

RESEARCH

Millennial Alumni Perceptions of Communications: A Look at One Land Grant University's Media Use

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ABSTRACT

An important aspect of higher education is alumni relationship cultivation, because it keeps alma maters connected to graduates. To assess this relationship, researchers sought to describe Millennial alumni perceptions of media distributed by the Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food, and Life Sciences (Bumpers College) from 2012 through 2014. Assessed media included alumni magazines, an e-newsletter, key event invitations, College website, and social media presences. Active and inactive alumni responses were gathered via telephone interviews and qualitatively analyzed for emergent themes. Researchers identified Building the Professional and Interest in Giving Back as themes related to respondents' connection to Bumpers College. Five additional themes emerged related to assessed media and included Message Relationship, Specialized Content, Communications Medium, Message Barriers, and Need for Promotion. No alumni were dissatisfied with their collegiate experience and favored monetary donations for its convenience. Alumni sought a personable-angle communications media and were drawn by updates about the College's research and global impacts. Respondents consumed print and digital media differently with engagement based on personal preference and flexibility. Subthemes emerged related to Message Barriers and included time, distance, vague messages, too much information, non-relatable subject matter, technical errors, and outdated information. Finally, there was little brand recognition between Bumpers College and University messaging, and most alumni were unaware of the College's social media presences.

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KEY WORDS

Agricultural Communications, Agricultural Education, Alumni Relations, Communications, Development, Higher Education, Media, Millennial Alumni

INTRODUCTION

Today's land-grant institution is challenged to reach new and non-traditional audiences by redefining and diversifying the agricultural field (Baker, Abrams, Irani, & Meyers, 2011). In addition, the world is facing new and complex issues in agriculture (National Academy of Sciences, 2009); therefore, there is a need to produce highly skilled graduates to identify solutions (Doerfert, 2011). This need was emphasized in the 2011-2015 National Research Agenda as a research priority with the hope of driving "...sustainable growth, scientific discovery, and innovation in public, private, and academic settings..." (Doerfert, 2011, p. 18). Although there is a need for higher education to produce agricultural scientists and professionals who meet industry demands (Doerfert, 2011), progress is dependent upon the generosity of

external constituents to assist in providing opportunities to agricultural students. With the decline of government appropriations and the general economic climate, public institutions depend on alumni donations for a considerable portion of their overall budget to keep education affordable (McDearmon & Shirley, 2009). Further complicating the issue, a land-grant university's fundamental product, education, is "largely intangible" (McAlexander, Koenig, & Schouten, 2006, p. 109). University branding is used to give face to an institution and increase valued behaviors such as "donations, college referrals, engagement in alumni groups, and participation in continuing education" (McAlexander et al., 2006, p. 115). Understanding and managing a university or college's brand can have a strong impact on advancement programs (McAlexander et al., 2006).

Consistent communication and relationship cultivation with alumni is often the backbone of the institution (CASE, 2014a; CASE, 2014b). Advancement programs perceive alumni as the most loyal supporters of an institution (Muller, 1986); however, these programs must keep alumni informed and involved with their alma mater to generate interest and investments over time (Webb, 1989). According to Weinreich (2010), "[t]he single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place" (p. 135). While alumni are significant contributors to funding public institutions, the number of alumni donors is decreasing (McDearmon & Shirley, 2009). Though research has been conducted to identify factors that impact alumni giving, it was not until recently researchers began considering generational differences in their analyses (McDearmon & Shirley, 2009). As history's first "always connected" generation (Taylor & Keeter, 2010), Millennials, or individuals born during 1981 or later, comprise the smallest percentage of nonprofit giving (Rovner, 2013; Twenge, 2006). Because it is important to create meaningful experiences and relationships for alumni while they are students, one would surmise interacting with Millennial alumni could provide an up-to-date assessment of a college or university's communication strategies, because they are the most recent graduates. A recent survey revealed nonprofit practitioners did not see the value in prioritizing Millennials because they did not yield a great return on investment (Achieve & Johnson, Grossnickle and Associates [JGA], 2012). This is because the most recent graduates have student loan debt which delays alumni giving (McDearmon & Shirley, 2009). However, not seeing value in Millennial relationship cultivating is problematic as alumni-alma mater relationships are not only important for generating future investments (Webb, 1989), but help provide insight regarding alumni needs and an assessment of the quality of university education (Miles & Miller, 2000). Despite their high level of self-interest, Millennials are more socially tolerant and possess a greater international outlook than older generations (Rovner, 2013). They are the most diverse and educated generation in history (Rutgers, 2012; Taylor & Keeter, 2010), and history's first "always connected" generation (Taylor & Keeter, 2010). Millennials are the first generation to grow up with the Internet and are more open about their lives with others—even strangers (Twenge, 2006). Therefore, colleges must create communication strategies to effectively target Millennials in an effort to keep them connected.

To develop committed alumni, alumni relations programs seek to keep alumni informed and involved with their alma mater to generate interest, which translates into investments over time (Webb, 1989). Multichannel communications is the new normal for all generations, but the ideal mix of channels is dependent on generation (Rovner, 2013). Although Millennials are still decades away from the donor marketplace, there is a need to begin building relationships now (Rovner, 2013). Generational use of communication channels in relation to charitable giving has been researched to help nonprofit organizations gain a better idea of Millennial channel preferences in relation to researching an organization and making a donation. According to *The Millennial Impact Report* (Achieve & JGA, 2012), 65% preferred websites, 55% of Millennials preferred to learn about nonprofits through social media, 47% preferred e-newsletters, 18% preferred print, and 17% would rather have face-to-face contact. Creating messages using communication channels appropriate for Millennials is necessary stay connected to these important alumni after they leave our colleges and universities.

This study was guided by the Shannon and Weaver Model developed in 1949 and Berlo's Source-Message-Channel-Receiver Model of Communication, developed in 1960s, to better understand where breakdowns in communication can occur (Berlo, 1960; Communication Theory, 2010). Berlo's SMCR model illustrates the significance and influence of the communication process. In each stage of communication, special care should be given to shape the way a message is interpreted and impacts the attitudes of the receiver. Although transmitters can control how a message is encoded, this does not ensure the desired message reaches the receiver. Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) Elaboration Likelihood Model

maintains there are central and peripheral routes to persuasive communication. When individuals lack information to form an opinion, they will rely on peripheral cues such as a message's treatment, structure, or code to shape an attitude (Miller, Annou, & Wailes, 2003). As emphasized in previous studies (AA, 2009; McAdoo, 2010), branding higher education's messaging can increase valued behaviors including "donations, college referrals, engagement in alumni groups, and participation in continuing education" (McAlexander et al., 2006, p. 115). Alumni relations programs must ensure proper messages are being communicated through appropriate channels to strengthen and maintain relationships across the world.

In addition, alumni relations programs must remember a college is a marketing institution that offers a range of services through its brand (McAlexander et al., 2006). Although education's product is elusive, the strength of a college's brand relationship with consumers is apparent in the frequency consumers adorn themselves and spaces with branded merchandise (McAlexander et al., 2006). One area of marketing that has been underexplored for public organizations is branding (Waeraas, 2008). Consumers who invest in a common brand form a brand community (McAlexander et al., 2006; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). As cited by McAlexander et al. (2006), a brand community is formed through social relationships amongst consumers of a common brand, regardless of location, who acknowledge their commonness and share traditions and a sense of duty related to the brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). In higher education, consumer relationships include: (a) alumni-product, (b) alumni-brand, (c) alumni-institution, and (d) alumni-alumni, (McAlexander et al., 2006). The alumni-product relationship is one of the most meaningful relationships an individual can have because the product (education) shapes the consumer's identity (Belk, 1988) as a student (McAlexander et al., 2006). An alumni-institution relationship follows graduation and is damaged or improved through interpersonal relationships with alumni relations (McAlexander et al., 2006). An alumni-brand relationship is also a core concern for institution marketers in building a consistent message and an emotional connection with consumers (McAlexander et al., 2006). Understanding an institution's identity can strengthen a customer's sense of pride for their alma mater as well as strengthen the alumni-brand relationship (McAlexander et al., 2006). Institution-alumni relationships are the most important bond in maintaining a brand community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) and impact buyer behaviors through communication (McAlexander et al., 2006). Colleges of agriculture have a critical need to identify the most effective ways to stay connected with former students. Understanding alumni needs, especially Millennials because they are different from previous generations, will be critical to fundraising efforts in the future; especially as colleges and universities rely more heavily on alumni financial support.

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study was to describe Millennial alumni's relationship with the Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences (Bumpers College) and print and electronic communications media utilized by the College. Through this assessment, researchers sought to identify Bumpers College Millennial alumni's: (a) perceptions regarding current electronic and print communications media utilized by the College; (b) communication preferences; and (c) giving preferences (funds, time, or services).

METHODS

Researchers conducted a series of telephone interviews with active and inactive Millennial alumni to evaluate media utilized by the Bumpers College from 2012 through 2014 to maintain relationships with graduates. This time frame was selected to assess communications media distributed during the introduction of a Director of Development, Director of Communications, and Communications Graduate Assistant. Selected print media included *The Graduate* alumni magazine and the *AR Culture* student-written magazine. Digital media included (a) *The Graduate* e-newsletter, (b) email invitation to the *Bumpers College Alumni & Friends Tailgate*, (c) email invitation to the *Connecting Bumpers College Professional Mocktail Party*, (d) Bumpers College website and alumni homepage, and (e) Bumpers College social media presences (Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn). Although there are currently no existing communications media or events

solely targeted toward Bumpers College Millennial alumni, assessed media (identified by key communications personnel) included a sample typically shared with Millennial alumni.

To identify participants for this study, subjects were supplied by Arkansas Alumni Association [AA] archive based on the following sampling frame: (a) obtained bachelor's degree from Bumpers College and (b) age of 32 and younger. This query produced 1,122 male or female subjects labeled as active or inactive alumni (418 active, and 704 inactive). Individuals classified as active alumni had either received a one-year complimentary AA membership following graduation or had paid the membership fee, while inactive alumni were those who had discontinued their AA membership or allowed it to expire (T. Tucker, personal communication, December 20, 2013). Prospective participants were identified through a stratified random sample. Because there are no rules for sample size in qualitative research, a baseline of 20 alumni (Erlandson, 1993) was established to easily replicate the 6:4 female-to-male gender ratio of the Bumpers College as of 2013. Each individual from the list was contacted until researchers obtained 10 active and 10 inactive alumni ($N = 20$) with the goal of redundancy in data. Researchers found a sample size of 20 sufficiently yielded saturated data.

Before conducting telephone interviews, participants were contacted by the graduate student's research advisor to verify involvement, confirm the study's credibility to participants, and increase response rate. Correspondence followed a specific script developed by researchers based on a sample script developed by Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (CAHPS®) (2009). IRB approved all data collection materials including initial and follow-up contact scripts and interview protocol. Interviews were held in the spring of 2014 and aimed to last 45 minutes (Creswell, 2009). Participants scheduled their own interviews, and the print and digital media were sent to participants one week before interviews to allow participants ample time for reviewing content. Conversations were recorded using two varying audio recording devices and handwritten notes (Creswell, 2009). All but one interview took place via telephone with one participant, despite instructions, appearing for a face-to-face interview.

Once the subject and researcher were acquainted through an ice-breaker question (Creswell, 2009), the interviewer led participants through a series of semi-structured questions regarding identified media utilized by the College. Interviews were neo-positive in nature as the interviewer aimed to ask good questions, minimize bias, and generate quality data as well as conversation (Merriam, 2009). Interview questions were open-ended and few in number to evoke participant opinions as suggested by Creswell (2009). A few questions focused on participant's ability to recall or engage in the particular communications medium, their impression of the medium, and the type of information they would like to receive and how they preferred to receive it. After the questioning route was completed for a single medium, the interviewer conducted member checking to ensure recorded data agreed with the participant's intended perception (Creswell, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This process was repeated until each medium was reviewed. A brief survey was then administered at the end of each interview to gain a deeper understanding of participant's past and present relationship with Bumpers College. This survey collected data on participants' level of education and whether they had made a donation to Bumpers College, were a first generation college graduate, had a relative graduate from the University of Arkansas, or had received financial aid to complete their education.

Following each interview session, audio recordings were saved to a computer and assigned a number based on interview order and labeled with an AR or IR depending on their active (n_a) or inactive (n_i) alumni status. Once sessions were completed, transcribed data were arranged according to their information source (Creswell, 2009) and interview question. Triangulation was implemented using various modes to record data including notes and two audio recordings, each with differing audio quality to increase transcription accuracy (Merriam, 2009). Transcripts were hand-coded using color schemes and key segments were placed under categorical themes (Creswell, 2009). Open codes from each interview were clustered and consolidated through axial coding (Creswell, 2009; Tesch, 1990). Findings were reported through narratives supported by respondent quotations and included a general summary written to capture lessons learned in thick description (Creswell, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefing between the researcher and a panel of experts was used to reinforce the data's accuracy and reach intercoder agreement of greater than 80% (Creswell, 2009; Gibbs, 2007). Transferability was increased through rich, thick description so that individuals in a similar context may draw

commonalities (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). Dependability was maintained through a detailed audit trail and use of an interview protocol and script (Merriam, 2009).

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

Participants were 22 to 29 years of age with no correlation between age and AA status. The majority of participants ($n_a = 5, n_i = 6$) had completed a bachelor's degree with the remainder having received at least a master's degree. Six of these participants ($n_a = 3, n_i = 3$) had returned to the Bumpers College for graduate school with two of these participants ($n_a = 1, n_i = 1$) enrolled as graduate students at the time of their interview. One active alumna was completing her doctoral degree and one inactive alumnus had completed his Ph.D. There was no relationship between distance from campus and their AA status. Sixteen of the 20 participants ($n_a = 8, n_i = 8$) resided in Arkansas with 10 ($n_a = 6, n_i = 4$) living an hour or less from the University of Arkansas campus. Looking at participants' academic relationship with Bumpers College, half ($n_a = 4, n_i = 6$) were first-generation college graduates. Of those who were not first generation graduates, eight participants ($n_a = 5, n_i = 3$) had a relative graduate from University of Arkansas. Nineteen participants ($n_a = 9, n_i = 10$) reported receiving financial aid to complete their education.

Two key themes emerged related to Millennial alumni's connection to the College: *Building the Professional* and *Interest in Giving Back*. As participants reviewed and discussed each of the eight communications media, the following themes emerged related to Bumpers College Millennial alumni's connection to the media: a) *Message Relationship*; b) *Specialized Content*; c) *Communications Medium*; d) *Message Barriers*; and e) *Need for Promotion*.

Alumni Connection to College – Building the Professional

Regardless of whether respondents were using their degree in their occupation, no alumni said they were unprepared or upset with their collegiate experience. In fact, four participants (IR3, AR15, IR16, AR19) made it known they have considered returning to Bumpers College to pursue a master's degree in the future. Only one alumna displayed a detached outlook of her relationship with the College. She reflected, "...I was more involved with my sorority and that kind of thing. Sorry, I'm not really helpful on that one. My major helped me get a job" (AR10).

Alumni Connection to College – Interest in Giving Back

While money was perceived as a barrier to the alumni-college relationship ($n_a = 5, n_i = 2$), most responded positively toward the idea of giving back financially. When asked if they would rather donate funds, time, or services, nine alumni ($n_a = 5, n_i = 4$) said they would prefer to give back financially. One alumnus cited monetary donations as a convenience because he just began his career. "...[T]here's not a lot of time to donate, but definitely in the future as I get more involved and more comfortable in my job, I might [have things] that I could contribute and advice I could give" (AR8). Making a financial gift was also viewed as the most convenient option for respondents who lived far from the College campus. Some were more interested in providing directly to current students rather than the College as a whole. "...[I]f I ever came to the point where I had a considerable amount of money to give the program, it'd likely go into some form of scholarship... Funding *that* to help some of the other current students out" (IR5). Although many showed interest in giving back financially, participants noted needing more time to accumulate money to give.

Contributing to the College through mentorship and service opportunities also appealed to alumni. Few respondents ($n_i = 3$) mentioned they had or were currently collaborating with past professors to help mentor or offer services for students. Not only did they feel good about giving back to their alma mater, but they were also glad to be providing meaningful opportunities for future students. An alumna explained, "I want to offer students what I had as a student and those opportunities to network and meet with professionals... College was so great and helpful to me in that aspect that I feel like I owe them" (AR17). Finally, alumni were least likely to donate their time for general volunteer opportunities. As with monetary donations, alumni cited being too fresh in their careers to donate.

Alumni Connection to Media – Message Relationship

While reviewing each medium, respondents wanted to feel like Bumpers College was connecting with them on a

personal level. When asked about what they wanted to receive from their alma mater, all participants desired updates on specific people in the College. Whether through visual and textual content, special events, or event invitations, alumni wanted to feel they had made a connection with someone.

My favorite part was the 'Bumpers College Family Album.' It showed what alumni have been doing and pictures of like the girl meeting Clinton... I really like things that are related to particular people instead of just Bumpers College in general. It makes it more personal. (AR10)

Sections in *The Graduate* magazine such as the "Bumpers College Family Album," "Class Notes," and *AR Culture* articles were standout elements to alumni who encouraged the College to add more people-focused content. Respondents noted they typically did not read everything distributed by the College, but scanned content for key words and images related specifically to their interests. One respondent who traditionally left their copy of *The Graduate* unread reflected, "I think I sat down and read one article in this one, and the *only* reason was because when I opened that very first page, one of the photos was a friend of mine..." (IR1). Instances of seeing familiar faces and programs were not only what respondents noted as a point of entry, but were what they remembered most.

Anticipating familiar faces and reconnecting with instructors and classmates were also reasons most alumni ($n_a = 8$, $n_i = 9$) considered attending a college event. Most respondents ($n_a = 8$, $n_i = 9$) were drawn to the alumni and friends tailgate as football attracts many former students and professors. In contrast, while many related the event to seeing familiar faces, others said they would be more swayed to attend specialized, departmental events. One participant warned, "Just a random invitation wouldn't really entice me to come... It would probably be just a room full of people I've never seen before eating a buffet" (IR13). Along with an intimate approach to alumni events, some ($n_a = 2$, $n_i = 3$) valued personalized invitations or being approached by an individual to attend a Bumpers College event. Alumni were more willing to give the College their time when it looked like a message had been specially crafted for select individuals rather than to the masses.

Alumni Connection to Media – Specialized Content

Along with interest in a people-focused approach to communication, alumni desired to hear about research being conducted at their alma mater. Regardless of education level, almost half ($n_a = 3$, $n_i = 5$) wanted to continue to hear about advancements made within the agriculture industry and their personal field. Research served as a thread that not only linked alumni to their past but also related Bumpers College to their current industry positions. Two alumni in particular noted interest in hearing about community and global impacts of research conducted on campus. One alumna noted, "I like that *AR Culture* highlights different things that students are doing around the world... That's just interesting to know students from my alma mater are able to have that sort of have a hand in something big" (IR6). Hearing these stories helped alumni to see how Bumpers College continues to connect and impact their lives even though they are no longer on campus.

While the message or purpose was perceived as the most important part of a communications medium, the quality of the visuals encouraged alumni to invest time in the College's message. An alumnus explained, "[T]he invitation design encouraged me to read the whole invitation. But as far as encouraging me to come the event... I think that's the function of the event itself" (AR7). When discussing the *AR Culture* magazine, one alumnus added, "It's got good pictures in almost every story. And I think that does a lot for reading purposes. It helps engage the readers" (IR2).

Alumni Connection to Media – Communications Medium

Alumni's willingness to receive and engage in Bumpers College messaging was dependent on the communications medium. Over half of respondents had a particular medium preference for different information and was largely dependent on personal convenience.

...I think it's just one of those things. I like them sent to my inbox so I can read them where I want to if I'm on

the computer. But I do also like having a hard copy so that way if there's a really cool article, I can give it to somebody else to let them read it. (AR18)

Although some alumni flexibly engaged in print and electronic media, others were unwavering in their medium preference. One alumna explained, "I would like to receive *nothing* in the mail. I don't like mail[ed] items. They end up being thrown away, and then they're just waste, which I think is bad for the environment" (IR4). Essentially, alumni saw a benefit in having a variety of media at their disposal to opt in and out of at their leisure.

Not only did personal preference play a role in medium selection, but alumni also admitted to reading print and electronic news media differently. Respondents typically perceived print media as lengthy, in-depth, and needing more time to read, while electronic media was described as providing a quick list of topics for scanning. An alumna with a preference for print noted instances where content frequency and length described the medium/channel.

I would read a printed version—I'd always read that more thoroughly. I just like to have paper in front of me. But for just a monthly [publication], I would rather get it digital and I'll just scan through it. It's easier to just kind of glance through and click on the topics that are interesting to me. (IR11)

Clearly, some alumni were willing to compromise their personal preferences at times to ensure information was sent in the most practical manner.

Focusing specifically on electronic media, alumni identified unique benefits and expectations for messaging. With everything a click away, alumni expected interconnectivity between varying electronic media including e-newsletter, webpage, and social media presences. This caught one alumna off-guard as she looked at the mocktail party invitation and noticed it didn't include an active link to RSVP. "If I was sending someone an email or if there was a website or link for that party, I would expect to be able to click on it and it send me right to it" (AR12). In addition, alumni did not want to be overwhelmed with content. Some alumni suggested linking emails to a landing page to prevent being bombarded with too much content.

Alumni also viewed electronic media as an opportunity to save the College money ($n_a = 3$, $n_i = 4$). "Well I think that electronic form, it could probably be published more than twice a year as in it could possibly be a cheaper way to get higher volume out" (AR14). Respondents expected (but did not necessarily want) a higher frequency of news and timely content because it was available online. Along with the instantaneity that comes with electronic media, alumni anticipated social media be kept up-to-date, active, and engaging as a digital form of public relations.

I think for me, if you're going to be on social media, you shouldn't just say that you have a page. You should have a page that you could share and post information, where you can be authentic and engage in two-way conversations... I really think it's important for there to be an active, engaged presence on social media. Not just a presence. (AR18)

Respondents were not content with just recent updates from the College, but wanted their alma mater to be seeking a relationship or forming dialog with alumni online.

Alumni Connection to Media – Message Barriers

As active and inactive Millennial alumni began to justify their perceptions of each medium, a theme of *Message Barriers* emerged with nine subthemes. 'Time' was frequently identified as the reason for a respondent's inactivity with the College and its media. Their choice to invest in content was often dependent on time available. When asked their likelihood of opening an email based on its subject line, one alumnus respondent, "If I had time to sit there and look through it, I would just open it. If I didn't [have time], I wouldn't and I'd probably not come back to open it" (AR7). Alumni will not open an email if they do not believe they have time to look through it—no matter how well crafted a subject line may be. Messages with chunks of content were also perceived as taking too much time, and often set aside for later. One

respondent explained, "I always have the best intentions to read things like this because I'm a very proud alumna,... [b]ut it's just hard to keep up with time and that kind of thing" (AR10).

Another external barrier cited by almost half of respondents was the issue of distance. This barrier was only mentioned when discussing alumni events and the possibility of making a gift of time or services. When asked which events they would return to campus for, one alumnus replied, "Well if we're just talking about me, I live four and a half to five hours away, so probably about the only thing I'm coming for is a sporting event" (IR7). Those who lived quite a distance from the campus cited only returning for sporting or other major events. Distance also made alumni selective about which messages they would receive. If a respondent anticipated being unable to attend an event because of distance, the alumnus would instantly discard or skip an electronic or print invitation.

Also when discussing the likelihood of engaging in Bumpers College communications media, a subtheme of 'vague messages' emerged. If alumni were unable to understand the key purpose of a message without additional research, these messages were discarded or skipped. This theme emerged when discussing the *AR Culture* magazine and reemerged when reviewing the mocktail party invitation. An alumnus shared, "It says 'An Evening of Engagement, Networking Among Bumpers College Alumni and Current Students.' I think it'd be nice if it listed for the networking side what alumni or what businesses might be there" (IR2). Rather than understanding the event as a mentorship opportunity, the alumnus was seeking ways he would professionally benefit from attending. A lack of details not only led alumni to misinterpret the event but to see no value in attending.

On the other hand, too much information was perceived as a barrier preventing the receiver from discerning a key message. Discussing the tailgate invitation's subject line, one alumna remarked, "That's way too long for a subject line. You could easily just leave it as 'Bumpers College Alumni Tailgate,' and I'd probably open it... That's a really, really, long subject line. You lost me after Register Aug. 31" (IR1). Digging into the invitation, respondents felt they had to sift through material to find event information. On top of being bombarded with content from a single source, respondents receive an overflow of print and electronic media from external sources, vying for their attention. This led alumni to prioritize messages worthy of their time and attention with some messages never reaching the receiver.

Another barrier presented by respondents was the inability to relate to the subject matter. As mentioned in the *Message Relationship* theme, alumni wanted to read content that appealed to their interests and history. Stories featured in *The Graduate* or *AR Culture* that had no relation to their interests were skipped. This was also true for invitations and events. When speaking about her likelihood of opening the tailgate invitation, an alumna responded, "Whenever I think tailgate, I'm thinking football. If that pops up, usually I'm never interested in it. It's one of those things I just kind of think football and that just goes into the trash" (AR20).

During participant interviews, a seventh barrier surfaced when alumni were unable to properly view electronic media because of technical errors. Although the same email was distributed to all alumni, each viewed the electronic media differently based on their email provider and screening method (desktop/mobile devices). When photos did not appear and electronic templates were warped, participants lost patience and abandoned the message. An alumna who had difficulties with *The Graduate* e-newsletter commented, "It's not lined up correctly or anything. So even on my computer screen, they didn't even manage to line up everything correctly" (IR4). Instances like these reflected poorly on the College as alumni perceived the creative piece as being carelessly thrown together.

The final subtheme identified by Millennial alumni was 'outdated information.' This theme was mentioned by two respondents while reviewing the Bumpers College alumni webpage and social media presences. "...[W]hen you look at on the left-hand side at the 'Alumni and Friends Blogs,'... the most recent post is from October 8, 2011... It's completely neglected" (IR4). Alumni showed interest in the 'Alumni and Friends Blogs' link; however, content was no longer timely to be relatable.

Need for Promotion

A final theme observed during participant interviews was the *Need for Branding and Promotion* for Bumpers College. Although alumni were attracted by the reference of their alma mater in subject lines, media distributed by the two entities (Bumpers College and the University of Arkansas) had little brand recognition. Though Bumpers College and the University are not competing entities, each sent separate messages which confused alumni. Not only were *The Graduate* and *AR Culture* magazines interchangeable in the minds of alumni, but participants viewed the AA and Bumpers College Alumni Society as two separate organizations. "...When Bumpers College goes to events and tries to get people to join the alumni society, [they think] there's an alumni society for the University and one for Bumpers College. And they're two separate alumni societies..." (AR17).

Lastly, it was noted the College needed to promote their social media presence. A little over half of participants ($n_a = 6$, $n_i = 5$) were unaware of Bumpers College social media presences, and those who were aware confused the separate student and alumni Facebook pages.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While discussing their relationship with the Bumpers College, alumni showed *Interest in Giving Back* to the College. Though most were fresh in their careers and unable to presently make a gift of their funds, time or services, they still hoped to make a contribution—whether to the College or directly to students—sometime in the future. Alumni were pleased with their experience and wanted to offer the same advantages and opportunities to the next generation of Bumpers College students. By creating personal connections with alumni while they were students, the Bumpers College established a strong customer-product tie for Millennial alumni and can continue to develop its brand community by answering the call for a fruitful customer-institution relationship.

In addition to their relationship with Bumpers College, alumni discussed their relationship with distributed media. A theme of *Message Relationship* emerged as alumni described information they would like to receive from their alma mater. One alumna commented,

I feel like Bumpers College was really kind of personal with me as far as I made a lot of good connections with the faculty, and staff, and my friends, and so I want to still kind of feel that connection to the Bumpers College as a whole. (AR19)

Alumni valued relatable, familiar, and specialized messaging and communicated a need for the College to build its customer-brand relationship to foster an emotional connection. This may be caused by a lack of branding associated with distributed media, reflected in the *Need for Promotion* emergent theme. Bumpers College currently does not have a brand identity, so alumni adopted faces of students and professors to form the College's identity. Alumni were not nostalgic for a tradition or symbol, but for the personal connections (customer-customer relationships) they made while students. Brand identity is an important component of communications (McAlexander et al., 2006), and should be improved by Bumpers College. Studies regarding alumni communications media should continue as they are often the only element currently linking Millennials to their alma mater post-graduation.

Participants showed interest in *Specialized Content* including compelling research visuals to "catch their eye" as they scanned messaging. Most alumni expressed a desire to hear about Bumpers College research with a focus on professors and students. The few participants who were seeking employment preferred job listings and networking opportunities for reviewed media. These preferences were largely dependent on an alumnus's stage in life and will evolve as participants mature in their role as an alumnus.

In discussing their relationship to the College's media, a theme of *Communications Medium* emerged. Alumni acceptance of a medium is depended on individual preference, but they sought flexibility in the way they wanted to receive College messages. If the Bumpers College failed to send a message through a desired channel, this led to a

communication breakdown caused by the receiver's unique attitude. Print and digital media were consumed differently with separate expectations. Print media were viewed as more in-depth and involving more time, while digital media were prompt and easy to scan. Though the particular issue of the *AR Culture* magazine was two years old, alumni were more shocked by the three-year-old 'Alumni & Friends Blog' post. Alumni expected instantaneity and timeliness from digital media and were more forgiving of print. Communications that failed to encode the message to meet alumni expectations were more susceptible to noise interference and prevented the message from reaching the receiver (Berlo, 1963; Communication Theory, 2010; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Finally, as alumni justified their perceptions of distributed media, the *Message Barriers* theme emerged. While time, distance, and an overflow of external messaging were barriers outside of the College's control, most of the listed barriers or noise could be solved. These included vague messaging, too much information, non-relatable subject matter, technical errors, and outdated information. This supports Berlo's SMCR, which stresses the importance of shaping messages to positively impact the attitudes of the receiver. By noting and addressing these barriers and its delivery to specific channels, Bumpers College could foster growth in alumni involvement. One alumnus commented,

In the end, it all comes down to me as an individual if this is something that I want to have as part of my life... A website one way or the other isn't going to convince me. (AR14)

Although media distributed by alumni relations isn't going to sway an alumnus to get active, making information available to alumni is important to help keep them connected enough to easily become active if they choose to do so.

Because Millennials are the first generation to grow up with the Internet (Twenge, 2006), understanding their preferences and habits is critical. Since multiple media messages were used in this study, the findings provide insight how to shape the message and the desired channel (Berlo, 1960) for reaching Millennial students (McDearmon & Shirley, 2009). Studies regarding alumni communications media should continue because they are often the only element linking Millennials to their alma mater post-graduation. This will allow Alumni Relations to identify and be mindful of barriers hindering relationships. Secondly, researchers also suggest alumni involvement be increased through a personable approach. Not only does this method communicate sincerity, but it also gives face to an institution. When information is disseminated by the preferred methods of communication, the likelihood of reaching alumni with a persuasive message will increase (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) for the institution. This tactic builds the alumni-brand relationship by instilling an emotional connection to their alma mater—a core concern for marketers wishing to strengthen their brand community (McAlexander et al., 2006). Finally, practitioners must ensure strategy implementation is driving their tactics rather than visa-versa. Before jumping to the next social media frenzy, alumni relations must evaluate whether these tactics truly align with strategies for reaching an overarching goal.

Despite Bumpers College alumni being spread all over the world, it is recommended future studies regarding alumni communications follow a focus group methodology for data collection. Researchers for this study ideally would have held two to three focus groups; however the planned focus group never came to fruition because it lacked a proper incentive and timing for alumni participation. A drawback to interviews is the assumption participants have thoughts about and understand how they feel about something (Krueger, 1988). Some respondents during their telephone interview provided brief or one-worded answers without much elaboration despite interviewer prompts. Unlike interviews, focus groups allow participants to hear the opinions of others and build on their own (Krueger, 1988). This method would also be a solution for improving dialog and discussion during the data collection process. While focus groups may pose respondent bias because of social pressure and anxiety, researchers could better understand how people influence their relationship with communications media and the Bumpers College. The researchers also believe holding a focus group would have reduced limitations associated with the unpredictable nature of technology (interview recorders over the phone) and people. With the researcher and participant present in the same room, the researchers could have ensured print and digital media would have been viewed in the same manner by all participants. Finally, this method would have also reduced the frequency of rescheduled interviews among participants.

As researchers of this study, we realize this is a small glimpse at alumni communication perceptions and needs for one Land-grant university. However, we believe there are findings in this study that can and will relate to other universities across the United States. Staying connected to our alumni through effective communication messaging and strategies is of current and lasting interest. Furthermore, this information can be used to inform communication efforts in our agricultural communication classrooms.

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