Making connections: An evaluative study of the role of LinkedIn in alumni engagement

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ABSTRACT

Alumni engagement is a growing area of interest for institutions of higher education. Often alumni want to continue ties to their alma mater after graduation and they are increasingly asked to participate by their alma mater. This participation can be measured financially, physically and/or intellectually. Engagement, while desirable for both parties, becomes a challenge when distance is involved. Today's alumni are increasingly online, so it is reasonable to assume that use of social media will strengthen relationships near and far while fostering alumni engagement.

This research project used evaluative research to examine alumni engagement through social media, with a particular focus on the professional online networking platform LinkedIn. Applying diffusion of innovation, virtual community, and engagement theories, this project incorporated a census sample survey of all alumni from the School of Public Health at the University of Alberta to explore awareness and use of LinkedIn. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore, in depth, the user's experience with LinkedIn. Both pieces combine to evaluate the extent to which LinkedIn serves to foster engagement, build community, and maintain relationships between alumni and their alma mater.

This exploration of alumni experiences with LinkedIn provides insight and strategies for alumni engagement online, suggestions to overcome barriers, and opportunities for future research on alumni engagement that incorporates social media.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has found a stronghold in both the personal and professional world in the last ten years. From wikis and blogs to social networks of peers and friends, social media is ubiquitous. Social media facilitates the sharing of information, bringing previous weak ties closer and strengthening them by breaking through geographic, linguistic, and cultural barriers. According to Charles Kadushin (2011), humans have been networking socially since the times of hunting and gathering. The idea of being connected to one another is not new, but with each new generation, the means of *how* people connect with one another change.

The question of how people choose to communicate has been a catalyst for social media adoption in organizational communications. Businesses and their customers are increasingly "glocal" (both global and local) (Wellman, 2004, p. 29), which tests how people can be effectively connected. Increased globalization of organizations means that collaborative group work must span different continents and time zones. Social media has stepped up to fill that gap, using platforms like Skype, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn to keep conversation flowing smoothly. Institutes of higher education are not immune to the lure of using social media to connect with their audiences; from student recruitment to alumni recognition and overall retention, social media has played a large role in moving higher education into the next century of virtual community building.

Background

When computer networks link people as well as machines, they become social networks. Such computer-supported social networks (CSSNs) are becoming important bases of virtual communities, computer-supported cooperative work, and telework (Wellman, Salaff, Dimitrova, Garton, Gulia & Haythornthwaite, 1996, p. 213).

With the advent of wireless, mobile communication and social media, the ability of individuals to build on the traditional sense of community—a physical place where people connect through participation in group activities—means that virtual communities are now building that sense of connectivity. Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, Qui & Sey

(2006) believe that wireless and mobile connectivity helps to reinforce peer groups that are already solidified in our lives, as well as grow our networks. " . . . technology also allows for a rapidly expanding network, adding individuals to or deleting individuals from the network . . . So that networks expand, overlap, and are modified" (p. 304). When evaluating the notion of "community" it has been determined that, theoretically, online or offline, community holds "common themes such as interdependence, interaction/participation, meaningful relationships, shared interests, and concern for all views" (Parr & Ward, 2006, p. 777).

The School of Public Health (or the School) at the University of Alberta has grown and changed significantly over the last seven years, bringing together the Alberta Centre for Injury Control & Research (ACICR), the Centre for Health Promotion Studies (CHPS), and the department of Public Health Sciences (PHS), each with their own traditions, culture, and administration. Communication to prospective students, current students, faculty, employees, and alumni has been highlighted as a priority by the Marketing, Alumni Relations and Communications (MARCom) team and also by the management within the School.

Communications and engagement, especially with alumni, comes with its own set of challenges. School alumni span more than fifty years when combined between the two centres and one department. As well, the School itself has seven years of graduates from the faculty proper. Alumni are spread across Canada and around the world, so maintaining connections has been difficult. Recently the School has approved the process of moving towards a non-departmentalized structure. This means that PHS and CHPS may not exist in the future the way alumni remember them, and as such communicating this change to alumni is extremely important. Alumni who have graduated from the previous centres and department will want to know how the changes affect them, as well as how to continue the relationship that has been cultivated between them and the School.

The School has been exploring and evaluating what its traditional community of faculty, staff, alumni, and students look like and where they live, both physically and virtually. According to Christakis and Fowler (2009), the most basic definition of a social network is "an organized set of people that consists of two kinds of elements: human beings and the connections between them" (p. 13). When the School of Public Health

looks at its stakeholders' social networks, those individuals that are highly networked socially can be identified as major connectors between disparate groups.

In early 2012 the School surveyed its alumni to gauge their affinity to the School and awareness of ongoing research and initiatives within the faculty. As part of the survey, alumni were asked what information they would like to receive and how their interest could be increased in School events, planning, and overall awareness. Alumni responded that they wanted to hear stories about current faculty research and student success, and see profiles of fellow alumni who have achieved success in their careers. Alumni also indicated that they feel part of the overall faculty "family", but would like more opportunities to engage with the School, specifically with the students. They expressed openness to connect online through discussion forums. This feedback has created an opportunity for the School to leverage faculty research, student success and alumni profiles currently captured in their online newsletter, Healthe-news. This feedback also mirrors the perspective/findings of Olsen (2012), who said, "what if . . . we work hard to 'find and tell the best stories happening on campus – so that . . . alumni are proud to be a part of it'" (http://higheredlive.com/why-engagement-is-a-red-herring-for-social-media/). Strong feelings of affinity and pride can be created through engaging alumni and student narrative—something the School has tried to capture through its e-newsletter. Alumni also said that they were interested in contributing to events and programs in the School, regardless of whether they live in Edmonton or, for example, Uganda. It is important for the School to take advantage of alumni interest so that they can connect with others and bring them into their "community" (Elad, 2012).

How can connections be maintained and contributions facilitated across geographic distance, time and cultures? This was a question the School pondered after reviewing the results of the survey. A solution was offered for consideration: connect with alumni online. Online platforms are starting to make alumni outreach much easier; "social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube . . . engage alumni and keep them involved in the college community" (Halligan, 2010, p. 31). The hope for the School was that, if a community could be created online where alumni felt engaged, they would feel valued and contribute accordingly. According to Kowalik (2011), "social media provides you the opportunity to humanize stories of students and alumni of your institution, which

can create loyalty and earn future business (students), and ultimately their respect" (p. 212). Social networks today operate as "both a meta-community and a specific community . . . it is a conglomeration of all interests into a single hub . . . [and] the focus of the new social web is individuals and their collective identity" (Keenan & Shiri, 2009, p. 441).

The School has adopted specific social media platforms to help connect alumni, students, faculty, and staff together in meaningful ways. Through YouTube, Twitter, Flickr, and LinkedIn, the School has shared conversations and latest research, and has been increasingly focused on facilitating networking, mentoring, and job sharing among alumni stakeholders. LinkedIn has been targeted as the primary way to reach and connect alumni to students within the School.

LinkedIn is a social networking website for people in professional occupations. Founded in 2002, it has grown to more than 175 million registered users in more than 200 countries and territories (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LinkedIn). The School created its LinkedIn profile in March 2012, initiating closed discussion groups and actively inviting alumni, faculty, staff, and students to connect with each other and join in the closed group discussions. Within the closed groups in LinkedIn, the School's Marketing, Alumni Relations and Communications team maintains and moderates relevant content posted within the group and monitors the requests to join the group. What has yet to be proven is if LinkedIn provides enough opportunity for alumni and students to interact with one another. It is through the literature reviewed and the research conducted in this final project that will determine if LinkedIn can provide an on line community for alumni engagement.

Existing studies

A review of the literature on social media's contribution to building virtual communities resulted in an unanticipated volume of information. The concept of building a connected place in an online environment was first documented in the early 1990s, largely attributed to Howard Rheingold (1993). The concept of a virtual community has embodied everything from grouping together "gamers", to a community of dedicated knitters contributing to a wiki sharing their knitting secrets. There have been extensive

studies exploring why virtual communities exist, thrive, and evolve. Comparisons between geographic, physical communities, and online, virtual communities have been made.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace have been compared and contrasted for their roles in building virtual community; each has their own unique way of attracting and building sustainable communities. There has been research done into the role LinkedIn plays in building community within professional organizations and also how LinkedIn helps undergraduate students prepare professional social media profiles for career development upon graduation. What is missing from the discussion is how LinkedIn could possibly build community in post-secondary education, especially regarding alumni outreach and engagement. It is this missing piece of research that is addressed through this study.

This project focused on how LinkedIn may be used to create a virtual community in post-secondary education. After synthesizing the differing perspectives on the use of LinkedIn to build virtual communities, a research question and objectives that would result in solutions (or strategies) for the use of LinkedIn for building virtual alumni communities were posed.

Study approach

The purpose of this research project is to determine the best way to build online bridges with post-secondary alumni at a distance, using the University of Alberta's School of Public Health as a case study of alumni engagement. Based on an engagement survey administered to School alumni in January 2012, alumni outside of Edmonton and Alberta expressed interest in remaining connected to the School. As follow up to that engagement survey, an additional electronic survey was distributed to all School of Public Health alumni (with an updated email address). This new survey gave participants the opportunity to share their online habits, as well as thoughts and opinions about the use of LinkedIn as a tool to build community. Individual follow up interviews were scheduled with alumni who self-identified at the end of the electronic survey and were interested in being contacted. Those who self-identified, were randomly sampled for

interviews to delve further into their usage (or non-usage) of LinkedIn as a means of connecting and building community.

The research question

Can professional social media platforms such as LinkedIn create a space where alumni will choose to interact and engage with students, faculty, and staff from their alma mater?

The objectives of the study were to:

1) review the current literature on the use of social media, and in particular LinkedIn, as tools for creating positive connections among post-secondary alumni,

2) use the School of Public Health and their alumni relations as a quasi-case study on the use of LinkedIn, and

3) identify strategies to generate opportunities or improve ways for post-secondary alumni to contribute to their virtual community in meaningful ways.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is Charles Kadushin (2011) who makes a strong point about social networks existing since the days when humans were hunters and gatherers. Throughout his book, *Understanding Social Networks: Theories, Concepts, and Findings*, Kadushin examines what role technology has played in "creating" or facilitating social networks in society. He proposes that, while technology is yet another vehicle that drives the social side of our networks, it has not created a new hybrid of social networking (p. 4). In fact, Kadushin says that the more frequently that people network face-to-face, the more frequently they network online. So, are we becoming antisocial physically, relying on letting our online personas do the talking? Or are we still dependent on physically talking and meeting with others? Some might argue both sides of the question. Along this vein, and for the purpose of this study, a literature search was conducted using the keywords "engagement", "social media", "LinkedIn", "community", and "social capital" to help better understand the technology and the theory behind how and why people connect both physically and virtually (especially alumni).

The literature review for this project showed common themes around technology, social media, learning, and engagement. At the heart of true engagement is a shared reason for people to be there and participate in the first place. Literature on the whole was positive about the role technology and social media play in bridging gaps between customer and organization, learner and institution. What was surprising was the recurring theme that online community and physical community are both still needed to make overall community sound. Both virtual and physical complement one another and neither one stands alone as stronger when building and maintaining community. Finding valuable experiences through the use of social media tools should work only as a supplement to face-to-face communities where needed (Hung & Yuen, 2010). In their research on the platform Twitter, Gruzd, Wellman & Takhtyev (2011) ponder the same question: "We want to see if Twitter can sustain and provide grounds for development of an online community that is not simply imagined by each user but that is built on the shared sense of community" (p. 1298). They go on to discover that shared interests online and a sense of community don't necessarily translate into sustainability down the road.

The literature documents emergent ideas regarding the value of social media in new conceptualizations of community. In particular, the literature about LinkedIn strongly indicates that participants choose to belong to a professional space that encourages connections and discussions, and shortens the geographical distance (Comer, 2011), but continue to be concerned about putting complete faith in social media alone to help build and maintain community (Comer, 2011). According to Gruzd et al. (2011)

> [T]he presence of a virtual settlement does not necessarily guarantee the presence of a community. . . the fact that there is a system like Twitter that allows people to get together and exchange messages does not necessarily make people feel as if they belong to a community. For that, they need a sense of community (p. 1298).

So what gives people that sense of belonging? And where is it maintained? Is it online or face-to-face? Or is it a combination of both? These questions were explored through this project. Gruzd hits upon an important issue, that while social media can overcome a number of barriers, there are others that exist that may hinder adoption and user engagement. What are the barriers that do exist? How will they affect LinkedIn adoption and interaction for alumni from the School?

Using social cognitive theory of mass communication, specifically diffusion of innovation (Craig & Muller, 2009), helps to identify if social media platforms such as LinkedIn can create spaces where alumni will choose to interact and engage with students, faculty, and staff from their alma mater. Incorporating the interpretive paradigm, this paper explores alumni's perception of online environments for interaction and engagement. The goal is to help capture the experiences alumni have (negative and positive) interacting with others in an online space using rich narrative and description. Makrez (2011) explores how social media can contribute to alumni audiences, including empowerment, sharing research, and overall benefits, in a cost-effective manner. Based on the evidence amassed and literature discussed regarding engagement and geography, the idea of using LinkedIn to support alumni engagement is one with real merit. Makrez states, "As the world connects in new ways, so does our student body, so do our graduates and, therefore, so do our alumni. We must be able to be part of the

conversations because they are happening whether we know about them or not" (2011, p. 229).

Benefits and strategies for using LinkedIn

Homophily is the term used to describe the phenomena of people who think the same, coming together. No better way is this evidenced than by watching how networks are built on social media platforms. Social media encourages people to find like-minded individuals to connect and share with. As Kadushin (2011) puts it, "people with like characteristics tend to be connected . . . connected people tend to have an effect on one another" (p. 9). This raises the question of how can alumni from the School of Public Health remain connected when they are geographically separated from their alma mater? It is through the work of Kadushin and others that we can begin to understand the role social media can play in connecting people virtually. How are these online groups formed; who assumes leadership, and how do these networks grow and evolve?

Christakis and Fowler (2009) examined the ways that social networks influence every part of our lives. "[T]hey can be conduits for altruistic acts in which individuals pay back a debt of gratitude by paying it forward" (p. 7). They argue that our social connections can influence us across a broad spectrum, from perpetrating or ending violence to encouraging us to be organ donors. Much like the ripple effect from a stone being thrown into a pond, both authors argue that friends of friends of friends can still exert a powerful influence on a network of individuals.

Influence is always strongest when people who come together have the sense of being safe among friends, and also that they can reach out and connect with others from their place of safety (Kadushin, 2011). For organizations looking to experiment with virtual community building, restricting use and membership to these communities is a starting point worth trying. This can create a safe environment where participants feel comfortable sharing. Through building a safe online environment for participants, you can address concerns regarding who you can and cannot trust in these virtual environments. In research conducted by Gruzd et al. (2011) "people seem to need to imagine that they . . . belong to a community . . . . [E]ven when people are in loosely bounded networks, they will often identify themselves as part of a more defined group or

community" (p. 1295). What seems important in both research cases by Gruzd et al. and Kadushin is that community is no longer bound by sheer physical boundaries—increasingly, community can be found where our interests are.

Benkler (2006) talks of studies done during the Internet's infancy. In these studies, people would increasingly spend time online instead of with their own family and friends. The findings from Benkler's study fueled "fears that human connection ground into a thin gruel of electronic bits simply will not give people the kind of human connectedness they need as social beings" (p. 361). Instead of buying into the less favourable opinions that were being published, Benkler looked at how humans were evolving to fit the technology around them. Instead of people relying on the strong, thick ties from their local community (the ties they could access on a daily basis), people were using technology to become more social and relying more and more on their weaker ties—becoming more fluid in their networking than static.

In his study, Gary Burnett (2000) explored the idea that virtual communities spawn "information neighbourhoods". In such neighbourhoods, participants can settle in and "keep a lookout for any information related to their general interests and concerns" (http://informationr.net/ir/5-4/paper82.html). For institutions of higher education, social media is a ripe place to gather together people who share similar feelings towards a particular topic. In sharing knowledge, studies, ideas, and comments that are familiar to the participants, they can learn, debate, dialogue, grow, and share in a familiar neighbourhood of peers. Online or offline, people tend to exhibit similar characteristics when grouped together with others in a type of community—they are inquisitive, they get along and they learn.

In a bid to define exactly what a community is, Hillery (1982) noted that geography aside, the one important thing all communities have is "the presence of a group of people . . . [and] social interaction as a necessary element of the community" (p.111). In Keith Hampton's 2011 study of "Netville"[1], he observed a community that had high-speed Internet piped in. He was curious to see if the way people networked

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[1] Netville is a suburban Toronto development equipped with a high-speed network as part of its design. The clustering of homes within this area allowed researchers to study the social networks, civic involvement, Internet use, and attitudes of residents. (taken from http://abs.sagepub.com/content/43/3/475.abstract)

would change, and found that, even with the highest of high-speed cables linking community members to the digital world, inhabitants of Netville still went for walks down the street and stopped to talk to the neighbours. In fact, the physical and virtual community ties of Netville actually strengthened during Hampton's study period. "[C]onnections with family and friends seemed to be thickened by the new channels of communication, rather than supplanted by them" (Benkler, 2006, p. 364), putting to rest the belief that the Internet was ruining relationships as we passively watched. What Hampton means by "thickened relationships" are those connections we have in our lives that we interact with daily—close family and friends that we visit, converse with on the phone, or spend time with. More important, and relevant to this study, is that Hampton's research found that people's weak ties (acquaintances, far-flung family members, etc.) could be "thickened" (contact with remote participants happened more frequently) through the use of online relationships and virtual community.

The concept of thickening relationships between post-secondary institutions and alumni provides another lens through which to consider the benefits or value of developing virtual communities. Social media has emerged as a primary way to keep alumni in touch as it helps to create an active community regardless of geographic, financial, or societal boundaries (Makrez, 2011). Indeed, as today's classrooms incorporate social media into learning programs with students, the expectation is that alumni will continue to communicate anytime and anywhere as they move on in their careers (Hung & Yuen, 2010). Careers for alumni have grown global in scope, meaning companies need to invest in communication and collaboration systems that enable individuals and teams to work together across the globe (Schacht & Madche, 2010).

Makrez (2011) believes that at the end of the day, active alumni are contributing alumni. As such, alumni offices should be engaging in ways to keep their alumni connected. Baron, Richardson, Earles & Khogeer (2011) examined a case study where a group of marketing academics and practitioners created a LinkedIn community to help facilitate conversations and bridge the gap between what academics knew versus what practitioners had put into practice. Their research found that the discussions in the academic/practitioner communities were enthusiastic and fostered collaboration between the two groups.

Through literature and discussion, it has been established that the Internet and social media can foster strong relationships and networks. However, there are other benefits of being networked virtually other then reinforcing relationships. The literature around virtual community building also explored how people interacted with one another; what benefits and drawbacks there were to it and how participants could be engaged with each other in meaningful ways. This was also explored as part of this research project. It is through participation in community, be it virtual or physical, that members feel they are truly engaged and "part of the community" (Makrez, 2011). When organizations and individuals are motivated to participate and interact with another group or individual for a purpose, even just for fun, they are engaged. Engagement can be as simple as asking an individual to complete a survey that will benefit the organization, or it could be as complicated as a group of people rallying together to fundraise money for a cause they believe in. Making the message or mission of the organization clear is important when it comes to building community. As noted in the literature, people come together online based on similar interest areas (Kadushin, 2011). Clear messaging, mission, or vision for an organization can capture the interest of participants and gather them closer together, building engagement on that interest.

Trying to engage people though social media can be a challenge because it has been portrayed and/or experienced as being impersonal. It is of benefit to organizations to work on overcoming negative assumptions as it can pave the way for true audience engagement. The value in an organization building a positive culture of social media engagement is that it allows them to respond quickly to stakeholders when needed. The organization that learns how to properly engage their networks through social media stands to reap sizeable rewards. Porter, Donthu, MacElroy & Wydra (2011) have discovered that engagement can be amplified by the efforts an organization puts into its online communities. Putnam (2000) reminds us "sociologically these organizations are an important locus of social solidarity, a mechanism for mutual assistance and shared expertise" (p. 80). And as social media challenges our conception of what a traditional community looks like, Putnam argues that as many of us work outside of the home, we have transferred many of our social relationships from our physical community to our workplace community (2000). Social media helps make transitions from and constant

connections between multiple realms (social, professional, physical and virtual) much more fluid. Members of those communities that feel loyalty to the organization will increase their engagement, creating an increasingly informal reciprocity between organization and members. What does it take to help organizations overcome negative assumptions attributed with social media engagement?

With a strong framework, effective leadership, and sustainable management, engagement can and does happen (Siddique, Aslam, Khan & Fatima, 2011). Engagement should be a natural thought process in regards to using social media, especially with younger alumni, as it is the way most of them receive their information (Halligan, 2010). Engagement online helps people learn about themselves, their field of practice and the most current news. Social learning enhances the online experience through participation, changing the workforce rapidly (Allen & Naughton, 2011).

Emotional ties are important to alumni relations: if alumni feel part of a strong community, their inclination to donate to their alma mater increases (Kowalik, 2011). LinkedIn, in particular, allows communities to grow by connecting friends to friends to colleagues, creating strong networks (Makrez, 2011). The strong networks that are built through the use of LinkedIn provide both intrinsic and extrinsic value to both the alumni being connected and the higher education institution that has set up the community. Through participation in online communities, members can fulfill their sense of belonging while helping the institution with a vital link to the external environment (Porter et al., 2011). The challenge to building an online community is motivating people to participate. Often online communities break down when the support systems fail, and the issue of a digital divide still exists in some areas of the world, as accessibility to technology pervades (Lwoga, 2012).

Social media is providing alumni relations offices a new realm within which to practice old business. Mentoring, networking, career advice, maintaining connections, and soliciting alumni donations are just some of the things that a typical alumni relations office does. In 2009, Vadim Lavrusik captured the different ways colleges, students, and alumni were making their LinkedIn profiles work for them. From helping alumni find jobs to connecting and collaborating with students, LinkedIn is becoming a social media powerhouse to "meet alumni where they're at" (Lavrusik, 2009,

http://mashable.com/2009/07/23/alumni-social-media/). Eventually, as alumni become more comfortable using social media, they can start contributing to their online community with their own content. McCorkle and McCorkle (2012) discuss the use of LinkedIn as a teaching tool in marketing classrooms, which is implemented early in students' studies. Aside from LinkedIn being a hub to help introduce students to professional networking, it helps with "reviewing the career progression of alumni and professionals in the desired field, [whereby] students can also join special interest groups for discussions, news, and job opportunities" (p. 158).

In recognizing the breadth and depth of opportunities to foster engagement, it makes sense that measuring alumni engagement online is a priority for many organizations and institutions. However, measuring alumni engagement online is difficult as has been the experience by various educational institutions. According to Kevin MacDonell of CoolData blog (2012), there is no correct way to measure alumni engagement; measurement is dependent on the needs of the educational institution and their alumni. "[M]easuring engagement—it sounds analytical, but inevitably it rests on some messy, intuitive assumptions" (http://cooldata.wordpress.com/2012/06/06/how-you-measure-alumni-engagement-is-up-to-you/). MacDonell suggests that institutions benchmark against themselves if they really want to gauge and track their alumni engagement. This can be done by surveying alumni or by tracking numbers at alumni-focused events. The criteria is set and adjusted by the institution itself.

Tracking numerical measures of impact can be easily facilitated with social media, using, for example, connections, likes, and retweets. It is more difficult, however, to measure the depth of the relationship (e.g. the impressions community members have of your organization, or what qualities or characteristics of yours that they value) or to whom you may be connected (Kolowich, 2012).

> The colleges do not appear to be as interested in deeper study of those
> with whom they are ostensibly "engaging" via social media. Asked for
> specific areas of success, most officials said "increasing engagement with
> our target audience." Only a slim minority said they used the two
> outcomes measures – "penetration measure of use among target
> audiences" and "surveys of target audiences" – that would shed significant

light on the extent of that success
(http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/08/28/colleges-still-relying-simple-metrics-measure-roi-social-media).

Kolowich stresses that beyond tracking sheer clicks generated by social media, the real test for educational institutions is to address audience feedback and exhibited behaviours (if possible).

Sevier (2007) looks beyond the idea of tracking social media engagement and counting clicks generated online. Sevier believes that developing one's own social network creates an inclusive space where not only can the organization focus its messaging and marketing, but also create an inclusive and supportive community where participants feel comfortable to share their observations. "If the social networking concept includes an emphasis on community building, then the array of tools available to colleges and universities increases dramatically . . . Alumni are engaging with current students through an online directory as well" (Sevier, 2007, p. 26). When those connections between alumni and current students can be evaluated for the kinds of topics discussed and the richness of the discussions, then post-secondary institutions can think of ways to target messaging and truly engage with their alumni audiences.

Analyzing audience responses through social media channels is an important process; it can be as simple as taking a suggestion and tweaking messaging, or it could be as significant as diffusing a potentially tense situation. The trick with feedback is to balance it so that, positive or negative, the audience will feel like they can still achieve a goal. Challenges can sometimes dissuade people from engaging with a task yet, "even when these challenges are unpleasant, they can increase the attraction toward a positive target" (Higgins & Scholer, 2009, p. 102). According to Higgins, if challenges are dealt with transparently online, both the institution and the audience member can achieve a state of satisfaction.

Attention to detail and audience response creates value, which can increase engagement and create the feeling of community and belongingness. This belief is supported by Girard and Sobczak (2011) when they examined the relationship between stakeholders of a French bank. They mention that legitimacy of engagement between a company and its stakeholders depends on the true nature of their relationship. If the

relationship is not genuine and built on trust it can create problems with lasting engagement. With trust, learning relationships can be created that will bring value to the relationship, further strengthening engagement. As Foster, McNeil and Lawther (2012) examine, feedback doesn't necessarily mean engagement will continue, but it will help improve the process.

Lisa Fall (2006) captures the relationship that a university can hold with its students, staff, community, and alumni. Her research focused on the community-university partnership, "communiversity" as she terms it, is a place where the pulse of engagement can be measured. She states that, as a centre for higher learning and education, it is incumbent upon universities to remain closely connected to its communities. By combining sense of community with social capital, Hastings, Barrett, Barbuto & Bell (2011) found that there was huge opportunity to grow engagement and leadership, especially in youth. Referencing Holland's theory and also pulling from Fall, Hoyt, Higgins and Scholer (cited in Hastings et al. 2011) they state that exploring a "sense of community allows us to understand the individual's connection to the community, which is central to the concept of social capital" (p. 20).

Shirky (2008) defines social capital as that intangible but yet important "thing" that makes a community work. "It is the shadow of the future on a societal scale" (p. 192), where the idea of reciprocity factors in a huge way. As Rainie and Wellman (2012) mention, the idea of social capital and reciprocity can be the glue that holds a community together. As a community member you may be asked to help another member out, and someday your good deed will be revisited back on you. The idea of what makes an online community successful or not is difficult to determine, but according to Parr and Ward (2006) the most common factors in online community interaction involve "human activity . . . shaped by the software and systems and affected by sociability and usability factors" (p. 778).

According to Putnam (2000), communities (many unrelated people gathered together by loose interests) that are built on social capital actually end up better serving constituents and their emotional needs. In his research on the breakdown and reformation of American society, Putnam notes that small group growth "reflects the application of social capital remedies to a set of previously neglected problems" (p. 151). His idea of a

small group was simply those friends and family who people kept closest to them, their "thick ties". Putnam believed that it was the strength of personal relationships that would effect change on a much larger scale in society, not decisions made in large (and clunky) levels of government.

Building a community based on a sense of loyalty or strong affinity is something that is desirable for most organizations. Maintaining a relationship with community members so that they speak highly about your organization has traditionally entailed good customer service, engagement, and some continuity. "Individuals use social media for business purposes such as networking opportunities, business research, business knowledge, contacts, and product knowledge" (Witzig, Spencer & Galvin, 2012, p. 115). Social media today has opened up possibilities for organizations to reach wider and more dispersed audiences with specific messaging. The emphasis has changed from broad messaging to the masses to more specific messaging to individuals. "By creating systems to stay in touch with your contacts, you can keep the connections fresh and deepen the relationships over time" (Comer, 2011, p. 10).

Shirky (2008) believes that by creating online spaces for people to connect, sharing and conversation will happen naturally and the idea of community can be strengthened. "Our electronic networks are enabling novel forms of collective action, enabling the creation of collaborative groups that are larger and more distributed than at any other time in history" (p. 48). Comer (2011) agrees with Shirky's assessment of what can make an online relationship grow. Emphasizing that relationships are initially built on LinkedIn through the personal connections one has, "you . . . learn about a contact's interests, making it a great resource to help you build relationships" (p. 10). It is finding that initial commonality that will attract people together and give them a shared frame of reference to start discussions from.

The potential to tap into opportunities to collaborate and to build strong communities is perhaps the greatest benefit experienced by organizations that incorporate social media into the workplace. By forming an online network, organizations can create a pool of resources that can be used for accessing and sharing expertise and knowledge (Schacht & Madche, 2010). In the workplace, the implementation of social technology enables employees to meet multiple information and communication demands (Lin & Ha,

2009). Collaborative tools help off-site or dispersed employees to maintain vital links to their home office (Altes, 2009). It is easy to see parallels between organizations and employees with higher educational institutions and alumni. Focusing on the social side of Web 2.0 has helped actively involve users in the co-creation of content, generation of knowledge, sharing of information, and participation (Lwoga, 2012). Time and again, through examples such as these, we see that social media is an extension, a complement to systems and relationships that are already at play in organizations.

Prevailing challenges with LinkedIn use

Cliques, cohorts, and relationships are all based on cohesiveness and the individuals contained within are all connected and have commonality amongst themselves (Kadushin, 2011). There is a tipping point with regard to how many people one can maintain in their social networks before strong ties break down to weak ties and cohesiveness is lost. Taken another way, networks based on "connectedness" are complicated. They can be long lasting or fleeting; they can be incredibly personal or completely anonymous. Really, how networks are defined is up to how individuals set up their parameters and collect people that fall within specific interest areas (Christakis & Fowler, 2009). Personal networks and professional networks share some characteristics (strength of ties, connectedness, learning environments, etc.) but the approaches taken to maintenance of personal versus professional personas sometimes differ. Professionally and personally, it is not enough to just set up an online community and leave it to be populated by others.

One of the more detrimental impacts that the use of social media (by organizations and institutions) can have on engagement is experienced when social media profiles are created and then abandoned. As Bunker (2011) points out, to be successful with social media and alumni engagement, "online platforms require at least weekly updates . . . use social media judiciously; don't make the mistake of turning potentially essential alumni contact into Internet noise" (p. 13). This is especially true when one tries to create a substantial presence that they're trying to uphold online.

One of the biggest challenges faced when introducing social media into an organization is managing where personal and professional lives intersect online. Employers worry that social media will encourage employees to be too "social" online, possibly divulging company secrets (Allen & Naughton, 2011). However, Altes (2009) argues that younger alumni will set the standard of social interaction in professional workspaces as they have already mastered the online environment personally. The use of social media will present a steep learning curve for organizations not familiar with the medium. Social media is intended to be informal and yet professional—often a difficult balance to strike (Makrez, 2011). Ultimately, one has to ask what will be gained (and lost) when lives are so inextricably connected to Twitter and YouTube (Blankenship, 2011). Can trust be built in a professional environment without necessarily meeting face-to-face first? Trying to hard-sell community members without building trust first is also a drawback (Kowalik, 2011).

Staff and customer engagement cannot find strong footing without the support of business. If an organization supports a social media initiative spearheaded by one of their internal staff, that person becomes more passionate about the work they're doing and they bring their colleagues on board, which helps spread the message of a social media presence. Hoyt (2010) demonstrated, in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) MIT@Lawrence project, that stable engagement with a research community happened in large part because MIT supported Hoyt's engagement project through funding dollars and let the researcher tailor her project around her community involvement. Hastings et al. (2011) also noted that supportive environments were essential to foster engagement with budding young leaders.

Technology helps to build organizational interaction and culture. At the heart of organizational culture is a narrative woven together by members using the technology. Social media helps higher education institutions humanize stories of alumni and students, creating emotional attachment and possible future business (Kowalik, 2011). Leonardi and Jackson (2009) suggest that at the core of an organization, grounding in technology—coupled with communications—are essential to organizational culture. According to Lin and Ha (2009), the impact of culture and technology is a reciprocal one: culture can influence technology use, and increased technology use works with other

organizational factors to reinforce culture. Strong cultures can often clash with strong technologies, but with proper leadership, technology can be used to supplement and enhance organizational communications (Leonardi & Jackson, 2009). Effective leadership in an organization can use motivation and influence to form culture (Siddique, Aslam, Khan & Fatima, 2011). A climate of strong culture breeds a fertile ground for idea sharing, facilitated through technology. Important to the success of technology in organizational culture is ensuring that the platform being used is a fit with the community members. Organizations are encouraged to meet their clients in the spaces they already exist (Smedley, 2012).

The question of sustainability and online communities continues to come up in the literature. Often the idea of online community is better in theory than it is in practice, as evidenced in research conducted by Parr and Ward (2006). According to their findings, online community can ignore "vital precursors such as level of skill, and importantly, understanding of community in terms of roles and how a community might function to meet member needs" (p. 783). It is important to listen to stakeholders and conduct research before building and implementing online community. When proper research has not been conducted to see what interventions or frameworks are needed and how they can support the people who are already there, a community, whether physical, virtual or both, is more likely to fail.

According to Halligan (2010), the point of post-secondary institutions using social media to build community is ". . . about creating a relationship between the institution and its most important audiences—prospective students, alumni, donors, and others" (p. 32). Lakshiminarasimha and Vijayan (2008) see the combination of social networking with community building as bringing together people's skills and interests to contribute to a greater good through discussion and collaboration. They specifically looked at how LinkedIn encourages professionals to invite their friends and colleagues to join the platform, growing connections and community in an organic way.

No matter how many colleagues or friends are invited to join an online community, building relationships can be difficult if there is low awareness of the platform being used. If people don't understand how to use LinkedIn properly they could feel wary of sharing their thoughts, information, and personal details in such an open

environment. This issue is not adequately covered in the literature reviewed for this project.

METHODOLOGY

The literature review provided a strong foundation to ponder the objectives and research question for this study. In order to test some of the claims made in the literature regarding the use of social media for engagement, a mixed methods approach of collecting quantitative and qualitative data from a set population of alumni, specific to a post-secondary institution, was chosen to obtain a clearer understanding of LinkedIn use. The study was interested in evaluating the quality and value of interaction and engagement with alumni through social media. Can professional social media platforms such as LinkedIn create a space where alumni choose to interact and engage with students, faculty, and staff from their alma mater?

This study was discovery based and relied on a combination of empiricism and rationalism to test the research question and objectives. What this means is that "Logical methods help us determine through rational means what is theoretically connected and free from contradiction, whereas empirical methods help us identify what is probable based on our observations" (Merrigan, Huston & Johnston, 2012, p. 35). LinkedIn, the concept of the virtual community, and social media platforms have been studied and written about extensively in literature, but how it affects alumni engagement has only been observed until now. While an extensive review of the literature on the subject of building community online had been conducted, there were a number of gaps in the literature; for example, what supports an online environment; can that environment be a stand-alone piece to build community, and does it complement other pieces?

Participants

Just like the inhabitants of Netville ON, recent graduates tend to thicken their physical communities built during studies as they move into their career with their newly minted credentials. Job opportunities often lure alumni far around the world, so it is up to the parent institution to maintain a connection and foster a community-like feeling for alumni. The School of Public Health provides a good source of data to gain insight into the research question proposed for this study. Thinking about the young professionals in public health that graduate from the School, it seems natural that relationships that

developed between students will transfer to the workplace where they will continue to interact with one another as professionals.

The School, as a small and well-networked faculty, seems poised to grow its online community through social media in a way that can be sustainable and familiar to its alumni, developing this online community from existing relationships that are built on trust and tied to a geographical space. It is natural that using alumni from the School (a small faculty with a fairly well connected group of alumni) would make for the perfect testing ground for the LinkedIn research question. The School would like to be able to use their social media persona to set that genuine and informal tone with their alumni so that there can be the start of conversations, which can lead to connections and relationships that can hopefully lead to mentorship, volunteerism, leadership, and philanthropy.

As a smaller faculty on campus, students who went through programs with the School had the opportunity to meet their professors and instructors throughout the year. Students also had the opportunity to develop personal relationships with each other. Those relationships forged between classmates and between students and their professors are the face-to-face relationships (thick ties) that contribute to stronger online connectedness after students graduate and move on from post-secondary studies. LinkedIn is considered a key platform for networking the current students and staff. The group discussion spaces alone hold vast opportunity for the School; considering the balance of research and practiced-based learning and instruction, LinkedIn could theoretically be used to help facilitate discussions on translating research into practice for School participants.

As mentioned previously, the School conducted an alumni engagement survey in early 2012. Questions were posed to alumni about their previous, current, and future involvement with the university; with the School; with their community; their level of sentiment to the School, and ways they would like to be involved. The aim of this survey was for the School to better understand who their alumni were, what they were doing, how strongly they felt a tie to the School and how better the School could serve alumni needs. Based on the feedback from that survey, the School prioritized three pieces of information:

1.   Alumni feel an affinity for the university first, the School second.

      a.   Out of 110 respondents to a survey, 76% felt a "strong" affinity for the School of Public Health.

How can the School continue to leverage that feeling of affinity and connection? According to Girard and Sobczak (2011), engagement can be characterized by the emotional attachment to an organization. This survey shows evidence of more than three quarters of alumni feeling strong emotional attachment to the School. This attachment provides rich ground to build new and lasting relationships.

2.   Alumni want to hear more from the School including research, student accolades, and people profiles.

      a.   The School subscribed all alumni to the monthly electronic newsletter, Healthe-news, to help them stay in touch with what's happening.

According to Jenkins and Gravestock (2012), the interest in people profiles is understandable—storytelling is not only a way to share information, but also a way for individuals to make sense of their own experiences and where they fit in the world.

3.   Alumni want to be able to contribute and participate with the School, even from a distance.

      a.   The School has really tried to focus on this piece and it is the central part of this research. Can the School create an online environment that will encourage alumni to participate through networking and mentoring?

The School has developed systems to monitor the connections they make and the people who join their groups monthly. Beyond simply tracking growth, the School's MARCom team is monitoring the content being contributed to discussion groups and who some of the top discussion posters are. By responding to the tracked information, the School is taking tangible steps to show that they are paying attention to alumni comments. Also the School is focusing on some of their possible, previously neglected problems, which engages in the paradigms of knowing to help support the research methodology that addresses this and more (Merrigan, Huston & Johnston, 2012). A simple place to start is to canvas their alumni body so that the School can get a quick read for where there may be problems but also where there is opportunity to grow community.

This research project revealed that there is continued need for support for alumni once they pass through the doors. With the formation of a new, reinvigorated and functioning alumni chapter, executive members are seeking new ways to support alumni initiatives and bring students and alumni together for mentorship and networking possibilities. By creating an online environment where former classmates can find one another and begin to engage in conversations relevant to their field or place of work, feelings of loyalty and community can be rekindled among participants.

Methods

An electronic survey was devised to help gather quantitative data regarding social media and LinkedIn use by alumni. While the electronic survey asked important demographic information like age and degree, it was not the most important piece of this study. In order to achieve a more in-depth understanding of the relationship between alumni and the building of an online community, interviews were conducted with a small sample of survey respondents about their social media use, especially LinkedIn. According to Merrigan, Huston and Johnston (2012), using survey data and interviews as part of a research study, are considered self-reports, which allow participants "to disclose their own behaviours, beliefs, or characteristics" (p. 62). All survey data, interview themes, and literature reviewed would be compared and contrasted to help strengthen the study observations and support the research question.

Ethics approval

As this project served the purpose of fulfilling the requirement of this master's degree, it also informed the actual practices undertaken by the MARCom team at the School of Public Health. The principal investigator worked closely with the Director, Marketing and Alumni Relations, as well as a supervisor to structure survey questions that would inform the research study but also yield useful data for the School to use in communications planning (see Appendix C).

Prior to data collection, the project was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. Particular attention was given to the methods used to collect the data (both online survey and in-depth interviews). For the purposes of

this particular research project the interest was in collecting responses and analyzing data from a specific group of individuals (School alumni), but this group would still be respected in terms of confidentiality and informed consent when they were approached for study participation. The study participants were determined from a list drawn from a database that is maintained by University of Alberta Alumni Affairs. Requesting access to emails involved stating the purpose of use as well as signing a one-time-use confidentiality agreement. The request made to Alumni Affairs was also encapsulated in the ethics approval to the Research Ethics Office regarding how the list would be used.

Once ethics was approved and granted by the Research Ethics Board, the online survey was pre-tested with the project supervisor, and members within the MARCom team in the School, before being distributed to alumni. The project supervisor was also privy to the survey before it was distributed to make any necessary suggestions. Once alumni completed the survey, any who self-identified for further in-depth interviews would go through a simple random sample to choose six who were contacted for further interviews.

Process

Determining how to approach this study was influenced by the initial alumni engagement survey that the School of Public Health conducted in 2012. One of the findings from that particular survey was that alumni who did not live in Edmonton wanted to remain connected to the School and were open to online platforms to help facilitate that. It was from this population that this research project wanted to draw from again, to further determine the online habits of School alumni.

An electronic survey was created and distributed to the School alumni population, to get a quick, accurate view of LinkedIn use by that particular audience. The electronic survey was an appropriate method for the research question as it captured the demographics and the current use of LinkedIn. Once the data from that survey had been sifted through, it helped inform the development of the in-depth interview questions.

To help structure the 2013 online alumni engagement survey, the 2012 alumni engagement survey was referenced to help formulate questions. The survey was divided into four sections titled I: About You, II: Your Internet Use, III: Your Online Interaction,

and IV: Your Impressions of LinkedIn. In the first section (About You) all participants were asked to respond to basic demographic information (age, degree obtained, where participants lived and year of graduation). The next section (Your Internet Use) asked all participants to answer three questions about their Internet habits (how do you currently use the Internet, how would you characterize your Internet use, in the past year how often have you used [variety] of following social media platforms), etc.

Section three (Your Online Interaction) parsed out participants based on certain online habits. Participants were asked specific questions about how they received information from the School of Public Health, if they were interested in connecting to the School through specific social media platforms, and if participants had visited any of the School's social media accounts in the past year to receive news (YouTube, Twitter or LinkedIn)? Next, participants were asked if they had a LinkedIn account, or if they did not. Skip logic was employed on this question so that if participants answered "yes" to having a LinkedIn account, they were moved on to the next series of questions that asked them things like, "why are you on LinkedIn?" and "are you connected to the School of Public Health on LinkedIn?" Again, asking participants if they were connected to the School through LinkedIn was another decision point that incorporated skip logic. If people answered that "yes," they were connected to the School, they were moved on to the next question, which asked them if they participated in any groups on LinkedIn.

If participants answered that "no," they were not connected to the School on LinkedIn, they were skipped to a question that asked them why they were not connected to the School. They were given choices like: "I don't have time", "it seems like too much work", "I don't understand it", "I don't see any value in it", "I am not interested", etc. with an opportunity to offer their own open-ended responses to the question. The purpose really was to get as much explanation to alumni online habits as possible for the study. Once they had answered why they were not on LinkedIn, participants were directed to a question that stated how the School was currently using LinkedIn for alumni engagement; out of all the ways listed, the non-LinkedIn account holders were asked to check all the things that might possibly interest them.

In reality, this was the question that brought all the survey participants back together and reunited them so that they could finish the survey together. No matter which

direction the skip logic parsed out participants, they were all brought back to this specific question because they all had a voice and ideas that could be shared about how the School's LinkedIn group spaces could be used more effectively.

For the participants that were connected to the School via LinkedIn, the next questions were to dig a bit deeper into their group interaction and behaviours. If participants were a member of LinkedIn groups, they were asked whether they connected daily, weekly, monthly, or less than monthly, and how they used the groups (was it to share information, to listen to discussions, to connect with individuals within the group, to pose questions, or other reasons). If participants were not a part of any groups they were skipped to a question that asked them why they were not part of the group. The choices available were similar to those offered to people who were not connected to the School on LinkedIn: "I don't have time", "it seems like too much work", "I don't understand it", "I don't see any value in it", "I am not interested", etc. with an opportunity to offer their own open-ended responses to the question.

Next, participants were informed that the School actually had two closed groups on LinkedIn that were available to all staff, faculty, alumni, and students to join. They were asked if they were a member of the School closed group, a closed group for the global health stream, a member of both groups, or a member of neither. If participants chose neither group, they were skipped to a question that asked them to choose as many options as possible as to why they were not. Choices included: "I don't have time", "It seems like too much work", "I don't understand it", "I don't see any value in it", "I am not interested", "I was not aware of the closed groups created on the School's profile", and an open-ended answer section.

Finally, all participants were asked three questions: would they be interested in having a dedicated closed group for alumni only? Did they have any further feedback—based on the engagement survey in 2012 and this survey—on how the School could continue to serve the networking needs of alumni online? Would any of the survey participants be interested in being contacted for further in-depth interviews?

Due to the complexity of these questions and the skip logic employed the principal investigator piloted they survey with the project supervisor, as well as the Director, Marketing and Alumni Relations, and other members of the MARCom team

multiple times to ensure all questions and skip logic made sense. Once all members signed off on the survey, the next step was getting access to the list of School alumni that the survey would be distributed to. Then the Director, Marketing and Alumni Relations, sent a letter of invitation to all alumni via email on behalf of the School, providing the rationale for the research, the letter of informed consent and provided the link to the electronic survey (see Appendix B). On April 26, 2013, the online engagement survey was distributed to alumni via email. After 10 days the survey was closed on May 6, 2013, and the results were tabulated.

Data Collection and Analysis

Using a convenience sample approach, a survey was administered electronically to all alumni from the School of Public Health at the University of Alberta. All alumni with a valid email address were sent the survey. This electronic survey was designed to meet both the goals of this research project as well as help inform the future marketing, communications, and alumni relations programs for the School. Survey questions 11 to 26 were of particular importance to this study as they allowed the researcher to explore the LinkedIn habits of School alumni (see Appendix C).

Of the approximately 1,000 plus alumni from the School, the electronic survey was sent to 641 participants. Of the 641 people who received the survey, a total of 121 people completed it (approximately 18 percent). From the completed electronic survey 19 alumni self-identified that they were available for further interviews. From those 19 individuals, six were randomly selected for interviews. Those alumni chosen for further interviews were asked semi-structured questions about their experiences using LinkedIn (Appendix E).

This study adopted a mixed methods approach and as such, data coding took on different forms. The data that was collected from the electronic survey was tabulated and coded through SurveyMonkey's own filters. When the survey data was downloaded and analyzed using the default mode in SurveyMonkey, completion rates for all of the questions were shown (including actual numbers of participants who completed, as well as a percentage of those who completed each answer). There was also the option to download question responses in basic pie charts or graphs (SurveyMonkey, 2013).

This study started by looking specifically at the percentage of alumni who did or did not have LinkedIn. Out of 117 respondents, 74 (63%) indicated they had a LinkedIn profile. The remaining 43 respondents (37%) indicated they did not have a LinkedIn profile. The percentages and corresponding reports and charts provided insight into the divisive lines between LinkedIn use and lack of use. The survey also served to generate a list of participants who agreed to participate in an interview regarding their use of LinkedIn. Interview participants were audio recorded to help capture all of the nuances and data. All six participants were asked the exact same six questions in the same order and all participants had the same welcome and closing speech during the interviews (see Appendix E).

Audio recordings and transcripts were saved on a secure computer behind locked doors as per ethical requirements. Each transcript was completed using a unique colour in order to facilitate anonymous analysis of the representativeness of participants' comments across themes. Thematic analysis was completed; according to Merrigan et al. (2012), the "literature review may suggest that your topic can be divided into several small topics. Each one of these subtopics may represent a thematic unit that can be treated individually" (p. 167). The subtopics or themes for this research project were teased out through repeated readings of the interview transcripts in order to identify common or recurring themes. These themes were placed in a spreadsheet with one theme per column, and then pieces of the interviews were copied and pasted into the columns based on the fit for each theme. Once all interviews had been combed for text that supported the themes, the principal investigator printed out the spreadsheet and began looking to see where there was a high concentration of similar feelings by alumni, and which themes were underrepresented. Preliminary data and interpretations were explored with a third party who was familiar with the literature and research question. This process served to validate and critique potential findings and their implications in how LinkedIn was perceived and being used by alumni, but there were also barriers that were stated by participants through the interview process.

Findings

Of the 121 School alumni that participated in the electronic survey, 117 respondents answered the question that asked them if they had a LinkedIn profile. Sixty-three percent (74 respondents) confirmed that they do have a LinkedIn profile, leaving 37 percent (43 respondents) who do not have LinkedIn profiles. Of the 74 respondents that had a LinkedIn profile, they all responded strongly that they used LinkedIn to build their professional network, they wanted to increase their professional profile and finally, they wanted to share and get information on LinkedIn.

However, of the 74 who had LinkedIn, only 44 percent were connected with the School. When asked why they were not connected to the School of Public Health on LinkedIn, 61 percent or 25 respondents, answered that they were unaware that the School had a profile on LinkedIn. Those responses indicate that alumni awareness of the School's social media profiles continues to be low. What does this mean in terms of using LinkedIn for alumni engagement? There is an opportunity to learn from the survey responses and find ways to raise awareness of LinkedIn as a tool to connect alumni online. It also means that LinkedIn cannot, without some effort, lead to building a community or participation in the community.

Of the 43 respondents that said they did not have a LinkedIn profile, when asked why they were not LinkedIn users, the biggest reason they indicated was that they were not interested, followed by they didn't want to share their personal information online and that they didn't see the value in having a LinkedIn profile. These responses were the first indications of themes that would recur throughout the in-depth interview process.

All survey participants (regardless of whether they used LinkedIn) were asked in question 23, what ways they would or could use an online LinkedIn group for (see Appendix C). Respondents indicated they wanted to be able to use the closed discussion group spaces in LinkedIn to: 1) read the latest School research; 2) stay current with current global health issues; 3) participate in discussions on public health issues; 4) post job opportunities that connections may be interested in; 5) to introduce current public

health research to connections; and so on. The responses to question 23 helped shape the questions for the in-depth interviews that would follow (see table below).

Alumni Online Engagement Survey 2013

Alumni have said they want to be connected to the School online. LinkedIn members are currently using the School's two closed LinkedIn groups in the ways listed below. Which of the following are you interested in using the School's groups for. (please check all that apply)

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
To introduce current public health research to my	15.7%	11
To participate in discussions on public health issues	44.3%	31
To post job opportunities my connections may be interested	35.7%	25
To read the latest School research that is posted	65.7%	46
To stay current with global health issues	51.4%	36
To poll my connections on a certain public health issue	5.7%	4
To comment on previous discussions posted	12.9%	9
To like previous discussions posted	4.3%	3
Other (please specify)	7.1%	5
	answered question	70
	skipped question	51

Recurring themes that emerged during analysis of the interviews with LinkedIn users, included: 1) lack of time and interest with LinkedIn; 2) issues around privacy, security, and trust online; 3) recognition of LinkedIn as a professional space; 4) interest in staying in touch; 5) interest in the discussions and the importance of having facilitated/moderated discussions; and 6) LinkedIn being too impersonal a platform within which people want to interact.

Thematic analysis revealed that the alumni were engaged with each other and engaged with the content that was posted on LinkedIn for the most part. Within their closed group spaces they have used the discussions to share recent research information, student success stories and faculty and alumni profiles. Interviewees appreciated that discussions were seeded and moderated, and that the frequency of posts wasn't too high. However, LinkedIn users also indicated that there were some prevailing barriers that prevented uptake or extensive participation. Some of the barriers are far beyond the control of alumni or LinkedIn (such as lack of time or interest). Other barriers such as privacy, trust, and security issues were supported by the data pulled from SurveyMonkey and also supported by some of the literature reviewed for this project. The same could

also be said for the concern that LinkedIn was not personal enough for participants to have meaningful interactions.

Throughout the research process for this project, the ways in which social media supported reaching online community members in ways that resonated with them emotionally, were evidenced. While this outcome is desirable from a philanthropy perspective in alumni relations, the literature has indicated that relationships through social media have to be ongoing, informal, reciprocal, and participatory to reach the desired end goal. Social media must adapt to help supplement the supports currently in place to help engage alumni at the School of Public Health, but for now the literature indicates that face-to-face contact is still preferred as a means of communication.

So can community building and engagement work online using social media? The literature points to a resounding "yes". "More and more prospective students and younger alumni are joining social networks . . . in 2005, only 8% of adult Internet users had an online profile; today that number has more than quadrupled to 35%" (Lenhart, 2009, Kowalik, 2011, p. 215). Can engagement between the School of Public Health and its alumni remain sustainable? People still crave physical interactions that only face-to-face meetings can provide. Kowalik (2011) builds the case that social media is only as successful as the foundational pieces an educational institution has in place; strong communications and strategic plans potentially make for strong social media profiles and communities.

Study deficiencies

The results from this project may not be generalizable beyond this study, but the findings here have value to others post-secondary institutions looking to improve their alumni engagement strategies. There were a few things to note in this study that may have compromised the data that could have been collected and used for analysis. For example, the electronic survey was distributed only to School alumni with an email address, not distributed to *all* School alumni. Not including alumni without an email address results in a bias towards those connected by technology. The surveys could not remain anonymous as it was too easy to track Internet IP addresses for the electronic

surveys. Results from the survey had to remain confidential to the principal investigator and stored as designated in the ethics approval.

The response rate to the survey was only 121 people out of 641 surveys sent out. That means a response rate that was 18 percent, far lower than what the literature supports for a statistically valid survey response (approximately 30 percent response rate is what is recommended). While the response rate was below the recommended 30 percent, it doesn't invalidate the results. The data yielded from the survey was still valuable for gaining insight.

The in-depth interviews yielded much richer information regarding LinkedIn use by the School's alumni. Out of the 19 survey participants that self-identified for further interviews, the principal investigator wanted representation from three non-users of LinkedIn and three users of LinkedIn. Coincidentally, when the participants' names and contact information was pulled for the interviews, there were three people who had stated they were non-users of LinkedIn. Unfortunately, despite exhaustive efforts on the part of the principal investigator to contact the three non-users and set up interview times with them, none of the three returned emails or phone calls. That meant the study had to change; instead of having an equal balance of LinkedIn non-users and users, the principal investigator had to randomly sample six individuals who were all LinkedIn users for the in-depth interviews. While the selected participants reflect opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of LinkedIn usage, there is still data lacking from those who stated non-usage from the beginning.

Discussion / Conclusion

What this study has shown is that social media can indeed be used to help supplement and reinforce the idea of a traditional community. What it has also revealed is that social media is not a magic bullet solution to bridging distance and time when it comes to engagement. Social media, particularly LinkedIn, provides what could be termed as an introduction to an individual or a group and as the relationship progresses; there is a point where engagement must be taken to a face-to-face level for it to be significant.

It is worthy to note that previous scholars have critiqued online communication, believing that society would lose basic socialization skills without face-to-face communications. Rainie and Wellman (2012) argue the opposite

> [The] view has been that the Internet would foster an enormous increase in cooperation by allowing far-flung people to interact. Rather than alienation and isolation, there would be more relationships, more long-distance relationships, and more connections among the members of a person's network (p. 120).

The evidence for and against online communication is well documented, but unless it is put into practice, one will never know what outcomes are achievable. The School's MARCom team had already been conducting research into which social media platforms could be best used to connect with faculty, students, alumni, and staff. It is important to do the research and be prepared for what social media platform to engage in, according to Bunker (2011)—the proper social media can quickly help connect the School to alumni where they already have an online presence. Based on initial research, the School chose LinkedIn as the platform with which to experiment.

Based on the evidence amassed and literature discussed regarding engagement and geography, building LinkedIn as a professional space to make initial connections and to network is easy and applicable. Along the way participants indicated there were barriers in building and maintaining these online environments, specifically worries about privacy, security, trust, and getting over the lack of personalization online interactions can sometimes have. Overall though, the idea of using LinkedIn to support alumni engagement is a good one. The findings from this study show both differences and similarities of physical and virtual communities. Instead of finding overwhelming evidence of technology replacing physical community, instead the lesson learned is that social media does not replace the physical need human beings have to look someone in the eye when having a conversation.

What the survey and interview data revealed was that, strategically, the School was using LinkedIn in all the right ways to engage alumni. This engagement included creating and maintaining a professional profile, reaching out and connecting with former and current faculty, staff, students and alumni, creating a safe closed space for

discussions, and continuously moderating and seeding the discussion forums. But the interviews also revealed a whole set of barriers that had previously not appeared in any other literature, including privacy/security/trust issues, lack of time or interest to those engaged on LinkedIn, and the opinion that the technology itself wasn't as personalized as people would like. The interviewees views towards LinkedIn revealed that was that there were gaps between the expectations the School had towards LinkedIn and the actual experience of those who were on the platform.

Proximity previously meant that those who shared physical space constituted a community. Yochai Benkler (2006), who writes about social networks and the idea of being social through references from Howard Rheingold, discusses how communities are created around new technologies as more of our physical informal spaces disappear. His analogy is that of sitting around a campfire—it is new; it is warm, and it instantly attracts people around it. Then, as people gather closer, the stories begin, the laughter becomes easier, the mood lightens and people share. The social networks of today are like the campfires Benkler describes—inviting and inclusive without necessarily physically sitting next to someone around a campfire. When all six alumni were interviewed for this research project they all could agree that LinkedIn discussion groups, in essence, provided that analogous experience. Many appreciated the discussion topics that were posted—some of the interview subjects reported that they liked to look, listen, and learn, while others were much more active and vocal in their participation.

Mark Blankenship (2011) argues that, while social media can bridge some of the geographical gaps by creating online creative space for conversation, sometimes the best ideas come from sharing physical space with others. Two of the interviewees indicated that they found it more difficult to conduct conversations virtually because they felt like they were talking to strangers, which speaks to the need for some to maintain physical proximity to people when learning or discussing things. There is efficiency and ease between interactions based on the non-verbal cues one can pick up from one another. According to the literature, geography is being re-imagined—it is no longer defined by physical, tangible boundaries, but is increasingly associated the boundless spaces and relationships that are built on connections and facilitated by technology. Both the

physical and the virtual are needed in a relationship to make successful and lasting communication.

Five out of six alumni interviewed agreed that having a LinkedIn profile allowed them to stay in touch with former classmates and professors and work colleagues. They appreciated having a professional space, unlike Facebook, where they could connect with people and share things that were of interest to them. Their comments reinforced the data that came from the electronic survey (51 of 74 respondents, or 69% agreed that they were on LinkedIn to build their professional networks). The School's social media accounts act like a middleman or a broker, bringing together people who formerly studied there or have a general interest in public health. This type of participation online creates value for both members and the organization. The engagement has to be genuine and informal— communities can be built from simple conversations, which are important (Makrez, 2011). As Makrez probes, social media is a relationship, and to be successful the lines of communication must be open.

The purpose of the study was to learn about how LinkedIn could be used as an engagement tool for alumni audiences with their alma mater. The findings will inform communications planning and practices at the School of Public Health. The School has always prioritized the building of relationships with their alumni. From a strong foundation built on trust, LinkedIn can be used to inspire School alumni to volunteer, to mentor, and to eventually give back financially to their alma mater. This approach is supported in the literature; the conversations cultivated early on in an online environment can lead to successful campaigns and possible philanthropy down the road (Kowalik, 2011). While the tool may fit the purpose, Comer (2011) also stresses that if the online relationship is important enough, there will be a point where one might want to take the conversation offline and meet face-to-face. The School is realizing more and more the importance of connecting with alumni face-to-face at networking events. The interim dean had begun late in 2012 and into 2013 contacting alumni whenever she was travelling. She would often arrange dinners, brunches, or cocktails for these small pockets of alumni so that she could have more focused conversations and hear what their concerns and interests were with the School, with public health research and the like.

Oddly enough, five of the six interviewed lamented the fact that they didn't have enough time to make proper use of LinkedIn and the discussion groups. More often it was due to busy work and life schedules, but one interviewee indicated that the workplace did not encourage any sort of connection with social media. Sites were blocked and access to social media platforms were monitored by IT to see how long employees spent in these spaces. Workplace behaviour like this can discourage employees from using a social media platform that could be such a useful tool. The literature supports the use of social networking within professional settings; Hung and Yuen (2010) discovered that social networking makes for a more focused environment with fewer distractions, as opposed to face-to-face interactions. Their research has also shown that online interaction, coupled with offline conversations, helped strengthen emotional connectedness of users to their organization. Unfortunately, poverty of time is something that every person and organization encounters and it is not something that is easily solved.

Overall lack of awareness about LinkedIn's functionality, and concerns about sharing personal information online, were other barriers that emerged in both the survey and the interviews. While not directly addressed in literature used for this study, the concern about privacy, security and trust online was very real to those interacting in LinkedIn's spaces. This indicates the need for in depth discussion to increase the understanding of exactly what concerns alumni most. One interviewee indicated that fears around trust, privacy, and security could possibly be remedied by having a training session with alumni on how to create and use their LinkedIn profiles to full potential. Some issues around privacy may never be fixed, though, as the concern hinges on who owns the technology, where the servers that hold LinkedIn's information are housed, and what the online privacy legislation is in the host country. Social media users may be faced with the constant difficult choice of how and who they interact with online.

When it comes to overcoming barriers and finding the solutions to making LinkedIn successful for building online community, it is going to require a community effort (in all senses of the word), and the best way to overcome these barriers is to come back to the idea of how social media community-building can bridge alumni with their alma mater through social capital. Social capital is the backbone of what makes traditional and virtual communities work. "Social capital theory is that social networks

have value . . . social capital refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity . . . " (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). In this new mixed "community" space, by blending the virtual with the physical, people can collaborate more, working together to find solutions to problems.

Directions for future research

This study has established LinkedIn as a tool for online engagement, supporting alumni who want to be connected with their alma mater online. How to overcome the barriers reported by participants during this research study will be important if LinkedIn is to ever be considered as a lasting, sustainable way to build and maintain community. It will be interesting and worthwhile in the future to do research around how important trust, privacy, security, and personalization are and what it means to alumni engagement.

There are a number of ways that the research from this study can move LinkedIn forward as the technology of choice for continued use between alumni and their alma mater. Raising awareness around LinkedIn's functionality in building professional profiles and the potential to facilitate rich discussion in groups could be achieved through some sort of campaign. A video, an infographic, mail-outs, or regular reminders sent to all alumni could help increase awareness. For those who are savvier with how LinkedIn profiles and discussions spaces work, they could do a video tutorial and/or a brown bag lunch with alumni and train them how to properly, securely, and efficiently use their LinkedIn accounts.

More research needs to be done on the alumni that are connected to their alma mater through LinkedIn. The struggles around participation in the discussion groups should be further explored to see what would entice alumni to contribute in conversations. This is where the participant sample for this project, the School, could be further studied to see how they interpret the literature, the survey, and interview comments about not abandoning face-to-face interactions in the future. The key for success for LinkedIn is finding how the tool can supplement face-to-face interactions to help overcome barriers. A study of connected alumni that attend physical networking events could yield some interesting results that further supports or refutes the claims this study has made. The School's new dean has the opportunity to continue the trend the

interim dean started. If he travels, it would be good for him to reach out to alumni at his destinations and engage them in meaningful conversations. The literature and this study have indicated that there is great potential for virtual and physical interactions to grow, adapt, and perfect community building overall. This study is but one step in the cyclical process of testing, trying, evaluating, changing, and testing.

Because the School is keen to entrench social media into the faculty overall, especially with new students as they arrive, it would be interesting to choose an incoming cohort as a LinkedIn pilot group. Using them as a longitudinal study following as they join the technology in the beginning, how they shape it and the many uses they will have for the platform as students and eventually as professionals entering the workforce could yield interesting results.

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Appendix A

Letter of informed consent for surveys

Participant Information and Consent Form (survey)

Study Title: Using LinkedIn for Alumni Engagement

Research Investigator:
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Background
- You are being asked to participate in this study because you at one point attended and/or graduated from the School of Public Health (and/or the Centre for Health Promotion Studies or the Department of Public Health Sciences).
- The results of this study will be used in support of my final research project for my master's program.

Purpose
- The purpose simply is to evaluate the effectiveness of social media use by the School of Public Health at the University of Alberta.
- Research Question: Can professional social media platforms such as LinkedIn create a space where alumni will choose to interact and engage with students, faculty and staff from their alma mater?
- The research aims to determine if the social (media) technology being used, particularly LinkedIn facilitates engagement for School alumni. The results from this evaluation will be used to determine if other social technologies should be maintained and grown to further engage with target audiences.
- The study is in partial fulfillment of the Masters of Arts in Communication and Technology degree for Andrea Lauder.

Study Procedures
- An evaluative approach will be taken to ascertain the effectiveness of social technology on external and internal communications with the School of Public Health
    - A census survey will be administered to all alumni from the School of Public Health, to better determine their Internet usage as well as any social media platforms that they use.
    - Based on responses to the survey, those participants who indicate they would like to participate further will be contacted to do face-to-face interviews.
    - The Principal Investigator (PI) will use social media analytics tools such as Google Analytics, TwitterCounter and Bit.ly stats to understand the relationship to social technology in use for the School.

Voluntary Participation
- Participants are under no obligation to participate in this study. Participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw and/or opt out of this study at any time without penalty. To withdraw from

this survey, simply close your browser window. If you complete and submit the survey, you can ask to have any collected data withdrawn from the study. In the event of opting out, all data withdrawn will be destroyed (deleted from server and paper documents shredded). Requests for withdrawal of data must be received by the author, in writing, before May 1, 2013. There are no known risks or personal benefits from participation in this study.

Confidentiality & Anonymity
- All participant information (names (if provided), survey answers, titles) will be kept private and confidential. For participants who take part in optional post-survey interviews, all collected information pertaining to interview questions and data analyzed will be kept anonymous in the research project and reporting process.
- All audio and electronic Word files will be downloaded from specific devices and stored in a password protected file for a minimum of five years. After that point in time, where appropriate, electronic files will be deleted and physical documents will be shredded. Data collected for this specific research project will be used for the final research project produced by the researcher, and has received Research Ethics Board approval.
- Data collected through participation in the SurveyMonkey survey will be stored on servers that are located in the United States of America, and as such are subject to review by the U.S. Federal Authorities as per the U.S. Patriot Act (section 215 Access to Records).
- Only a copy of the final study that reports aggregate survey results and summaries of interview answers that do not in any way identify the respondent will be made available.

Further Information
- If participants have questions please contact:
    - Andrea Lauder, 780.492.1982, andrea.lauder@ualberta.ca
    - Fay Fletcher (supervisor), 780.492.2283, fay.fletcher@ualberta.ca
- The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at 780.492.2615.

Participant Informed Consent
- I acknowledge that the research procedures have been explained to me, and that any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that my participation in this survey indicates that I consent to have my information used for the purposes of this study. In addition, I know that I may contact the person designated on his form, if I have further questions, either now, or in the future. I have been assured that the personal records relating to this study will be kept anonymous. I understand that I am free to withdraw from this study at any time and I will not be asked to provide a reason.

By participating in this survey you acknowledge that all information gathered about you during this survey can be used for further contact or further research purposes related to this project only. You need not answer all the survey questions and if, at any point, you wish to not complete this survey, please simply close your browser window.

If you would like a copy of the research report after final grades have been assigned please contact Andrea Lauder at: 780.492.1982 or andrea.lauder@ualberta.ca.

Appendix B

Letter of invite from the School of Public Health to alumni to participate in the survey

[date]

Dear alumnus:

In 2012, many alumni of the School of Public Health participated in the Alumni Engagement Survey. Perhaps you were one of them.

Since then—thanks in large part to your feedback—we've implemented more ways for you to connect with each other, the School and future graduates. We hope to foster reciprocal, meaningful and relevant opportunities for you to share knowledge, experience and networks.

We are following up with you at this time to ask specific questions about how you use online spaces and how you like connect to the School and to others.

This survey is being distributed on behalf of Andrea Lauder, marketing and alumni relations associate with the School. Andrea is conducting this survey on behalf of the School, but also as part of the degree requirements of the master of communication and technology program through the Faculty of Extension. Her master's research will examine how social media can be used to build online community and connect our alumni.

Andrea has received ethics approval from the University of Alberta for this project, and you will find attached a detailed letter of informed consent on how your feedback will be used for this research project. From the perspective of the School, your feedback will be used to strengthen our communication and connections with alumni.

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey, which should take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. Please note that your responses will be confidential and you will remain anonymous, unless you indicate a desire to participate in a follow-up interview.

Please direct any questions to Andrea Lauder at andrea.lauder@ualberta.ca or to me at donna.richardson@ualberta.ca.

Yours truly,

Donna Richardson
Director, Marketing and Alumni Relations

cc Lory Laing, Interim Dean
/attachments

Appendix C

Survey questions administered to alumni through SurveyMonkey.com

Sample Survey Questions

Thank you for your participation in this survey. You need not answer all of the questions and your submission of this survey implies your consent to participation.

1. What was the highest degree you obtained during your studies with the School of Public Health at the University of Alberta? (please check all that apply)
   a. PGD / PhD
   b. MPH
   c. MSc
   d. MHSA

2. What year did you graduate? (drop down menu) groups

3. How old are you?
   a. Less than 30
   b. 30 to 39
   c. 40 to 49
   d. 50 to 59
   e. 60 and over

4. Where do you currently live?
   a. Edmonton and area
   b. Alberta, excluding Edmonton and area
   c. Canada
   d. Other (please specify)

5. How do you get information about the School of Public Health? (please check all that apply)
   a. School of Public Health website
   b. Healthe-news (electronic monthly newsletter
   c. Media coverage (television, newspaper, radio, etc.)
   d. Colleagues
   e. Other alumni
   f. New Trail (University of Alberta alumni magazine)
   g. University of Alberta website
   h. School of Public Health Twitter feed
   i. School of Public Health Linked In group
   j. I do not get news about the School
   k. Other (please specify)

6. How interested are you in connecting with the School through the following media?
    (Very Interested, Somewhat Interested, Not Interested at all)
    a. Healthe-news (electronic monthly newsletter
    b. Facebook page
    c. Twitter feed
    d. Linked In group
    e. Other (please specify)

7. How would you characterize your current Internet usage?
    a. I'm a power user (I'm online all the time).
    b. I use the Internet for my job, but not much outside of that.
    c. I use the Internet infrequently.
    d. I am not on the Internet at all.
    e. Other (please specify)

8. How do you currently use the Internet?
    a. Mostly for work (collaborating on documents, sending files, using programs specific to my job)
    b. Mostly for personal use (Skyping with family, posting to Facebook, emailing photos, etc.)
    c. A mixture of work and pleasure
    d. I use the Internet only for basic communication
    e. Other (please specify)

9. In the past year, how often have you used the following social media platforms? Daily, weekly, monthly, less than monthly,
    a. YouTube
    b. Linked In
    c. Twitter
    d. Facebook
    e. Flickr
    f. Blogger
    g. Wordpress
    h. Other (please specify) separate question

10. The School of Public Health currently communicates and interacts with audiences on the following social media platforms. In the past year, how often have you visited these School of Public Health platforms? (Daily, weekly, monthly, less than monthly,)
    a. School of Public Health Twitter feed
    b. School of Public Health YouTube channel
    c. School of Public Health Linked In group

11. The following questions are specific to Linked In.

    a. Do you have a LinkedIn Profile? (Yes – if yes logic will pass them on to next question; No, Not applicable – if either of these are checked, logic will pass them on to question 11.h)

    b. Why are you in LinkedIn? (Please check all that apply.)

       To build my professional network
       To increase my professional profile
       To share information
       To get information
       Other (please specify) [text box]

    c. Are you a part of any groups through your Linked In profile? (Yes – if yes logic feeds them to next question, No – if no logic skips them to another question asking them why they are not)

    d. In the last year, how often have you participated in Linked In groups that you are a member of?

       Daily
       Weekly
       Monthly
       Less than monthly

       How do you **currently** use Linked In groups? (please check all that apply)
       To share information To listen to discussions To connect with individuals through the group To pose questions Other (please specify)

    e. Are you connected to the School of Public Health profile on LinkedIn? (Yes, No) add logic

12. Which of the following Linked In groups are you a member of?

    School's closed groups that have been created on their LinkedIn profile? (Yes – if yes bump them down to the next question, No – logic bumps them to an open-answer section where they can explain why they are or are not connected with our groups)
    a. School of Public Health group
    b. Global Health – School of Public Health group

13. Shown below are several ways that the School's Linked In groups could be used. Which of these ways are you interested in using the School's LinkedIn closed group ? (please check all that apply)
    a. For sharing *your* news with the School
    b. For sharing *your* ideas with the School
    c. For sharing *your* relevant job postings
    d. To read more about research results from the School

      e.   To read current School news
      f.   To connect with individuals related to the School
      g.   To ask questions to School Linked In group participants
      h.   Other (please specify)

14. Why are you not currently a Linked In user?

    I don't have time.
    It seems like too much work.
    I don't understand it.
    I don't see any value in it.
    I am not interested
    I don't want to share personal information online.
    Other (please specify) (comment box)

15. Last January, the School of Public Health surveyed alumni. In that survey, alumni told us that they are interested in staying connected to us, no matter the distance. We heard your feedback and we are working towards building a strong community online through our social media to serve faculty, staff, alumni and students. Please share your thoughts on how we can continue to serve you better and meet your networking needs online. (comment box)

16. The School would like to contact you for further interviews regarding how to connect with alumni using LinkedIn. If you would like to participate in interviews please provide your contact information including email address, phone number and year of birth (open ended, comment box). Not everyone will be contacted to participate in the interview portion of this study.

Thank you!

Appendix D

Letter of informed consent for in-depth interviews

Participant Information and Consent Form (for interviews)

Study Title: Using LinkedIn for Alumni Engagement

Research Investigator:
NAME: Andrea Lauder
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POSTAL CODE: T6G 1C9
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Supervisor:
NAME: Dr. Fay Fletcher, Associate Professor and Academic Director, Community Engagement Studies
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Edmonton, Alberta
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EMAIL: fay.fletcher@ualberta.ca
PHONE NUMBER: 780.492.2283

Background
- You are being asked to participate in this study because you operate on the social technology that is currently being used by the School of Public Health. The experience that you have in this medium is important to how the School currently interacts with its publics online and where it will possible move in the future.
- The results of this study will be used in support of my final research project for my master's program.

Purpose
- The purpose simply is to evaluate the effectiveness of social media use by the School of Public Health at the University of Alberta.
- Research Question: Can professional social media platforms such as LinkedIn create a space where alumni will choose to interact and engage with students, faculty and staff from their alma mater?
- The research aims to determine if the social (media) technology being used, particularly LinkedIn, facilitates engagement for School alumni. The results from this evaluation will be used to determine if other social technologies should be maintained and grown to further engage with target audiences.
- The study is in partial fulfillment of the Masters of Arts in Communication and Technology degree for Andrea Lauder.

Study Procedures
- An evaluative approach will be taken to ascertain the effectiveness of social technology on external and internal communications with the School of Public Health
  o Six alumni will be interviewed chosen from a simple random sample based on their response to an administered survey. This interview will consist of no more than five questions and will take no longer than 30 minutes.

Voluntary Participation
- Participants are under no obligation to participate in this study. Participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw and/or opt out of this study at any time without penalty. You can ask to have

any collected data withdrawn from the study. In the event of opting out, all data withdrawn will be destroyed (deleted from server and paper documents shredded). Requests for withdrawal of data must be received by the author, in writing, before June 1, 2013. There are no known risks or personal benefits from participation in this study.

Confidentiality & Anonymity
- Participant information (names, answers, titles) will be kept private and confidential. All collected information pertaining to interview questions and data analyzed will be kept anonymous in the research project and reporting process. All audio and electronic Word files will be downloaded from the device and stored in a password protected file for a minimum of five years. After that point in time, where appropriate, electronic files will be deleted and physical documents will be shredded. Data collected for this specific research project will be used for the final research project produced by the researcher, and has received Research Ethics Board approval.
- Information collected and compiled for this study can be made available to study participants once final course grades have been issued.

Further Information
- If participants have questions please contact:
    - Andrea Lauder, 780.492.1982, andrea.lauder@ualberta.ca
    - Fay Fletcher, 780.492.2283, fay.fletcher@ualberta.ca
- The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at 780.492.2615.

Participant Informed Consent
- I acknowledge that the research procedures have been explained to me, and that any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that audio and paper transcripts of the interview will be recorded. In addition, I know that I may contact the person designated on his form, if I have further questions, either now, or in the future. I have been assured that the personal records relating to this study will be kept anonymous. I understand that I am free to withdraw from this study at any time before April 1, 2013 and I will not be asked to provide a reason.

_____
DATE

_____   _____
PRINTED NAME OF PARTICIPANT   SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

_____   _____
PRINTED NAME OF INVESTIGATOR   SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

Please indicate if you would like a copy of the research report after final grades have been assigned:
☐YES   ☐NO

Appendix E

Interview questions

Sample Semi-Structured Interview Questions

For this portion of my research project I am interested in learning how School alumni are using the Internet and social media. The literature states that, "social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube . . . engage alumni and keep them involved in the college community". I am interested in learning if social media can indeed create a feeling of 'community' online for our alumni and if it is a community they are interested in participating in.

1.   What is your experience with LinkedIn? (for those who have responded yes to LinkedIn)

2.   Can you tell me more about why did you / did you not adopt this technology? *What would motivate you to join our online community through LinkedIn? (if answer was no to #2).*

3.   Who have you found to connect with on LinkedIn? Who do you interact with on LinkedIn? (if yes to adopting technology)

4.   What characteristics make it easy to join and interact in an online community in your opinion? (for all to answer)

5.   Can you tell me about the benefits that you have experienced in being part of the School's LinkedIn community? (for those who have only answered yes to LinkedIn)

6.   What advice do you have for us about making the School's LinkedIn group an appropriate place to build a community for alumni?

Context setting (this will be used for the final question which all will be asked to answer:

- *Half of alum are not in Edmonton. Even those in Edmonton don't necessarily connect with each other.*
- *Yet, alumni have indicated that they would like to connect with the School virtually.*
- *How can we help alumni connect virtually? Do you want to connect virtually? LinkedIn? Other ways?*