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Centennials' Communication Channels: Guiding the way St. Norbert Shares Information

Introduction

The survey required us to explore which communication channels St. Norbert College should use to share information with current students. This survey helped guide the analysis and expand previously found studies we researched within our literature reviews. The chosen demographic for the survey contributed to the results we found because of the strict use of sending it to only St. Norbert College students. St. Norbert College students have a vital impact on the way information is retrieved and analyzed. Over time, communication channels have expanded, leaving Gen Z (centennials) to prefer certain channels, over others. Students throughout campus have given us information, through a survey, in the ways they wish to see change in the College's communication. Though this will be ever-changing and continuously developing, the St. Norbert College administration must adapt. When reevaluating the channels in which they communicate through, administration needs to consider the current ways in which the growing population sends and receives information so the retrieval of campus information can improve.

Literature Review

Communication channels have an important impact on the ways in which college students retrieve information. Communication channels have continued to expand over time due to technology advancements. According to Lodge (2010), "as these channels of communication

continue to expand and new technologies become available, it has made the task of getting messages, whether they are related to learning or administration, far more complicated” (p.102). There are certain communication channels that millennials, individuals born between 1980 and 2002, are categorized into. According to Hartman and McCambridge (2011), millennials see technology as something that is part of their lives, not something that they adopt or try to integrate. It is inseparable from who they are and what they do. This expands to the ways of well-developed communication skills that enhance both individual success, which relates to the ways individuals prefer to communicate with information provided by the school.

Most people, including students, are quick to respond to communication that is similar to their dominant style, whether that is through, email, text, calling, etc. However, students do not all have the same communication style. According to Hartman and McCambridge (2011), students rely on their preferred communication style to retrieve information. Students were generally positive about the use of social networking and other new online media but strongly preferred more established channels for official academic and administrative information (Lodge, 2010).

The question of interest, in simplified format, is which communication channels are preferred and valued by St. Norbert College students. Communication channels in the area of concern are the popular, mainstream social media platforms and/or email and websites. When categorizing the college students, interviewed in this research project, Gen Z seems to be the most appropriate with the age range including our target ages of 18 to 22 and up. Pruett’s (2018), article is an analysis of Gen Z’s favorite social media networks and contains minimal explanation as to why the results are what they are. With about 95% of teens owning or having access to a

mobile phone and spending about 23 hours a week streaming video content, the reality becomes evident that this generation has only lived in a world with technology in it (Pruett, 2018). An explanation for the dominance of certain platforms over others, can result in the, “the most popular social networks among Gen Z being the most visual ones” (Pruett, 2018). Pruett’s (2018) analysis does require more of an explanation and a need to take a further look at the relation between digital communication channels and students.

A study conducted by Arceneaux and Dinu (2018) found similar results as Pruett (2018). The design of the experiment consisted of four experimental groups, testing four different variations of these chosen variables: a distinct medium (Twitter or Instagram) and a specific information source (user or professional). It allowed participants to choose which sources are credible and to see how well the platform and source worked together for the participants to be able to recall information and test the credibility of each source. Therefore, the findings of this study, was that professional news outlets were found to be more credible information sources than random social media users. Also, that “visual-based social media platforms are more effective in producing memory recall than textual-based platforms” (Arceneaux & Dinu, 2018, p. 4170). These findings stress paying attention to the patterns of our study, specifically if the information sources that are ran by professionals are credible platforms to students locally at St. Norbert College.

A study performed at Purdue University in 2018 gathered Purdue students to determine which social media platforms they currently utilized, which platforms they wanted the library to use, and what content they wanted to see on each platform (Howard et al., 2018). The librarians created a survey in electronic form with both closed and open-ended questions. Their findings

are applicable to colleges beyond Purdue. Two valuable results were that “students/teens continue to use Facebook for its utility in scheduling events or keeping in touch regarding homework” (Howard et al., 2018, p. 16) and “social media is a key component of how students communicate with everyone” (p. 8). These insights into which platform students prefer and which mediums connect with users could be applied to St. Norbert College’s decisions when conducting a study aimed towards local students’ preference of communication channels for receiving information.

Hertlein and Ancheta (2014), conducted a study that found advantages and disadvantages of technology. An overarching disadvantage is that technology can lead to misinterpreted messages and create impaired trust between individuals. Hertlein and Ancheta (2014) found, “there may also be challenges in interpersonal communication when the message is not clear” (p.8). Students are constantly being informed through technology about current events on campus. However, since messages are often not relayed in person, there is room for misinterpretation. This can foster an impaired trust between students, faculty and staff. Cabral (2018) discovered that, “the consistent technological developments that help connect the world can be seen as either beneficial or detrimental to human relationships” (p.6). The use of technology is becoming increasingly favorable and common in people's daily life. However, when technology is abused, it can become damaging to human relationships. When information is communicated only through technology, at St. Norbert College, it can become damaging to the relationships on campus. Students may feel a lack of face-to-face connection which raises some concern. This can cause students to not feel comfortable enough, to reach to others in person, if there are questions or concerns from messages sent on platforms.

Results show that technology is not going anywhere, and people need to learn how to manage and adapt to these mainstream forms of communication. An article by Vittadini, Siibak, Reifova, and Bilandzic (2013), defined what a generation is. They argue, “generational identity is built through social relationships and help to define the social significance of generation” (p.1). They further explain, there are two distinct types of generations; a demographic generation and a cultural generation. A demographic generation is, “age cohorts of people who were born and happened to be alive at about the same time” (Vittadini et. al. 2013, p. 2). A cultural generation can be defined by, “constituted on the basis of shared experience of the same formative events and collective memory” (Vittadini et. al. 2013, p. 2). St. Norbert students all grew up with the ability to be surrounded by technology, which shows shared experience and collective memory.

When determining the means by which a college like St. Norbert should share information with its current students, it is important to assess the natural differences between the interactions of generations. According to a collection of data by Karr with Zone (2017), technology usage seems to be related to what technological advances were made in each generation, i.e.: telephone advances made during GenX time, social media and messaging during GenY, and hand held devices with GenZ. This research shows a distinct difference between effective communication methods among current students and older faculty due to age difference and technological advancements of each generation. An individual’s comfort with technology depends primarily upon which devices and communication tools they have grown up with. In order to deliver information effectively to its students, St. Norbert College administration needs to understand the technological preferences and abilities of their students. The similarities of GenX and GenY does not always align with today’s cutting-edge students.

Bolin and Westlund (2009) states that younger people are the first to adopt new media technologies. They stated “in 1994, about 20% of Swedish households possessed a computer and the amount was similar for mobile phones. Thereafter followed a rapid increase until the early 21st century, when the growth had reached about 70% for computers and 80% for mobile phones” (Bolin & Westlund, 2009, p. 112). The research shows that technology keeps increasing, and the amount of people that use it is multiplying. Younger people adapt to new technology faster than older people do. When examining individuals in their eighties and twenties, people can see that those in their eighties may have trouble operating a computer or smartphone, whereas people in their twenties grew up learning how to use these “new technologies.”

Technology is a dominant form of communication in people's daily lives. Cabral (2018) found that technology is evolving, “the new digital age has brought about extraordinary developments in technology that has altered the way many people access and use information” (p.8). These innovative developments are a part of the way in which Gen Z actively communicating. People are becoming so addicted to technology that they are not even aware of, “unconsciously addicted to social media and as a result they feel constant societal pressure to be connected” (Cabral, 2018, p.6). Students are checking social media (i.e. Facebook, Email, Instagram) to feel connected and informed about current events happening throughout campus. Though they may feel connected, disadvantages emerge from these subtle addictions. As channels of communication continue growing, the messages can become misinterpreted (Lodge, 2010). As well as the messages becoming more complicated, there are can also be offer disadvantages from students on a college campus that do not have the same level technology skills or information literacy (Lodge, 2010).

The topic that was explored was the relationship between technology and St. Norbert students. The research demonstrates that there are several ways to communicate. Ten years ago, there was not as much social media as there is today. Majority of centennials use snapchat to communicate in today's world. By analyzing what communication channels St. Norbert College students use, it shows that there is an abundance of ways to be connected with people. In ten years, developments and innovations could be made to these communication channels.

Research Questions

1. What communication channels should St. Norbert College stop using?
2. How might communication evolve at St. Norbert College in the future?
3. Are there any channels that St. Norbert College is not utilizing, though they should be?

Methods

Participants

Within this survey, we incorporated demographic questions that helped us provide an overview of the individuals that we selected to participate in the survey. Every individual that participated attends St. Norbert College. Each person in our research methods class selected ten people to email the survey to. After giving these individuals, we selected, time to respond we got a total of 183 valid participants. There was a total of 125 females and 55 males, 1 non-binary, and 1 that preferred to self-describe. The individuals age range was between 18 and 22. The majority of the individuals that took the survey were between the ages of 18 and 19. There was a sum of 87 individuals that were between the ages of 18 and 19, 84 were between 20-21, and 11 were either 22 or 23 years old.

Majority of the individuals that took the survey were freshman. There was a total of 74 freshmen, 35 sophomores, 45 juniors, and 27 seniors. A total of 170 students, who participated in the survey, live on campus, which meant the remaining 11 participants live off campus. The individuals that we surveyed all varied in studying different programs and degrees. The major that majority of individuals studied was business, there were 51 students in this field. About 48 individuals are getting their degree in arts, 33 in social sciences, 27 in sciences, and 27 in education and there were two individuals who are still undecided.

Procedure

Two sections of Dr. Smith's Communication Research Methods course distributed a survey to St. Norbert College students. Each student in the course emailed ten students encouraging them to participate in the survey. All the information that was gathered, was kept anonymous. In total, there were 183 valid responses. The survey took an average of fifteen minutes and had both open-ended questions and closed-ended questions. The closed-ended questions involved a list of options that were provided. There was a total number of 14 questions that the student had to answer, twelve closed-ended, four scale questions and one open-ended question. Since each participant responded to the same survey, it led to clear, concise results. With each student reaching out to ten different participants, it allowed for diversity in demographics such as: gender, age, and campus involvement.

Results & Discussion

The predominant findings of this study indicate that there are similar results between what was found in previous interviews versus the current survey that was conducted. There still exists dissatisfaction among a portion of St. Norbert College students with the way the college communicates information to them. Though the survey results show a mean response of 3.84 (on a 1 to 5 scale ranging from disagree to agree) mostly agreeing to the statement “St. Norbert College does a good job communicating important information to students,” this does not devalue the input of the other students who still wish to see change. A finding that could possibly raise questions in the interview results, is that 85.2% of respondents use Snapchat the most out of any other social media platform. Though the majority of respondents use Snapchat more than any other app, there were only four comments made on behalf of the open-ended section, for the idea that the college should utilize Snapchat specifically when communicating. Changes that were suggested from the interviews, generally encompassed the idea of pushing more text notifications for alerts and immediate information and having St. Norbert College be more active on social media for important information. Suggested changes from the survey included the previous desires and the wish for emails to be strictly important information and less cluttered with unneeded or unwanted upcoming events, campus news, etc.

Since both the interviews and the survey yielded similar results when it came to what kinds of changes students think are necessary to communicate with St. Norbert College, it presents an overall agreement that there is some dissatisfaction. In a broad sense, the interviews suggested that the college should push more text notifications for alerts and immediate

information. This was supported in the survey by 68.7% of the students responding with the desire to see more safety alerts over text message rather than email. A further 63.7% responded that they would rather be texted about closures, delays, and cancellations, instead of having an additional email sent out. When it comes to alerts on social media, several of the interviewed students wanted to see St. Norbert College actively dispersing important information over social media. This desire for change was mirrored in the survey. In the open-ended response section of the survey, it was stated that along with more text messages being sent out there should be a more active stance on different social media platforms.

A majority of the information gathered in the recent survey of 183 students, correlates with the previously conducted interviews. In the previous interviews, 30% of the interviewees said they got most of their information, for St. Norbert College, from Instagram and 10% said the same for Facebook, which corresponds to the survey results having a mean of 3.59 (on a scale from 1 to 5, disagree to agree) in agreement that social media is being effectively utilized by the college.

From the interviews, 60% of students said they received the most information from St. Norbert over email. These students also said they found the student email to be the most reliable source of information. In the new method, the survey, there were about four times as many respondents. The overall feeling towards the student email being successful as a communication channel, remained through each method of study (interview and survey). The first round of interviewees agreed that St. Norbert College is successful in sending information through the

school email, which again relates to the recent survey. There was a mean of 4.16 in regards to the agreement that St. Norbert efficiently uses the student email to communicate with students. This suggests that there is an overall satisfaction and agreement towards St. Norbert's use of email as an efficient communication method, yet there is still room for improvement.

One of the survey questions, "which technologies do you use to communicate every day," provided a "select all that may apply" option. Of the 183 students who responded to the survey, 98.9% selected their cell phone as the most commonly used technology to communicate with everyday and 89.1% chose laptop/computer as their answer. This parallels with the 50% of interviewees who answered with iPhone/laptop in the interviews. Another question in the survey, allowed respondents to select all that may apply to, "which social media platforms do you use on a daily basis." The number of students who chose Instagram as the social media platform they use daily was 90.2%, 84.7% chose Gmail, and 69.9% chose Facebook. This pattern displays a high percentage of students preferring Gmail which could contribute to the idea that St. Norbert is successful in sending information through the school email. The other high percentages for Facebook and Instagram, align with the idea that the high use of these visually dominant networks is a major proponent in students' memory with recalling information. This can contribute to the popularity and activeness among users (Arceneaux & Dinu, 2018). Looking back at the previous method's results, 50% agreed that their daily form of technology was social media, however there was no specification as to which platforms they favored. The most used social media platform, from the survey, left 66.7% of respondents selecting Instagram, 23.5% for

Gmail, and 25.1% for Facebook. For the hours spent on social media per day, the most common answer had 43.1% of students choosing 3-4 hours, which was the highest percentage among the other choices. This finding provides an explanation for the desire that St. Norbert College utilize more social media platforms because that is where both the interviewees and respondents from the survey, spend most of their time.

Where 60% of the previous interviewees received the most information from, was email and the survey results paralleled this finding. The question from the survey that provided these similar results is, “for which communication channel (Email, Social Media, Website, Text, Other) should St. Norbert College use to communicate information.” The types of information this question was referring to included: homework due dates, messages from professors, events on campus, special action, and parking information; the most dominant answer was email. For homework due dates, 63.9% of respondents chose email, 88.4% for messages from professors, 56.6% for events on campus, 87.3% for special action, and 79.1% for parking information. These results replicate the previous pattern found, which was that student email is the most credible networks for students. This can link back to a study previously done. Arceneaux and Dinu (2018) conducted a study and found similar results in which students saw professional news outlets as a far more credible information source, than random social media user posts. Since the college’s email is updated by professionals, who are knowledgeable and send factual information, the results from our survey respondents and interviewees show that majority prefer networks ran by professionals for information (Arceneaux & Dinu, 2018). The lack of interest students gave other

platforms for which communication channels the college should use to communicate certain information, suggests that other social media platforms are not being utilized and updated by St. Norbert College to their full potential.

While analyzing the results from the survey, it is significant to point out the positive and negative correlations found. A Pearson's correlation analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between age and the number of times students reported checking email during the day, $r(180) = .149, p < .01$. Similarly, there was a significant positive correlation between year in school and number of times students reported checking email during the day, $r(179) = .213, p < .01$. These results are important because it supports the conclusion that students prefer email as their main communication channel for school information. The longer students attend St. Norbert, the more active they become when looking for opportunities and campus information. There was also a significant negative correlation between age and the number of hours spent on social media per day, $r(181) = -.164, p < .05$. Similarly, there was a significant negative correlation between year in school and the number of hours spent on social media per day, $r(180) = -.159, p < .05$. These results are intriguing because as students get older they become more involved which then leads to busier schedules and new responsibilities. Due to their tight schedules, they do not have as much free time, compared to a first-year student, to be constantly on social media platforms. Finally, the Pearson's correlation analysis also revealed a significant negative correlation between age and the belief that St. Norbert College does a good job communicating important information to students, $r(182) = -.178, p < .05$. In keeping with the

trend, there was also a significant negative correlation between year in school and the belief that St. Norbert College does a good job communicating important information to students, $r(181) = -.236, p < .01$. These results are valuable because as St. Norbert College students become older, they experience negative and positive situations involving the campus. This affects their information intake and explains why the older students have more of a disagreement towards St. Norbert College doing a good job communicating messages to the student body.

Major differences between what this survey covered and what the interview did not, include: the option for respondents to select tablets and smartwatches for a technology used to communicate every day, the variety of options for which social media platforms used on a daily basis/the most, and the abundance of feedback for change. The survey found that 2.7% of students use a tablet and 27.3% use a smartwatch to communicate every day. The interview did not carry the same feedback since there was a limited number of students used in the study. The survey had respondents who utilized the various options for social media platforms used daily/the most. The mainstream platforms (Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, Gmail, and Twitter) had the largest percentages of users, however other the other options like: LinkedIn, Gmail, Pinterest, Reddit, YouTube, VSCO, Google Calendar, GroupMe, and those who do not regularly use social media, all had at least one respondent select it as their answer. This raises concern for the restricted options that were given in the interview. The abundance of answers, though not all useful to our focus in this study, gave valuable insight to which apps students favor. The major difference between the interview and survey is the number of participants. Only ten students

were chosen to be interviewed versus 183 students who responded, with valid answers to the survey. This vast number of respondents makes less room for error, allows for different relationships between variables to be formed, increases the amount of validity in results, and has allowed generalizations to be made easier. While the study of which communication channels St. Norbert College should use to share information with current students does require more research, these findings make a theoretical contribution to understanding the relationship between communication and education.

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