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Introducing Public Speaking Self-Concept (PSSC): A Novel, Qualitatively-derived Communication Anxiety and Competence Variable

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Abstract

Despite numerous quantitative assessments of teaching interventions that have helped mitigate public speaking anxiety (PSA), this common barrier to public speaking persists. In addition, quantitative measures may not be appropriate for all instructional goals, especially with students from across a variety of cultures. To enrich educators' capacity to help diverse bodies of students overcome the challenges presented by PSA, this qualitative study asked students to "Please describe yourself as a public speaker" at the beginning and the end of a freshman-level, general education public speaking class. Thematic analysis identified a two-dimensional pattern within student responses ($N = 51$) (a feelings-based dimension and a beliefs-based dimension), indicating that students could hold both emotionally-based self-perceptions about their fear or confidence regarding the act of public speaking along with separate, skills-based perceptions about themselves as public speakers. Every student's answer ($N = 51$) contained one or both types of descriptions, evidencing a novel construct the authors have dubbed public speaking self-concept (PSSC). By the end of the course, the thematic analysis revealed students' heightened ability to report more nuanced descriptions of their self-concepts, which often included positive belief-based descriptions acknowledging their enhanced public speaking skills, even if they still

reported fearful or anxious emotions surrounding speaking experiences. Helping instructors and students understand and accept natural nervous reactions often elicited by public speaking while reflecting on specific, skill-based beliefs can help decrease students' fears and, in turn, could prove key to enhancing the impact of future PSA interventions.

Introducing Public Speaking Self-Concept (PSSC):
A Novel, Qualitatively-derived Communication Anxiety and Competence Variable

A 2015 survey of 1,541 adults from across the United States showed that 28.4 % of Americans still listed public speaking among their top fears—more than the percentage who listed fears of unemployment (23.8%) or dying (21.9%) (Chapman, 2015). Despite decades of research and scores of studies examining instructional methods for decreasing public speaking anxiety (PSA), this malady continues to impact an estimated 30 to 40% of people in the United States, threatening their relational, emotional, and even financial well-being (Richmond et al., 2014). Morreale et al. (2021) reported that continued assessment of public speaking course outcomes promises to enhance communication pedagogy and the communication discipline's contributions to positive student experiences. Furthermore, the enrichment of scholarly understanding of how students' fears are experienced and manifested can foster the creation of novel interventions that may empower instructors to improve student outcomes, not only in public speaking classes but in their professional and civic lives as well (LeFebvre et al., 2018).

The use of public speaking as an instructional tool is widespread throughout the academy, as evidenced by the fact that 60% of introductory communication courses are based on public speaking (Morreale et al., 2023), adding up to an estimated 1.3 million students enrolled in such course each year (Beebe, 2013). While 20% of these students come into the course suffering from some type of serious anxiety associated with public speaking (McCroksey, 1982), the ability to help students reduce PSA is one of the most fundamental strengths of our discipline (Bodie, 2010). In fact, a recent study (Hunter et al., 2014) reported an average 10% reduction in PSA for students upon completion of an introductory communication course that emphasized public speaking. Thus, PSA reduction remains a primary goal of most introductory public

speaking courses (LeFebvre et al., 2020). Furthermore, public speaking assignments are often woven into the curriculum of courses and disciplines outside of communication. As we see an increase in the use of communication-focused instruction across the curriculum, we can anticipate that faculty across disciplines will benefit from additional research focused on PSA reduction.

Since McCroskey's seminal work on "Measures of Communication-Bound Anxiety" (1970, p. 269), communication studies employing primarily quantitative methods have provided an invaluable understanding of the challenges to and potential interventions for improved outcomes of the introductory public speaking course. These studies have examined the impacts of myriad communication variables, including, but not limited to, general anxiety, tolerance for ambiguity, self-control, adventurousness, neuroticism, introversion/extroversion, self-esteem, shyness, and assertiveness (Richmond et al., 2014). Despite decades of success in PSA-reducing pedagogy and research testing best practices in PSA reduction, "(w)e still struggle with a gaping hole where much of our communication education research should be" (Fassett, 2016), and problems related to PSA remain. Since such a large number of quantitative explorations exist, new light can be shed on whether additional variables exist by incorporating qualitative analysis, which provides a grounded approach for a more in-depth analysis of findings than quantitative research alone can provide.

In addition, quantitative measures can prove problematic in eliciting reliable and valid results in samples with people from diverse populations. Simmon and Wall (2016) stated, "We are overdue in productively addressing issues of 'diversity—or the lack thereof—in mainstream communication education research'" (p. 232). Amidst admonitions that "studying CA seems to be a U.S. enterprise" (Klopf, 1997, p. 269), communication apprehension has been studied in a

handful of other countries such as Japan (Klopf et al., 1981; McCroskey et al., 1985; Nishida, 1988) and a number of European countries (Croucher et al., 2015). However, some research has suggested that quantitative measures of anxiety and apprehension may not be appropriate for research with all populations (Levine & McCroskey, 1990), for instance, in collectivist cultures such as Japan (Pribyl et al., 1998). In a thorough review of communication apprehension (CA) literature across cultures, Fayer, McCroskey, and Richmond (1984) lamented the strong cultural biases inherent in these instruments. Therefore, new assessments of anxiety may allow for an improved understanding of these constructs cross-culturally. Consequently, such assessment may advance our ability to help communication educators across diverse institutions and cultures assist their students and the public in overcoming public speaking-related fears.

For these reasons, a call for extended introductory course research includes further modeling of the relationships among PSA-related variables with the ultimate goal of creating, testing, and enhancing more effective interventions to help students overcome PSA and bolster competence (Bodie, 2010; Dwyer & Fus, 2002; Hunter et al., 2014). In recent years, qualitative scholars have explored which specific fears students hold at the outset of a public speaking course (Grieve et al., 2021; LeFebrve et al., 2018; 2020) as well as how those fears change and diminish as a result of completing the course (LeFebvre et al., 2020). The current grounded, exploratory study contributes to these qualitative findings, adding an exploration of how students perceive themselves as speakers at the beginning of an introductory speaking course as compared with how they report their self-perceptions upon completion of the course. After all, “The complex interactions among teachers, students, and the [introductory public speaking] course are difficult to measure and understand, but are probably essential in a thoughtful pursuit of a model which explains course outcomes” (Pearson et al., 2010, p. 71).

To prepare for such modeling, this qualitative analysis seeks to determine whether previously unconsidered variables within or impacting the PSA construct might exist. Qualitative research of this nature may provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' anxiety through the introductory course (Worley et al., 2007). Such methods can allow for the emergence of a rich dataset of subject-produced responses and illuminate new constructs that, later, quantitative analyses can explore, test, and refine.

The purpose of this study was to extend knowledge and understanding of students' views of themselves as public speakers. In doing so, we aim to lay the foundation for testing future interventions to help improve those views and, therefore, student outcomes from public speaking courses. Therefore, this research employs thematic analysis to identify and characterize the ways in which students describe themselves as speakers in open-ended questioning. The following section reviews PSA research as well as a number of variables that have been explored in relationship to the communication anxiety/competence construct. Definitions of these constructs are offered in Appendix A.

Literature Review

Public Speaking Anxiety

While communication anxiety (CA) is a "broadly based anxiety related to oral communication" (McCroskey, 1984, p. 13), either real or anticipated (McCroskey, 1977). PSA, the most common form of CA (McCourt, 2007), is more precise, relating to fear or anxiety specific to the public speaking context (McCroskey, 1984). Defined as "a situation specific social anxiety that arises from the real or anticipated enactment of an oral presentation" (Bodie, 2010, p. 72), PSA's symptoms can be relatively fleeting and manageable--sweating, shaking, muscle tension, increased heart rate, and nausea (Bedore, 1994; Nutt & Ballenger, 2003; Witt et

al., 2006). Other sufferers, however, can experience such serious consequences as heart palpitations, dizziness, and general confusion (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Daly et al., 1997).

A worthy objective of public speaking education is to influence students' long-term public speaking experiences by creating learning activities that bring about genuine changes in individual levels of PSA. To ensure valid measurements of this outcome, research has differentiated between two types of PSA: state and trait anxiety. State anxiety pertains to temporary psychological states surrounding individual speaking events, while trait anxiety is specific to public speaking environments (Smith & Frymier, 2006). While most speakers experience some level of (PSA) for a particular speaking occasion, it may also persist as an enduring trait across various public speaking situations, even when no specific event is planned (Spielberger, 1966). Notably, individuals with trait anxiety are not solely anxious about communicating in basic public speaking courses but also experience nervousness in other public speaking situations (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 2004). This means that communication education's impacts on student PSA promise to transcend to positive outcomes in their professional and civic lives. As demonstrated, PSA, whether occurring in state or trait situations, is a complex construct as illustrated through ongoing research and assessment.

Research over the past 50 years has demonstrated a decrease in students' PSA as a result of educational interventions (McCroskey, 1970; Bodie, 2010; Witt et al., 2006; Hunter et al., 2014), and recent findings bolster the robustness of public speaking education's PSA-reducing impacts (Morreale et al., 2021). However, much of this work has employed quantitative measures. A handful of qualitative studies (Nash et al., 2016; LeFebvre et al., 2018; 2020; Grieve et al., 2021) have enriched scholarly understanding of the PSA construct and how public

speaking education can help mitigate it. Nash et al. (2016), for instance, found that the public speaking course could significantly increase students' sense of satisfaction while reducing their fear, indecision, and confusion about public speaking. While PSA literature consistently demonstrates positive impacts on students' feelings towards public speaking instruction for some students, these changes are not consistent for all students, many of whom continue to grapple with PSA.

Communication Competence

Communication competence (CC) "generally refers to the quality of interaction behavior in various contexts" (Canary & Spitzberg, 1987, p. 43) or the effectiveness of an individual's communication behavior. One of the primary contexts examined is the classroom and, in particular, the public speaking classroom (Canary & MacGregor, 2008; Rubin et al., 1997; Westwick et al., 2015). Scholars hold differing opinions about how CC should be defined (McCroskey, 1980; McCroskey, 1982a; & Spitzberg, 1983). It has been operationalized in several ways, including objective observation, subjective observation, self-report, and receiver report (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988), but one of the more consistently used measures in research has been self-reported communication competence (SPCC) (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988) especially when CC is linked to PSA (Ellis, 1995; Hinton & Kramer, 1998; MacIntyre & MacDonald, 1998; Rubin et al., 1997). Communication education can enhance CC (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988). However, in a study measuring the impacts of an online introductory public speaking course on students' SPCC, Westwick et al. (2015) found that the course did not lead to the expected significant enhancement in students' CC; therefore, especially for online students, testing further interventions is merited.

The SPCC/PSA Relationship

Numerous studies have associated student-perceived competence levels with reported anxiety levels, suggesting that students with greater anxiety report lower perceptions of their CC (Ellis, 1995; MacIntyre & MacDonald, 1998; Rubin et al., 1997). Previous research has shown that trait CA, including PSA, is inversely correlated with Self-Perceived Communication Competence (SPCC) (Ellis, 1995; Rubin et al., 1997; Teven et al., 2010). “This indicates that people with higher communication apprehension see themselves as less competent communicators” (Teven et al., 2010, p. 267).

The intertwining of these variables raises an interesting conundrum: If SPCC increases for students whose apprehension decreases as a result of an introductory public speaking course, is there a way to enhance perceptions of competence for those for whom PSA is more enduring? It was this question that guided our research. This research was grounded, therefore, the following section of our literature review is placed here, not because of any prior deductive beliefs about additional variables we had expected to encounter in our data. Because these variables became relevant upon analysis of our data; however, for clarity, we will discuss the literature about self-concept, self-efficacy, and self-esteem here.

The terms self-concept (beliefs about oneself), self-efficacy (beliefs about one’s abilities), and self-esteem (positive or negative feelings about oneself) are sometimes used interchangeably, but such usage is erroneous. Self-concept can guide feelings of self-efficacy, or lack thereof, without affecting self-esteem. I may feel that I possess the skills and abilities to tie my shoes effectively, but my self-esteem may not have been impacted by that sense of effectiveness since I was a young grade school child. With regard to a skill so indicative of personal success and satisfaction, such as public speaking, however, a negative impact on self-

esteem might logically accompany high PSA and low CC. Therefore, the following section delineates the definitions and differences among these concepts, which will become key in the discussion of our study's findings.

Self-concept

Historically, quantitative studies established a connection between enhanced self-concept and communication instruction, including public speaking, interpersonal, and small group courses (Brooks & Platz, 1968; Dieker et al., 1968; Furr, 1970; Stacks & Stone, 1984). In 1970, the same year McCroskey first published his work testing the personal report of public speaking anxiety (PRPSA), another scholar was testing public speaking education's impact on self-concept. Furr (1970), who defined self-concept as "an integrated synthesis of all the elements which the individual includes as constituting himself" (p. 26), found that self-concept is relatively stable. He added, however, that it can become malleable in the presence of stimuli such as training, making speech education especially pertinent. Though not all such studies found significant differences in self-concept between pre and post-test responses of first-semester college students enrolled in a speech course, in one study, the control group who were not enrolled in a speech course actually experienced "a sharp drop" in their self-concepts pertaining to communication (Brooks & Platz, 1968, p. 48.)

Self-concept has been studied in specific areas such as foreign language learning (Mercer, 2011), entrepreneurship (Obschonka et al., 2015), and sexual self-concept--"self-perceptions of one's qualities in the sexual domain" (Aubrey, 2007, p. 157). This means that an individual can have one self-concept about their ability as a good foreign language learner and separate self-concepts of themselves as a decent businessperson, and a highly sexual being. Each of these avenues of self-concept, however, may or may not bear on the way that individual feels

about him or herself in the same way as one's self-concept about communication. For this reason, as our data analysis in this paper will show, the variable we observed makes sense as an aspect of self-concept since it regards one element the individual regards as constituting the self. In addition, qualitative studies and more recent research exploring the relationship between communication instruction and self-concept appear to be scarce.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy (SE) refers to a person's beliefs regarding whether they possess the tools necessary to complete an important task as well as the capability to utilize those tools effectively (Bandura, 1997). Like communication competence, SE is also often measured using McCroskey and McCroskey's (1988) SPCC measure as opposed to measuring actual communication skills because communicative self-efficacy assesses the "confidence individuals have that they can successfully employ whatever skills they possess to communicate effectively across different communication settings" (Hodis & Hodis, 2012, p. 43). In exploring the types of fears public speaking students experience, LeFebvre et al. (2017) employed a qualitative methodology grounded in social cognitive theory and self-efficacy. They cited Bandura's work (1977), which asserted that fear can result from a perceived lack of control over outcomes while enhancing perceived capacity to achieve the outcomes desired in a given situation can empower a sense of self-efficacy (1997).

LeFebvre et al. (2020) found that, while students remained apprehensive of public speaking after completing the introductory public speaking course, the majority of them reported a different set of fears than they had at the beginning. In addition, these researchers found that the number of fears students reported decreased over the course of the semester, as did the fear's intensity. The scholars report that, although the course may not be able to eliminate some of the

students' fears entirely (e.g., memory glitches, disfluency, or sharing false information), the skill building offered by the course, in addition to the graduated exposure to more challenging assignments were effective at enhancing students' self-efficacy, creating a documented transformation in students' perceptions of public speaking. Conversely, fears regarding elements of the speaking environment that students likely learned to control as a result of their completion of the public speaking course diminished measurably, if not entirely (e.g., repeating information, speaking volume, and making poor judgments during the speech).

One of the ramifications of efficacy research is its consistent affirmation that efficacy beliefs are stronger predictors of behaviors than actual, measured capabilities (Schunk & Pajares, 2005). These findings apply to the positive impacts of public speaking education in that competence perceptions empower more beneficial choices regarding whether, when, and how to communicate with others (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988). Among those choices may be one's accepting or refusing public speaking opportunities that may be vital to job placement or advancement. Richmond et al. (2014) found that individuals with higher public speaking self-efficacy are more likely to take advantage of such opportunities and reap their rewards. This finding resonates with Bandura's (1997) assertion that students higher in SE are less likely to be deterred by challenges than those with lower SE.

Self-esteem

Research has established that self-esteem is one unidimensional characteristic of the multi-faceted construct of self-concept (Harter, 1999). "In general, self-esteem is conceptualized as individuals' feelings toward themselves, and it is considered to be largely a product of our perceptions of ourselves in various arenas of life, especially our interactions with others" (Holmstrom, 2008, p. 2). Self-esteem is a global characteristic, while self-concept is specific

based on each unique context (Marsh & Martin, 2011). However, Kumar et al. (2017) asserted that students with higher self-esteem engaged in more mindful behaviors, which had a mediating effect, leading those with higher self-esteem to have lower PSA.

Much of the above-cited research, in addition to research on numerous intervening variables in the competence-anxiety relationship, has been based on quantitative assessment measures. But what can be learned from qualitative analysis of student's open-ended descriptions of their perceptions of public speaking before and after the introductory public speaking course? This study explored students' pre and post-test responses to a single, open-ended request: "Please describe yourself as a public speaker." A gap in the research on public speaking anxiety, dominated by quantitative research, can be filled by applying qualitative measures in testing the impacts of an introductory public speaking course explicitly designed to reduce PSA and enhance SPCC.

A Blended Approach to Impactful Course Design

Many introductory public speaking courses across our discipline infuse anxiety reduction and competency development into their course design and, as a result, have reduced the anxiety of "literally thousands of individuals" (Richmond et al., 2014, p. 106). The course assessed in this study was a multi-section, standardized course (e.g., it utilizes the same text, PowerPoint© presentations and lectures, rubrics, and exams across all sections). A training session was required for all new instructors to "calibrate" instruction and critiques. Part of the training directed all instructors to identify one or two strengths about each student's speech for every constructive criticism or limitation discussed, and to elicit positive feedback and constructive criticism from the students' peers as they critique each other's presentations. All speeches were assigned to be delivered extemporaneously--the most anxiety-producing mode of speaking (Witt

& Behnke, 2006). The course design blended elements of exposure therapy, cognitive modification, and skills training—a different treatment for each "proximal cause" of PSA (Bodie, 2010, p. 86). This blend is "more effective than any single method" (Pribyl et al., 2001, p. 149) at reducing PSA, maximizing the effects and long-term results of treatment (Bedore, 1994).

The instructional plan in the assessed course is three-fold: exposure therapy treats psychological arousal, cognitive modification addresses negative thought patterns, and skills training increases aptitude (Bodie, 2010). The course began with a relatively simple speaking situation followed by increasingly challenging speaking experiences "to reduce reactivity by graduated exposure to speaking situations of greater potential stimulation" (Bodie, 2010, p. 87). Additionally, whenever a student gave a speech or discussed their topic, ideas, or source material with the instructor or other students, they were engaging in this type of "repeated exposure" therapy. The course design also involved elements of cognitive modification, such as that tested by Fremouw & Scott (1979), training students to recognize negative attitudes about public speaking and replace them with positive speaking experiences and strengths-focused feedback. PSA readings, a PowerPoint© presentation, and discussions offered the students a restructured, alternative view of anxiety as a normal and frequent human trait. Students were given opportunities to practice "realistic thinking" (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 2004, p. 81), acknowledging that the problem of anxiety exists and acknowledging one's challenges as a speaker but viewing these challenges through a strengths-based lens. This newly-framed view, along with the instructor's encouraging feedback, offered the student reassurance, allowing for improved attitudes toward speaking anxiety and, hence, toward public speaking. Finally,

competence training inherent to the course builds public speaking skills, reducing communication anxiety (Kelly, 1997) and increasing self-perceived communication competency.

Methods

To extend our knowledge and understanding of students' beliefs about themselves concerning public speaking and whether these perceptions change as a result of completing the introductory course in public speaking, this analysis employed thematic analysis to explore inductively the ways students would describe themselves as speakers when prompted at the outset of a foundational public speaking course, as compared with their descriptions at the end of the course. Two initial research questions were drawn from the literature and were explored through inductive thematic analysis of students' descriptions of themselves in terms of speaking.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do students describe themselves as public speakers?

RQ2: Do those descriptions change upon completion of an introductory public speaking course?

Procedure

To assess these hypotheses, during the first week of classes during a single semester, a link to a questionnaire (entered into a QuestionPro© survey) along with the implied consent letter necessitated for human subject research was emailed to each class instructor, who then emailed the letter with the link to all of their students and announced a five-point extra credit opportunity for those who completed the questionnaire at that time (Time 1), and again during the final week of class (Time 2). The questionnaire requested demographic information, and for the participant to provide a unique identification code of their choice that we be used both times the survey was completed. Because the research team members did not serve as instructors for the course during the term in which the study took place, the students' responses remained

confidential. Upon completion of the time 2 survey, the list of identification codes was provided to the instructors so they could award the extra credit by matching them with the codes their students had given them. Further, the questionnaire contained the statement, "Please describe yourself as a public speaker." This was the only question asked as part of the data collection and analysis for this particular study.

Participants

As part of a multi-study assessment effort focused on the online context of an introductory public speaking course, eighty-seven surveys were distributed to students enrolled within four online sections of the introductory course at a Midwestern university. Fifty-one students completed the measure during Time 1 for analysis of themes [10 males (19.6%); 41 females (80.4%)]. Of that sample, a smaller sub-sample ($n = 20$) [3 males (15%); 17 females (85%)] completed the measure during both Time 1 and Time 2 for pre-test/post-test comparison to determine course outcomes. This resulted in a response rate of 56.3% for the initial measure and a response rate of 20.6% for students completing the questionnaire during both Time 1 and Time 2 of the study. We recognize the limitation created by focusing only on the online context of the introductory course; however, the value of the data remains rich and valuable for those focused on reducing speech apprehension and anxiety, regardless of course modality.

Thematic Analysis

To analyze student pre and post-test open-ended responses, the researchers employed Owen's (1984) three criteria of thematic analysis: recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. Recurrence occurs when "at least two parts of a report have the same thread of meaning, even though different wording indicated such a meaning" (Owen, 1984, p. 275). Repetition is the "explicit repeated use of the same wording" (Owen, 1984, p. 275), and forcefulness is "vocal

inflection, volume, or dramatic pauses which serve to stress and subordinate some utterances from other locations in the oral reports" (Owen, 1984, p. 275).

After becoming familiar with the data, to begin the thematic analysis, the lead researcher individually employed Owen's model to identify recurring themes determined which themes were repeated between and within subjects' answers (e.g., whether those themes were repeated or changed from time one to time two), and assessed the forcefulness of the wording utilized by looking for introductory/explanatory phrases such as "the main thing is…" or "…is what I really think." Typically, according to Owen's method, underlines, capitalization, or bolded letters would also provide forcefulness cues, but the QuestionPro© context for student responses does not allow for such "nonverbal" information, so only verbal forcefulness was assessed. Then, two additional research team members reviewed these themes to ensure they represented the data in a meaningful and accurate way. The team then worked together to ensure these themes had reached a point of saturation. Saturation of themes is observable when the same themes continue to occur and new themes no longer appear (Holton, 2008). We then asked another communication professional to review the data and themes to ensure face validity. Finally, we analyzed differences among Time 1 and Time 2 student responses to look for nuanced trends in the themes between the two timeframes.

Results

In answer to research question one regarding how students described themselves as speakers, two general themes were revealed; these themes often existed in tandem: 1) a feelings-based dimension that includes such things as fear, confidence, enthusiasm, or indifference, and 2) a beliefs-based dimension which includes a student's beliefs about their public speaking skills

(e.g., "I am still too quiet," or "My speeches are well organized."). Appendix B offers a side-by-side comparison of examples of these two types of descriptions.

Feelings-based Descriptions

Some students' descriptions were purely based on their feelings, often negative, toward public speaking. The following student descriptions exemplify the feeling-based dimension present in many students' descriptions:

- "I am fairly confident in my ability to speak in front of other people."
- "I tend to get very nervous when presenting professional material."
- "I try to do the best that I can but usually become very nervous while talking in front of others."
- "I tend to get really nervous and anxious while speaking however [*sic*] I am still able to present. I will sometimes stutter and tend to hurry through my words because of my nerves."
- "I don't enjoy talking in front of people, I never have. I've always been nervous in front of people and it sometimes shows."

Beliefs-based Descriptions

Other students' descriptions were purely based on their beliefs, especially about their skills relative to public speaking. The following student descriptions exemplify the beliefs-based dimension present in many students' descriptions:

- "I think that I am an average public speaker."
- "I believe I am okay in the area of public speaking, but I know I definitely have room for improvement."
- "Inexperienced."

- "I'm very organized, and make good points."

Research question two asked whether students' descriptions of themselves as speakers changed upon completion of an introductory public speaking course. The following section displays and describes the distinctions between their Time 1 and Time 2 descriptions, which are displayed for side-by-side comparison in Appendix C.

Time 1: Intertwined Feeling and Belief Descriptions

In addition to demonstrating that students' self-descriptions were based on two different, yet sometimes parallel dimensions, feelings and beliefs, our analysis also revealed the often-intertwined nature of confidence and competence in students' perceptions of themselves as public speakers, especially during Time 1 at the beginning of the course. It became apparent that many students mistook PSA (their feelings about public speaking) for lack of skill or described their skills as reliant on their feelings and subject to negative impacts due to their nervousness. This finding was evidenced by answers during Time 1, such as the following:

- "I am not good at giving speeches. I always get really nervous before and during it."
- "I don't like to talk in public and I'm not very good at it. I get nervous and that makes me do worse on my speeches."
- "I don't feel like I am a very good public speaker. I get nervous and shakey [*sic*] and can't seem to keep focus."

Time 2: Nuanced Separation Between Feeling and Belief-Based Descriptions

Regarding research question two, which inquired whether students' descriptions of themselves as public speakers would change upon completion the introductory public speaking course, many students who still reported nervousness after the course showed a greater ability to separate the feelings and beliefs dimensions. Thus, students demonstrated having learned that

they could possess both anxiety and competence simultaneously. Responses during Time 2 demonstrated students' stronger capacity for holding the more complex, nuanced separation between feelings, which may have remained uncomfortable, versus beliefs about their enhanced public speaking skills. Examples of these responses included the following:

- "I have always been afraid of public speaking and I probably always will, but this class made me feel more confident and comfortable in my speaking abilities and lowered the tension I usually get before and during a speech."
- "I don't like giving speeches but I am confident in my ability to give them."
- "Shy, but capable."
- "Nervous, yet competent."
- "I get pretty nervous, but I always seem to do I [*sic*] good job. I'm really glad I'm done with this class, but I can tell that I have really gained confidence and ability."
- "I believe I am getting better. I have realized that public speaking is not a large strain on my life. I enjoy public speaking now."

In direct comparisons between students' Time 1 and Time 2 responses, students' growth as a result of the course was further evidenced. For example, the student above who reported during Time 1, "I am not good at giving speeches. I always get really nervous before and during it" said in Time 2: "I do ok, but I still get nervous." A second student stated in Time 1, "I can speak in front of people but I am often very nervous. I can get it done but not very well" and in Time 2 stated "I'm a fair public speaker."

Another student stated initially, "I am not a bad speaker, I just feel an overwhelming sense of nervousness. In fact just thinking of the speeches coming up I have butterflies in my stomach. I do alright [*sic*] when I am giving them although my nervousness shows through to the

audience I believe. I have gotten better with age. So I guess I would say I am adequate, although I do not enjoy public speaking at all." This student's view, upon completion of the course, changed to "I am a decent public speaker, although I am always nervous before the speech starts, I am calm once it starts. I feel I have made some great improvements through the class I took, being able to watch my speeches showed me that in great detail."

Another qualitative example of a student's positive change in skill-related beliefs moved from a pre-test answer of "I believe I am okay in the area of public speaking, but I know I have room for improvement" to the post-test response, "I believe I am a fairly good public speaker, although I do get nervous. My speeches are still fluent and rehearsed." An additional student's self-assessment began with the statement, "I can do it successfully. I get considerably nervous no matter the situation, but I can control my fear and get through it if I have to do it" and changed to the post-test response, "I am a very competent speaker. I get anxious about it, but will do it and succeed if I am prepared." Another student stated during Time 1, "I am not a very confident public speaker and I do not make public speeches." By the end of the semester, the same student stated, "I have improved as a public speaker, there are still some things I need to improve on but I feel as if I am capable of giving a public speech."

The change in the forcefulness of responses such as these indicates that the students' cognitions were successfully modified. The skills training provided during the introductory public speaking course affected the confidence and competence of students, helping them to acknowledge "great improvements throughout the class." Students also learned to manage anxiety and lessen rumination (fears about fears). Many students appeared to be able to pinpoint precisely where, in the process, their fear was greatest, and by the end of the course, many were

able to report that, although some fears remained, they understood that they could still be quite competent speakers.

Discussion

Thematic analysis revealed that two dimensions were present in students' descriptions of themselves as public speakers: one dimension discussed the students' feelings about public speaking, while a second dimension discussed the students' beliefs about their skills as a public speaker. Commonalities among students revealed that most of the responses discussed one or both of these themes. Further, the commonalities showed Time 2 responses appeared to focus more on beliefs and less on feelings than the Time 1 responses, or two add a layer of complexity to their descriptions, allowing for residual feelings of fear or nervousness at the same time as they held beliefs about the strengths they had developed in their speaking skills. Feelings also appeared less negative during Time 2, and beliefs more positive.

Public Speaking Self-Concept

These thematic findings indicate that a novel communication variable containing both a feelings dimension and a beliefs dimension is at play in these student descriptions. This variable appears to be a form of self-concept, in this case, specific to public speaking. We have chosen to label the construct public speaking self-concept (PSSC), which we define as an individual's evaluation of their skills and talents based on the public speaking context. While public speaking may be considered a singular activity, however, it contains a cluster of elements within an individual's overall regard of what constitutes the self. This cluster of characteristics merits further analysis and may illuminate further avenues for PSA mitigation and competence enhancement.

Mitigating public speaking anxiety and helping students develop an enhanced sense of communication competence are both highly meaningful objectives to the learning process

because the introductory public speaking course is designed to improve public speaking for personal development and future employability (Emanuel, 2005). Therefore, the major implications of this research are four-fold: First, PSSC appears to be a potentially spurious or intervening variable that impacts and is impacted by one's experiences as a public speaker. Second, PSSC appears to be malleable and positively impacted by an introductory public speaking course. Third, the malleability shown in students' Time 1 and Time 2 descriptions of themselves as a speaker points to the potential for classroom interventions to further enhance students' PSSC with purposefully designed and tested teaching activities. Finally, the revelation of this new construct may aid efforts to model further the PSA/CC relationship. These implications merit a number of deeper theoretical considerations.

First, with regard to the research differentiating between trait-like and state-like anxiety, instructors and scholars can assess whether students are suffering from one or both types of anxiety at the same time with the relatively simple, open-ended question of how students describe themselves as speakers. The same is true for different types of fears as discussed by Nash (2016), Grieve et al., (2021), and LeFebvre & LeFebvre (2018; 2020). As scholars continue to model and understand the anxiety/competence relationship and how to guide students to enhance their communication confidence and competence, instructors gain a growing repertoire of PSA-mitigating teaching interventions, which can be mapped to a variety of student self-concepts.

Second, Hunter et al. (2014) reported an average 10% decrease in student's PRPSA scores. Because that score represents the mean student outcome, however, it indicates that a number of students experienced smaller PSA reductions. Continued research is warranted to discern teaching methods and interventions that may yield stronger PSA reduction outcomes,

especially for those still experiencing high PSA. Instructors can work toward such outcomes in their own classrooms using the one-question PSSC survey (“Describe yourself as a speaker”) at multiple points during their courses without the potential concern of student burnout or lowered validity and reliability that may result from taking a quantitative measure like the 34-item PRPSA multiple times throughout the same semester. This method simplifies formative as well as summative assessment for classroom instructors who would prefer a simple, narrative-based method for determining their students’ experiences with anxiety mitigation and competence building. By simply asking their students to describe themselves as speakers, those whose primary motivation lies in pedagogical enhancements can quickly and easily test the impacts of new teaching interventions. These reflections open the door to further, more class-specific, or individual lines of inquiry to guide students directly toward increased focus on the elements of the speaking situation within their control. Hence, aligned with the findings of LeFebvre et al. (2020), such fears can be significantly reduced or even eliminated by weaving the PSSC survey question together with their survey questions, “What is your most intense fear about public speaking? Elaborate on your response as necessary to explain, rather than a simple word” (p. 101). This 3-sentence reflection exercise may provide a stronger real-world indication of students’ needs as well as their growth than choosing one, more specific quantitative measure.

In addition, considering PSSC among variables in a model of how Bandura’s (1977) social cognitive theory relates to public speaking can help scholars elicit new inspiration for efficacy-building interventions. For instance, when Kumar et al., (2017) modeled the PSA mitigation process with respect to the PSA/self-efficacy relationship, they discovered the mitigating effect of mindfulness interventions. Since efficacy beliefs are stronger predictors of behaviors than actual, measured capabilities (Schunk & Pajares, 2005), these findings hold

strong promise for improving student outcomes through new avenues. By discussing PSSC in class, instructors might be able to help students further separate their PSSC into beliefs-based versus feelings-based descriptions of themselves as speakers. In so doing, if students strengthen their positive public speaking self-concepts, they may be empowered toward more beneficial choices regarding whether, when, and how to communicate with others (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988), including whether or not to accept public speaking opportunities that may help them to be hired or gain promotions on the job (Richmond et al., 2014).

Finally, focus on narrative forms of inquiry offers scholarly methodologies that heighten the communication discipline's capacity to treat diverse students and participants more respectfully. In so doing, this type of scholarship enhances our value to assist a larger number of people with their anxiety mitigation and competence-building journeys. Such culturally relevant research methodologies include instrumentation that respects diverse ways of knowing and experiencing the world.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study revealed that analysis of students' descriptions of themselves as public speakers contained what appeared to be a single, two-dimensional construct--a previously untested form of self-concept, public speaking self-concept (PSSC). The occurrence of this construct and its two dimensions in a larger sample will be required to generalize about its impact on students and whether, like other forms of self-concept, it shows significant malleability upon introduction of significant stimuli, in this case, teaching interventions in the public speaking course.

In addition, as with any study, there are a number of limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results of this particular study. First, participants in this study were

enrolled in online sections of an introductory public speaking course. While previous research has shown similar outcomes between the face-to-face and online sections of the course (Westwick et al., 2015), we cannot say with any certainty that these results would be indicative of students in face-to-face sections of the same course. Any future research exploring PSSC should be examined in multiple course modalities. Further, this work could explore the difference between course modalities. Future studies should also test whether PSSC differs between students who choose online versus face-to-face course delivery and whether the course delivery method impacts PSSC differently than the other. Online public speaking courses are sometimes criticized for teaching students using different speaking contexts than a live audience of over twenty classmates. Open-ended, self-concept questions could help inform studies of communication competence and apprehension differences in face-to-face versus online sections of public speaking classes, asking each student to describe him or herself in the context specific to the course design and the speaking assignments therein.

A second limitation of this study includes the high proportion of women in the sample. It is possible that a more even proportion of males in the sample would have added information that would have required further analysis to achieve saturation of themes. Future research should compare and contrast men’s and women’s PSSC and the introductory public speaking course’s impacts on it. An additional limitation may stem from the rural college student sample, whose experiences may not generalize to audiences of other ages and in other walks of life. For the purposes of studying the impacts of the college introductory public speaking course, this demographic is appropriate, but findings may differ from culture to culture, region to region, or even in more rural versus urban university contexts. Future research should test whether PSSC differs cross-culturally and in more varied university settings and should perform the same

analysis at multiple universities whose courses vary at least slightly. The nature of qualitative research lends itself to serving diverse audiences with greater flexibility and representation.

An additional limitation of the thematic analysis includes the potential for bias introduced by the researcher. Mixed methods research can continue to strengthen communication scholarship grasp on the anxiety/competence construct and how to enhance students' self-efficacy with regard to public speaking. Quasi-experimental studies assigning different pre-test PSSC types as the independent variable might illuminate whether and how this variable might impact the effectiveness of various PSA treatment modalities. Regarding future research directions, researchers should also employ similar, open-ended questions to learn more about students' self-concepts about communication in other contexts. Thematic and content analysis of individuals' communication in contexts external to public speaking might include questions such as "Describe yourself as a member of a small team working on a group project" or "Describe yourself as a communicator when meeting a new person." In such a way, perhaps new elements of those aspects of communication anxiety measured on instruments such as the PRCA-24 (McCroskey, 1982b) and competence will become visible in the same way the feelings and beliefs differences became visible in this study.

Future studies might also separate the two dimensions that emerged within students' responses to the request, "Please describe yourself as a public speaker." Future quantitative testing might include Likert-type and/or semantic differential scales to enable direct, quantitative comparison with other variables. Finally, quasi-experimental research should test teaching activities specifically designed to help students separate their public speaking feelings versus public speaking self-beliefs, such as mind maps describing their feelings and beliefs about themselves and making visible the impact the course has had on enhancing students' sense of

competence in the face of residual fear or nervousness. Perhaps making this separation visible to students through lectures and self-reflection can improve their scores on various measures of confidence and/or competence. In addition, exploring the variety of elements that are encompassed in one's beliefs about their skills and talents with regard to public speaking may yield further educational interventions to enhance students' future public speaking experiences and outcomes.

Finally, qualitative measures such as PSSC studies might expand CA researchers' ability to study the public speaking self-descriptions given by people of different backgrounds and walks of life, including racial and ethnic backgrounds or cultures. Additional qualitative studies might enhance communication education's ability to address diverse perspectives and perform multi-cultural and cross-cultural applications of PSA research.

Conclusion

As McCroskey (2009) stated at the closure of his article *Communication Apprehension: What We Have Learned in the Last Four Decades*, "There never will be enough research on communication apprehension until the effects of high CA can be prevented for everyone in our society and in other cultures" (p. 169). Public speaking anxiety and communication competence have been studied intensely in the communication discipline for over forty years, yet few studies have approached PSA or CC through a qualitative lens. This exploration employed thematic analysis, finding that, especially at the beginning of a public speaking course, some students' fears of public speaking are so tightly intertwined with perceptions of their public speaking abilities that their anxiety might impede accurate appraisal of their skill level and progress. However, in comparing Time 1 to Time 2 students' descriptions of themselves as speakers, this study revealed the foundational speaking course was able to help students separate their feelings

from their beliefs to enhance their experiences with public speaking. As a result of these findings, future interventions may be able to help students further separate the two dimensions of PSSC and begin to rely even more heavily on assessments of their skills than on residual fears in their formulations of their descriptions of themselves as speakers. In this way, a student's self-concept about public speaking could grow more nuanced, integrating residual fears while offering heightened confidence due to the improved skills that result from speech education.

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Appendix A

Definitions of Key Communication Competence and Anxiety Variables Discussed

Communication Apprehension (CA): "Broadly based anxiety related to oral communication" (McCroskey, 1984, p. 13), either real or anticipated (McCroskey, 1977).

Communication Competence (CC): "The quality of interaction behavior in various contexts" (Canary & Spitzberg, 1987, p. 43) or the effectiveness of an individual's communication behavior. Often measured by self-report measures such as McCroskey and McCroskey's (1988) self-perceived communication competence (SPCC) instrument.

Self-Concept: "An integrated synthesis of all the elements which the individual includes as constituting himself" (Furr, 1970, p. 26). Furr found that self-concept is relatively stable. He added, however that it can become maleable in the presence of stimulti such as training, making speech education especially pertinent. In addition, self-concept can differ based on differing areas of concern (e.g., math self-concept, sexual self-concept).

Self-Efficacy (SE): A person's beliefs regarding whether they possess the tools necessary to complete an important task as well as the capability to utilize those tools effectively. Like communication competence, SE is also often measured using McCroskey and McCroskey's (1988) SPCC measure as opposed to measuring actual communication skills. This is because communicative self-efficacy assesses the "confidence individuals have that they can successfully employ whatever skills they possess to communicate effectively across different communication settings" (Hodis & Hodis, 2012, p. 43).

Self-Esteem: "In general, self-esteem is conceptualized as individuals' feelings toward themselves, and it is considered to be largely a product of our perceptions of ourselves in various arenas of life, especially our interactions with others" (Holmstrom, 2008, p. 2).

Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA): "A situation specific social anxiety that arises from the real or anticipated enactment of an oral presentation" (Bodie, 2010, p. 72), PSA is the most common form of CA (McCourt, 2007) relates to fear or anxiety specific to the public speaking context (McCroskey, 1984). Defined as PSA's symptoms can be relatively fleeting and manageable--sweating, shaking, muscle tension, increased heart rate, and nausea (Bedore, 1994; Nutt & Ballenger, 2003; Witt et al., 2006). Other sufferers, however, can experience such serious consequences as heart palpitations, dizziness, and general confusion (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Daly et al., 1997). Can be trait-like (personality-based; relatively enduring; across contexts) or state-like (situational).

Public Speaking Self-Concept (PSSC): An individual's evaluation of their skills and talents based on the public speaking context. While public speaking may be considered a singular activity, however, it contains a cluster of elements within an individual's overall regard of what constitutes the self.

Appendix B

Examples of Students' Feelings-Based and Beliefs-Based Descriptions of PSSC

Feelings-Based Descriptions	Beliefs-Based Descriptions
"I am fairly confident in my ability to speak in front of other people." "I tend to get very nervous when presenting professional material." "I try to do the best that I can but usually become very nervous while talking in front of others." "I tend to get really nervous and anxious while speaking however [*sic*] I am still able to present. I will sometimes stutter and tend to hurry through my words because of my nerves." "I don't enjoy talking in front of people, I never have. I've always been nervous in front of people and it sometimes shows."	"I think that I am an average public speaker." "I believe I am okay in the area of public speaking, but I know I definitely have room for improvement." "Inexperienced." "I'm very organized, and make good points."

Appendix C

Examples of Students' Time 1 (Intertwined) and Time 2 (Nuanced) PSSC Descriptions

Time 1: Intertwined Feeling and Belief Descriptions	**Time 2: Nuanced Separation Between Feeling and Belief-Based Descriptions**
"I am not good at giving speeches. I always get really nervous before and during it." "I don't like to talk in public and I'm not very good at it. I get nervous and that makes me do worse on my speeches." "I don't feel like I am a very good public speaker. I get nervous and shakey [*sic*] and can't seem to keep focus."G	"I have always been afraid of public speaking and I probably always will, but this class made me feel more confident and comfortable in my speaking abilities and lowered the tension I usually get before and during a speech." "I don't like giving speeches but I am confident in my ability to give them." "Shy, but capable." "Nervous, yet competent." "I get pretty nervous, but I always seem to do I [*sic*] good job. I'm really glad I'm done with this class, but I can tell that I have really gained confidence and ability." "I believe I am getting better. I have realized that public speaking is not a large strain on my life. I enjoy public speaking now."