the musical *Kinky Boots* accentuates the musical's themes of acceptance and compassion. Through this musical, audience members and students alike can see that when participants in a friendship balance relational dialectics, the relationship tends to be rewarding. When participants favor one opposition over another, the relationship often fails. We hope that when viewing *Kinky Boots* through this lens, audience members and students will find that the most beautiful thing in the world is, in fact, not a shoe, as suggested in the opening number, but a friend.

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Connecting Through Comments: A Thematic Analysis of Blogging Comments

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Abstract

There are millions of blogs available for readers and a lack of existing research on the interactions occurring through the comment-based dialogue between bloggers and their readers. This study examines the comments from 14 blog posts from a well-established lifestyle blog, which yielded 640 unique comments, 25 emergent themes, and three categories for thematic analysis. An inductive approach was used to identify the emergent themes from the blog comments. The results of the study suggest interactions are occurring primarily between the blogger and their readers, with minimal reader-to-reader interaction taking place.

Keywords: *Computer Mediated Communication, Blogs, Blog Comments, Online Community Dialogue*

Introduction

With the increasing prevalence of mediated communication, there has been a reduction in face-to-face communication and an increase in face-to-screen communication. While there may be some adverse effects from increased use of mediated communication (Torr, 1999; Turkle, 2012), there has also been potential to form and build communities, some that could mimic the social communities of the past and eliminate the barriers of time and space through means such as blogging. Social media/new media/computer mediated communication (CMC) has been used

by over half of the population (Duggan et al., 2015). Mediated communication has permeated personal, professional, and academic interactions; therefore, understanding more deeply the role of face-to-screen interaction may benefit those who have engaged in this experience.

Blogging was considered “new media”, defined as “the advancing presence of communication technology in everyday life” (Duhe, 2015, p. 153). New media has continued to evolve as Duhe (2015) stated, “These new media range from the first Internet-enabled PCs in the workplace to tweets and status updates across a 34-year timeframe” (p. 153). From a historical perspective, blogging has not become outdated and has remained relatively new; from a technology perspective, blogging has been well-established. New media, with ever-changing platforms and functions, has continued to include blogs and points toward interactivity as a key factor.

Blogging, in fact, has continued to increase in popularity, and blogging, in particular, has provided a rich face-to-screen environment. Rothenberg (2004) believed blogs would be a passing phase; in contrast, Porter et al. (2007) found that those surveyed in their study felt blogs were not going to go away. Recent studies examined the use of blog comments in areas such as health communication (Jenkins & Moreno, 2020) and information diffusion using social media (Liang & Kee, 2018).

WordPress.com (n.d.), a popular blog hosting site, has reached “409 million people” and showed updates to “more than 20 billion pages each month” (para. 2). In March 2021, data from WordPress.com (n.d) indicated substantial blog use, particularly comments, with new content of “70 million posts” accompanied by “77 million new comments each month” (para. 3). The data from WordPress.com (n.d.), which is only one of multiple platforms available for blog hosting services, has indicated a significant volume of blog posts, and more importantly, it has shown

many readers are commenting on blog posts. With the significant number of comments posted, it has become necessary to explore the purpose of such comments, to see if the comments are one-way communication or if there has been interaction taking place.

The conversational exchange—a form of interfacing through comments—has been important and has led to the thematic analysis of blog comments in the present study. Seltzer and Mitrook's (2007) findings support that an important element in blogging has been to create an opportunity to interface with readers. The dialogic nature of blogs has been related to Porter et al.'s (2007) findings that users who were familiar with reading blogs were familiar with the culture of the blog world.

Blogging has been shown to provide an enhanced sense of social support (Sanford, 2010). De Zuniga et al. (2013) emphasized that interpersonal elements intersect with new media when interaction has occurred. Walther (2017) emphasized the integration of mass communication and interpersonal communication. Blogging has included multiple forms of communication, such as dyadic communication—when interacting with a single comment author, small group communication—when responding or asking for input from readers, and mass communication—when readers lurk without comment in this one-way broadcast of the blogger's message. Walther (2017) has urged a closer examination of metaconstructs, specifically “distribution capacity, message persistence, audience, channels and cues, relationships, temporality, interactivity and mutual influence, message characteristics, and social goals” (p. 560). The core of communication quality in interactivity “is the responsiveness and interrelationships of the messages communicators exchange over the course of a conversation” (Walther, 2017, p. 566). Blogging has benefited from its interactivity between the blogger and the blog readers.

A significant body of research on mediated communication has been developed (e.g., Antheunis et al., 2012; Chen & Persson, 2002; Turkle, 2012; Walther et al., 2011). Walther et al. (2011) provided foundational research on how individuals may share at a hyperpersonal level through mediated channels. Research has been conducted on romantic and friendship relationships forming through mediated means (e.g., Best & Krueger, 2006; Henderson & Gilding, 2004), the risks and opportunities of anonymity online—including privacy issues—(e.g., Bae, 2016; Yang et al., 2016), self-presentation in mediated environments (e.g., Bonebrake, 2002; Huang & Leung, 2012; Simpson, 2016; Smith & Sanderson, 2015), blog use and commenting with regard to political engagement (e.g., de Zuniga et al., 2013). Prior research about blogging and social support exists but has been limited (Sanford, 2010) particularly in the area of feedback (Walther et al., 2011). Research regarding relationships has been conducted previously, but in comparison the use of the mediated channel of communication to develop relationships, in this context, has remained relatively new (Marchionni & Thorson, 2014).

In a study of blogs, Sanford (2010) asserted that blogs are distinct in providing social support. “One key distinction is the higher level of control the blogger has over the form and format of one’s communication” (Sanford, 2010, p. 569). Prior to blogs, there were greater restrictions and guidelines in online environments, such as chat rooms, “[t]hus in this earlier context, the Internet user was potentially limited in expression” (Sanford, 2010, p. 569). Blogging has made it possible for an individual to create an environment entirely their own, which may or may not reflect reality. The richness of the environment has allowed for self-expression and control of the message, which may allow for more openness or potentially hyperpersonal sharing (Sanford, 2010; Walther et al., 2011). In a more recent study, Bondi (2018) stated, “Within the framework of the blog site, each thread develops according to the

expected sequence of post and comment” (p. 50). This pattern of the blogger generating content and readers responding has been established along with a pattern for posting frequency.

Periodically, a blogger may have intervened in the comments, but it has not been the typical practice; according to Bondi (2018), “Bloggers publish their posts regularly and other participants contribute with comments of different kinds, usually showing agreement or disagreement with the post or with other comments, occasionally also adding other references and well developed argument” (p. 50). Further, Bondi (2018) found it rare for bloggers to intervene in the comments even though they have the option to do so.

Related to increased openness, Porter et al. (2007) identified, “The final step in the evolution of blog use is to begin engaging in two-way communication” (p. 94), creating a multi-directional communication channel through commenting. The same study examined how bloggers began using blogs; their findings indicated readers were “using blogs routinely for informational purposes – seeking out alternative viewpoints, the latest news, and experimenting with blogs for research purposes. Then, use [shifted] to a more professional – albeit passive – orientation” (Porter et al., 2007, p. 94). However, Porter et al. (2007) examined blogging through the framework of public relations practitioners, those who strategically used blogging in a specific context, not from an interpersonal relational perspective.

Considerations of blogging have included audience analysis and identity management. Ford (2012) stated that bloggers have been strategic in their content decisions choosing what to post and what not to post based on their perceptions of their audience. “Bloggers manage access based on an interaction between the blog content and the author’s relationships with members of particular publics. When the blogger wants to keep certain publics from seeing particular content, they take steps to *exclude* those publics from that content” (Ford, 2012, p. 551), which

aligns with the performance element discussed by Walther et al. (2011) and contrasts Bondi's (2018) findings that bloggers do not intervene frequently through comments. The effect of managing an online persona has affected both online partners and the individuals themselves (Reed, 2005; Walther et al., 2011).

Some of the effects on online tools, like blogs, have been positive, such as a sense of social support that emerged through blog reading and commenting, which may have developed interpersonal relationships between the reader and blogger (Sanford, 2010). To develop relationships between the blogger and commenters, and potentially among readers through comments, interaction must have occurred, and the rich medium of blogging may have served as a mediated channel for interaction. According to Sanford (2010), "The richness of each medium is based on (a) the medium's capacity for immediate feedback; (b) the number of cues and channels available; (c) language variety; and (d) the degree to which intent is focused on the recipient" (p. 579). Blogs have been a rich medium when considering the four criteria set forth by Sanford (2010) – they have allowed for the blogger and blog readers to engage through multiple mediums.

The present study has built upon existing research on mediated communication to advance the existing framework through an exploratory thematic analysis of blog comments. As part of the current study, it was necessary to determine if blog comments have been one-way communication (from the reader to the blogger) or if they have been bi- or multi-directional, meaning the comments are serving as a dialogue between the blogger, the reader, and among readers. If interaction has occurred, it necessitates consideration of the nature of the interaction and forming of connections. For purposes of this study, connections have been defined as

interaction through comments in a dialogue between the blogger and readers or between reader and reader. This research has addressed the following questions:

R1: What themes emerged from blog comments? And has there been interaction occurring in this space?

R2: Do those who interacted through commenting on blogs build a connection? If so, have they connected with other commenters? With the blogger?

R3: What role have mediated communication interactions played as a replacement or supplement to social groups? Has a sense of community been created using these mediated communication platforms? If so, how? If not, why?

Each of these questions has been examined through this study.

Method

This exploratory study examined the content and interaction of blog comments through a thematic analysis, an approach recognized since the 1970s (Braun & Clarke, 2014). Due to the exploratory nature of this study, thematic analysis has been appropriate during what Boyatzis (1998) refers to as the “fuzzy” stage, before things are fully focused (p. 5). It has also served as a bridge for elements of the study that are quantifiable, but not fully quantitative, and the deductive themes that emerged (Boyatzis, 1998).

For purposes of this study, comments were analyzed from 14 posts from a single well-established lifestyle blog using posts that were publicly available online. Since one aim of this study was to examine the potential creation of community through blogging, the blog selection was important. A lifestyle blog most closely represented face-to-face communities due to the range of topics addressed through posts and comments; therefore, it was a well-founded choice for analysis. The blog post topics ranged from health and beauty product recommendations, to

pregnancy and birth, to pets, to family and marriage, to diet and exercise, much like topics of conversation with friends or neighbors in non-mediated environments. Other types of blogs have more limited focus such as a particular interest area; some examples of more specialized topics have included photography, cooking or food, home design, or travel. The topics of blogs have been as varied as the bloggers.

This study examined how those who have read one lifestyle blog may or may not have interacted and formed relationships through the comment feature available on most posts. The comments have been examined as the interaction between the blogger and the reader, also referred to as the comment author throughout this study. During the early years of the blog used for this study, I followed the blog as a reader; however, I have not been a regular blog reader for several years and have never interacted with the blogger through comments or any other means. The blog has been well-established. According to Walther (2017), it may take more time to establish a relationship online, so it was important to examine interaction through comments on a well-established blog with strong potential to extend into the future.

Data Collection

To determine the posts and comments for the sample, I explored the blog's archive, opened each post, and manually counted and logged the number of comments written in response to each post. Rather than examining concurrent posts, a 12-month timeframe was selected to include a wide range of life events and opportunities for commenting to occur. In this instance, the posts included an array of topics and events such as holidays, vacations, and the birth of the blogger's second child. The blog post with the largest number of comments each month, excluding those requiring a comment to enter a prize give-away, were analyzed in this study. Comments for prize giveaways typically have a set criteria for a particular type of response and

encourage posts from readers that do not otherwise comment on the blog. Since there were two months where the two posts had the same number of comments, both posts have been included in the sample, which is the reason 14, rather than 12, posts were selected.

The posts were dated beginning in October 2018 and concluded with posts through September 2019. The number of comments for the selected sample ranged from 23 to 81. There were a total of 640 comments across 14 blog posts included in the sample for thematic analysis. Once the high comment posts had been identified, the posts and comments were saved as .pdf files at the time of data collection to ensure they were consistent and remained intact until analysis was completed. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, the aim was to determine if interactions were taking place and, if so, whether those interactions occurred through comments, potentially as a dialogue.

Identifying Themes

The researcher identified 27 themes emerging from the comments, which fit into three broad categories. These themes, used to create a codebook, were grouped into categories, and two independent research assistants completed labeling of all blog comments individually. Training included the use of a sample blog post that was labeled by both research assistants. The labeling was reviewed and feedback was provided for adjustments required in the process, which led to the topic of each comment being labeled. Once the individual research assistants completed their reviews, they met and compared the labels applied to the comments. For any discrepancies, they came to consensus regarding the most appropriate label for the comment. The thematically labeled data was returned to the researcher for further analysis.

Results

From the comments analyzed, 27 themes emerged in three categories: Blogger response, social support, and interaction. In the first category of blogger response, sub-categories of gratitude, emojis, questions for comment author, refutation, and response to comment author were used. Included in the comments were shortened or modified word forms used as an abbreviated method to type content and a conversational style; as with informal conversation, one may not always practice perfect grammar, and in the blog comments, spelling errors and typographical errors occurred occasionally. Because such informal writing has been considered as part of the whole, these errors and stylistic writing choices have remained intact in the comments included in the following section. Broadly, the overarching theme was positivity. This positivity was demonstrated in the majority of posts from the blogger, which aligned with the authentic, healthy, vibrant, and positive tone of the blog. Comment authors, or readers, typically responded in a similar manner.

Considering Walther et al.'s (2011) concern for performance, it was considered that this tone may be part of the blogger's performance—or presenting self—to draw and maintain readership. Further, the blogger may have tended toward hypersharing (Walther et al., 2011) in an effort to build a sense of community with readers; however, the motivation of the blogger cannot be ascertained from the content posted when choosing what information was disclosed. The information on the blog was often highly personal (for example, issues with her children, husband, ex-husband), but if the reader only knew the blogger through this mediated channel, the reader may have perceived that the blogger was very open to sharing personal information, when the motivation could have been to garner “clicks” to build income. The analysis of each label has been discussed in the following paragraphs.

Blogger Response

A total of n=185 (28.91%) of the comments posted were responses from the blogger. Most prevalent in this category were responses to the comment author (n=152, 23.75%). The other themes within this category ranged from n=3 (0.47%) to n=12 (1.88%), with emoji only responses being the smallest number.

Gratitude

A total of n=12 (1.88%) comments expressed gratitude. Typically, these responses were concise and consisted of statements like “Thank you!” or “Thanks!” from the blogger. Since the use was minimal across all the comments, this theme did not provide a strong indication of a theme of gratitude across the comments.

Emojis

Posts in this category were limited (n=3, .47%) and were only posted by the blogger. Only minimal emojis were used: the smiley emoji ☺ and the symbols for a heart emoji “<3”. While other comments periodically included an emoji symbol, there was accompanying text. Therefore, this form of expression as a comment was not analyzed further. Instead, it has been interpreted as a virtual acknowledgement to the reader that does not require a more comprehensive response; however, it served as an indicator of interaction between the blogger and comment author.

Questions for Comment Author

This category addressed instances when the blogger asked a comment author questions directly. With n=12 (1.88%) comments falling into the category, it was evident the blogger was infrequently asking questions of the comment authors; however, this did not indicate a lack of interaction—only interaction in this specific format. An example of one such comment included

“Can you share?! Broc Cheddar is my favorite soup!!” The use of “Broc” as shorthand for broccoli, served as an example of informal writing lending to a conversational style from the blogger.

Refutation

The next theme, refutation, was one of the least frequent formats of responses from the blogger. There were $n=6$ (0.94%) comments directly responding to a comment author. In one particular post regarding a dental issue for the blogger’s child, she refuted a comment about the cause of the child’s teeth grinding, “The pediatric dentist told me it was common. If you’d like to challenge him or project stress onto [name of child] you can, but I assure you he is not stressed out from all of his ‘life changes.’” While there may have been an element of performance (Walter et al., 2011) in many posts and comments, this indicated the blogger was not always focused on reader perceptions, as she asserted herself through this response. It also aligned with research by Bondi (2018) that bloggers do not typically intervene in comment posting. Instead, this blogger elected to interact with (rather than remove or block) the comment author.

Response to Comment Author

Responses to comment authors were not necessarily to address a specific question; instead, those comments were of a conversational nature. Comments in this category made up the largest portion of comments ($n=152$, 23.75%) and were found in every blog post. In a post about a new kitchen tool (a popular pressure cooker), the blogger wrote, “I’m still using my rice cooker for rice but I’m using my instant pot for all other kinds of things!” Comments could also have been in response to advice posted by a reader through a comment, such as, “Thanks for the suggestions! We considered the hotel option and think just getting up is going to be equally as logistically hard. Since we’d still have to get up at 4:30/5 at a hotel.” Some comments provided

positive affirmations to the comment author, such as the following reply written to a reader regarding a post on flying with two children; the blogger stated, “You are so brave to fly alone!!” These examples have provided a concise overview of the range of topics included within this coding category. Thematically, the tone of these comments has been identified as positive and consistent with the overall tone of the blog.

Social Support

In the broad category of social support, 10 sub-categories emerged with a total of 261 (40.78%) comments: Partnering (n=1, 0.16%), in-person relationships (n=1, 0.16%), correcting blogger (n=3, 0.47%), food affirmations (n=5, 0.78%), physical appearance affirmation (n=5, 0.78%), support (n=8, 1.25%), family affirmations (n=33, 5.16%), general comment (n=46, 7.19%), positive affirmation (n=72, 11.25%), and advice (n=88, 13.75%). Categorically, this set of comments made up the largest percentage of comments; of note was that these were comments posted by readers of the blog; these were not comments written by the blogger. This suggests the readers were seeking to be a part of the blog in some form. However, there was not a clear indication a community was formed with the blogger and readers.

Partnering and In-person Relationships

A single (0.16%) comment was identified in each of these two categories. First, this indicated partnerships were not a primary focus of this particular blog, which has provided a signal that the tone of the blog was authentic, rather than a performance to help support the income generated from blog posts. Second, it indicated if there were existing in-person relationships with those who commented, the comment authors shared this information infrequently. This phenomena may be explained by the fact that the face-to-face relationships

were known by the blogger and reader; therefore, it was not necessary to declare the relationship when commenting.

The single instance when a reader identified the face-to-face relationship indicated it was not a close relationship, potentially an acquaintance who needed to re-establish how they were known to the blogger in the non-mediated environment. The comment author stated, “Hi [blogger’s name]! It’s [reader’s name] from soccer! I wanted to let you know that I’ve been really enjoying your blog because I just had my first little one on October 18th.... It’s really helpful to hear how life with [name of blogger’s new baby] is going for you. Hope you are enjoying the day!” The face-to-face connection was established in the comment when the author indicated the relationship from playing soccer with the blogger. It also provided further evidence supporting Walther’s (2017) findings that online relationships form more slowly.

Correcting Blogger

In three (0.47%) instances, a reader elected to correct the blogger. One comment from a reader clarified an erroneous remark in a video created by the blogger, stating, “Just a note – when I watched the oatmeal video you mentioned that possibly it was the gluten coming out of the oats that was making it creamy.... What is making the oatmeal creamy is the release of starch when the cell walls are disrupted from the cooking and stirring process. Looks like a delicious way to make oatmeal though!” This comment provided a point of clarification for the readers; however, the correction was posted as a comment on an unrelated blog post due to the fact that the video was a pop-up when a reader viewed a blog post. In this instance, the actual post with the comment was about creating meals using eggs as a key ingredient.

The following comment seemed to issue a warning to the blogger from a reader. The tone was somewhat friendly, but also suggested the blogger was unaware of potential guidelines from the company being discussed. The comment author stated:

Hi [blogger's name], Be careful! You mentioned that there are no sales quotas with [beauty product brand]. Well, technically true, because they use the term "activity requirements" instead of "sales quotas". In order to maintain consultant status, you have to meet a certain sales volume every six months. Yes, it can be in personal purchases, but yikes, I don't think you'll be keen on spending that much on products all yourself! We're looking out for you! Please ensure you understand everything about what you opted into.

While the comment author indicated concern, stating "we're looking out for you!", there was also evidence of judgement of the blogger; the correction suggested the blogger did not have the necessary knowledge or information to make an informed decision.

The third comment provided a clarification from another reader, "The brand is [popular pressure cooker brand]. Just pointing that out here because the name matters if you are talking about the specific brand. I love cooking in mine so much I have both a 6qt and 8qt!"

There were not a significant number of corrections posted in the sample of 640 comments analyzed in this study, which was consistent with prior research (Bondi, 2018); however, such comments have served as an indication the readers feel the need to clarify information for other readers. This clarification may have been an indication of a sense of community by addressing the other commenters; however, the data was inconclusive. The comment cautioning the blogger may have indicated a sense of a relationship with the blogger, but it was not clear if the comment indicated a level of care/concern from the reader or perhaps judgement of the blogger.

Food Affirmations

An important notation about this category was the name of the blog as well as the educational background of the blogger were both food/diet/nutrition related. However, only five (0.78%) of the comments were identified as food affirmations, comments providing a positive response relating to images of food or recipes shared through the blog post. Other comments related to food could also include a question for the blogger and were labeled under the interaction categories addressed in the coming paragraphs.

Physical Appearance Affirmations

A relatively small number of comments addressed the physical appearance of the blogger (n=5, 0.78%). All comments relating to the blogger's physical appearance were positive. The comments included topics relating to her eyes, skin, hair, and overall appearance. In some instances, comments were a direct response to the blogger's request for recommendations for products, such as eye cream.

Support

Comments coded as support were those where the comment author provided support for the blogger, which may have included coming to the blogger's defense. Labeling indicated a small number (n=8, 1.25%) of comments were in this category; comments that were primarily offered as support to the blogger focused on when her dog had undergone a medical procedure.

General Comments

General comments, or those that do not fit into the other 26 categories, included what can best be described as statements from the comment author. A moderate number of comments fell in this category (n=46, 7.19%). Such comments provided an outlet for the reader to make a statement about something posted in the blog or commented upon, but the remarks were not

affirmations, did not provide advice, or otherwise fit in the other categories; an example of such a post follows: “This post reminded me of how my oldest used to come home from kindergarten looking like a chimney sweep! Even his feet would need scrubbing (heaven only knows how the dirt got through his shoes and socks)! Glad he got lots of fresh air and exercise!!” This comment did not fit into the study’s emergent themes. The comment indicated the reader was reminded of something from their past, the reader shared the memory, but the comment was primarily a personal recollection. An example from another reader:

I try not to use bribery too often. Dental work is the perfect time to pull it out of your box of tricks though! My daughter has had fillings, sealants, a couple of crowns and 3?4? teeth pulled. The tooth fairy has been very generous with the pulled teeth! There was also a loom kit for weaving her own creations, ice cream, donuts....anything to make her get over the trauma!

Such comments, while related to the topic of dental work in the blogger’s original post, reflected on the comment author’s past experience.

Comments in this category may have been similar to conversational flow in face-to-face communication. While they did not fit into another category for labeling, they were a form of self-disclosure. Such comments may also have fallen into the hyperpersonal category (Walther et al., 2011); however, without additional knowledge about the blogger and comment author’s relationship, there was not adequate data provided to examine this potential hypersharing without further research.

Positive Affirmations

Comments labeled as positive affirmations were the third most frequent with a total of n=72 (11.25%). Comments of this nature were posted in 12 of the 14 blog posts examined in this

study. The highest number of positive affirmation comments occurred when the blogger wrote posts about and shared her recent family photos, what her children ate, motherhood, and the introduction of her newborn baby. Comments ranged from general remarks about the blog, such as a frequent comment author who posted, “I can’t enough of your punny blog titles! I swear you have the best ones! 😊” Another comment from a reader stated, “What an adorable baby! Congratulations!!!” Comments in this category were positive remarks to the blogger regarding her posts, a product she was using or promoting, or other general points of interest to the readers.

Advice

In the advice category, 12 of the 14 blog posts included the use of the label advice, where readers provided advice—most often directed toward the blogger. Advice made up n=88 (13.75%) comments. The post garnering the highest number of comments providing advice was on upcoming travel where the blogger sought recommendations from her readers. A post on motherhood and recipes for a new pressure cooker had an equal number of comments, the second highest number of advice comments (n=17, 2.66%). One blog reader provided a lengthy comment:

I would totally recommend bringing a stroller all the way to the gate. Granted, I am usually flying alone with my kids, but even when my husband is with us it is nice to be able to just sit down and take inventory after making it through security to the gate. The other thing to consider is a delay – and then you’d have to be wearing [initial of blogger’s baby] or passing him back and forth. Just a thought. I have lots of friends who never bring the stroller to the gate! If he’s not sitting upright well in an umbrella stroller (which sounds like your best option to bring to the gate), consider rolling some lightweight muslin blankets and putting them at his sides. I’m sure either way – stroller or no stroller

– once you get to the gate and can breathe, you’ll feel like you’ve finished a huge part of the race that is traveling with more than one kid! The only other suggestion I have is to drive to the airport the night before and stay at a hotel. Oftentimes they’ll have a shuttle and you can sometimes even park for free during the entire trip. On the way home, you can send your husband and [initial of blogger’s oldest child] on the shuttle to pick up the car, and they can swing back to the airport to get you and any luggage they didn’t take, or you can all just shuttle back to the hotel to get the car. Choose a hotel with breakfast, and if you have to leave too early they will sometimes pack a bag of fruit or something for you to grab and go. Happy travels!

This comment was laced with advice throughout. In contrast, another reader provided a more concise piece of advice, “You are super organized so I’m sure you’ll do great. We used to travel with three kids under 3 1/2 and were no where near as organized. My only suggestion is to NOT take advantage of the early boarding. I would get on at the end to avoid time having to be still on the plane. Have fun!” The comment had both affirmations and advice for the blogger.

Other advice came in the form of recommendations for a beauty product, once again, at the request of the blogger. Comments included strictly product recommendations as reader posts: “[product name] Eye Masks are amazing.” Others provided comments that include affirmations and links to products, such as the following comment, “Hi [blogger’s name], you look beautiful and radiant! But as you asked for it I recommend this eye cream, I use it every morning and like it very much. [product link] Best [blog reader’s name].” Particularly when recommending beauty products, the comments were accompanied by affirmations about the blogger’s appearance.

Some advice about babies/parenting were also included in readers’ comments, such as the following comment: “Just a tip that I didn’t know when swaddling my own baby but learned

from the nurses in the NICU where I work. Try swaddling [name of blogger's baby] with his elbows bent and his hands out of the top of the swaddle. This will keep him snug and secure but with access to his hands to suck for self soothing. Babies sleep better when swaddled this way because they don't fight to get their hands free." Often, comments providing advice were thoughtfully, rather than judgmentally, delivered by the comment author, which may suggest an affinity for the blogger-reader relationship.

Interactions and Reader Interactions

This grouping of labels included the use of comments by blog readers to engage in communication with the blogger. There were a significant number (n=151, 23.59%) of comments in this group. The categories that emerged in this section included the following: Questions for blogger, responses to blogger, negative responses from reader, positive product comments, and pricing. Another collection of codes were used to indicate reader interaction, where the comment authors were interacting with other readers through the comments, which included a much smaller number of comments (n=43, 6.72%). The codes used for reader-to-reader interaction were as follows: Affirming another reader's negative comment, question for another comment author, questions for all, responded to all (not only the blogger), and responded to another comment author.

Negative Response from Readers

A total of n=9 (1.41%) comments from readers were a negative response to the blogger's post. The majority of the negative comments (n=7, 1.09%) were in response to a post perceived by readers as promoting a multi-level marketing (MLM) promotion. Although these were a small percentage of the total comments posted, the strong negative response to this single post, making up 15% of the total comments on that individual post, indicated a significant response from

readers. The readers expressed their disappointment in the blogger for promoting such a brand, which may have suggested readers felt some level of betrayal or a violation of their mediated relationship with the blogger. Further research on this particular topic could be used to determine if the comments indicate a breach of the implied blogger-reader relationship. One reader stated the following:

I love this blog but I really dislike multilevel marketing schemes such as [beauty product brand]. . . [reader quoted report]. What bothers me most about these companies is that they especially take advantage of women (and ESPECIALLY stay at home moms) because the model is so misleading and it encourages women to invest in a business that does not see returns once you account for time and money spent on inventory and sales. The company benefits when you take on consultants but at what cost to the women that sign up? . . . It seems innocent enough, but when you understand how the model truly takes advantage of its consultants, its horrifying. . . . I know I'm a little fired up about it, but I HATE to see large companies take advantage of women's valuable time and desire to work hard for their families. I still support this blog and your other content, but definitely can not get behind the MLM machine.

This comment expressed a strong negative response. Another reader expressed similar dislike:

As a long time reader, I am really bummed out that you joined an MLM. 😞 I don't care how great the products might be, the MLM business structure is predatory and the vast majority of people who sign up (those without blog platforms and built-in customer base!) lose money. I'd encourage anyone thinking about joining [beauty product brand] to do their research and check out their financial disclosure statement to see how much people REALLY make.

Yet another lengthy post expressing a strong, negative reaction from a reader. An additional lengthy comment came from a self-identified longtime reader:

Hi [blogger's name], long time blog reader here. I really have enjoyed reading your blog over the years and I haven't had a strong opinion about how you format your blog and what topics you've covered as you've changed throughout the years, mostly I've enjoyed it all. But I have to be real with you, I hear that you're insisting [beauty product brand] isn't MLM so I'll trust you on that. But I'm already skimming sections going into detail on products and skipping your stories ... You sound like an MLM saleswoman in a way your sponsored posts rarely do. I thank you for your years of working on this blog and I admire you for building a lovely business that I enjoy consuming content from. I'm just not so excited about content related to your makeup sales business.

This comment addressed the tone of the blogger as the issue that was negatively received by the reader. The comment authors of the negative comments, while attempting politeness, wrote in a direct manner to express their disappointment, disagreement, and opinion of MLM. The blogger responded, defended her position, and provided additional evidence for her position that the company was not a MLM.

For those who identified themselves as long-time readers, a point of interest was their decision to comment at this particular time. It was unlikely as a longtime reader one would identify themselves in that way if they were also a regular comment author. This perceived potential violation of reader trust was enough to elicit these negative comments, many of which were substantive comments. While the context has not provided data rich enough to confirm this, meaning further study would be required, it was a potential indication of a blogger-reader relationship and possibly the formation of community.

Positive Product Comments and Pricing

While many readers responded negatively to perceived MLM strategies being used, there were positive comments regarding products (n=27, 4.22%) and pricing (n=1, 0.16%). Positive comments in this coding category were frequently from readers who also used the recommended product and supported the blogger.

Responses to Blogger

In this category, readers responded directly to the blogger through their comments, often to a question posed from the blogger. Comments in this category made up a moderate portion of total comments (n=49, 7.66%). Some responses included links to other resources; one reader responded to the blogger's question with the following:

I use this guide: [link to online resource] If I'm just making a bowl for myself, I use a regular ceramic bowl for my potin-pot and eat out of that – one bowl to wash! If I'm making a batch for two or three people, I use a stainless-steel bowl and serve out of that – if I'm not doing the jars like I mentioned above. 😊 Now I'm off to make the egg loaf – thanks for the idea!

In contrast to the prior response, another blog reader shared details of a vacation destination in a concise comment, “We stayed at the Ocean Reef Club on Key Largo. It was amazing! Lots of great resort options in the Keys!” The responses thematically were positive and friendly, potentially indicating an informal conversational tone.

Questions for Blogger

In this sub-category, readers were asking questions directly of the blogger. This activity accounts for n=64 (10%) of the comments in the analysis. A theme emerging from these questions was often in regard to a product shown in a photo on the blog, for example, several

comments asked about a lunchbox the blogger's oldest child used and a bathing suit shown in vacation photos. Thematically, these comments were not considered strong evidence of performance nor hyperpersonal sharing (Walther et al., 2011).

Affirming Another Reader's Negative Comment

This label accounted for a single comment (0.16%) out of 640; however, it had additional relevance. In this instance, the reader was supporting another reader's negative response to the post perceived by many as a MLM. It was noteworthy because it was the only instance of a reader supporting another reader through the comments in such an obvious manner. The blog and comments together did not show if this was significant in a face-to-face environment; it is not clear if the two readers may know each other and/or the blogger outside of the blog, which may have further informed the understanding of this particular comment.

Question for Another Comment Author, Questions for All, Response to Another Comment Author, and Response to All (Not Only the Blogger)

The questions labeled in the first two areas (questions for another comment author and questions for all) accounted for three (0.47%) comments each. The third label (response to another comment author) had somewhat more frequency (n=19, 2.97%). The final label accounted for n=17 (2.66%) of the comments. These labels were significant in this study because they provided evidence readers were interacting with one another. However, with such a small total number of comments, it was evident interacting with other readers may not be a primary reason for engagement in blog comments, which indicates there was only minimal evidence that readers were forming community with the blogger and other readers as a group.

Discussion and Implications

The thematic analysis conducted for this study was guided by three research questions:

R1: What themes emerged from blog comments? And has there been interaction occurring in this space?

R2: Do those who interacted through commenting on blogs build a connection? If so, have they connected with other commenters? With the blogger?

R3: What role have mediated communication interactions played as a replacement or supplement to social groups? Has a sense of community been created using these mediated communication platforms? If so, how? If not, why?

R1 is answered with a total of 25 themes emerging from the analysis that are further divided into three categories: Blogger responses, social support, and interaction and reader interactions.

R2 is partially answered; yes, some connections are potentially being made. There is minimal evidence of interactions occurring among readers; however, interaction is reoccurring at a greater volume between the blogger and the readers. Readers do interact with each other, but the sample in this study does not show support to be a significant reason for commenting on the blog. The themes indicate readers have some desire to interact with the blogger.

R3 is partially answered. The evidence from the thematic analysis is inconclusive regarding the role mediated communication interactions play through following and commenting on blog posts. It is also unclear if the connections—bi or multi-directional interactions through comments—that appear to form can serve as a replacement or supplement to social groups; the analysis does not lead to strong support for communities being built.

Further research is necessary to determine the significance of the relationships occurring face-to-screen, face-to-face, and in blended environments. A potential limitation of examining the comments alone is the fact that a blogger may have some control over what appears on a

blog; readers may be required to register, or the blogger may moderate or delete comments. Thus, the comments shared publicly on a blog may not reflect all the comments from readers. For a deeper understanding of the relationships and the role of comment moderating and to build upon this exploratory study, additional methods of examination may be necessary, such as interviews with bloggers and their readers. There may be reluctance, particularly for the blogger, to reveal information since it may change readership and potentially sponsorship. Another area with potential for further examination is the frequency with which an individual comments on the blog. Since the reader enters their own name or pseudonym, it is not possible to determine if any comments are written by the same individual, particularly with the use of only first names and variations that may be entered each time an individual comments.

Particularly with the recent COVID-19 outbreak, face-to-screen interactions are increasing as society adapts to isolation and quarantine environments; this is also creating significant modifications in interactions, causing a heavy reliance on mediated communication channels as individuals seek to fulfill unexpected social and familial voids. Since the data collection was completed months before the outbreak, it is not considered as part of the study; however, additional research is needed in this area to determine if interaction changes between the blogger and readers during a crisis.

What can be learned from this study is that bloggers and readers are interacting through comments. They are engaging in a dialogue to connect and learn from each other as identified through the themes presented here. While there are limitations, there are opportunities to build upon this research to gain a deeper understanding of these interactions and the potential to form, maintain, and deepen communities in mediated environments.

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TEACHER'S WORKBOOK

A Precarious Prediction: Applying Predicted Outcome Value Theory to Classroom First Impressions

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Abstract

First impressions have a significant impact on our initial and long-term communication interactions. The predicted outcome value theory suggests that the initial impressions we make upon meeting someone new stimulate us to make predictions about potential outcomes and values of continuing or terminating a relationship (Sunnafrank, 1986). This classroom activity provides an opportunity to explore predicted outcome value theory through application and discussion-based learning. Students have praised the activity and demonstrated growth in the learning outcomes.

Keywords: *Communication Pedagogy, Predicted Outcome Value Theory, First Impressions*

Courses: Introductory Survey Course (provides an overview of public speaking, interpersonal communication, and small group communication) and Interpersonal Communication

Objectives:

- Students will recognize the significance of first impressions in initial communication interactions.
- Students will apply predicted outcome value theory to communication interactions.
- Students will evaluate the consequences of focusing on outcomes and values of a relationship during initial interactions.

Introduction and Rationale

Berger and Calabrese (1975) contended, “When strangers meet, their primary concern is one of uncertainty reduction or increasing predictability about the behavior of both themselves and others in the interaction” (p. 100). Predicted outcome value theory (Sannafrank, 1986) further contended that first impressions, the initial assessments made upon meeting someone new, motivate us to predict the extent to which investment into the relationship will be worthwhile. “When we first meet another person, we predict the probable outcome of our relationship and try the hardest to develop relationships we expect to be rewarding” (Gamble & Gamble, 2013, p. 62). For example, if we form an initial positive judgment of an individual, then we are likely to engage in more communication with them and seek additional information. On the contrary, if we form a negative judgment of an individual, we might restrict our communication with that individual (Sannafrank & Ramirez, 2004).

Horan et al. (2011) found that students’ first impressions of their instructor affected their judgments about future instructor interactions. Other research has documented the impact of first impressions on students’ relationship development with their classmates (Sannafrank & Ramirez, 2004). Therefore, considering the significance of initial interactions on interpersonal communication, the first day of an academic course allows a unique opportunity to illustrate and discuss the importance of first impressions, both of one’s instructor and one’s classmates. Thus, to demonstrate the significance of first impressions and an application of predicted outcome value theory, this classroom activity instructs students to make relational predictions based on these initial classroom interactions. Then, later during the semester, the students discuss whether initial interactions affected their relational formation with fellow students and with their instructor.

The Activity

This classroom activity requires approximately 50 minutes of class time divided among three class periods over the semester: the first day, a day about two weeks into the class, and a day close to the end of the semester. The time requirements and processes are detailed below.

Activity Part One

Time one, the first day of class (20 minutes): Like many instructors, I spend a significant portion of my first class introducing the course and engaging in activities designed to introduce the members of the class to their classmates and me. For the student introductions, I prefer to have the students form dyads, spend a few minutes getting to know one another, and end by having them introduce each other to the class. I also engage in other introductory activities and ice-breaking activities that allow students to meet and have initial interactions with their new classmates. Following the student introductions, I introduce myself by sharing information about my background, including my academic journey. After all of the introductory activities are complete, I provide the students with a piece of paper and an envelope. Next, I ask the students to write a letter to themselves, answering the following questions:

1. Based on one of the students you met during the introduction exercise, what is your current impression of the person you just met? Based on your initial impressions, do you believe you will be able to maintain a positive relationship with the individual you just met? Why or why not?
2. Based on your introduction to the professor, what is your current impression of the professor? Based on your initial impressions, do you believe you will be able to maintain a positive relationship with the professor? Why or why not?

When the students complete their letters, they should fold their letter and place the note inside the envelope, write their name on the outside of the envelope, then seal the envelope and return it to the instructor. The instructor should explain that the letters will be kept confidential and that the letters will be stored in a secure place for use again at the end of the semester (day three discussed below).

Activity Part Two

Time two (10 minutes) occurs during the point of the semester that you discuss first impressions, predicted outcome value theory, and perception. The textbook utilized for my introductory course includes content on first impressions and predicted outcome value theory within the broader concept of perception (see Gamble & Gamble, 2013). Following the explanation of the different concepts, I ask the students to recall the first day of our class, their initial interactions with their classmates, and the predictions they made in the letter they wrote to themselves. Next, in a large group discussion, the students respond to the following questions:

1. Based on first impressions, to what extent do verbal communication, nonverbal communication, and perceptions of individual status influence the predictions you make about future relationships with others?
2. In what ways does a positive or negative prediction about an initial interaction affect future interactions?
3. What are the potential negative consequences of focusing on the potential outcomes and values of a relationship during initial interactions with others?

Activity Part Three

Time three (20 minutes) is typically during the last week of the class. The final day of the activity provides an opportunity for the final synthesis and reflection of the activity. I begin by

returning the letters that the students wrote to themselves to the original author. Then, I ask students to open their letters and to individually read their responses to the question prompts from day one. Next, in a large group discussion, the students respond to the following questions:

1. Are the predictions you made about your first impression of one of your classmates and the instructor accurate or inaccurate?
2. What does the accuracy or inaccuracy of your prediction say about the significance of first impressions and the utility of predicted outcome value theory?

Debriefing

The final step, included in part three of the activity, is the debriefing that allows the students time to process the activity experience, critically reflect on class discussions regarding the activity, and illustrate an application of the learning outcomes associated with the activity. I prefer to debrief in smaller groups of four to six; however, the debriefing questions below are also appropriate for a large class discussion.

1. What did you learn about first impressions and interpersonal relationship development through this exercise?
2. How do the positive or negative judgments we make during initial conversation impact relationship development?
3. How would you modify your future initial communication interactions based on your understanding of first impressions, impression management, and predicted outcome value theory?

Appraisal

Before this activity, students indicate that they have some understanding of the influence of first impressions on relationship formation. However, most students are not aware of the

complexity of perception and its relationship to our first impression of others. By completing this tri-part activity, students demonstrated a deeper understanding of the significance of initial communication interactions and the utility of predicted outcome value theory.

Overall, I have found that students enjoy the process of reflecting on their initial predictions from the first day of class. Students often comment on the accuracy of their predictions. However, in some cases, students' predictions are not accurate, which often leads to a robust and insightful conversation about human communication variables and their complexity. The classroom discussions have been lively, exciting, and even transformative. More so, the activity allows the students to demonstrate the application of the student learning outcomes.

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Stereotyping: An Open Conversation on the Establishment, Nature, and Impact of Stereotypes on Society

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Abstract

Stereotypes are generalizations about groups of people that have impacted predominantly marginalized communities. We typically use stereotypes against a generalized other and some stereotypes have become part of our perceptual sets. This activity attempts to re-humanize stereotypes by confronting students with known stereotypes and makes students reflect on the impact of stereotypes on people's lives.

Keywords: *Communication Pedagogy, Stereotypes, Perceptions*

Intended Course: Although developed for the basic Fundamentals of Communication course, this activity could be used in Intercultural Communication, Race/Whiteness in Communication, Interpersonal Communication, or any courses that address the impact of stereotypes on our communication.

Objectives:

- Reflect on where stereotypes are learned
- Understand and explain the relationship between stereotypes and unconscious biases
- Analyze the impact of biases and stereotypes on individuals' daily lives through overt or covert communication

Theoretical Rationale

Stereotypes, or “generalization[s] about a group or category of people that have a powerful influence on how we perceive others and their communication behavior” (Floyd, 2018, p. 65), are all around us and consciously and unconsciously influence our communication. We often don't realize or remember how we learned or where we first heard a stereotype, how it

influences our day-to-day interactions, or how it could ultimately change the way we perceive ourselves and others. The stereotypes we hear easily become perceptual sets, predispositions based on particular features of a stimulus (Allport, 1955) through which we look out for confirming messages of the stereotypes and disregard the disconfirmations of these stereotypes. This could ultimately cause us to evaluate people based on easily recognizable traits. Stereotypes reduce to a singular and untrue generalization about people's ability and identity, and they provide unfair evaluation.

Common stereotypes include "People in poverty are lazy," "Asians are submissive," "women are caring," and "Black people are criminals." These stereotypes are likely to be internalized and lead to the systematic idea among a group of people that they might not be worthy enough. Yamato (2004) calls this "internalized oppression" and explains that "members of the target group are emotionally physically, and spiritually battered to a point that they begin to actually believe that their oppression is deserved" (p. 100). Internalization of these stereotypes can have detrimental and damaging consequences for people. Bonnot and Croizet (2006) found that women who internalized the "women are bad at math" stereotype also ranked their self-evaluation in math lower, even when they controlled for prior achievement.

Though we cannot control the ways in which people internalize stereotypes, we can control the ways in which we communicate to and about people; challenging stereotypes and becoming aware about our own biases established through these stereotypes is a good first step. Lyons and Kashima (2003) explain that the communication chain of passing on one's knowledge about a group of people strongly contributes to the establishment and maintenance of stereotypes. We need to examine how we consciously or unconsciously communicate stereotypes. In a variety of situations, people are likely to evaluate behavior and performance

through these stereotypes. McGrady and Reynolds (2013) showed that white teachers evaluated their Asian students with higher scholastic aptitude than white students, while ranking the Black students with lower scholastic aptitude. Though the Asian stereotype might seem positive, it dehumanizes and could be all-defining. Additionally, McGrady and Reynolds noted that black children were ranked less attentive in class by their white teachers. This last finding has previously also been found by Downey and Pribesh (2004) who note that the behavior of black students in the classroom is evaluated less favorably by white teachers as compared to black teachers. We don't only evaluate children based on perceptions we hold on people's fundamental identities. MacNell et al. (2014) found that when students perceive their online instructor to be a male, they evaluate the instructor significantly higher as compared to perceiving them female, regardless of actual gender.

In the current political climate that prioritizes nationalistic ideals and monocultures, stereotyping seems to become more prevalent and largely contributes to a widening gap between people. It used to not be accepted for public officials to make racialized comments meant to oppress people. Statements by public officials such as "They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people" (Scott, 2019, para. 6) have gone nearly unpunished. In fact, the generalizations and vilifications such as the previous citation have likely contributed to an increase in violence against Latinx communities in the last decade (FBI, 2019). It is important to take a step back and reflect on how these stereotypes contribute to our internalized oppression and the influence it has on our day-to-day communication.

Description

Before performing this activity in class, it is important as an instructor to reflect on the classroom climate. This activity is not recommended before week three of a semester due to the

necessity to have a level of trust among students. If students are feeling too uncomfortable to even discuss stereotypes with their classmates, they are unlikely to discuss this topic with the depth it urges.

For this activity, materials are needed to help students keep anonymity and maximize the impact on students' understanding of stereotypes. Firstly, the instructor will need to bring enough blank notecards to class to provide each student with one card. Secondly, the classroom should be equipped with a whiteboard or chalkboard which the students can face. The instructor needs to bring enough markers to have at least two to three students write on the whiteboard at the same time. Lastly, computer access through a projector is needed to show the three-minute clip about racial profiling. Prior to beginning the activity, the instructor will divide the whiteboard into six categories (Black people, White people, Asian people, Latino/Latina people, men, and women). Categories could be adjusted to include different sexualities, races, gender identifications, or other identities.

The instructor prefaces that we have all heard of stereotypes, that some of us can relate to some stereotypes, while others are far from what we hold true. The class will be told that the following activity might be perceived as awkward, but stereotypes are not supposed to be considered comfortable. In pre-phasing the activity, the instructor will address the definition of stereotyping as well as perceptual sets. Both terms were addressed in the reading assigned for that class period (Floyd, 2018). Instructors could use other course materials addressing both stereotypes and perceptual sets. It is important for the instructor to highlight some research about the impact of stereotypes (e.g. Downey & Pribesh, 2004; MacNell et al., 2014) to emphasize the importance of the topic.

Each student is given a notecard. Students are asked to anonymously write one stereotype they have heard about each of the six groups on the whiteboard. Once the class is done writing, students will fold their notes, and put them in a bag. Each student pulls out a notecard with stereotypes another person wrote and chooses one stereotype to write on the whiteboard. Once each student has had a chance to write something down, the instructor remains quiet for a couple of minutes to let these stereotypes sink in. From there, a discussion ensues about the stereotypes with the following questions as prompts:

- How did you learn about these stereotypes?
- Do you identify with any in the category you consider yourself to be in?
- How are some stereotypes originated?
- How could these stereotypes be harmful?
- How could these stereotypes play into our perceptual sets?

Once the students have had a chance to reflect on the stereotypes, the instructor will play a three-minute clip of the film “Zwart als Roet” by Sunny Bergman (2014). The clip reveals the difference in response of witnesses when three men, a white man, a black man, and a man from Middle Eastern background steal a female’s bike in a busy park. The video shows that people were more likely to presume innocence from the white man while stereotyping the black and Middle Eastern men as criminal and dangerous. This video is used to exemplify how (unconscious) biases impact bystanders (and our own) actions to make students aware about the tangible impact stereotyping can have.

The last part of the activity allows students to reflect on stereotypes and their impact. Potential question prompts include:

- Did you realize you might be unconsciously influenced by these stereotypes?

- Do you realize ways in which these stereotypes have influenced ideas about people?
- How do these stereotypes influence the context in which we communicate with others?

Debrief

The effectiveness of the lesson is measured through the way students respond to the lesson. Many students experience discomfort, which is good. Stereotypes are uncomfortable. In the discussion, students' reflection on and grappling with serves as an evaluation of the effectiveness of the activity. Students should be able to understand that stereotypes contribute to shaping our biases, which in turn impact our communication with individuals in these groups. It is important, however, that students feel supported enough in their class to openly reflect on these stereotypes. The reflection questions assist in creating a non-judgmental environment by not asking people for their beliefs, but rather, by helping students reflect on the origins and impacts stereotypes have.

Typically, students show much more empathy in the way in which they answer the questions about stereotypes after seeing them written on the whiteboard as compared to before. This shows that students are starting to understand that stereotypes are real and have an impact on people's lives.

Appraisal

Students indicated both a degree of irritation and appreciation towards this activity. The university in which this activity was performed was in a medium-sized predominantly white university in the Midwest. Some students noted that they knew what stereotypes are and therefore didn't need to learn about them. These comments indicate that students might not realize the extent to which stereotypes influence people's lives and how stereotypes have been

internalized by both people stereotyped and stereotyping. This activity is for many students a first exposure to stereotypes beyond a dictionary term. Though this activity might not take away everyone's stereotypes, it does allow for reflections most students do not do. In a discussion about the activity, one student mentioned, "You usually hear stereotypes around, but writing them down on a piece of paper is confronting. Seeing all stereotypes on the whiteboard made me realize we are talking about people."

Though this activity has many benefits, there are some limitations. If students are already feeling strongly that stereotypes aren't impacting their communication, they might become disengaged, and the activity might have a countereffect. It is therefore important to be very sensitive as an educator of the approach to the activity, and to decide when in the semester the class is ready for such an activity. In addition, it is important to walk between groups and sit with groups to listen and ask follow-up questions to encourage student to reflect on the material.

If a class has little diversity, minority students might feel uncomfortable in the discussion of stereotypes due to the more prevalent exposure to stereotypes. The way in which this activity attempts to limit this is through asking about stereotypes about not only people in minority status, but also people from dominant cultures. Despite this, tokenization can still happen, which is why the instructor needs to be proactive in engagement with student groups. This activity and the discussion questions can be adjusted depending on the goals of the instructor and discussion questions. For example, one student noted that it would be interesting to have men and women write stereotypes separately to see how gender influences the type of stereotypes we write down. Additionally, instructors can choose different marginalized identities to reflect stereotypes more prevalent in their region or more relevant to the course material.

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An Active Learning Approach to Listening: The Coin Drop Activity

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Abstract

There is considerable research examining listening, as it is an important skill. While listening skills are important, very little instructional time is devoted to developing those skills (Hopper, 2007). After completion of this activity, students are able to describe their own listening process and assess listening techniques. This activity works well to introduce the concept of listening and various components within the listening process. Students do not typically think of listening as a skill that they can improve. When we discuss the listening process, we can recall this activity to illustrate the connection between sensing and processing.

Keywords: *Communication Pedagogy, Listening Process, Listening Techniques*

Intended Courses: Any communication course that has a listening module

Learning Outcomes: Upon completion of this listening activity, students will be able to: 1)

Discuss when they choose to listen, 2) Explain barriers to effective listening, 3) Describe their listening process, and 4) Assess their own listening techniques.

Rationale

There is considerable research examining listening, as it is an important skill. Drollinger et al. (2006) explained three broad dimensions of the listening process: sensing, processing, and responding. Sensing refers to hearing, but also taking in the message through nonverbal cues.

Processing involves assigning meaning to and evaluating the messages. Responding involves sending messages/feedback to the source of the message. The following activity and discussion touch on all three dimensions, but particularly illustrate the connection between sensing and processing. Students also focus on barriers to listening. Golen (1990) found five common barriers including: “(1) listen primarily for details or facts; (2) become distracted by noise from office equipment, telephone, other conversation, etc.; (3) daydream or become preoccupied with something else when listening; (4) think of another topic or detour because of what the speaker has said; and (5) lack of interest in the speaker's subject” (p. 29). Bond (2012) explained barriers beyond these, such as the context of the classroom, cognitive dissonance, and staying focused when ideas conflict with the students’ beliefs.

While listening skills are important and barriers are numerous, very little instructional time is devoted to developing those skills (Hopper, 2007). Sypher et al. (1989) concluded that listening is associated with success at work. “Better listeners held higher level positions and were promoted more often than those with less developed listening abilities” (Sypher et al., 1989, p. 301). Another benefit of effective listening is performing better academically (Bond, 2012). Therefore, if students understand the importance of listening, they may be more willing to enhance their listening skills. Ferrari-Bridgers et al. (2017) found that students can significantly improve listening skills over a 4-week period by 20 percent, and these improved listening skills lead to an increase in learning. The following activity provides students with an initial consideration of barriers to effective listening, their individual listening abilities, and the listening process.

Description of the Activity

This activity is used as an introduction to listening processes and skills. Students are told they will be taking a “listening quiz.” The quiz consists of listening to coins drop and determining which coin dropped. We use a quarter, dime, nickel, and penny because they are familiar objects which make similar, yet distinctive, sounds. We give the students a baseline first by dropping each coin and telling the students which coin it is. The coins are out of sight of the students, so they cannot see what coin is being dropped. We use an open three-ringed binder to hide the coin and drop each coin from the top of the binder to keep the height of the drop consistent. Prior to dropping the coins, we set up the benefits or consequences of missing an answer in a variety of ways. We typically say: 1) there are not any negative consequences if you do not get an answer correct, 2) the quiz is not for a grade in class, and 3) you will be grading your own quiz once completed. Another way to set up the activity would be to provide some benefit of getting all the answers correct; for example, anyone who gets 100% on the quiz will receive extra credit or some tangible prize.

The coin drop activity begins and each coin is dropped twice so there are a total of eight questions on the quiz. After all coins have been dropped twice, we let students score their quizzes by letting them know which coin was dropped for each question. After students “grade” their own quiz, we then ask them to raise their hands based on how many questions they missed. Very rarely do any students get all of the questions correct. This semester we had over 70% of the class miss four or more questions on the quiz, which would result in a failing grade on an actual graded quiz.

Debriefing and Appraisal

When debriefing the activity, students discuss various listening concepts. We discuss the importance of active listening, that we choose to listen, when we are better listeners, physical and psychological barriers to listening, how students approached listening in the activity, etc. Student learning outcomes include students being able to better explain when they choose to listen and when they do not. Students are also able to explain the barriers in their own lives that inhibit effective listening.

Examples of some questions to ask after the activity include:

- 1) Why did you perform the way you did on the quiz? What were you listening for?

Why did you get certain sounds wrong? Students typically discuss there was little motivation to do well since there were not any negative consequences of performing poorly. Students indicate that they have never paid attention to the sound of coins dropping before and do not have the frame of reference to differentiate sounds.

Emphasizing the importance of effective listening prior to the activity could improve student motivation and could be used in the discussion to explain the motivation to listen in general.

- 2) Were there any barriers to listening during the activity? Students talk about physical and psychological noise. In one class, a student arrived late and was trying to get settled in during the activity. It was a good example of a distraction that was then used as part of the learning process.
- 3) When do you actively listen? Why do you choose or choose not to listen? Students are able to apply course material to this activity, but also bring in other concepts about the benefits of listening well or the consequences of poor listening.

- 4) How do you change your listening when the stakes are high versus low? What are situations in your life that have barriers to listening? Work, home, etc.? Students realize they choose to listen and discuss that they listen better when the information is important or the stakes are high.
- 5) How does the activity illustrate the processes of sensing, processing, and responding? This activity works well to introduce the concept of listening and various components within the listening process. Students do not typically think of listening as a skill they can improve. When we discuss the listening process, we can recall this activity to illustrate the connection between sensing and processing.

Further Considerations

This activity could be altered in a few ways. For example, one could consider adding a reward, such as an extra credit point or candy, for 100% correct answers to see if students perform better on the listening quiz. Instructors may want to ask a student to be a confederate in the activity and arrive during the activity so that there is physical noise present during the activity. When arranging the order in which coins will be dropped, one recommendation is to drop the same coin back to back so that students do not guess that each coin is dropped once before repeating.

Another variation could be to use different sounds from audio files instead of coins dropping. For example, students could listen to *Mairzy Doats* by the Pied Pipers or different YouTube links with audio illusions (e.g., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tG9HSvNPVKQ>). Both alternative exercises require students to interpret ostensibly nonsense words to make sense of the words in each utterance (e.g., "mairzy doats" as "mares eat oats"). Instructors could play the audio clips and then quiz students on the accuracy of their interpretations. Based on the

breadth and depth of the discussion, instructors can recall the activity and students' comments when teaching the listening module and throughout the rest of the semester.

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