# A Strategic Framework for Communicating with Generation Y via Emerging Media: A Longitudinal Examination with Public Relations Results and Implications

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## ABSTRACT

Today, Generation Y represents the largest demographic group in America and is defined by an Internet landscape that has revolutionized daily living. Likewise, social media has revolutionized the public relations industry. This research longitudinally examines Generation Y's expectations of organizational social media use across three years and directly compares results to longitudinal research that analyzes public relations professionals' own indications of organizational social media use across three years. Results indicate that organizational communication via social media generally fails to meet the expectations of the Generation Y demographic; however, professionals' indications of what should be happening are more closely aligned. Implications for scholarship and practice are discussed.

**Keywords**: emerging media, Generation Y, Millennials, public relations, social media

Often referred to as Net Natives or Millennials, members of Generation Y are those born between the years 1982 and 2001[1] and represent 27 percent of the American population (Wellner, 2000; Almash, 2000; and Scarpa, 1999). Their numbers surpass their Baby Boomer parents by nearly 4 million (Tapscott, 2009), and they are the nation's first to be born into a society with an accessible Internet system that permeates both business and social spheres of American life. For Generation Y, social media is woven into the very fabric of their life (and lifestyles). In fact, a 2007 study conducted by eMarketer.com reported the percent of time consumers spent online at user-generated sites versus company-generated sites based on age group:

Of particular interest was the group called the Millennials or Gen Y (ages 13-24), who were on user-generated sites 51 percent of the time as compared to Gen X (ages 25-41), who spent about 35 percent of their times on these sites and Baby Boomers (ages 42-60) even less time, at 27 percent. This is a tremendous consideration and opportunity for brands to use social media tools incorporated into their PR strategy and

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[1] The birth years for Generation Y have not been solidified; however, 1982 through 2001 are commonly used.

planning and overall Web communications (Breakenridge, 2008, p. 188).

Indeed, a five-year global trend study by Wright and Hinson (2010) notes that the impact of social media on the practice of public relations has brought "dramatic changes to many aspects of the field," and "it's an understatement to suggest that social media have had a staggering impact on the practice of public relations since the first weblogs, or blogs, appeared more than a dozen years ago" (p. 3). Non-coincidently, the rise of social media corresponds directly with the maturation of Generation Y. It is therefore impendent upon public relations professionals to incorporate sophisticated social media strategies and campaigns in order to strategically communicate with this audience.

Thus, the current research longitudinally examines Generation Y's expectations of organizational social media use across three years (2010, 2011 and 2012) and directly compares results to longitudinal research that analyzes public relations professionals' own indications of organizational social media use (Wright & Hinson, 2009 and 2011). Such an approach allows for the identification of trends among members of Generation Y and proposes a practically useful strategic framework for organizational communication with the nation's largest generational group. For public relations professionals, this research both (1) serves as a guide for understanding the social media usage habits of the highly sought-after Generation Y demographic and (2) identifies disparities between existing organizational social media use and the social media use desired by the Generation Y demographic. Professionals may, therefore, be better able to adjust and align organizational social media use accordingly, which results in a more strategic approach to organizational communication via emerging media tools and the reallocation of organizational resources to include time and money. Likewise, using this research as a framework, public relations professionals may be better able to predict future trends among the Generation Y demographic and make more educated decisions about which emerging media to pursue for both campaign and communication programs.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Generation Y's knowledge and experience with the Internet have led to both the creation and mass use of social media tools that have transformed interpersonal and organizational communication, and the public relations industry by extension. Tapscott (2009) describes Generation Y's unique technological characteristics as environmentally based assimilation, stating, "For this generation, new technology use comes as natural as breathing" (p. 18). Schwalbe (2009) surveyed 1,584 members of Generation Y, concluding that 95 percent report using email messaging, 76 percent use social networking, 29 percent use personal blogs and online games, and 12 percent use podcasts "frequently or occasionally" (p. 58).

To better understand the characteristics of this demographic group Tapscott's (2009) research identified eight pre-established norms that define Generation Y:

(1) *freedom* refers to the freedom of choice that this generation requires for productivity, specifically in the workplace, but also in everyday activity;

(2) *customization* refers to this generation's need to not only have products that work, but to have products that work *for* them;

(3) *scrutiny* refers to the skepticism inherent within this generation that has consistently faced unreliable Internet sources, spam, phishers, hoaxes, scams, and misrepresentations throughout their lifetimes;

(4) *integrity* refers to the value that Generation Y respects most: honesty;

(5) the changing character and significance of the family group, due to higher levels of divorce and working parents, has led to an increase in the importance of the fifth norm, which is *collaboration*;

(6) *entertainment* is an important norm for organizations to recognize because Generation Y members tend to believe that, "Having fun while using a product is just as important as the product doing what it is supposed to do" (p. 93);

(7) *speed* refers to accessibility and the speedy delivery of services this generation is accustomed to;  and the final group norm

(8) *innovation*, represents a mainstay for Generation Y as dramatic technological advances occur within months for this generation.

## Social Media and Public Relations

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media in the following way, "Social media are a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content" (p. 61). Social media provides organizations with an opportunity to connect with Generation Y in new and meaningful ways. It represents the most undiluted, direct and cost-effective means of learning about target publics and provides an unfiltered view of consumer perceptions, so firms can see what will impact the future of their business (Marken, 2008). In order to facilitate communication and build relationships with Generation Y, it is important for public relations professionals to recognize that the concept of "mass media" is waning (Phillips, 2008). Therefore, practitioners must be prepared to adopt group-specific and community-specific (including online community) communication strategies and tools to reach this public.

According to DiStaso, McCorkindale, and Wright (2011), "Organizations are using social media to engage in important conversations and to enhance understanding of markets, customers, competitors, and employees" (p. 327). More than two-thirds of Fortune 2000 companies are using social networking sites (McCorkindale, 2009), and the Council of Public Relations Firms (2009) finds that social media will play an even larger role in the

future of the industry.

Wright and Hinson (2009) categorize social media tools to include the following: blogs, forums or message boards, micro-blogging sites, photo sharing sites, podcasts, RSS (really simple syndication), search engine marketing/results, social bookmarking, social networking sites, video sharing sites, and Wikis. *Blogs*, a contraction of "web logs," represent a type of website usually maintained by an individual as a type of online public diary. Blogs can also be maintained by an organization or corporation to update interested parties on corporate culture and occurrences. A survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that eight percent of Internet users, approximately 12 million adults maintain a blog, and approximately 57 million American adults read blogs. Most applicable for the current research, the study found that 54 percent of bloggers were under the age of 30 (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). *Forums or message boards* represent the electronic and updated version of the traditional bulletin boards from years past. Users of message boards pose and respond to questions, as well as comment on topical threads of conversation that often include Internet jargon. *Micro-blogging* refers to a form of blogging where entries are reduced to short sentences or fragments, typically 140-characters or fewer. Information ranges from topical expertise to status updates. Twitter is the most popular micro-blogging site with more than 500 million users (Lunden, 2012). *Photo sharing sites* refer to Internet sites that host photo uploading and sharing between individuals and among groups of users. More recently, Pinterest and Instagram have emerged as leading platforms in this area for both individuals and organizations. Pinterest has recently been described as the third largest "social networking site" behind Facebook and Twitter (Palis, 2012), and Instagram boasts 150 million active users (Instagram, 2013). *Podcasts* are video or audio files that can be single (one time) or episodic (series) in nature. They are maintained by a server and interested parties can download any given file when it is convenient for the user. Apple's iTunes is one of the most popular methods for downloading podcasts. Krazit (2008) reports that the iTunes software has approximately 65 million users and 125,000 podcasts are available. *RSS* (really simple syndication), is often referred to as a web feed. RSS offers users a constantly updated feed of sites they have subscribed to receive updates from; that is, blogs, news sites, favorite websites, and so on. *Search engine marketing/results*[2] involve finding ways to maximize a website's visibility on popular search engines or the results of these search engines. Approximately one billion searches are performed daily on Google (Google, 2013; Sullivan, 2006). *Social bookmarking* is a way for users to save the location of websites that they might want to share with other users or refer to at a later time. Bookmarks can be private or public and can be shared with specific people or entire networks. Some popular social bookmarking sites include Del.icio.us and Digg. *Social networking sites* represent one of the most widely used social media tools. Social networking sites are customizable electronic spaces for people to (re)connect without the constraints of time or space. Facebook and LinkedIn represent popular social networking sites, boasting more than 1 billion (The Associated Press, 2013) and 200 million members (LinkedIn Blog, 2013), respectively. *Video sharing sites* allow users to upload, share, and view video clips with

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[2] "Search Engine Marketing" used by Wright & Hinson (2009, 2011) was changed to "Search Engine Results" for the applicability of this research for Generation Y participants.

other users. YouTube is the most popular of these social media tools with more than 1 billion unique users each month videos (YouTube, 2013). In addition, *wikis* describe server software that allows users to freely create and edit webpage content using any web browser. Wikipedia is the most popular wiki; it represents the sixth most popular website in the world and the fifth most popular in America (DiStaso & Messner, 2010).

Research demonstrating how public relations professionals are using social media includes the work of Eyrich, Padman, and Sweetser (2008) who surveyed 283 practitioners and found the social media tools used most often include: "e-mail (96.1 percent), intranet (68.2 percent), blogs (41.7 percent), videoconferencing (39.1 percent), podcasts (35.2 percent), video sharing (30 percent), and PDAs (30 percent). Less often used tools include instant message (29.6 percent), events (27.2 percent), social networking (24 percent), text messaging (23.6 percent), photo sharing (19 percent), and wikis (18 percent). And, virtual worlds (6.7 percent), social bookmarking (5.6 percent) gaming (3.1 percent) micro-blogging/presence applications (1.7 percent) and news aggregation (0 percent) represent rarely used tools" (p. 413). These findings led Eyrich et al. (2008), to conclude, "Practitioners have clearly adopted the more established and institutional tools (e-mail, Intranet), yet they are slower to integrate more technologically complicated tools that cater to a niche audience (e.g. text messaging, social networks, virtual worlds)" (p. 414). Likewise, a 2009 analysis by Wright and Hinson measured public relations professionals' perceptions regarding the importance of social media for their organization's or client's communication efforts. Professionals indicated that social media *should* be more important than they believed it actually was (for their organization or client) in each subject category. A longitudinal extension of the research similarly found that, "mean scores and overall perceived importance for each of seven new communications media items [blogs, forums or message boards, podcasts, search engine marketing, social networks, micro-blogging sites, and video sharing sites] in all three years are considerably higher when subjects are asked what should be happening in terms of social media and other new communications media use than they are when the question asks what actually is happening" (Wright & Hinson, 2011, p. 9). In other words, across three years, Wright and Hinson (2011) determined that significant gaps existed between what professionals indicated was happening and what they believed *should* be happening with their organization's or client's social media communication efforts. The authors also examined these significant differences in relation to demographic variables to include age. They determined that the greatest number of statistically significant differences occurred when comparing mean scores based on age, again evidencing the importance of the Generation Y demographic and the current research.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Thus, the purpose of this research was to similarly longitudinally examine the expectations and desires of Generation Y regarding social media in order to identify trends and draw comparisons to public relations professionals' use of social media for organizations and clients' organizations (Wright & Hinson, 2009 and 2011). Such an approach allows for the identification of a strategic framework for organizational

communication with the nation's largest generational group. The following research questions were posed across three years (2010, 2011, and 2012):

**RQ1:** What are the trends in the expectations of organizational communication via social media for Generation Y?

**RQ2:** Do public relations professionals' indications of organizational communication via social media show significant differences in comparison to Generation Y's expectations regarding organizational communication via social media?

**RQ3:** Do public relations professionals' indications of how organizational communication via social media *should* be occurring show significant differences in comparison to Generation Y's expectations regarding organizational communication via social media?

## METHOD

In order to answer these questions, a nonprobability cohort-trend sample of Generation Y (defined as those participants having been born between 1982 and 2001) members from a midsized, private university participated in this survey research project in 2010, 2011, and 2012. Participants were recruited in sections of undergraduate communication courses and were majoring in various areas. Invitations to participate were extended in-person during class time, and instructors distributed the survey link via Blackboard (a university service used for faculty communication with students) for participation. Participants were offered a small amount of extra credit for participation in the study.

### Sample

Participants in this research were filtered to exclude those who did not fit within the defined parameters of Generation Y's birth years (1982-2001). A total of 633 Generation Y participants responded to this research across three years. Overall, across years, participants were generally female (n=473, 75%) and generally White (n=209, 58%) for the two years ethnicity data was collected. More specifically, participants in the 2010 study (n=270) indicated that they were female (n=183, 67.8%) as opposed to male (n=87, 32.2%). Ethnicity data was not collected for 2010. The majority of participants in the 2011 study (n= 179) also indicated that they were female (n=128, 71.5%) as opposed to male (n=50, 27.9%) (one respondent did not answer this question). Additionally, participants indicated their ethnicities as follows: Asian (n=14, 7.8%), Black (n=6, 3.4%), Hispanic (n=50, 27.9%), White (n=97, 54.2%), and other (n=12, 6.7%). And, participants in the 2012 study (n=184) likewise indicated that they were female (n=162, 88%) as opposed to male (n=22, 12%). Participants indicated the following ethnicities: Asian (n=23, 13%), Black (n=17, 9%), Hispanic (n=27, 15%), White (n=112, 61%), and other (n=5, 3%).

## Design and Procedure

The study's primary measurement instrument consisted of 11 close-ended questions and demographic measures (year of birth to filter for Generation Y participants, gender, and ethnicity). Participants responded to close-ended questions on a 5-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Data were input into the statistical program SPSS, and means and standard deviations were assessed for each of the social media variables. In order to identify if significant differences existed, 95% confidence intervals for study means were calculated and longitudinal data from the authors' previous examinations of Generation Y were compared in order to reveal significant trends across three years. If the comparison means fall outside the confidence interval, results are significantly different. Likewise, if the comparison means fall within the confidence interval, results are significantly similar.

Next, data from Wright and Hinson's (2009 and 2011) study of public relations professionals were compared to confidence intervals in order to reveal significant differences between public relations professionals' indications (both in regards to the actuality of communication via social media and in regards to what they believed *should* be happening) and Generation Y members' expectations regarding organizational communication via social media. This research is statistically significant ($p<.05$) for all relevant cases, yet only significant *differences* are asterisked in relevant tables for clarity's sake. The use of 95% confidence intervals is appropriate for identifying significant differences when using only study means (as opposed to raw data calculations). The researchers did not request access to raw data from Wright & Hinson's work used as a major point of comparison.

## RESULTS

Across three years, researchers asked Generation Y participants the importance of organizational social media use in communicating with them. Table 1 presents the significant differences ($p<.05$) in means for Generation Y's responses across each year regarding how important each social media tool is for organizational communication aimed at them. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses.

Table 1: Generation Y's Expectations for Organizational Communication via Social Media (Dodd & Campbell 2010, 2011, 2012)

| In communicating with you, how important is it that organizations use these media? | Dodd & Campbell (2010) | Dodd & Campbell (2011) | Dodd & Campbell (2012) | Combined Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Blogs | 3.31* (1.14) | 2.72** (1.22) | 3.11*** (1.11) | 3.05 |
| Forums or Message Boards | 3.41* (1.10) | 2.96** (1.22) | 3.43 (1.05) | 3.27 |
| Photo Sharing | NA | 3.26** (1.27) | 3.49 (1.06) | 3.36 |
| Podcasts | 3.03* (1.07) | 2.68 (1.19) | 2.84*** (1.09) | 2.85 |
| RSS | 3.08* (0.99) | 2.84 (1.15) | 2.99 (1.13) | 2.97 |
| Search Engine Results | 4.07* (1.11) | 3.86** (1.24) | 4.22*** (0.96) | 4.05 |
| Social Bookmarking | 3.34* (1.06) | 3.04** (1.16) | 3.36 (1.12) | 3.25 |
| Social Networking | 3.74 (1.12) | 3.78** (1.14) | 4.45*** (0.81) | 3.99 |
| Micro-Blogging | 3.50* (1.06) | 3.25** (1.26) | 4.23*** (1.01) | 3.66 |
| Video Sharing | 3.62 (1.08) | 3.69** (1.12) | 4.11*** (0.88) | 3.81 |
| Wikis | 3.44 (1.07) | 3.42** (1.17) | 3.80*** (1.01) | 3.55 |

*$p<.05$ significantly *different* across years (from 2010 to 2011)
**$p<.05$ significantly *different* across years (from 2011 to 2012)
***$p<.05$ significantly *different* between years (2010 and 2012)

## Generation Y: 2010-2011

An initial longitudinal examination across one year revealed significant differences ($p<.05$) for the following media: blogs; forums or message boards; podcasts; RSS; search engine results; social bookmarking sites; and micro-blogging sites. Of these media that demonstrated significant differences, the mean difference demonstrated a *decrease* in the importance Generation Y participants indicated for organizational use of all of these media to communicate with them. There were no significant differences found across 2010-2011 data for the following media: social networking sites; video sharing sites; and wikis.

## Generation Y: 2011-2012

The examination across 2011-2012 revealed significant differences ($p<.05$) for the

following media: blogs; forums or message boards; photo sharing sites; search engine results; social bookmarking sites; social networking sites; micro-blogging sites; video sharing sites; and wikis. Of these media that demonstrated significant differences, the mean difference demonstrated an *increase* in the importance Generation Y participants indicated for organizational use of all of these media to communicate with them. There were no significant differences found across 2011-2012 data for the following media: podcasts and RSS.

**Generation Y: 2010-2012**

The examination between 2010 and 2012 data revealed significant differences ($p<.05$) for the following media: blogs, podcasts, search engine results, social networking sites, micro-blogging sites, video sharing sites, and wikis. Of these media that demonstrated significant differences, the mean difference of blogs and podcasts demonstrated a *decrease* in the importance Generation Y participants indicated for organizational use to communicate with them. And, the mean difference of search engine results, social networking sites, micro-blogging sites, video sharing sites, and wikis demonstrated an *increase* in the importance Generation Y participants indicated for organizational use to communicate with them. There were no significant differences found between the 2010 and 2012 data for the following media: forums or message boards and RSS.

**Generation Y: 2010, 2011, and 2012**

The longitudinal data as a whole, then, demonstrate a slight u-shaped dip over three years' time for the salience participants indicated for organizational use of social media to communicate with their demographic group. This was the case for each of the social media across three years except for video sharing sites, which increased in importance with each consecutive year.

Overall, when the means were combined across years, participants indicated agreement that the following were important for organizational communication with them, respectively: search engine results; social networking sites; video sharing sites; micro-blogging sites; and wikis. On the other hand, participants were overall neutral in regards to the following, respectively: photo sharing sites; forums or message boards; social bookmarking sites; blogs; RSS; and podcasts. For no media did participants' mean responses indicate general disagreement as to the salience of organizational communication with them via those media.

**Public Relations Professionals and Generation Y**

Researchers also compared data from Wright and Hinson's longitudinal (2009 and 2011) study of public relations professionals' indications of organizational communication via social media to the longitudinal data collected for Generation Y members' expectations of organizational communication via social media. Wright and Hinson's research asked professionals to indicate both (1) how important social media are in their communication efforts; and (2) how important they believe social media

*should* be for communication efforts. Tables 2-4 present the significant differences ($p<.05$) in means for public relations professionals' responses to the aforementioned in comparison to Generation Y members. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses.

**Study One.** The first examination (Table 2) compared the results of Wright and Hinson's (2009) study of public relations professionals to Generation Y's expectations (2010) (see Dodd & Campbell, 2011a). Results showed that significant gaps ($p<.05$) existed when measuring the difference between what public relations professionals indicated was happening in actual organizational communication via social media and Generation Y's expectations for organizational communication via social media. The examination of data revealed significant differences for the following media: forums or message boards; podcasts; search engine marketing/results; social bookmarking sites; social networking sites; micro-blogging sites; video sharing sites; and wikis. Of these media that demonstrated significant differences, results showed that the mean difference for all indicated that organizations were underusing these media (per public relations professionals' indications) when compared to Generation Y's expectations, respectively: micro-blogging sites; social bookmarking sites; social networking sites; wikis; search engine marketing/results; video sharing sites; forums or message boards; and podcasts. There were no significant differences found for the following media: blogs and RSS.

Similarly, Wright and Hinson (2009) also found meaningful gaps between what professionals believed was happening and what they believed *should* be happening. Thus, it was important to extend this study by comparing the significant findings from Wright and Hinson (2009) in regards to professionals' indications of what *should* be happening with organizational communication via social media to Generation Y's expectations.

Results showed that significant gaps ($p<.05$) existed when measuring the difference between what public relations professionals indicated *should* be happening with organizational communication via social media and Generation Y's expectations for organizational communication via social media. The examination of data revealed significant differences for the following media: blogs; forums or message boards; podcasts; RSS; and wikis. Of these media that demonstrated significant differences, results showed that the mean difference of the following media were being overestimated by public relations professionals, respectively: RSS; blogs; podcasts; and forums or message boards. Likewise, results indicated that professionals were significantly underestimating the importance of wikis in regards to communicating with Generation Y. However, half of these media showed no significant differences between professionals' indications of what *should* be happening and Generation Y's expectations, as follows: search engine marketing/results; social bookmarking; social networking sites; micro-blogging sites; and video sharing sites.

Table 2: Study One, Organizational Communication via Social Media (Wright & Hinson, 2009, and Dodd & Campbell, 2010)

| | **Generation Y:** In communicating with you, how important is it that organizations use these media? ( Dodd & Campbell, 2010) | **Practitioners:** How important ARE these media in your organizations' PR efforts? (Wright & Hinson, 2009) | **Mean Difference** Practitioners (2009) and Gen Y (2010) | **Practitioners:** How important SHOULD these media be in your organizations' PR efforts? (Wright & Hinson, 2009) | **Mean Difference** Practitioners (2009) and Gen Y (2010) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Blogs** | 3.31 (1.14) | 3.34 | 0.03 | 4.00 | 0.69* |
| **Forums or Message Boards** | 3.41 (1.10) | 3.07 | -0.34* | 3.78 | 0.37* |
| **Photo Sharing³** | NA | 2.60 | NA | 3.19 | NA |
| **Podcasts** | 3.03 (1.07) | 2.81 | -0.22* | 3.64 | 0.61* |
| **RSS** | 3.08 (0.99) | 3.20 | 0.12 | 3.90 | 0.82* |
| **Search Engine Marketing/Results⁴** | 4.07 (1.11) | 3.63 | -0.44* | 4.11 | 0.04 |
| **Social Bookmarking** | 3.34 (1.06) | 2.74 | -0.6* | 3.38 | -0.09 |
| **Social Networks** | 3.74 (1.12) | 3.20 | -0.54* | 3.64 | -0.10 |
| **Micro-Blogging** | 3.50 (1.06) | 2.80 | -0.7* | 3.48 | -0.02 |
| **Video Sharing** | 3.62 (1.08) | 3.20 | -0.42* | 3.67 | 0.05 |
| **Wikis** | 3.44 (1.07) | 2.91 | -0.53* | 2.91 | -0.53* |

*$p<.05$ significantly *different*

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³ Data for photo sharing sites was not collected by Dodd & Campbell in 2010.
⁴ The social media category "Search Engine Marketing" used by Wright & Hinson (2009) was changed to "Search Engine Results" for the applicability of this study to Generation Y participants.

**Study Two.** The next examination (Table 3) compared the results of Wright and Hinson's (2011) study of public relations professionals (reporting 2010 data) to Generation Y (Dodd & Campbell, 2011b). Importantly, Wright and Hinson (2011) reported results for fewer social media than were present in the 2009 study. Results showed fewer significant gaps (*p*<.05) existed than were found in the first examination when measuring the difference between what professionals believe is happening and Generation Y's expectations regarding organizational communication via social media. The examination of data revealed significant differences for the following media: blogs; search engine marketing/results; and micro-blogging sites. Of these media that demonstrated significant differences, results showed that the mean difference for blogs and micro-blogging sites, respectively, indicated that organizations were overusing these media (per public relations professionals' indications) when compared to Generation Y's expectations. And, the opposite was true for search engine marketing/results; that is, results indicated that organizations are underusing these tools (per public relations professionals' indications) when compared to Generation Y's expectations. There were no significant differences between professionals' indications of what was happening with organizational social media use and Generation Y's expectations for the following social media: forums or message boards; podcasts; social networking sites; and video sharing sites.

Again, as with the first examination, results were also compared to what professionals

believed *should* be happening with organizational social media efforts (Wright & Hinson, 2011). Results indicated significant overemphasis on all social media tools by public relations professionals in regards to what they believed *should* be happening when compared to expectations of Generation Y participants, respectively: blogs; micro-blogging sites; podcasts; forums or message boards; social networking sites; video sharing sites; and search engine marketing/results.

Table 3: Study Two, Organizational Communication via Social Media (Wright & Hinson, 2011 reporting practitioner 2010 data and Dodd & Campbell, 2011)

| | **Generation Y:** <br><br> In communicating with you, how important is it that organizations use these media? <br><br> (Dodd & Campbell, 2011) | **Practitioners:** <br><br> How important ARE these media in your organizations' PR efforts? <br><br> (Wright & Hinson, 2010) | **Mean Difference** <br><br> Practitioners (2010) and Gen Y (2011) | **Practitioners:** <br><br> How important SHOULD these media be in your organizations' PR efforts? <br><br> (Wright & Hinson, 2010) | **Mean Difference** <br><br> Practitioners (2010) and Gen Y (2011) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Blogs** | 2.72 (1.22) | 3.31 | 0.59* | 4.01 | 1.29* |
| **Forums or Message Boards** | 2.96 (1.22) | 2.94 | -0.02 | 3.60 | 0.64* |
| **Podcasts** | 2.68 (1.19) | 2.54 | -0.14 | 3.41 | 0.73* |
| **Search Engine Marketing/Results**[5] | 3.86 (1.24) | 3.61 | -0.25* | 4.20 | 0.34* |
| **Social Networks** | 3.78 (1.14) | 3.89 | 0.11 | 4.26 | 0.48* |
| **Micro-Blogging** | 3.25 (1.26) | 3.56 | 0.31* | 4.05 | 0.80* |
| **Video Sharing** | 3.69 (1.12) | 3.57 | -0.12 | 4.10 | 0.41* |

*$p<.05$ significantly *different*

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[5] The social media category "Search Engine Marketing" used by Wright & Hinson (2011) was changed to "Search Engine Results" for the applicability of this study to Generation Y participants.

**Study Three.** The final examination (Table 4) compared the results of Wright and Hinson's (2011) study of public relations professionals (reporting 2011 data) to Generation Y (2012). Results showed that significant gaps ($p<.05$) existed when measuring the difference between what public relations professionals indicated was happening in actual organizational communication via social media and Generation Y's expectations for organizational communication via social media. The examination of data revealed significant differences for all of the media. Of these media that demonstrated significant differences, results showed that the mean difference for the majority indicated that organizations were underusing these media (per public relations professionals' indications) when compared to Generation Y's expectations, respectively: micro-blogging sites; search engine marketing/results; social networks sites; video sharing sites; forums or message boards; and podcasts. On the other hand, results indicated that blogs were significantly being overused by organizations (per public relations professionals' indications).

Further, as with each of the previous two examinations, results were also compared to what professionals believed *should* be happening with organizational social media efforts (Wright & Hinson, 2011). Results indicated significant overemphasis (*p*<.05) by public relations professionals in regards to what they believed *should* be happening when compared to expectations of Generation Y participants for the following media, respectively: blogs; podcasts; and video sharing sites. On the other hand, results also indicated a significant underestimation by public relations professionals in regards to what they believed *should* be happening when compared to expectations of Generation Y participants for social networking sites.

Table 4: Study Three, Organizational Communication via Social Media (Wright & Hinson, 2011, reporting practitioner 2011 data and Dodd & Campbell, 2012)

| | **Generation Y:**<br><br>In communicating with you, how important is it that organizations use these media?<br><br>( Dodd & Campbell, 2012) | **Practitioners:**<br><br>How important ARE these media in your organizations' PR efforts?<br><br>(Wright & Hinson, 2011) | **Mean Difference**<br><br>Practitioners (2011) and Gen Y (2012) | **Practitioners:**<br><br>How important SHOULD these media be in your organizations' PR efforts?<br><br>(Wright & Hinson, 2011) | **Mean Difference**<br><br>Practitioners (2011) and Gen Y (2012) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Blogs** | 3.11 (1.11) | 3.31 | 0.20* | 4.00 | 0.89* |
| **Forums or Message Boards** | 3.43 (1.05) | 2.94 | -0.49* | 3.41 | -0.02 |
| **Podcasts** | 2.84 (1.09) | 2.54 | -0.30* | 3.25 | 0.41* |
| **Search Engine Marketing/Results**[6] | 4.22 (0.96) | 3.61 | -0.61* | 4.17 | -0.05 |
| **Social Networks** | 4.45 (0.81) | 3.89 | -0.56* | 4.26 | -0.19* |
| **Micro-Blogging** | 4.23 (1.01) | 3.56 | -0.67* | 4.09 | -0.14 |
| **Video Sharing** | 4.11 (0.88) | 3.57 | -0.54* | 4.25 | 0.14* |

*p<.05 significantly *different*

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[6] The social media category "Search Engine Marketing" used by Wright & Hinson (2011) was changed to "Search Engine Results" for the applicability of this study to Generation Y participants.

## DISCUSSION

The current research longitudinally examined Generation Y's expectations of organizational social media use across three years (2010, 2011 and 2012) and directly compared results to longitudinal research that analyzes public relations professionals' own indications of organizational social media use across three years (Wright & Hinson, 2009 and 2011). Importantly, as noted by Wright and Hinson (2012), such an approach enhances the credibility of public relations scholarship where there exists a significant lack of longitudinal research and a large percent of studies having fewer than 350 participants.

Results generally indicated a slight "u"-shaped dip among social media throughout the three-year research period for Generation Y participants. It was particularly interesting to note that 70% of the 10 social media showed a significant *decrease* and none showed a significant *increase* in importance for organizational communication for Generation Y participants between the 2010-2011 years. On the other hand, between 2011-2012 years, none of the 11 social media showed a significant *decrease* and 82% showed a significant *increase* in importance for organizational communication among Generation Y participants. Further, for the comparison of 2010 and 2012 data, results showed that 50% of the 10 social media showed a significant *increase* and 20% showed a significant *decrease* in importance for organizational communication among Generation Y participants.

Clearly, we find that social media were generally evaluated as less important in 2011 than in 2010 or 2012. It may be important to note that 2012 was an election year, which may have impacted the evaluation of social media for that year. Additionally, future research may look at 2010 as a potential year of adoption or emergence of new social media tools; whereas 2011 may demonstrate a leveling-off period or plateau among Generation Y participants. This is particularly demonstrated by the three social media that did not show significant differences across 2010-2011 data: social networking sites, video sharing sites, and wikis. It may be reasonable to propose that these tools are social media "mainstays" and, thus, it may not be surprising to find that Generation Y participants did not demonstrate a significant increase in importance across that year. A comparison with social media milestones to this extent would also prove useful for better understanding these results. Moreover, it may be reasoned that these results could be a reaction to a surge of organizational adoption of social media tools, and, thus, poor communication and/or the barrage of communication Generation Y members receive/d on a daily basis as organizations increased the emphasis on and budgets for such communication programs (as demonstrated by Wright & Hinson, 2009 and 2011).

Again, when the overall means were combined across years, participants indicated agreement that the following were important for organizational communication with them, respectively: search engine results; social networking sites; video sharing sites; micro-blogging sites; and wikis. On the other hand, participants were overall neutral in regards to the following, respectively: photo sharing sites; forums or message boards; social bookmarking sites; blogs; RSS; and podcasts. For no media did participants indicate general disagreement. These results seem reasonable such that we again may look at those social media tools that participants indicated agreement as important for organizational communication as mainstays of social media. Perhaps, the only really surprising result was finding that blogs were not evaluated as important proportionately to what academics and professionals may have liked to find. In fact, participants indicated neutrality across each year toward blogs as an important social media tool for organizational communication. This will be discussed further as follows in comparison to professionals' evaluations of social media tools. In any event, these findings offer professionals the ability to understand those tools that have demonstrated consistent interest (and those that have not) for organizational communication with the Generation Y demographic across the past three years.

Next, in comparison to Generation Y's expectations of organizational communication via social media, professionals' indications of how important social media are in *actuality* to their organizations' communication efforts revealed that the majority of media were significantly underused (62.5%) across years. Of those significantly underused social media, only one (search engine marketing/results) was significantly underused by organizations in comparison to Generation Y participants' indications across all three years. Results also showed that 12.5% of social media tools were indicated as being overused by organizations in comparison to Generation Y participants' indications across three years. Of those significantly overused social media tools, blogs were determined to be significantly overused by organizations in comparison to Generation Y participants' indications across two years (2010-2011 and 2011-2012). Of those social media tools that did not show significant differences (25%), there was no consistent overlap across any measurement years, perhaps reinforcing the ever-changing nature of social media use and attempts by organizations to adapt to such a shifting media landscape.

Further, when results of Generation Y participants were compared to public relations professionals' indications of what *should* be occurring with organizational communication via social media, the majority of social media tools were found to be significantly overestimated by public relations professionals (58.3%). It is important to note, however, 29% of those tools that were overestimated across years came from the dipping 2011 data where all social media were found to be significantly overestimated by public relations professionals. Of those tools that were significantly overestimated, blogs and podcasts were significant across each measurement year. Moreover, the results of what professionals believed *should* be happening were more closely aligned with the expectations of Generation Y (than the indications by professionals of what was happening in actuality) with 33.3% not showing significant differences across three years. Likewise, only 8.3% of social media were underestimated by public relations professionals in regards to what *should* be happening when compared to Generation Y's responses.

## IMPLICATIONS

Of these results, a few important takeaways are worthy of further discussion. First, it seems that blogs may not deserve the attention they've received in the public relations literature or in public relations practice aimed at members of the Generation Y demographic. The scholarly and practical implications of this are many such that future research should explore who is using blogs to communicate with or receive information from organizations and to what extent. This finding may be of particular importance for scholarship surrounding the conceptualization of blog-mediated public relations/communication.

Next, it is important to note that the majority of social media tools were found to be underused in actuality (based on public relations professionals indications) by organizations in comparison to indications of importance by Generation Y participants.

This research finds that organizations are overall failing to adopt social media communication tools at a rate sufficient to keep up with the needs of this important demographic group that represents those most likely to use such tools and technologies. Specifically, search engines present an area for future emphasis in both practice and scholarship. Search engine optimization (SEO) is underrepresented in the public relations literature, and this research presents a strong rationale for its further examination as a communication strategy, particularly with the rise of various new search tools to include Bing and Facebook's Graph Search. Likewise, the use of hashtags in search deserves further attention in the academic literature surrounding public relations and aimed at enhancing the knowledge of practicing professionals to this extent.

Finally, when looking at those social media tools that were found to have no significant differences across years for what professionals indicated was happening in actuality versus what *should* be happening, the amount increased by 8.3% from the former to the latter. In other words, it seems that public relations professionals seem to "get it" in regards to the social media landscape for Generation Y more so than organizations. Professionals demonstrated fewer significant differences among social media tools in regards to what *should* be happening across years than in regards to their indications of what was happening at organizations in actuality across three years. The practical implications of these findings are clear: Public relations professionals are effectively predicting the importance of social media tools, and if anything, have a tendency to overestimate the importance of social media tools.

Specifically, this research finds that professionals are overestimating the importance of both blogs and podcasts across three years. Again, blogs deserve further attention in the scholarship and perhaps a lessened emphasis in practice. Podcasting, thus, offers similar implications for scholarship and practice. Similar to search engines, podcasts represent an underexplored communication tool in the public relations literature and are worthy of attention in regards to audience and effective use. Moreover, future research may be aimed at developing strategies that balance the resources and interests of the organization with those of public relations professionals for organizational communication via social media. In other words, while organizations generally underused social media, professionals generally overestimated the importance of social media when compared to the expectations of Generation Y participants in this research. Thus, there is a clear resource-based disconnect that deserves further attention.

In conclusion, this research provides public relations professionals with an enhanced understanding of the social media usage habits of the highly sought-after Generation Y demographic. It further identifies disparities between existing organizational social media use, public relations professionals' recommendations, and the organizational social media use desired by the Generation Y demographic. Taken together, this allows that professionals may take a more strategic approach to organizational communication via emerging media and the reallocation of organizational resources accordingly. Likewise, using this research as a framework, public relations professionals are better able to predict future trends among the Generation Y demographic and make more

educated decisions about which emerging media to pursue for both campaign and communication programs. Public relations professionals may similarly use this research as a framework for their own programs of research aimed at auditing their current organization/client social media use and comparing it to the desires of the Generation Y or other demographic groups. The alignment of emerging media tools with the desired communication of organizational audiences represents a more evidence-based, goal-directed, and overall strategic approach to communication via social media than has been represented thus far in scholarship and practice.

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