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Understanding how the need for popularity, conscientiousness, and the frequency of messaging affects professionalism in written computer-mediated communication

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ABSTRACT

Since the explosion of smartphones into society, more and more people are using smartphones to handle all technology related communication. While it is easier and faster to text than to email, it has given rise to a new language riddled with text-isms. This study focuses on professionalism in written computer-mediated communication, while seeking to understand what causes people to lack professionalism in their messages. We focus on three predictors, the need for popularity among peers, the extent of texting and instant messaging, and how conscientious an individual is. One hundred students completed a survey on professionalism. We found that conscientiousness causes professionalism, while the need for popularity causes one to lack professionalism. We also found that the number of texts one sends does not matter, but the frequency one instant messages causes one to lack professionalism in written computer-mediated communication.

Keywords

Professionalism, Written Communication, Popularity, Conscientiousness, Texting, Instant Messaging

INTRODUCTION

Since the explosion of smartphones into society, more and more people are using smartphones to handle all technology related communication. These devices are beneficial because they make communication easier and faster when both sending and responding messages. Not including application to application, we sent about 18.7 billion text messages each day in 2016 (Burke 2016). Application messaging services like WhatsApp or Facebook messenger add in another 60 billion messages sent per day (Goode 2016). There is no doubt that messaging has taken over as the primary form of communication (Newport 2014).

While smartphones have increased the ease of sending and receiving messages, more and more people have begun shortening their language to adjust to the increased demand associated with this growth. This has caused an influx of text messages with shortened language, termed text-isms. The Urban dictionary is a crowdsourced online dictionary for understanding slang words. The term text-ism has been a definition of this dictionary since 2010 and “formally” defines textism as the “Pneumonic devices or shortening of words into text form such as LOL, OMG.....” (allicov 2010). However, since then, authors of published work have begun to adapt this term and use it to understand this growing culture change (Drouin and Driver 2014; Grace et al. 2014; Lanchantin et al. 2014; Wood et al. 2011).

The use of text-isms is readily known and used by youths (McWhorter 2013). This use of shorthand seems so common that teachers have begun seeing it leak into their classroom. Looking into preteen and teen usage, Marissa Harshman (2011) of the Columbian Health Reporter reported that teachers of these students are finding text-isms, like emoji’s, LOL’s, or JK, in formal schoolwork. As students graduate and enter into college, the increased pressure to produce only accelerates and allows for new opportunities to use shorthand in formal writing (Krupnick 2010). While it is normal for a language to evolve overtime (McWhorter 2013), text-isms seem to overall lower the literacy of youths (Grace et al. 2014).

While researchers have begun to look at outcomes of textisms, scant research is available on what causes people to use this new language in alternate forms of computer-mediated communication, i.e., email. Therefore, what this paper does is explore how the frequency of texting causes one to use text-isms over other more proper forms of written language. Hence, we ask the following research question:

What causes people to lack professionalism in their written computer-mediated communication?

Our article is organized as follows. First, we depict a model of professionalism in written computer-mediated communication, predicting that need for popularity among peers, the extent of texting and instant messaging, and one’s conscientiousness cause

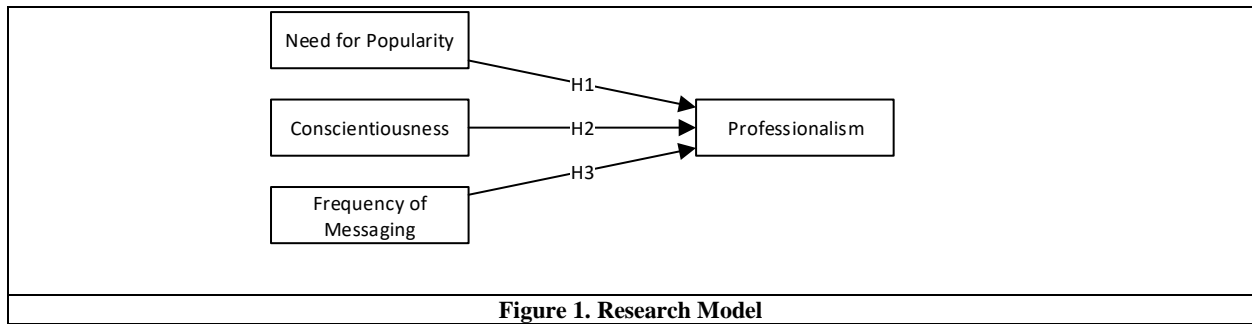
one to lack professionalism in written computer-mediated communication. Then, we present our methods describing our survey procedure. We finish with a presentation of the results and a discussion of the findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to understand a model of professionalism in written computer-mediated communication, we examine the false consensus effect (Ross and et al. 1977). The *false-consensus effect* is a bias where individuals in a group setting tend to think their opinion matches that of the larger population (Hee Sun 2012). This bias arises from a desire to be liked by others in a social environment. Therefore, instead of seeking to understanding differences in the population, individuals avoid the idea that others behave differently and start acting like each other in their immediate group. In a professionalism setting, if a group of likeminded youths believe it is ok to act the same way to adults as they do to their peers, then there would be no reason to adjust their behaviors and change their way.

There are many components involved in mastering written communication. Some examples include the ability to organize sentences and paragraphs, to write clearly and precisely, to spell correctly and use correct grammar, and to revise before sending (Jones 2011). Others have separated written communication into various categories, in which, we hope that *generally* youths master basic writing mechanics, editing, revising, and clarity of message content. One dimension of written communication is computer mediated, which spans from using email, instant messaging, blogging, and social media appropriately (Kleckner and Marshall 2014). While all these facets of communication are important, we focus this study on email etiquette and suggest that professionalism in written computer-mediated communication indicates that an individual will “email appropriately and effectively for correspondence” (Kleckner and Marshall 2014).

Using the false-consensus effect as a framework to study written professionalism in computer mediated communication (CMC), we argue that youths tend to think that their email etiquette, and the etiquette of their social group matches that of the population. In addition, the need to be popular, being unconscientious, and frequently participating in computer-mediated conversations with peers directly affects the level of professionalism. Figure 1 depicts our research model, and Table 1 defines our constructs.



Construct	Definition
Professionalism in Written CMC	“email appropriately and effectively for correspondence” (Kleckner and Marshall 2014).
Need for Popularity	the pressure to do things in order to be approved by and viewed favorably with friends (Santor and Messervey 2000).
Conscientiousness	the propensity to be self-controlled, responsible to others, hardworking, orderly, and rule abiding (Roberts et al. 2009).
Frequency of Messaging	The regularity with which a person sends messages over a smartphone device via text messaging or instant messaging using an application on a smartphone.

The need for popularity refers to the pressure to do things in order to be approved by and viewed favorably with friends (Santor and Messervey 2000). The need for popularity has been found to correlate to social media usage (Utz et al. 2012). We are interested in how the need for popularity affects one’s ability to be professional in their written CMC. Therefore, we propose the following research question:

Hypothesis 1: The need for popularity negatively affects professionalism in written CMC.

Conscientiousness is defined as the propensity to be self-controlled, responsible to others, hardworking, orderly, and rule abiding. Many researchers have found that conscientiousness is a strong predictor of GPA and academic performance (Corker et al. 2012; Nofle and Robins 2007; O’Connor and Paunonen 2007). At the workforce level, conscientiousness remains a positive predictor, in which people with higher conscientiousness have higher job performance (Hassan et al. 2016). Conscientiousness is also an aspect of in some researcher’s definition of general written communication [skill] as *editing and revising documents conscientiously* (Kleckner and Marshall 2014, p. 63). Conscientious people should care about following the rules of written communication and also hopefully revise their messages before sending. Therefore, conscientious people should be more aware that the broader population could be different from their immediate cohort, counteracting the false-consensus effect. Based on this rationale, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Conscientiousness positively affects professionalism in written CMC.

Hypothesis 3: The frequency of messaging affects professionalism in written CMC.

Hypothesis 3a: The frequency of texting affects professionalism in written CMC.

Hypothesis 3b: The frequency of using applications for communication affects professionalism in written CMC.

METHODS

Sample Characteristics

One hundred students completed a survey on professionalism. Our sample demographics are outlined below in Table 2. Our sample consisted mostly of females (65.9%) with GPAs above 3.1 (71.4%). Our sample was evenly spread across class statuses. Our sample was also regular users of their smartphone, with 100% of respondents using text message as a form of communication and 98% using text message at least daily. The majority of our sample used Snapchat (80.58%), Facebook (84.47%) and Instagram (71.84%) as means of communication. Finally, our sample had many chatters (44%), people who post (26.3%), people who use GroupMe (47.5%), IM through WhatsApp or similar (12.1%), and who instant message online (18.2%).

Gender	Male 29 (34.1%)		Female 56 (65.9%)			
GPA	> 3.5	3.1-3.5	2.6-3.0	< 2.5		
	27(32.1%)	33(39.3%)	17 (20.2%)	7 (8.3%)		
Class Status	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior		
	24 (28.2%)	17 (20%)	21 (24.7%)	19 (24.4%)		
Applications our sample used regularly.						
Snapchat	Facebook	Instagram	Twitter	SMS	Skype	FaceTime
83 (80.58%)	87 (84.47%)	74 (71.84%)	34 (33.01%)	57 (55.34%)	10(9.71%)	36 (34.95%)
Percentage of our sample that messaged at least daily.						
Text Messaging	Chatting	Posting	Using GroupMe	Instant Messaging through WhatsApp or similar	Instant Messaging Online	
98 (98%)	44 (44%)	26 (26.3%)	47 (47.5%)	12 (12.1%)	18 (18.2%)	
15% of our sample choose not to fill out the demographics						
4.7% of our sample were in an “Other category for class status”						
Table 2. Demographic Characteristics						

Measures

To measure professionalism in written CMC, we researched existing literature to see if we could identify a previously used inventory that might be suitable for use in our research. Because this particular study is somewhat new, we were unable to find a suitable scale in the literature. Therefore, we developed our own inventory to measure. The scale consisted of 10 items related to how the participants felt regarding their writing skill. Questions included *I could be more professional in my communication* or *I use informal jargon*.

To measure the need for popularity, we used existing items from the Peer Pressure, Popularity, and Conformity Scale (Santor and Messervey 2000). Or survey included 12 items to be reported on a 5-point Likert-scale (i.e., *I have done things to make me more popular, even when it meant doing something I would not usually do or I often do things just to be popular with people at school*).

We measured conscientiousness using items from the Big Five Inventory to measure the extent to which participants' personality type aligned with conscientiousness (Goldberg 1992). The self-reported responses ranged from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree on a continuous 5-point Likert scale. There were 9 items, examples include *I see myself as someone who... does a thorough job* or *can be somewhat careless*. Research has supported the Big Five Inventory's organization of personality types and is widely referenced in the literature.

Frequency of texting was measured with 2 items using on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from never/almost never to whenever I can. The first question asked about text messaging and the second asked about instant messaging. Specifically, these questions asked *How often do you...1) text message? Or 2) instant message on WhatsApp or a similar app[lication]?*

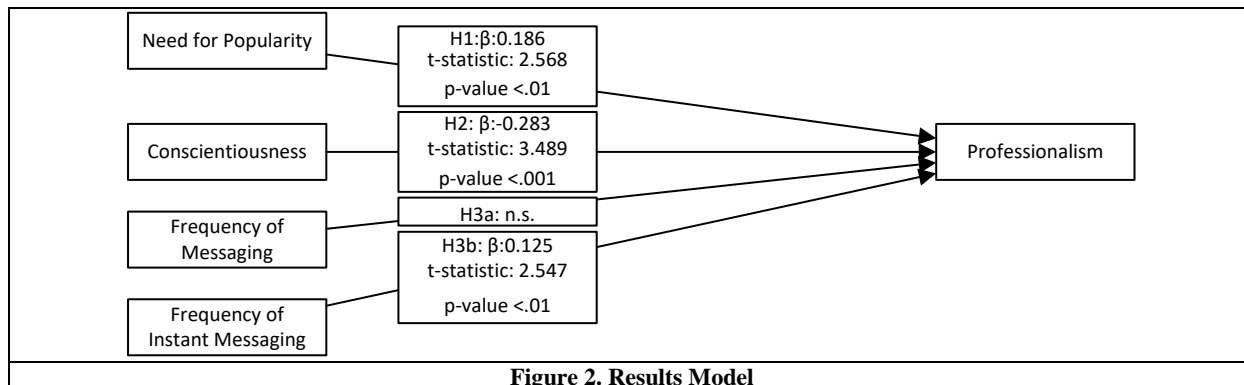
Table 3 provides the descriptive statistics of our constructs. Professionalism in written CMC, Professionalism in written CMC, the need for popularity, and conscientiousness all had Cronbach alpha scores above .63, which are considered *very good* (Comrey and Lee 1992).

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
Professionalism in written CMC	1.72	.551	.801	10
Need for Popularity	2.0694	.748	.873	12
Conscientiousness	3.7611	.652	.794	8
Frequency of Texting	4.29	.602		
Frequency of Instant Messaging	1.46	1.023		
*One item of conscientiousness, C6, was dropped during the factor analysis due to low discriminant validity.				

Table 3. Construct Descriptive Statistics

RESULTS

Figure 2 presents the results of our hypotheses. To test each hypothesis, we used linear regression analysis. Results provided confirmation that the need for popularity positively causes a lack of professionalism in written CMC (H1: β : 0.186; t-statistic: 2.568; p-value <.01), thus confirming hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 2 claimed that conscientiousness caused one to be professional in their written CMC. This hypothesis was also proved true (H2: β : -0.283; t-statistic: 3.489; p-value <.001). Finally, hypotheses 3a and 3b asked how frequency of a) texting and b) instant messaging on an application influenced professionalism in written CMC. This hypothesis was only partially true (H3a: n.s. H3b: β : 0.125; t-statistic: 2.547; p-value <.01). Age, class status, and gender were all included as predictors to see if they explained extra variance, however, they were dropped from final analysis after confirming that they did not matter.



CONCLUSION

Overall, we found that conscientiousness causes professionalism, while the need for popularity causes one to lack professionalism. We also found that the number of texts one sends does not matter, but the frequency one instant messaging applications does cause one to lack professionalism in written CMC.

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