Small but Mighty: Examining College Student Perceptions of Small Businesses' Social Media Use

Alan Abitbol
Monica Rook

Using the relationship management theory as framework, this study examines college student perceptions of how small businesses use social media to cultivate relationships with them. We conducted an online survey of 156 college students across the U.S. Results indicate that college students expect small businesses to use Facebook and Instagram as platforms and prefer they implement assurance and positivity strategies. However, together, the strategies did not predict attitude but did behavioral intentions. In terms of theory, this study advances RMT by analyzing it in the context of small businesses. Practically, the results highlight the importance of effective small business social media use to cultivate relationships with college students to ensure growth and prosperity.

Introduction

Social media has increasingly become a tool for businesses to reach their customers, and as this trend continues, the need for accessible and strategized social media techniques grow. In particular, small businesses lean on social media to meet their goals as they do not have time, money, or personnel to allow for experimentation. Small businesses can be defined as an organization that has less than 500 employees and are independently owned and created for profit (Anastasia, 2015). For small businesses, building relationships over social media is a viable strategy due to medium's affordable and accessible nature.

One theory that may provide small businesses direction on how to cultivate relationships with customers is the relationship management theory (RMT) in public relations. RMT outlines how organization-public relationships are cultivated and maintained. It provides guidance on strategies to build relationships with key stakeholder groups. This theory has been applied in several different contexts such as nonprofits and how they relate with their donors (Bertagnoli, 2018) and how *Fortune* 500 companies can build relationships with internal and external publics (Ki & Hon, 2007). However, few researchers have looked at RMT in the context of small businesses. With most small businesses having limited time and resources, social media provides an excellent medium for small businesses to build relationships with key publics.

Using RMT as framework, this research investigates how small businesses can cultivate and maintain relationships with customers by utilizing social media. One important demographic for small businesses to target are college students. Current college students, who most are classified as generation Z (Gen Z), are more likely to support local businesses (AT&T, 2017). And, as local businesses are the backbone of the U.S. economy (Nelson, 2015), members of Gen Z provide increased opportunities for growth and sustainability. According to a recent Piper Jaffray report, Gen Z contributes about $830 billion to U.S. retail sales each year (Christe, 2019). Gen Z also has a strong affinity for social media. For example, 80% of surveyed teens get their beauty tips from social influencers (Christe, 2019). Thus, we gauged Gen Z expectations of small business use of social media to cultivate relationships with them. This research offers valuable insight for small businesses that are seeking to increase the return on investment from their social media implementation and to cultivate stronger relationships with a specific public over social media.

Literature Review

Defining Small Businesses

Defining small businesses has been the subject of debate over the past 20 years within national, state, and local governments as well as the business community itself. This has led to an evolving definition of what constitutes a small business. Peterson, Albaum, and Kozmetsky (1986) define a small business to have less than 100 employees with less than $1 million in gross receipts. The Small Business Administration (SBA) offers a definition that is more focused on qualities rather than quantities. According to the SBA, a small business is created for profit,

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Alan Abitbol (PhD, Texas Tech University, 2016) is an Assistant Professor in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Dayton. Address correspondence to the first author at aabitbol1@dayton.edu.
Monica Rook is a Marketing and Proposals Coordinator for Ulliman Schutte Construction in Miamisburg, Ohio.

independently owned, and can either be "a sole proprietorship, corporation, or any other recognized legal form" (Anastasia, 2015, p. 90). For the SBA, a small business has less than 500 employees, while a subset of small business, the microenterprise, must have less than 10 employees and has very low income and restricted access to funding (Anastasia, 2015). Anastasia (2015) notes that family-owned, or mom-and-pop businesses, usually fall into the microenterprise category. Based on these definitions, Headd (2015) and Nelson (2015) estimated that there were over 28 million small businesses in the United States in 2012, with 5 million of these small businesses having less than 20 employees.

Small business use of social media. While small businesses are often at a disadvantage compared to larger businesses when it comes to time and resources, they still find ways to use social media to their advantage. In fact, according to a survey administered by Apenteng and Doe (2014), 80% of small businesses had a social media presence at that time. Other research shows that in 2014, 75% of small businesses had a company page on a social networking site, and 61% used social media to identify and attract new customers (Taneja & Toombs, 2014). Of these numbers, more than 70% were using Facebook, 58% were using LinkedIn, and 39% were using Twitter (Miller & Washington, 2013).

While these numbers make it clear that small businesses are already using social media, the most effective social media platforms for small businesses have yet to be identified. Taneja and Toombs (2014) posit that effective social media platforms for small businesses will help them "reach people faster, build relationships, and connect with potential customers" and will allow small businesses "to showcase and secure their brands" (p. 250).

Costs and benefits of using social media. Shilpa and Janhavi (2017) attribute the widespread use of social media by small businesses to its ability to connect a small business with a larger audience and attract more customers. They note the potential for small business use of social media to be a means to cultivate meaningful relationships with audience members. The ability to build flexible and cooperative networks with other small businesses using social media is also a benefit for small businesses (Barnes et al., 2012). Most importantly to this study, social media offer great potential for "interactive and more bottom-up, participatory methods of collaboration compared to previous waves of technology such as customer relationship management" that are especially useful for "cost-conscious small firms that rely on personal interactions and relationships in conducting business" (Barnes et al., 2012, p. 690-691).

Taneja and Toombs (2014) identify several additional benefits of social media for small businesses. These include visibility with customers, viability against competitors, sustainability in minimizing vulnerability, differentiation from competitors, and affordability (Bulearca & Bulearca, 2010; Stelzner, 2012). Alternatively, Taneja and Toombs (2014) identify a lack of technological sophistication as a major limitation for small businesses pursuing a social media presence. Weak security, lack of originality, and reputation are other risks and challenges to the implementation of social media tactics for small businesses (Bressler, 2012; Heller Baird & Parasnis, 2011; Taneja & Toombs, 2014; Urstadt & Grifantini, 2008). Despite these limitations, research maintains that social media is an important tool for small businesses (Taneja & Toombs, 2014).

Gen Z and social media

Broadly, past research shows that members of Gen Z are highly involved with social media (Duffett, 2017). They are the first generation to be raised in the era of smartphones and many do not remember a time before social media (Williams, 2015). Known as "digital natives", most members of Gen Z are active on social media and demonstrate a level of proficiency and comfort with technology that no other generation before them possess (Palley, 2012). They use social media as a general source of information or entertainment and are skilled at filtering out "non-relevant information" and judging "information posted online, especially the product characteristics communicated via social media" (Dabija, Bejan, & Tipi, 2018, p. 197). When it comes to interacting with businesses online, most Gen Zers prefer to create brand stories and forge relationships with brands through social media (Read, Robertson, McQuilken, & Ferdous, 2019). These interactions have resulted in both positive and negative attitudes toward the brands (Gensler, Volckner, Liu-Thompkins, & Wiertz, 2013).

A specific subset of Gen Z are college students (the sample public for this study), which are an important public for small businesses as they have growing purchasing power as they enter the workforce. Overall, college student use of social media is high, with "72% of all college students hav[ing] a social media profile" and "45% of college students using a social media site at least once a day" (Sponcil & Gitimu, 2013, p. 2).

Generally, research has identified four common social media uses for college students: emotional, cognitive, social, and habitual (Wang & Tchernev, 2012). According to Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973), emotional uses, or needs, refer to a "strengthening aesthetic, pleasurable, and emotional experience" (p. 166); cognitive needs gather "information, knowledge, and understanding" (p. 166); social needs strengthen "contact with family, friends, and the world" (p. 167); and habitual needs "are ritualized and help bring structure to one's day"

(Wang, Tchernev, & Solloway, 2012, p. 1830). Aside from these general uses, other researchers have found that college students use social media to build social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007) and publicly construct a concept of self (Sponcil & Gitimu, 2013).

Moreover, college students use social media to learn about products and to ultimately aid in their purchase decisions. Members of Gen Z are more focused on innovation and are conscientious when making purchasing decisions (Priporas, Stylos, & Fotiadis, 2017). Priporas and colleagues (2017) note that, in general, members of Gen Z use social media to collect information about products and to connect and interact with brands and retailers. Moreover, social media can play an integral role in their purchasing decisions as they use social media to learn about a product's characteristics, usage possibilities, and other customers' opinions. As small businesses rely heavily on social media to connect with a wider audience and to gain new customers (Shilpa & Janhavi, 2017), gaining an understanding as to how college students perceive small business social media is imperative. College students make up a large consumer group that, because of their reliance on social media to gain information about businesses, may influence the success or failure of small businesses. Therefore, the first research question is as follows:

RQ1: Which social media platforms do college students prefer small businesses use and how do they expect them to use the platforms?

Relationship Management Theory

Small businesses are looking to gain loyal customers and are using social media to do so. And, college students are a growing group with purchasing power that use social media to seek information and build interactive relationships. For small businesses to seize this opportunity, they must learn to build relationships with this stakeholder group using social media. Relationship management theory provides a theoretical framework to do so.

Modern public relations practice has evolved from disseminating information one-way to a more relational and managerial perspective (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Ledingham, 2006). 'Modern' public relations can be defined as "the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends" (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1994, p. 2). Relationships exist between the organization and its key publics, in which the actions made by both parties impact the social, economic, political, or cultural well-being of each other (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). For small businesses, these relationships exist between those associated with the business and their various stakeholders, including customers, employers, suppliers, etc.

Recent studies on public relations have captured this view. Beginning with Ferguson's (1984; 2018) suggestion that the unit of analysis that should be focused on in public relations scholarship is the relationship between organizations and publics, a rich body of research has been developed that examines these organization-public relationships (OPRs) including how these relationships are created, how they are managed, and the different types of OPRs. Recent OPR research has focused mainly on models of OPRs that typically include relationship antecedents, cultivation strategies, and relationship qualities (e.g., Grunig & Huang, 2000).

Exploring the relational perspective, Ledingham (2003; 2006) suggested making relationship management into a general theory of public relations. The theory states that "effectively managing organizational relationships around common interests and shared goals over time, results in mutual understanding and benefit for interacting organizations and publics" (Ledingham, 2003, p. 190). At its core, the theory values how communication processes and strategies within an organization can build relationships that bring greater understanding and benefits for both the organization and its publics (Ledingham, 2003).

To balance organizational interests with public interests, two-way symmetrical communication strategies were proposed as ways to most likely achieve favorable relationships (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 2000; Grunig & Huang, 2000, Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ki & Hon, 2009). These relationship cultivation strategies (Hung, 2007) include access, positivity, assurance, network-building, openness, and task sharing. *Access* is when an organization ensures that there are communication channels for publics to interact with it (Hon & Grunig, 1999). *Positivity* is "anything the organization or public does to make the relationship more enjoyable for the parties involved" (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 14). *Assurance* is the "attempt by parties in the relationship to assure the other parties that they and their concerns are legitimate. This strategy also might involve attempts by the parties in the relationship to demonstrate they are committed to maintaining the relationship" (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 15). *Network-building* occurs when organizations build "networks or coalitions with the same groups that their publics do, such as environmentalists, unions, or community groups" (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 15). *Openness* is clear disclosure of the organization's actions, intentions, thoughts, and feelings (Hon & Grunig, 1999). *Task-sharing* is when an organization and its public team up to solve an issue or complete a task, often "community issues, providing employment, making a profit, and staying in business" (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 15).

RMT and social media. New research has extended the findings of how relationships are measured and maintained into the world of social and online media. As social media becomes more widely used—and therefore more necessary in reaching audiences—research has responded to the need to understand how RMT and social media can be a blended tool. Hallahan (2006) argued that with online media, organizations can have more balanced relationships with key publics by fostering understanding, but these organizations must be committed to and have knowledge on how to use these online tools appropriately. Building OPRs online starts with building awareness, creating opportunities for interaction, and formulating chances to build impressions and drive action (Hallahan, 2006). These online OPRs can lead to positive attitudes toward the organization, increased communication activity, and possible repetitive behaviors such as purchases (Hallahan, 2006).

Social media platforms are natural channels to encourage two-way communication between organizations and publics (Lovejoy, Waters & Saxton, 2012). On social media, opportunities exist for organizations to engage with many different stakeholder groups in one place through proper relationship management (Carboni & Maxwell, 2015). For example, RMT was examined as a means to reach internal and external stakeholders in small businesses and nonprofits (Maxwell & Carboni, 2014). Applying relationship management principles to customer relations and engagement with luxury brands over social media, Guha, Harrigan, and Soutar (2018) found that allowing customers and brands to co-create on social media leads to engagement, purchases, and brand loyalty. Maecker, Barrot, and Becker (2016) examined data collected from customers of a mobile phone service provider to explore the role of interactions through corporate social media channels. Results reinforced the potential for social media use to lead to higher profitability for businesses by understanding public expectations of the brands social media profiles.

The present research carries the importance and value of relationship management into the digital age and lays a foundation for continued research in how relationships can be fostered through social media. Much of the research addresses how businesses can use social media to manage relationships with customers, but research has yet to deeply focus on small businesses. Therefore, the following research question was developed to examine the relationship cultivation strategies used by small businesses.

RQ2: For small businesses, which relationship cultivation strategies (access, positivity, openness, assurance, network-building, and task sharing) do college students prefer on social media?

The Impact of Social Media Use on Attitudes and Behavioral Intentions

A major line of relationship management research explores how effectively managed relationships can be connected to positive outcomes such as attitude formation and behavioral intention (Bruning, 2000; Ki & Hon, 2007). As this study focuses on social media being a vehicle for forging positive consumer-small business relationships, exploring perceptions of social media use on attitudes and behavioral intentions is necessary.

Attitude is typically defined as "a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner with respect to a given object" (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, p. 6). This definition breaks attitudes down into three parts: (1) attitudes are learned, (2) attitude predisposes behavior, and (3) attitudes are consistently either favorable or unfavorable toward an object. Research has indicated that an individual's attitude toward the internet and social media is related to their internet use (e.g., Poude, Zamani, & Abedi, 2011). Shin and Shin (2011) found that attitude influences a users' intention to use SNS. Wang, Jackson, Wang and Gaskin (2015) discovered that positive attitudes toward social media use led to more recreational use of social media including connecting with others and for using it for entertainment purposes.

In a public relations context, the publics' attitude can help measure the overall impact or effectiveness of a particular public relations program or activity. Knowing the attitude of the public allows practitioners to understand what the public says about something, but also what they feel and how they may act (Lindenmann, 2002).

Positive attitudes can in turn lead to positive behavioral intentions including purchasing intention. Behavioral intentions are "the intention to perform a particular behavior, a plan to put behavior into effect" (Perloff, 2003, p. 92). Behavioral intentions are typically treated as a predictor of actual behavior because inquiring about people's behavioral intention tends to be identical to behavior because most social behavior is under the control of the individual (Perfloff, 2003). According to the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), behavioral intention is an intermediate variable between attitude and behavior.

From a social media perspective, several characteristics of the medium can lead to positive behavioral intentions, including intent to purchase. These include perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and social norm. Perceived usefulness describes the degree to which a person believes using something in particular will help them in some way. Perceived ease of use is the degree, which a person believes a platform will be effortless (Davis, 1989). On social media, social norm is the degree to which a person perceives that other people believe they should or should not perform a specific behavior. In the context of purchasing intention in social media settings, this means

that a person can be influenced by someone online. While examining the role these three characteristics play in social media's influence on purchase intention, Sin, Nor, and Al-Agaga (2012) discovered that although all three characteristics are influential, perceived usefulness is the most dominant factor that influenced young consumers' online purchase intention through social media. Based on the previous literature, this study examines how relationship building strategies impact college student attitudes and behavioral intentions toward small businesses via social media.

> RQ3: Do college students perceive their (a) attitudes and (b) behavioral intentions toward small businesses to be impacted by relationship cultivation strategies? And if so, which ones?

Methodology

An online survey of college students over 18 years of age was administered. The data were collected from February 25 to March 24, 2019. The initial number of respondents was 171. However, participants who were under 18 years of age, were not college students, were not active on social media, or took the survey in less than five minutes were removed. The final sample consisted of 156 respondents.

Participants and Procedures

Participants were recruited through a convenience sample. Following IRB approval, in addition to recruiting students from the researchers' home university, the researchers sent emails to faculty at four universities across the U.S. These faculty were personal contacts of one of the researchers. The universities were located along the east coast, south, Midwest, and southwest. Recruited faculty were asked to share the survey link, via Google Forms, with their students. Although attempts were made to broaden the geographic reach of the survey, the majority of the participants came from the researchers' home university in Ohio ($n = 136$). The participants from the Ohio-based university were recruited through a department-wide email sent from the department's student advisor. Participants were eligible to be entered in a drawing for three $15 Amazon gift certificates.

Of the respondents, 83% ($n = 130$) were women and 16% ($n = 25$) were men. One participant chose not to declare sex. The median age was 20, with 34 of participants identifying as first years, 39 identifying as sophomores, 40 as juniors, 38 as seniors, and 5 identified as graduate students. 88% were Caucasian ($n = 137$), 6% were Hispanic ($n = 9$), 4% were Asian ($n = 6$) and .6% were African-American ($n = 1$). Two participants marked "other".

Measures

For each measure, means and standard deviations were first assessed. Then, where appropriate, the measures were collapsed to individual composite measures using principle axis factoring with a direct oblimin rotation. Direct oblimin rotation "is a general form for obtaining oblique rotations used to transform associated with factor analysis to simple structures" (Jackson, 2005 p. 6). Only variables that had factors loadings higher than .6 were kept for further analysis because these are considered to be statistically significant (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). Only factors that had an eigenvalue greater than 1, based on the extraction sums of squared loadings, were kept.

Attitude toward small businesses on social media. Adapting Kang and Yang's (2010) attitudinal scale, this variable examined participants' attitude toward small businesses' use of social media. The scale consisted of four semantic differential questions: (a) appealing/unappealing ($M = 2.24$, $SD = .88$), enjoyable/unenjoyable ($M = 2.28$, $SD = .85$), good/bad ($M = 2.23$, $SD = .82$), and useful/worthless ($M = 2.32$, $SD = .93$) where 1 was the positive choice. Using a principal axis factoring with a direct oblimin rotation, these 4 items loaded on one factor with an eigenvalue of 2.33. However, enjoyable/unenjoyable had a factor loading of less than .6, so it was thrown out. The analysis was run again with the remaining variables. These variables loaded on one factor with an eigenvalue of 1.55, which explained 51.7% of the variance based on the extraction sums of squared loadings. The resulting scale led to a Cronbach's alpha of .76.

Behavioral intentions. Adapting Kang and Yang's (2010) behavioral intention scale, this variable examined participants' behavioral intention based on their interaction with small businesses on social media. The scale consisted of four questions measuring a variety of behavioral intentions, including offering support ($M = 4.01$, $SD = .95$), purchase intention ($M = 3.90$, $SD = .79$), recommending the small business to a friend ($M = 3.92$, $SD = .81$), and sharing positive word-of-mouth ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 1.04$). Using a principal axis factoring with a direct oblimin rotation, these 4 items loaded on one factor with an eigenvalue of 1.81, which explained 52.3% of the variance based on the extraction sums of squared loadings. The resulting scale led to a Cronbach's alpha of .80 (1 = *not likely at all,* 5 = *very likely*).

Relationship cultivation strategies. Adapting Hon and Grunig (1999), six strategies that gauge how organizations attempt to build a relationship with different publics were examined. Each strategy was analyzed separately. All items were measured on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly agree,* 5 = *strongly disagree)*. To ensure the items for each strategy loaded onto one factor and could be collapsed to individual variables in order to properly test them, principal axis factoring with a direct oblimin rotation was used.

Access examines whether an organization provides publics channels to engage directly with them (Hon & Grunig, 1999), was measured using four items. An example item reads, "When users have questions or concerns on social media, I expect small businesses to be willing to answer their inquiries" (α = .94, M = 2.00, SD = .72)*.* The 4 items loaded on one factor with an eigenvalue of 3.36, which explained 84% of the variance based on the extraction sums of squared loadings. *Assurance* relates to an organization's attempt to demonstrate they are committed to the relationship with the public (Hon & Grunig, 1999). It was measured by four items. An example item reads, "I expect small businesses to communicate the importance of users on social media" (α = .96, M = 1.96, SD = .77). The 4 items loaded on one factor with an eigenvalue of 3.47, which explained 86.7% of the variance based on the extraction sums of squared loadings. *Network sharing* occurs when organizations collaborate with the same groups their publics do. This was measured by three items (Hon & Grunig, 1999). An example item reads, "I expect that the partnerships that small businesses are involved in on social media are helpful to its users" (α = .97, M = 2.19, SD = .84). The three items loaded on one factor with an eigenvalue of 2.76, which explained 91.9% of the variance based on the extraction sums of squared loadings. *Openness* refers to the organization's attempt to be transparent about its actions, intentions and feelings with its publics (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Measured with four items, an example question reads, "I expect small businesses to report to users what they have done in the past on social media" (α = .96, M = 2.34, SD = .85). The 4 items loaded on one factor with an eigenvalue of 3.52, which explained 88% of the variance based on the extraction sums of squared loadings. *Positivity* refers to the actions the organization makes to ensure the relationship it has with its publics is more enjoyable (Hon & Grunig, 1999). This is measured with five items. An example item reads, "I expect that small businesses' communication efforts with users on social media to be courteous" (α = .97, M = 1.85, SD = .73). The 5 items loaded on one factor with an eigenvalue of 4.32, which explained 86.5% of the variance based on the extraction sums of squared loadings. Finally, *task-sharing* captures an organization's attempt to work with its publics to solve an issue or complete a task (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Measured with three items, an example question reads, "I expect small businesses to work with users on social media to develop solutions to problems that benefit users" (α = .96, M = 2.14, SD = .84). The 3 items loaded on one factor with an eigenvalue of 2.71, which explained 90.2% of the variance based on the extraction sums of squared loadings.

Perceptions of small businesses' social media use. Adapted from Akar and Topcu (2011), this scale examines participant perception of company social media use. The scale, consisting of six items, can be categorized in two sections. The first section gauges participant perception on how necessary it is for companies to use certain types of social media platforms for marketing purposes (Akar & Topcu, 2011). This subsection consists of three questions, "It is necessary for small businesses to use social networking sites such as Facebook for the purposes of marketing" (M = 1.62, SD = .77), "It is necessary for small businesses to use photo sharing sites like Instagram for purposes of marketing" (M = 1.83, SD = .85), and "It is necessary for small businesses to use video sharing sites like YouTube for the purposes of marketing" (M = 2.99, SD = .90). The next subsection pertained to the purposes of social media use, specifically gauging perceptions of how certain aspects of social media use impacts purchasing decisions (Akar & Topcu, 2011). This subsection consists of three questions, "I believe that advertisements from small businesses on social media would affect my purchasing decisions" (M = 2.25, SD = .87), "I believe that reviews for small businesses' products/services/locations on social media would affect my purchasing decision' (M = 1.94, SD = .86), and " I believe that when small businesses directly engage with me on social media (i.e. answer my questions, reply to my comments, or share my posts) would affect my purchase decisions" (M = 1.71, SD = .70). All items were measured on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly agree,* 5 = *strongly disagree)*.

Results

Research questions were tested with SPSS 24. However, before research questions were explored, a series of bivariate correlations were run among the independent and dependent variables. Composite variables were created for each of the relationship cultivation strategies. All variable associations were strongly significant at the *p* < .05 or *p* < .01 level. Correlations between variables are shown in Table 1.

Table 1.
Correlations between variables in the model.

	Attitude	BI	Access	Assure	Network	Open	Positivity	Task-Sharing
Attitude	-							
Behavior Intention	-.50**	-						
Access	.13	-.28**	-					
Assurances	.16*	-.29**	.96**	-				
Networking	.19*	-.31**	.91**	.96**	-			
Openness	.14	-.27**	.92**	.95**	.97**	-		
Positivity	.14	-.29**	.98**	.97**	.93**	.94**	-	
Task-sharing	.16	-.31**	.92**	.97**	.97**	.96**	.94**	-
Perceived SB social media use	.19*	-.32**	.97**	.97**	.93**	.95**	.98**	.95**

Note. BI = behavioral intention; SB = small business.
** Correlation significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)
* Correlation significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

   The first research question examined college student perceptions of how small businesses should use social media. Per Akar and Topcu (2011), indices were calculated for each social media use. For platform type, results indicated that participants perceive small businesses should use social networking sites like Facebook ($M = 1.62$, $SD = .77$) and photo-sharing sites like Instagram ($M = 1.75$, $SD = .82$) more than video-sharing sites like YouTube ($M = 2.99$, $SD = .90$) (1 = *strongly agree)*. Lower mean scores indicate higher preference on social media platform type.
   For perceived purpose of social media use, results indicated that participants believe that small businesses should directly engage with them on social media, including answering questions and replying to comments ($M = 1.71$, $SD = .70$) more than advertising ($M = 2.25$, $SD = .87$) and posting reviews ($M = 2.41$, $SD = 1.17$). Although, all three purposes were higher than average (1 = *strongly agree;* 5 = *strongly disagree),* it was important to unpack whether the participants preferred a specific purpose on different platforms. To do this, multiple regression was run for each action serving as the outcome variable and the preferred platforms serving as the predictor variables. All three social platform types were significant predictors of places where consumers expect small businesses to advertise, but video sharing sites like YouTube were the strongest predictor ($F(1,154) = 476.80$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .76$) over photo-sharing sites like Instagram ($F(1,154) = 308.93$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .67$) and social networking sites like Facebook ($F(1,154) = 5.13$, $p = .03$, $R^2 = .02$). For asking questions, photo-sharing sites like Instagram ($F(1, 154) =$

754.52, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .83$) and video-sharing sites like YouTube ($F(1,154) = 250.53$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .62$) were significant, meaning consumers are more likely to ask questions on these site types. Social networking sites like Facebook were not significant for being a place participants view as a good place to ask questions ($F(1,154) = 3.71$, $p = .06$, $R^2 = .02$). All three social media platform types were significant predictors of sites that consumers would post reviews. Photo-sharing sites like Instagram ($F(1,154) = 637.39$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .81$) were the strongest predictors, followed by video-sharing sites like YouTube ($F(1,154) = 322.67$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .68$). and social networking sites like Facebook ($F(1,154) = 7,36$, $p = .007$, $R^2 = .05$).

RQ2 examined which relationship management strategy college students preferred on social media for small businesses. Comparing means, college students prefer the positivity strategy most (1 was highest) ($M = 1.85$, $SD = .73$), followed by assurance ($M = 1.96$, $SD = .77$), then access ($M = 2.01$, $SD = .72$), sharing tasks ($M = 2.14$, $SD = .85$), network sharing ($M = 2.20$, $SD = .84$), and openness ($M = 2.34$, $SD = .85$). Although all six strategies were rated higher than average, these results indicate that college students prefer small businesses to be positive in their social media communication when they attempt to build relationships with college students.

RQ3 examined if college students perceive their (a) attitudes and (b) behavioral intentions toward small businesses to be predicted by relationship cultivation strategies and if so, which ones. Using multiple regression, results showed that together, relationship cultivation strategies did not predict college student (a) attitude ($F(6,149) = 1.19$, $p = .31$, $R^2 = .05$) but did predict (b) behavioral intention ($F(6,149) = 3.39$, $p = .004$, $R^2 = .12$). When examining the cultivation strategies individually, not surprisingly based on the collective results, we discovered that none significantly predicted attitude. However, regarding behavioral intention toward small businesses, individual analysis of the cultivation strategies revealed only openness approached significance ($\beta = .61$, $t(154) = 1.80$, $p = .07$), but no strategy individually was statistically significant.

Discussion

This study examines college student perceptions of small businesses' social media use. College students, mostly comprised of Gen Z members, make up a growing customer base for small businesses. Using the relationship management theory as framework, we attempted to understand how college students expect small businesses to use social media and how those uses impact attitude and behavioral intentions.

Past research has outlined relationship cultivation strategies and their potential to build lasting organizational-public relationships (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Kang & Yang, 2010). This work extends these findings to small businesses, a unique type of organization. The findings of this study also build on the ways that RMT can be a tool for relationship building in the growing world of social media (Guha et al., 2018; Maecker et al., 2016; Maxwell & Carboni, 2014).

When considering college student perceptions of how small businesses should use social media, we found that social networking sites, like Facebook, and photo sharing sites, like Instagram, were perceived to be the most beneficial social media platforms to engage on with small businesses. This is supported by past research that also details how Instagram and Facebook are more popular and effective marketing and relationship-building tools for small businesses (Sharma, 2018; DeMers, 2015). Brands gravitate toward the eye-catching visual content on Instagram, and Instagram has a proven ability to grow customer engagement (Sharma, 2018). In general, images posted on Instagram get 23% more engagement than on other platforms (Sharma, 2018). And, Gen Zers are attracted to the highly visual nature of Instagram (Christe, 2019), especially when engaging with brands.

Facebook has one of the highest rates of conversion in terms of ecommerce, which can have a large impact on small businesses' financial return (DeMers, 2015). Additionally, customer engagement on Facebook is incredibly high—featuring curated business pages where customers can view content, post comments, and receive replies from the brand and other customers—provides an opportunity for small businesses and Gen Z members to engage with each other. Other research also corroborates our findings in that engagement has meaningful, real-world implications for small businesses, particularly in terms of brand recognition and loyalty with college students (Mersey, Malthouse, & Calder, 2010). However, trends seem to indicate that Gen Z is spending less time on Facebook (Premack, 2018). This though does not mean that brands should completely ignore Facebook. In fact, for connecting with brands, Facebook is still a viable platform; it is just that brands need to be creative in capturing Gen Z's attention. According to Hodak (2018), "[Gen Z] isn't interested in Facebook ads littered with OMGs and LOLs. Marketers must meet Gen Z consumers on their social channels at the right times and with campaigns the generation cares about."

For RQ2, results indicated that college students preferred the positivity and assurance relationship cultivation strategies the most. This means that when college students are looking to build relationships with organizations, they respond best to the use of more optimistic language. As research indicates, college students

prefer social media messages that are more positive, citing that students found positive messages to be more attractive and intimate (Bazarova, 2012; Park, Jin, & Jin, 2011). Regarding assurance, college students thrive on encouragement. Research indicates that Gen Zers are anxious about their future and expect their life to be harder than their parents (Turner, 2018). They value honest and transparent communication, thus brands who communicate honestly will capture the attention of Gen Zers.

Finally, for RQ3, which looked at cultivation strategies' impact on attitudes and behavioral intentions, results showed that together and individually, the cultivation strategies did not impact attitude, but they did impact behavioral intentions collectively. The reasons for these results may stem from the fact that if college students are already connected to the brand on social media, they most likely have a positive attitude toward them, but that efforts by small businesses to make long-lasting relationships with their customers does ultimately influence their intent to support and purchase the brand. Interestingly, not one strategy alone impacted behavioral intention. It is possible college students do not differentiate between strategies, but care ultimately that small businesses are making an effort.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The present study has theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this study expands the work on organization-public relationships by looking at a unique subset of organizations: small businesses. With over 3.7 million small businesses making up more than 75% of private-sector employers in 2013, small businesses are key players in the American economy (Headd, 2015). However, small businesses are worth studying for more than just their economic importance. These businesses are different from the organizations that are typically examined empirically, such as nonprofits (e.g. Maxwell & Carboni, 2014) and *Fortune* 500 companies (e.g. Ki & Hon, 2007, because of their size and place in the community. Small businesses can have more interpersonal relationships with their customers that can last over a long period of time. Empirically, this study highlighted the positivity and access strategies as the most preferred by participants. This differs compared to research on corporations (Vorvoreanu, 2009) but is similar to that of nonprofits (Bortree, 2010). For corporations, research showed that there was an expectation of distance and surprise when companies interact with customers, especially on social media (Vorvoreanu, 2009). The results of Vorvoreanu's (2009) study showed that participants (also college students) assumed efforts to cultivate relationships were merely transactional highlighting more efforts to advertise then to build a two-way relationship. Most small businesses do not have large professional teams to handle public relations, many meet their publics face-to-face and manage their relationships without any formal training. Interestingly, perceptions made by college students on nonprofits' efforts to cultivate relationships with them are similar to that of small businesses, most likely due to these same reasons. Because of these differences and small businesses' integral role in local economies, the inclusion of small businesses in OPR research is an important development.

Another theoretical implication stems from the high correlation found between the individual relationship cultivation strategies. Although previous studies have found these variables to be highly correlated (e.g., Bortree, 2010), most studies still test them independently in order to determine which strategy is most beneficial or impactful among a given public. However, it is quite possible that general public groups cannot differentiate the strategies and just respond generally to the fact that organizations are being strategic in their cultivation efforts. This possibility may explain why the collective use of relationship cultivation strategies significantly impacted behavioral intentions but none of the strategies were individually impactful.

Practically, this research shows that Instagram and Facebook are great platforms for small businesses to cultivate relationships with college students online. In a world overwhelmed with new social media formats, these two highly engaging platforms are solid starting places for small businesses looking to establish themselves. The capacity of these platforms to be both visual and conversational allows them to produce the kind of content Gen Zers and college students want to see. These publics do not want to be advertised "at"; they want to be a part of the conversation. Small businesses can build loyal, two-way relationships with these publics by using interactive content on their social media feeds—this includes creating polls, contests, and actively responding to comments and questions. This makes college students feel like they are valued and heard.

Another important takeaway for small businesses that are looking to attract and build lasting relationships with Gen Z and college students over social media is to develop content that conveys positivity and assurance. Small businesses can adopt an upbeat tone of voice in their messages, making sure to highlight hopeful and positive themes throughout their shared content. Although this study didn't examine specific types of positivity or assurance, in general, when it comes to creating a sense of commitment on social media, small businesses can do so by taking the time to authentically respond to comments, showing that they truly care about the happiness and well-being of their customers.

Although the positivity and assurance strategies were most preferred, all of the strategies were positively perceived. Therefore, small businesses are encouraged to use the other strategies as well. For example, small businesses could focus their social media strategy to be as transparent as possible. For small businesses, building a sense of transparency with customers can include using social media to share plans, ingredients, and new products with college students. They can also introduce employees and staff members, especially the people responsible for posting content on social media; clarify store policies; and provide information about when products will come back in stock.

Small businesses could also emphasize network sharing through their social media presence. This can include commenting on and liking the social media content of other comparable small businesses, creating a community of support. If small businesses collaborate with other small businesses, they should leverage these partnerships on social media, making sure to post about joint promotions, events, and special products. Moreover, small businesses share a unique position within local communities. By creating a network with other similar business types, small businesses can boost the local economy and bolster support from young professionals who want to give back to their community.

In summary, the results of this study provide guidance for scholars and small business practitioners on how to cultivate relationships with college students specifically, over social media. Ultimately, college students expect small businesses to make an effort to cultivate relationships with them over social media. And, although all six strategies are perceived to be important, college students desire for small businesses to promote positivity, understand what makes up their customers, and connect with their interests. This research supports existing literature that these six strategies do cultivate relationships between small businesses and college students, which leads to positive behavioral intentions. And, on social media, efforts such as engaging with their customers and answering questions will go a long way in building those relationships.

Limitations and Future Directions

The limitations of this study point to directions for future research. First, the number of participants is low for a robust survey. This may explain why some results approached significance but were not statistically significant. Second, a convenience sample was used. Although an attempt to collect data from participants across different regions of the U.S., the sample consisted largely of communication students who may have more expertise using social media compared to other types of college students. The participant pool was also heavily female, Caucasian, and from Ohio. This was mostly due to the fact that the majority of communication majors at the researchers' university (the students most sampled in this study as the researchers had direct access to them) are Caucasian females from Ohio. Future studies should explore all types of students, strive for a more diverse sample, and expand data collection to include other type of publics in addition to college students. This can be accomplished by going through a national survey panel company and/or setting up quotas for race, gender, and location. For example, future studies could focus on other groups of publics, as small businesses have the potential to build relationships with employees, future customers, and even other small business owners. This could also include other Gen Z participants as not all classified as Gen Z are college students. Third, the survey method was based on self-reporting. Other methods, such as experiments, where the type of social media or small business could be controlled for, could further investigate different strategies and compare how they impact attitude and purchase intention. Fourth, the relationship cultivation strategies were highly correlated. Although, the purpose of this study was to see which strategy was preferred as they have not been tested in the context of small businesses, future studies could combine the strategies into one composite variable and test the overall use of cultivation strategies on various outcome variables. Fifth, this study tested perceptions of small business use of social media in general. Future studies could describe a specific type of small business or even compare different types of small businesses (i.e., a restaurant and a clothing boutique) and see if the strategies differ. Also, participants were not necessarily customers of a specific small business. Future studies could examine how current customers interact with their favorite small businesses. Finally, this study only examines cultivation strategies. Future studies can expand this study to examine what types of relationships and what dimensions of the relationship are cultivated between small businesses and customers.

Conclusion

Social media offers a low-cost opportunity for small businesses to interact with their publics. Since most small businesses do not have the time or resources to pursue expensive PR strategies, social media is a valuable way for small businesses to build the relationships that will help sustain their business. Social media, especially social networking sites, help foster these relationships through online engagement, where Gen Z members and college

students look for positive content and commitment from small businesses. Moreover, social media is a great place for small businesses to build social networks with similar businesses, grow the local community and attract young professionals who want to do the same. Members of Gen Z are the future of the economy. By cultivating relationships with them, small businesses can tap into their buying potential, which will ultimately help small businesses grow and prosper.

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