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Increasing Engagement With Student Government Associations: An Examination Of Student Publics

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INCREASING ENGAGEMENT WITH STUDENT GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATIONS:

AN EXAMINATION OF STUDENT PUBLICS

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65 Pages

Student Government Associations (SGAs) are campus organizations comprised of student leaders which advocate on behalf of the student population. Participation in SGAs have proven academic, professional, and social benefits, yet the engagement in the organization has declined. This study employs Daft and Lengel's (1986) Media Richness Theory to examine if different media affect the composition of student publics. These publics are defined using Grunig's (1979) Situational Theory of Publics (STP). Additionally, the impact of self-efficacy, response efficacy, and perceptions of social norms on the variables in STP is also examined.

KEYWORDS: Student Government, Higher Education, Student Participation, Media Richness, Civic Engagement

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

I was introduced to American politics by characters in *The West Wing*, a workplace drama about the White House. The show follows a fictitious President and his senior staff who, as members of the Democratic party, engage in progressive politics. As a result, my values regarding the role of government and my duties as a voter in a society are idealistic. Just like Sam Seaborn and C.J. Cregg, characters in the television series, I believe that voter apathy and citizen inaction only exacerbate societal problems. So, in the sophomore year of my undergraduate career, I signed up to be a Senator for the College of Arts and Sciences for the Students' Association on my campus. During my two-year tenure, I was able to help my constituents address their academic, professional, and social concerns. I served on the Finance Committee, helping distribute $2.8 million/year among student organizations. Additionally, I interacted with the Presidents, Provosts, Deans, City Councilpersons, and Mayors, to implement policies on campus as well as in the community.

Student Government Associations (SGAs) are also known as Students' Associations, Student Governments, and College Student Councils. At the most rudimentary level, SGAs are organizations comprised of elected student leaders, who represent the student body by interacting in decision-making with campus administrators, staff, and faculty (Cohen & Krisker, 2010; Friedson & Schuhmann, 1955; May, 2010). The history of SGAs is parallel to the evolution of the federal government in the United States. National governance structures developed in response to protests and community dissatisfaction. According to May (2010), college students were discontent with the inferior treatment they received from campus administrators. As a

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result, students developed SGAs to take control of their collegiate experience and focus on problems faced by the student community.

According to Adler and Goggin (2005), when individuals become involved with the community, they partake in civic engagement. However, Saltmarsh and Hartley (2011) disagree, stating that "mere activity in a community does not constitute civic engagement" (p 17). Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, and Jenkins (2002) clarified by providing 19 indicators for community involvement, including but not limited to community problem solving, regular voting, protesting, and contacting officials. Skarmeas, Leonidou, Saridakis, and Mussara (2019) explained that civic engagement "can activate change in individuals' behavior and thus generate public support, which is *sine qua non* in the solution of large-scale problems" (p. 3).

Shifting the focus regarding civic engagement from the community to academia, Woolard (2015) created a typology of seven civic education pedagogies. Building on this typology, Hunt and Woolard (2016) expressed that, classroom education is a necessary component to increase civic engagement and, "various pedagogies of civic education, promote active student learning engagement" (p. 545). Kuh, Cruse, Shoup, and Kinzie (2008) added that institutional commitment is necessary for civic education to flourish. As organizations, SGAs help student access institutional entities while holding them accountable, serving as a platform for practical civic engagement. According to the criteria derived from Keeter et al. (2002), and Woolard (2015), this engagement is indicated by SGA leaders' interactions with students regrading problems on campus, or conversations with administrators regarding organizational concerns, and even involvement in process of curating and executing an electoral campaign.

Participation in SGAs has several benefits as well. Lawless and Fox (2013) discovered that students who participated in SGAs were seven times more likely than their peers to run for

political office, vote, and become involved in the community. Yet, SGAs are not necessarily a predictor of civic engagement after graduating college. Rather, SGAs model civic engagement for students. SGAs provide a low-risk environment to understand the structures of local, state, and national governance institutions, and can equip students with tools to be engaged within their communities. However, student involvement in SGAs has declined over the past few years (Daprile, 2019; Ellington, 2019; O'Brien, 2018; Wooddell, 2019). Having been a part of SGA, this paper is my attempt to examine the effectiveness of the media used to increase student engagement with SGAs.

Rather than focusing on the message, this study seeks to inspect the importance of the media used to deliver the message. SGAs use social media, emails, and print materials such as posters and flyers, to disseminate information to students. Grunig's (1976) Situational Theory of Publics (STP) argues that consumers react to Public Relations (PR) efforts by organizations in different ways based on their beliefs about a certain problem. Grunig placed individuals into four publics – active, aware, latent, or none, based on their interactions with PR messages created by organizations. This paper seeks to understand the influence of media on the composition of student publics. The study is predicated on the fact that exposure to different media could change the levels of independent variables in STP, resulting in a change in publics. The difference between the message and the media delivering the message has been described using Lengel and Daft's (1988) Media Richness Theory (MRT). According to MRT, messages differ in their effectiveness based on the media which is used to deliver them. Analyzing STP in relation with MRT is beneficial in examining the effectiveness of current media and improving their design for PR purposes.

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Additionally, STP furthers that PR messages aim to change consumer behavior. Witte's (1992) Extended Parallel Process Model (EPPM) examines the role of efficacy in behavioral change interventions. Student perceptions about their own ability to interact with SGAs and their beliefs about SGAs as organizations lead to participation, or lack thereof. As a result, self-efficacy and response-efficacy are also studied to expand STP. Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) posits that perceptions of societal norms are an important factor in predicting individual action. Peer perceptions of SGAs could influence student participation, hence the relationship between STP and perceptions of social norms is also considered in this research. The next sections include information about past research surrounding SGAs, the variables in STP, MRT, EPPM, and TPB. Additionally, the methods for data collections and analysis are outlined and commentary on results is provided. The thesis ends with a discussion about the findings and limitations, and direction for future research.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Student Government Associations (SGAs)

History of SGAs

Student satisfaction with higher education was extremely low until the 1900s because of the stratification of campus population with teachers and administrators at the top and students at the bottom (May, 2010). This hierarchical organization at higher education institutions was driven by the power distance between the two groups. Katz (1968) described the culture surrounding academia from 1700s to 1900s as one in which students were subservient to campus administrators, faculty, and staff, and not worthy of the same rights as teachers or even other citizens. Coulter (1979) added that officials at the University of Georgia during the late 1700s and early 1800s believed that students "had no rights that need be respected, in fact they were not supposed to be important enough to have rights" (p. 47). Student freedom was not considered a part of academic experience, so much so that "nearly every aspect of their lives was controlled and monitored by the faculty and college administrators" (May, 2010, p. 208). For students, the lack of ownership surrounding their lives was exacerbated by absence of activities outside of academics.

Rudolph (1990) expressed that curriculum in colonial times and the early 18th century centered around classical education. May (2010) added that "elective and professional courses were not available" (p. 208). During 1870-1890, many college administrators perceived that extracurricular activities would provide little benefit to the student population (Gholson, 1985). Administrative control of students' lives made it impossible for these activities to exist. However, May (2010) furthered "as with students of any era, these young people sought ways to express themselves, to find something to fill their time, and to empower themselves and become

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engaged in their campus environments" (p. 208). It is evident from these authors that autonomy in engagement was a priority for student populations.

Lack of control over their own lives prompted students to organize revolts and rebellions during the late 1700s and early 1800s. During this period, students targeted instructors and torched buildings to protest their subordinate-like treatment by college officials (Jackson, 2000). This tumultuous phase led to what Freeman (2017) called "a period of passive acceptance" by college administrators and faculty (p. 16). During this time, college administrators began to relinquish some authority and control to students (Crane, 1969). Students seized this opportunity to establish systems that gave them control over their student life. Student organizations started to emerge to provide college students access to extracurricular activities (Gholson, 1983). This was the genesis of organized student self-governance in the United States.

Friedson and Shuchman (1955) defined student self-governance as a "type of organization which by virtue of its composition and constitution is entitled to represent the student community as a whole" (p. 6). This self-governance started in the form of literary societies. May (2010) explained that these societies "enabled students to become engaged educationally and socially" and influenced the creation of campus libraries (p. 209). While managing these libraries, students developed a set of rules for borrowing and returning books. According to Harding (1959), at "Yale in 1856 seniors and juniors only were allowed to draw or consult books" (p. 95). At Harvard it was a rule that "no person, expect the librarian and his assistant shall go into the alcoves of the general library" (Carlton, 1907, p. 483). These rules served as a basis for the by-laws and regulations used by contemporary SGAs.

In the early 1830s, colleges started offering extracurricular activities such as athletics, fraternities, clubs, and other honor societies (Coates & Coates, 1985). The increase in

extracurricular activities led to student identification by their class associations and "as a result class councils were established in the late 1800s and early 1900s" (May, 2010, p. 212). These councils, governed by elected class officers, handled honor and discipline infractions among their peers and acted as liaisons between students and administrators (Somers, 2003). As previously noted, administrators were averse to providing students control over their lives. However, by managing infractions among peers, student councils developed mechanisms for self-accountability, and in the process, established a rapport with college administrators.

Coincidentally, the acceptance of extracurricular activities took place around the same time when women and some racial minorities were allowed admittance into colleges (Caple, 1998; Gordon, 1990). As student populations across campuses increased, extracurricular activities became a marker by which students began identifying themselves. Therefore, the influence of student councils began to decline. Yet, the effects of student councils were significant. Harris and Dyer (2006) contended that the student self-regulation provided by student councils was "clearly a precursor to student involvement in campus judicial matters, setting the groundwork for the student governments that arose in their wake" (p. 34). In the mid-20th century, the creation of representative governance organizations was formalized into the contemporary form of student associations (May, 2010). These student governments included, "honor systems, advisory councils to faculty, committees with power of discipline, oversight of residence halls, and management of extracurricular activities" (Cohen & Krisker, 2010, p. 261). To that extent, participation in SGAs, as a leader or a member, facilitated and continues to facilitate several cultural, social, educational, and professional benefits.

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SGAs and Student Engagement

Benefits of SGAs cannot be debated without understanding that SGAs serve as a good indicator and measure for student engagement. Finn and Zimmer (2012) summarize past research and posit two components of student engagement: behavioral and affective. The behavioral component comprises of three elements – academic, social, and cognitive engagement. The affective element "is a level of emotional response characterized by feelings of involvement in school as a place and a set of activities worth pursuing" (p. 103). The authors conclude that organizations which include these four elements are likely to attract student engagement. The following section contains examples which help justify the use of SGAs as a measure for student engagement.

Academic engagement. Finn and Zimmer (2012) claimed that "certain minimal 'threshold' levels of academic engagement are essential for learning to occur" (p. 102). This academic engagement may come in the form of formal classroom education or can be augmented through co-curricular or extra-curricular activities. Miller and Kraus (2004) posited that students gain "organizational, planning, managing, and decision-making skills from their experience in student government" by participating in SGAs (p. 424). These intangible, life-long skills are extremely beneficial, especially in the workplace.

A dated study conducted among AT&T male managers revealed that participation in student government increased managerial potential (Bray, Campbell, & Grant, 1974). SGA leaders often interact with their peers, faculty and staff, college administrators, state lawmakers, and state Board of Reagents. These interactions are likely to provide negotiation and public speaking skills, which could assist managerial ventures. Laosebikan-Buggs (2009) conducted qualitative interviews with SGA presidents to research their involvement in campus governance.

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One student claimed, "as a SGA representative in ANY capacity, one is given access to a pool of influential people/companies that other people are not" (p. 93). Student benefits of participation in SGA are evident even after their graduation from a higher education institution, leading us to a discussion of the next two elements.

Cognitive engagement. Organizations are successful in increasing student participation when they have proven benefits for the audience. As explained by Finn and Zimmer (2012) these benefits can be exhibited cognitively, in that they require "expenditure of thoughtful energy" and socially, in that the audience is motivated to continue in engagement behaviors (p. 102). The risk-free, experimental environment provided by SGAs on college campuses in the United States is a great mechanism to promote cognitive and social engagement.

Participation in SGA involves an internal investment from an individual. May (2010) stated that participating in SGAs leads to an understanding of some of the key components of the civic processes which include deliberation and negotiation using legal language, often using parliamentary procedures. Andrews (2010) argues that development of these argumentative skills are imperative "to argue rationally in a civilized society" and can lead to civic participation. The author adds that argumentation facilitates advances in education, as well because it increases critical thinking skills. These studies conclude that the processes used in SGAs lead to cognitive development, which in turn lead to social engagement.

Social engagement. In Finn and Zimmer's (2012) research, social engagement involves adherence to norms and rules set forth by the university. This argument can be extended to SGAs by focusing on their long-term impact. Rhee and Kim (2011) explained that student participation in SGA and organized demonstrations help develop civic values. Lawless and Fox (2013) concluded that SGA involvement was likely to increase future candidacy for political office

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seven-fold. The concept of service learning, i.e., "the merging of traditional classroom experiences with community services projects" adds to the social engagement perspective (Hunt & Woolard, 2016, p. 538). SGAs provide a platform for both theoretical and practical community engagement. Adding to these civic outcomes, students interact with local and state policymakers, which provides them direct tools to partake in the process of governmental decision-making. These research studies prove that participation in SGA has benefits for the institution, the student, and the society.

Affective element. Participation in student organizations can also be improved by a focus on the affect it generates among participants. Finn and Zimmer (2012) clarified that "affectively engaged students feel included in the school community and that school is a significant part of their own lives (belonging), and recognize that school provides tools for out-of-school accomplishments (valuing)" (p. 103). Essentially, the more students feel as if their actions have an impact on their communities, the more they are likely to be engaged with an organization. As Golden and Schwartz (1994) explained, "the student government was essentially an extension of the college administration with little decision-making responsibilities and not an independent entity that has power to make decisions and influence campus policy" (p. 34). This generated negative affect among students, until recently as students have gained the trust of college administrators.

Most SGAs now provide students with the ability to influence campus policy. Kezar (2005) posited that "high-performing schools include students in policymaking" by encouraging participation in "committees, task forces, and governance groups, often in leadership roles" (p. 2). Additionally, universities benefit from an active, engaged group of students. Sabin and Daniels (2001) stated that student involvement in collegiate policymaking is a mutually

beneficial exchange because it facilitates enhanced institutional transparency, considerate and inclusive deliberation of university policies, and an experiential learning of organizational processes. Ideally, campus administrators seek to improve the collegiate experience of students. SGAs provide a clear mechanism to facilitate administrations and students to talk about the pros and cons of student involvement. This connection between key components in the vertical hierarchy of higher education promotes affective engagement. Since SGAs promote academic, cognitive, social, and affective engagement among students, they serve as an appropriate measure for student engagement.

Criticisms of SGAs

McKaig and Poticello (1999) theorized that "an analysis of an institution's philosophy toward the culture and value of student involvement is critical in order to give context to the role of student government" (p. 1). The level of involvement with SGAs differs by institution, yet the areas of involvement are similar. Laosebikan-Buggs (2006) summarized the following four common areas where SGAs function:

1. serves as the official voice of students to the administration (representation);
2. allows students to participate in the decision-making processes of university governance (voice);
3. ethical and responsible collection and dissemination of student fees; and
4. recognition of student organizations as well as the coordination of the activities of clubs and organizations on campus (advocacy) (in Miller & Nadler, 2006, p. 3).

These diverse range of activities under the purview of SGAs leave them open to criticism. To begin with, student leaders are criticized on terms of representation. Students are elected to SGAs on behalf of the student body, but representation is not always ubiquitous. Miles

(2011) explained that student leaders often become sidetracked by their own agendas, and "represent a certain sub-population of an institution and work to push forward the concerns of that one sub-population" (p. 327). This single-purpose focus by student leaders often leads to the perception of SGAs as elitist silos, out of reach of the very constituents the organization vows to serve.

By criticizing this under-representation, college administrations commonly withhold power from SGAs. Miles, Miller, and Nadler (2008) revealed that administrators deny autonomy to students by questioning their "age and maturity, self-interest in immediate outcomes as compared to long-term thinking, a contended naiveté about politics and institutional structures, and the argument that higher education is not egalitarian and should be governed by the best and most capable" (p. 1062). These preconceptions about students' decision-making abilities limits some SGAs to serve in a mere advisory role, where student leaders' opinions can be easily overruled by administrators.

As a mediated solution to this issue, college administrators often allow SGAs control over some finances. Love and Miller (2003) stated that "students have typically held control over many aspects of student life, such as fee money distribution" (p. 533). SGAs are often given a budget to allocate resources to campus and community organizations (Miles, 2011). The article continues, that with the help of advisors, student leaders can learn sound fiscal management from an organizational perspective. Yet, a lack of proportionate representation on SGAs leaves students vulnerable to making inequitable financial decisions. SGA members are often juniors or seniors, who do not reside on campus which can lead to a perception that these student leaders do not represent the part-time or commuter students (Miles, 2011). These criticisms lead to the

belief that SGAs are meant to represent a select few, in effect decreasing their value to higher education institutions.

Declining SGA Participation

Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) examined the process through which citizens become active in a society. Their research revealed the most common reasons why people do not want to become politically active, "because they can't; because they don't want to; or because nobody asked. In other words, people may be inactive because they lack resources, because they lack psychological engagement with politics, or they are outside of the recruitment networks" (p. 269). While these claims were made pertaining to adults and their civic engagement, it applies to student populations as well. Adults and students experience similar types of constraints, although the physical manifestation of the constraint might differ.

Verba et al. (1995) stated three kinds of resources which predict participation: money, time, and civic engagement. While money is not a factor in SGA participation, it is a deciding factor for attending college. Urbi (2019) reported that the cost of higher education in the United States has doubled since the 1980s, accounting for inflation. Attending college is a precursor for students to benefit from the presence of and participation in SGAs. Hence the cost of enrollment in a university can itself affect civic engagement.

Time. Researchers have maintained that career-focused education, high cost of enrollment, presence of social clubs, athletics, and Greek life have led to decreased involvement (Giroux & Myrsiades, 2001; May, 2010; Schlesinger & Baldridge, 1982). Some researchers contend that "a wave of voter apathy" following World War II led to disinterest in student-self-governance (May, 2010, p. 214; Rudolph, 1990). These claims are predicated on the fact that students were more concerned with issues outside of campuses, such as the Civil Rights

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Movement, and the war in Vietnam. This research implies that if different issues compete for audience attention, audiences will be involved in selective engagement.

   Civic engagement. Participation in the political process is predicated on what Verba et al. (2015) referred to as psychological predispositions to engagement. The authors listed the characteristics which make individuals partake in the civic process which include "the sense of political efficacy that provides the subjective feeling that they can make a difference when they do" (p. 272). This has been the case with SGAs as well. Miles and Miller (1997) contended that post-World War II, "student demands for non-traditional services, such as married student housing and evening course offerings, demonstrated the ability of students to speak out and be heard in policy and administrative decision making" (p. 4). Students gained access to administrative structures through self-governance, gaining some attention, self-control, and ultimately more power over their own lives (May, 2010). These behavioral and psychological factors need to be considered when examining civic engagement. As a result, the ensuing research contains an examination of behavioral variables expressed in the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and the Extended Parallel Process Model (EPPM).

   Citizen participation in political processes has declined. Previous studies have argued that students are yet to recognize and utilize the power vested in them through SGA (May, 2010). The benefits of SGA might potentially lead to long-term civic engagement among students. As a result, any efforts to increase student participation need to be researched for effectiveness. Verba et al. (1995) claimed that recruitment leads to participation and that political mobilization is possible through conscious recruitment. SGAs across the country are seeking methods to increase student engagement.

Increasing Student Engagement with SGAs

SGAs at Northeastern University, Trinity College, Johns Hopkins University, and West Virginia University are a few of the several organizations looking to increase student engagement (Asbury, 2017; Heyward, 2017; McKeon, 2016; Parayil, 2018). SGAs seek to increase student engagement using various communication methods. Miles and Miller (1997) led several interviews to examine ways to increase student participation. The study revealed three key approaches through which SGAs sought to achieve these goals: increasing publicity efforts, creating sound SGA structures, and managing public attitudes about the organization.

Previous research regarding SGAs commented on the processes of creating and managing the organization (Cohen & Krisker, 2010; May 2010; Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Research on publicity efforts is scarce but is often conducted using Media Richness Theory (MRT). Missing from this research is a conversation regarding the effectiveness of different publicity materials in managing public attitudes about SGAs. This study seeks to examine the effectiveness of different media on participant engagement. Grunig's (1976) Situational Theory of Publics (STP) classifies individuals into different groups based on how they interact with a specific issue. The situational nature of the theory makes it appropriate for our examination.

As mentioned before, student participation in SGAs could be affected by multiple issues competing for an audience's attention. For instance, an individual who cares more about smoking bans than parking-related complaints, is more likely to indulge in PR messages about the former topic. Using STP in our analysis assists in isolating, to a degree, the issue considered by the audience. The participants in the ensuing research study will encounter messages about participation in the SGA rather than specific problems experienced by students on campus. The study seeks to examine whether students want to participate in SGA and whether they perceive

SGA as an organization effective in solving their problems and concerns. The issue itself is participation in SGA, hence the use of STP as a theoretical lens is justified.

Situational Theory of Publics

In order to improve engagement with SGAs, leaders need to convey messages which will persuade students to think about SGA as an organization which is efficient and effective in solving their problems. A better understanding of student perceptions of PR media and messages used by SGA might help increase student engagement with the organization. According to Grunig (1978), the Situational Theory of Publics (STP) can serve "as a means of choosing and evaluating media for a particular public relations program" because it helps classify how certain types of audiences interact with organizations through public relations (PR) messages (p. 118).

STP takes an organizational view of human communication. Grunig (1976) initially posited this theory to understand how "public relations practitioners behave in the real world" (p. 1). He believed that organizations assumed the same PR messages would work for different audiences. However, individuals consume information in different forms, impacting message consumption. As a result, Grunig (1983) expanded STP to classify members of the audience into publics based on "how a person perceives a situation, whether he will communicate about the situation, how he will communicate about the situation, and whether he will have an attitude relevant to the situation" (p. 9). This definition of publics is predicated on previous public opinion research.

Blumer (1948) maintained that a public is formed when individuals identify a collective problem and seek a solution through discursive means. Dewey (1954) added that "the public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for" (p. 16).

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Based on these definitions, STP follows the logic that individuals interact with communicative messages from organizations by engaging in one of two types of communication behaviors: information seeking and information processing.

Information seeking behavior follows active communication styles, where an individual "purposively seeks information that has utility for him in deciding what to do in a situation" (Grunig, 1983, p. 11). Audiences who seek information tend to proactively search for solutions to a problem. Information processing behaviors are exemplified by individuals who do not "look for and generally does not need information that he processes" (Grunig, 1983, p. 11). These individuals are likely to consume information if it is presented to them. According to Grunig (1979) "watching television advertisements, reading a magazine while waiting for a medical appointment, listening to a stranger talk on a bus, or listening to the radio while driving, are all examples of information processing" (p. 742). Whether individuals seek or process information can be a determining factor to examine the effectiveness of different PR materials. Classification of audiences into these two groups demands a focus on the four independent variables used in this theory.

Problem Recognition

The premise of STP is that individuals choose to communicate with organizations in order to seek assistance in problem-solving (Grunig, 1976). Problem recognition is the first variable affecting the formation of publics. Derived from Dewey's (1954) definition of publics, "problem recognition represents the extent to which a person recognizes that something is missing or indeterminant in a situation so that he stops to think about the situation" (Grunig, 1979, p. 742). The level of recognition of a problem helps determine if an individual will initiate interaction to find a solution. As a result, "problem recognition increases the probability that a

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person will communicate about a situation and have a need for information about that situation" (Grunig, 1983, p. 10). Individuals recognize problems with a high or low intensity and hence engage in information seeking or information processing behaviors accordingly.

Constraint Recognition

Once problems are identified or presented to individuals, the presence or absence of obstacles will determine the execution of the solution (Grunig, 1976). This is characterized by the second variable under STP, constraint recognition. This variable "represents the extent to which a person perceives constraints in a situation that limit his freedom to plan and carry out his own behavior" (Grunig, 1983, p. 10). The degree of freedom possessed by individuals while implementing solution-steps will determine whether they partake in information seeking or processing behaviors. Individuals perceiving low amounts of constraints are likely to seek active engagement, while individuals who perceive high constraints are likely to process information as it is presented to them.

Communication Behaviors

Combinations of high and low problem recognition help classify four situations which help "identify publics that exhibit similar communication behaviors" (Grunig, 1983, p. 10). These behaviors are as follows: problem-facing behavior (high problem recognition/low constraint recognition), constrained behavior (high problem recognition/high constraint recognition), routine behavior (low problem recognition/low constraint recognition), and fatalistic behavior (low problem recognition/high constraint recognition). These classifications facilitate a typology of perceived communication situations, which can assist in improving PR efforts. This typology is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Typology of Publics based on Communication Behavior

Behavior	Problem Recognition	Constraint Recognition	Level of Involvement	Type of Public
Problem Facing Behavior	High	Low	High Low	Active Aware
Constrained Behavior	High	High	High Low	Active Latent/Aware
Routine Behavior	Low	Low	High Low	Active/Latent None/Latent
Fatalistic Behavior	Low	High	High Low	Latent None

Level of Involvement

The first two variables predict if individuals will engage in a situation, but do not clarify to what extent that engagement will take place. This is predicted using the third independent variable, individuals' level of involvement (Grunig, 1976). The theory is situational in nature because it argues that publics will address different problems in different ways. Grunig (1983) explained that the level of involvement "is the extent to which a person perceives a connection between himself and a situation" (p. 11). If people identify with a problem, they more likely to participate in information seeking behavior, and vice-versa. These three independent variables can be combined to create the four publics: active, aware, latent, and non-public. See Appendix A for information about the composition of publics based on the levels of independent variables.

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Past Experiences

When audiences interact with a problem, they often refer to their past experiences to determine their course of action. The referent criterion variable accounts for these past experiences. This variable "exists when a person knows what to do in a situation. He might have knowledge or experience from similar situations. or he might have a goal, a solution, or evaluation (an attitude) which he carries from situation to situation" (Grunig, 1978, p. 111). If previous events do not provide a clue as to the actions to be undertaken in a situation, then individuals will seek to find new solutions. As a result, the presence of a referent criterion decreases the need for new information. STP research over the years has eliminated the referent criterion from consideration in research, no definite reasons have been provided. Despite this exclusion, the other three variables predict the composition of publics accurately. The first goal of this study is to examine the difference in composition of publics based on exposure to different media containing messages about SGA. In order to do so, the study utilizes the MRT.

<div align="center">

Media Richness Theory

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Lengel and Daft (1988) proposed that different media have different characteristics and have a varied capacity to convey messages to a target audience. An examination of these characteristics and capacities led to the inception of MRT. Jourdan (2006) explained that original propositions regarding media characteristics was extended to include the idea that, "selecting an appropriate medium can reduce uncertainty in communication" (p. 52). This focus on uncertainty led to the two key components of the theory: media richness and equivocality.

Media Richness

According to Daft, Lengel, and Trevino (1987), "media can be characterized as high or low in 'richness' based on their capacity to facilitate meaning" (p. 358). Researchers have

operationalized this capacity by examining "a medium's ability to convey (a) quick feedback, (b) personal focus, (c) multiple communication cues, and (d) language variety" (p. 305). These degree of change in media along the lines of these characteristics determines whether a certain medium is rich or lean. Daft and Lengel (1986) placed various media on a continuum based on their levels of richness. Previous research has established that face-to-face communication is the richest of media because it can convey complex information with relative ease. On the other hand, spreadsheets, press releases, and departmental memos are examples of lean media because their capacity to communicate information is constrained. (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Kelleher, 2001; D'Urso & Rains, 2008; Tseng, Cheng, Kai, & Teng, 2017). These research studies demonstrated that different media are appropriate to communicate messages in different situations. MRT adds to these findings by explaining which media function well with which type of message, leading to a conversation about equivocality.

Equivocality

Lengel and Daft (1986) posited that media used to deliver messages could be determined by the demand for information created by the message. Some messages are equivocal in nature, in that they have multiple interpretations, other messages have unequivocal, singular meanings (Daft & Lengel, 1983). MRT posits that using rich media is necessary to convey equivocal messages because these contain multifaceted information (Kelleher, 2001). Conversely, lean media can be used to convey direct, straightforward information, which is not open to interpretation (Dennis & Kinney, 1988). As summarized by Kelleher (2001) "given these conceptual definitions of richness and equivocality, the central hypothesis of media richness theory becomes obvious. People are more likely to select richer media to handle information tasks that they perceive to be more equivocal" (p. 306). This discussion of media richness and

equivocality can help us understand the nature of media used by SGAs to convey information to students.

Emphasis on Media Over Message

This study seeks to examine how student publics react to different PR materials used by SGAs. These PR materials comprise of different media (e.g., posters, videos, podcasts, emails, and face-to-face communication), as well as different messages (e.g., elections, participation, general information, meeting information). This research prioritizes an examination of media over message for several reasons. First, message composition varies by target audience. When developing PR materials, organizations strive to consider target audience. Philipsen (1997) posited the Speech Codes Theory to explain how members of a community develop verbal and nonverbal language when conversing among each other and with outsiders. Different organizations communicate their needs to different audiences differently. Examining the message over the medium would be beneficial if a researcher sought to understand and explain the effectiveness of PR messages in a context. For instance, SGAs in one university might communicate with their constituents using university-specific codes. However, the media used to convey the message are similar across SGAs. The purpose of this study is to examine and predict if the media itself is effective in communicating the message. The volatility of the message makes it tougher to examine its effectiveness using quantitative means for the purpose of generalizability. Hence, this research prioritizes media over message.

Criticisms of MRT

One of the most common criticisms of MRT pertains to user choice in selecting the media to consume information. Walther and Parks (2002) state that prior studies on MRT have failed for this reason:

> Despite media richness theory's problems, it is also apparent that the research to date has not directly tested the underlying claim of the theory. The fundamental claim is that if users select richer media for equivocal messages, then their efficiency will be greater. Researchers who have asked respondents what they might use or have assigned users to tasks and media in order to assess perceptions or effectiveness have not addressed that proposition...The basic proposition remains untested. (p. 534)

While past research has focused on the richness of the media, few studies have examined the role of user choice. Walther and Parks (2002) are correct – MRT does not focus on user choice, however, this drawback does not affect our examination. As will be clarified in the methods section, participants in the study will be randomly presented with one of three media as stimulus. Since participants are not seeking the media, this criticism does not impede the ensuing research.

SGAs and Public Relations

SGAs use rich and lean media to increase student engagement. In an increasingly online world, students are informed about activities on campus through a variety of means including but not limited to emails, social media posts, and Facebook Live videos. These media are used in conjunction with traditional posters and face-to-face communication. An understanding of the way in which members of different publics interact with different media would provide significant insight into the effectiveness of PR practices employed by SGAs.

Werder (2006) examined the influence of activism messages on STP. These messages were created using Hazleton and Long's (1988) public relations process model. Werder's research revealed a connection between goal compatibility and STP. Lee, Oshita, Oh, and Hove (2014) researched the STP with Noelle-Neuman's (1974) spiral of silence theory to examine "people's willingness to express their evaluative and normative opinions about an issue and its

possible solutions" (p. 190). Major (1998) studied STP through the effects of participant responses to disaster prediction on the composition of publics. Research has yet to be conducted to examine the effect of different media on composition of publics. Hence, evaluating the effectiveness of the media used by SGAs is warranted. As a result, the researcher proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: Problem recognition will be higher after participant interaction with moderate media (Facebook Live) than participant interaction with the lean media (Poster).

H2: Level of involvement will be higher after participant interaction with moderate media (Facebook Live) than participant interaction with the lean media (Poster).

H3: Constraint recognition will be higher after participant interaction with moderate media (Facebook Live) than participant interaction with the lean media (Poster).

H4: The difference in posttest and pretest scores will be higher for participants exposed to moderate media (Facebook Live) compared to participants exposed to lean media (Poster).

Factors Influencing Behavior

PR materials are meant to increase awareness about a topic, either through providing information or by inciting participation. The persuasiveness of messages depends on internal (cognitive) and external (situational) factors. Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) predicts participant involvement after the consumption of a persuasive message. TPB states that individuals act in a situation based on their perceptions of three variables: control, normative, and behavioral beliefs. Constraint recognition and control beliefs are similar variables in that they both measure the impediments to implementing a behavior. But the impact of normative and behavioral beliefs on the composition of publics has yet to be examined.

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Perceptions of Social Norms

Ajzen (2012) explained that normative beliefs refer to the "expectations and actions of important referents and motivation to comply with these referents" (p. 18). Essentially, individuals act based on the way people close to them perceive a certain situation or event. As Marcinkowski and Metag (2014) clarified, "individual's behavioral intention is determined by his perception that people who are important to him support his performance of the given behavior" (p. 154). Societal norms seem to influence peer participation in student organizations as well. Juvonen, Espinoza, and Knifsend (2012) posited that "the role of friends seems to be especially important in encouraging continued involvement, potentially even when individual interest in the activity itself has waned" (p. 391). This effect seems to extend to SGAs as well. Laosebikan-Buggs (2009) conducted qualitative interviews with students involved in SGAs. Once participant claimed that he had "few friends involved in student government indicating that peer influence was as major motivating factor in his involvement" (p. 113). Since student involvement can be influenced by societal norms, it is imperative we examine how they influence the classification of publics.

Self-Efficacy

As Juvonen et al. (2012) stated, societal norms can influence human behavior even when individual interest in a behavior has declined. One predictor of individual interest in executing a specific behavior is efficacy. Both STP and TPB contend that beliefs about the degree of presence or absence of constraints will direct individuals' behaviors. Whether individuals believe they can implement a solution, and whether that solution will be effective can impact the perceived degree of constraints. The latter concept, termed as self-efficacy by Bandura (1991) refers to "people's beliefs about their capabilities to exercise control over their own level of

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functioning and over events that affect their lives" (p. 257). Student engagement is predicated on the concept of self-efficacy. Lam, Wong, Yang, and Liu (2012) examined the role of contextual factors influencing student engagement. Their research revealed that "the more the students believed that they were capable of successfully performing the course of action that would lead to success, the more they were engaged affectively, behaviorally, and cognitively in school" (p. 413). Since student engagement is associated with perceptions of self-efficacy, it is imperative to include it in our analysis. The degree of perceived self-efficacy could increase or decrease the degree of constraint recognition, impacting the consumption of persuasive messages.

Response Efficacy

The second factor influencing the perceptions of constraints regarding the effectiveness of the solutions implemented to solve problems. The Extended Parallel Process Model (EPPM) explains whether individuals will engage in solutions when presented with messages containing fear appeals (Witte, 1992). Persuasive messages containing fear appeals are often used in behavioral change interventions. EPPM employs a response-efficacy measure to examine the effectiveness of these messages. Witte (1992) explained that "response efficacy refers to an individual's beliefs as to whether a response effectively prevents the threat" (p. 332). PR materials created by SGAs to increase involvement are often persuasive, but do not always contain fear appeals. Yet, the attempt to increase engagement with SGAs is an attempt to change student behavior. The perception of SGAs as effective solution mechanisms could predict whether students interact with the organization. As a result, it is imperative to include the variable in our analysis.

RQ1: What is the relationship between participant perception of problem recognition and self-efficacy, response-efficacy, and perception of social norms?

RQ2: What is the relationship between participant perception of level of involvement and self-efficacy, response-efficacy, and perception of social norms?

RQ3: What is the relationship between participant perception of constraint recognition and self-efficacy, response-efficacy, and perception of social norms?

CHAPTER III: METHODS

The following chapter outlines the procedures which will be used to gather the data for this study and the methods to be used to analyze the collected data. This chapter also describes the measures that will be used to collect the data.

Participants and Procedure

After IRB approval, approximately 105 students from a large-sized Midwestern university were recruited to participate in an online Qualtrics survey. According to Dominelli (2003), online surveys serve several benefits. To begin, surveys provide access to a large sample, even if participants are interested "in very narrow topic domains" (p. 411). Surveys also have quicker distribution and response times. Finally, a researcher can pre-code responses to facilitate ease of analysis. Participants were recruited using a research board for the students in the School of Communication and a campus-wide Listserv. This sample size is appropriate to reach a power level of .80 to achieve a medium effect size at $p = .05$ (Keppel & Wickens, 2004).

The sample was 83.8% White/Caucasian, 5.7% Black/African American, 3.8% Asian, 4.8% Hispanic/Latinx, 1.0% Pacific Islander, and 1% of the participant preferred to not identify their race. The sample was represented across college levels with 13.3% Freshmen, 11.4% Sophomores, 16.2% Juniors, 21.0% Seniors, 29.5% Graduate Students, 7.6% Doctoral Students, and 1.0% identifying as a faculty/staff at the university with a Masters' degree. The sex distribution for the sample was 78% Male, 24% Female and 82.9% Straight/Heterosexual. Sexual orientation across the sample was 4% Gay and Lesbian, 9% Bisexual, 1% Pansexual, and 2% preferred to not identify. Another 1.9% did not provide a response to the question.

Data were collected in this study to further two goals. To begin, the study sought to examine the effect of different media on the composition of publics. After taking a pretest with

statements about problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement, participants were exposed to either a Poster, a Facebook Live video, or an in-person conversation about SGAs. Participants then took a posttest which was identical to the pretest. The second goal of the study was to expand on STP. To this extent, the pretest also contained statements regarding self-efficacy, response-efficacy, and perceptions of social norms. These statements were not included in the posttest.

Research Design

Upon entering the survey, participants were presented with an informed consent form which contained information about the study and provided them with the choice to continue or discontinue with the survey. If participants declined or if they were not 18 years or older, the survey ended, and they were presented a message thanking them for their consideration to participate in the study. If participants met the age requirements, and agreed to participate, they were directed to the next page where they were asked to respond to measurements regarding the problem recognition, level of involvement, constraint recognition, self-efficacy, response-efficacy, and perceptions of social norms. Consequently, participants encountered either a Poster or a Facebook Live video containing information about SGA responsibilities and roles, as well as means to participate in SGA. After being exposed to one of the media, participants were asked to respond to scales about problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement once again. At the completion of the survey, the participants were directed to a page containing information about extra credit participation. All responses to the survey were anonymous.

Finally, participants were recruited for an in-person element of the study. These participants were given an informed consent form upon the initiation of the survey and their survey was assigned a four-digit code to maintain confidentiality. Consequently, they were

presented a paper copy of a survey where they responded to the same pretest statements as the ones in the Qualtrics survey. After completion of the pretest, the researcher delivered a scripted message containing the same information about SGAs as the Poster and the Facebook Live video. Participants then were provided the opportunity to ask questions about SGA participation, and the researcher responded. This Q&A was planned to last for approximately five minutes and audio was recorded. At the completion of the Q&A, the participants responded to statements about problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement. The participants were then thanked for their involvement, and they were given a form containing information about extra credit participation. The required number of participants could not be recruited for the in-person condition due to the implementation of social distancing resulting from the Coronavirus Disease – 19 (COVID-19); hence this condition was eliminated from the study.

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Measures

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Problem Recognition

Measures for problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement were based scales used by Voss (2009) to examine public perception of reclaimed water. Problem recognition was measured across the following three items: "I do not think that low participation with SGA is a problem on my campus," "I believe that there is a problem with low participation with the SGA on my campus," and "I recognize there is a serious problem with participation with the SGA on my campus." Participants were asked to respond to these items on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). Item 1 was reverse coded. The pretest reliability was .64 and posttest reliability was .65.

Level of Involvement

Level of involvement was to be measured across four items: "I am involved with the SGA on my campus," "I have no involvement with the SGA on my campus," "I have strong opinions about student participation with the SGA on my campus," and "I am informed about student participation with the SGA on my campus." Participants were asked to respond to these items on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). The last item was eliminated from consideration because of a clerical error while entering the statement in Qualtrics, resulting in a three-item measure. The pretest reliability was .82 and posttest reliability was .76.

Constraint Recognition

Constraint recognition was measured across the following three items: "I do not understand issues related to participation with the SGA on my campus," "There are obstacles that prevent me from understanding problems about participation with the SGA on my campus," and "I do not have the ability to influence decisions related to participation with the SGA on my campus." Participants were asked to respond to these items on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). The pretest reliability was .50 and posttest reliability was .50.

Self-Efficacy

Measures for perceived self-efficacy and perceived response-efficacy were based on Witte, Cameron, McKeon, and Berkowitz's (1996) Risk Behavior Diagnosis Scale. Perceived self-efficacy was measured through four items. Participants were asked to respond to these items on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). The measures for self-efficacy operationalized participation in SGA to obtain a direct response from

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participants. The four items were: "I can easily attend an SGA meeting on my campus.," "I have the time to attend an SGA meeting on my campus," "I have the ability to contact a student representative to find more information about SGA," and "I have the ability to attend an SGA meeting on my campus." The reliability for the self-efficacy measure was .79.

Response Efficacy

Perceived response-efficacy was measured on a four-item, seven-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The measures for response-efficacy operationalized SGA duties and responsibilities to obtain a direct response from participants. The four items were: "I believe that SGA programming improves student life on my campus," "I believe that SGA programming improves student life on my campus," "I believe that SGA effectively advocates for students on my campus," and "I believe that SGA works with students on my campus to refer them to appropriate office for additional help." The reliability for the response efficacy measure was .85.

Perceptions of Social Norms

Measures for norms were developed based on the scale used by Courneya, Bobick, and Schinke (1999) to measure norms surrounding exercise behaviors. Perceptions of norms were measured across three items on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The three items are: "Most people who are important to me would encourage me to participate with the SGA on my campus," "Most people who are important to me would think I should participate with the SGA on my campus.," and "Most people who are important to me would support me participating with the SGA on my campus." The reliability for perceptions of social norms was .82.

Figure A-1 in the Appendix reflects the Poster design. A link to the Facebook Live can be found on *YouTube* (Patel, 2020). The script for the in-person conversation about SGA is as follows:

> Student Government Associations, also known as SGAs, are comprised of student-leaders, which serve as a representative body to bring the voice of students to university administration, faculty, and staff, and state legislators. SGAs also allocate student fee funds to campus facilities, such as the Rec, and many student organizations including Greek Life, club sports, and academic and professional organizations. SGAs can help you with several problems including but not limited to those regarding parking, dining, academics, or involvement across campus. SGA elections are conducted in the Spring, and meetings are held every Monday at 7 pm in the Jackson Ballroom. The meeting starts with a public forum where students can voice their opinions, comments, or concerns. To learn more about SGAs please visit the main office in the Student Union.

Data Analysis

A series of paired and independent sample *t*-tests were conducted using SPSS to test the hypotheses. Alpha was set at .05. Hypotheses 1-3 examined the difference in problem recognition, level of involvement, and constraint recognition from pretest to posttest between participants exposed to the moderate media (Facebook Live) and lean media (Poster). A paired samples *t*-test was used for this examination. By comparing the pretest-posttest means and standard deviations of the dependent variable, the paired samples *t*-test allows researchers to "know if the difference is real or simply due to chance," making it appropriate for this analysis (Keyton, 2011, p. 211). The fourth hypothesis sought to test the degree of difference between the pretest and posttest in the two media conditions. In an independent samples *t*-test, "a participant

cannot be identified with both categories of the independent variable" (Keyton, 2011, p. 210).

Participants in this study were exposed to either a moderate media (Facebook Live) or a lean media (Poster) condition. Since the independent samples *t*-test facilitates an understanding of the degree of difference between the two conditions, it served as an appropriate method for data analysis.

        Three research questions were asked to examine the relationship between self-efficacy, response-efficacy, perceptions of social norms and problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement. Since the measures for all the variables are continuous, multiple linear regressions were used to analyze data. Multiple regressions allow "a researcher to test for a significant relationship between the dependent variable and multiple independent variables separately and as a group" (Keyton, 2011, p. 233). There are several benefits of using multiple regressions. According to Keyton (2011), the value of R resulting from the multiple regression helps succinctly summarize the relationships between independent and dependent variables. However, the degree to which these variables are related is unclear but the value of R^2, "provides the proportion of variance explained or accounted for on the dependent variable by the independent variable" (p. 232). Additionally, the value of the beta weight, indicated by β, assists in the understanding of the degree to which these variables influence each other.

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CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Results

The first hypothesis predicted that participants in the moderate media condition

(Facebook Live) will report higher pretest-to-posttest means on the problem recognition measure

compared to participants in the lean media condition (Poster). Results of the paired samples *t*-test

revealed a statistically significant pre- to posttest difference on problem recognition in the

moderate media condition. For this condition (Facebook Live), there was a statistically

significant difference from the pretest ($M = 4.12$) to the posttest ($M = 4.68$), $t(44) = -2.98$, $p <$

0.05. A paired samples *t*-test revealed no difference between the pretest ($M = 4.26$) and posttest

($M = 4.40$) in the lean media (Poster) condition, $t(43) = -1.33$, $p > 0.05$ Descriptive statistics for

the first hypothesis can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Within Group Analyses for Problem Recognition

Condition	Pretest			Posttest		
	n	*M*	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*
Moderate Media (Facebook Live)	45	4.12	1.13	45	4.46	1.14
Poster (Lean Media)	44	4.26	1.21	44	4.40	1.17

The second hypothesis predicted that level of involvement will be higher after participant

interaction with moderate media (Facebook Live) than participant interaction with the lean media

(Poster). The moderate media (Facebook Live) condition saw a statistically significant difference

from the pretest ($M = 2.50$) to the posttest ($M = 2.81$), $t(45) = -2.27$, $p < 0.05$. A paired samples *t*-

test revealed no difference between the pretest ($M = 2.82$) and posttest ($M = 3.00$) for the lean

media (Poster) condition, $t(42) = -1.30$, $p > 0.05$. Descriptive statistics for the second hypothesis can be found in Table 3.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Within Group Analyses for Level of Involvement

Condition	Pretest			Posttest		
	n	M	SD	n	M	SD
Moderate Media (Facebook Live)	46	2.50	1.31	46	2.81	1.37
Poster (Lean Media)	43	2.82	1.67	43	3.00	1.60

The third hypothesis stated that means for the constraint recognition measure will be higher after participant interaction with moderate media (Facebook Live) than participant interaction with the lean media (Poster). The lean media (Poster) condition saw a higher increase from pretest ($M = 3.84$) to the posttest ($M = 4.28$), $t(43) = -3.18$, $p < 0.05$ compared to the moderate media (Facebook Live) condition, pretest ($M = 3.83$) to the posttest ($M = 4.18$), $t(46) = -2.17$, $p < 0.05$. Descriptive statistics for the third hypothesis can be found in Table 4.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for Within Group Analyses for Constraint Recognition

Condition	Pretest			Posttest		
	n	M	SD	n	M	SD
Moderate Media (Facebook Live)	47	3.80	.85	47	4.18	.87
Poster (Lean Media)	44	3.85	1.00	44	4.29	.80

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The fourth hypothesis stated that moderate media (Facebook Live) will reflect a higher change in problem recognition, and level of involvement, but a lower change in constraint recognition compared to the lean media condition (Poster). In order to analyze differences between the groups, I first computed difference scores by subtracting the pretest mean from the posttest mean for each of the dependent variables. Independent samples t-tests revealed no differences between the groups for problem recognition [$t(87) = -1.33$, $p = 0.187$], level of involvement [$t(87) = -.61$, $p > 0.05$], or constraint recognition [$t(89) = .44$, $p > 0.05$]. As a result, hypothesis four was not supported. Descriptive statistics for the fourth hypothesis can be found in Table 5.

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics for Between Groups Analyses by Manipulation Condition

Variable	Moderate Media (Facebook Live)			Lean Media (Poster)		
	n	*M*	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*
Problem Recognition	45	.34	.76	44	.68	.10
Level of Involvement	46	.30	.91	43	.19	.94
Constraint Recognition	47	.35	1.1	44	.44	.91

A stepwise multiple linear regression was calculated to find the amount of problem recognition predicted by self-efficacy, response-efficacy, and perception of social norms. Descriptive statistics for the regression analyses can be found in Table 6, and correlations between all variables can be found in Table 7. Results of the regression analysis, $F(1,100) = 28.46$, $p < .05$, indicated that the model significantly predicted problem recognition. Specifically, the results indicated that perceptions of social norms accounted for 21% of the variance in problem recognition, ($\beta = .36$, $t(101) = 5.33$, $p < .05$). Self-efficacy and response-efficacy were

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not significant predictors of problem recognition. Information regarding beta coefficients for problem recognition can be found in Table 8.

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics for Independent and Predictor Variables in Regressions

Variable	n	M	SD
Problem Recognition	103	4.19	1.20
Level of Involvement	103	2.71	1.62
Constraint Recognition	105	3.84	0.99
Self-Efficacy	105	4.02	1.39
Response Efficacy	104	4.55	1.26
Perceptions of Social Norms	105	3.84	1.58

Table 7

Pearson Correlations for all Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Problem Recognition	-	.40	.28	.27	.29	.47
2. Level of Involvement	.40	-	.43	.56	.43	.46
3. Constraint Recognition	.28	.43	-	.35	.37	.29
4. Self-Efficacy	.27	.56	.35	-	.52	.55
5. Response Efficacy	.29	.43	.37	.52	-	.57
6. Perceptions of Social Norms	.47	.46	.29	.55	.57	-

Note: $p < .01$ for all correlations

Table 8

Beta Weights for Problem Recognition

Variable	B	$SE\ B$	β
Social Norms	0.359	0.067	0.471
R^2		0.222	
R^2_{adj}		0.214	
F		28.466	

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The second research question sought to calculate the amount of level of involvement predicted by self-efficacy, response-efficacy, and perception of social norms. Results of a stepwise multiple linear regression, $F(2,99) = 34.83$, $p < .05$, indicated that the model significantly predicted level of involvement. Specifically, the results indicated that self-efficacy accounted for 32.1% of the variance in level of involvement, ($\beta = .42$, $t(101) = 3.99$, $p < .05$), and perceptions of social norms accounted for 9.2% of the variance in level of involvement, ($\beta = .37$, $t(101) = 3.93$, $p < .05$). Information regarding beta coefficients for level of involvement can be found in Table 9.

Table 9

Beta Weights for Level of Involvement

Variable	B	$SE\ B$	β
Self-Efficacy	0.427	0.107	0.368
Perceptions of Social Norms	0.372	0.090	0.362
R^2		0.413	
R^2_{adj}		0.401	
F		34.830	

The third research question was to determine the amount of constraint recognition predicted by self-efficacy, response-efficacy, and perception of social norms. Results of a stepwise multiple linear regression, $F(2,103) = 10.88$, $p < .05$, indicated that the model significantly predicted constraint recognition. Specifically, the results indicated that response-efficacy accounted for 13.4% of the variance in constraint recognition, ($\beta = .20$, $t(103) = 2.47$, $p < .05$), and self-efficacy accounted for 2.7% of the variance in constraint recognition, ($\beta = 0.15$, $t(103) = 2.06$, $p < .05$). Information regarding beta coefficients for constraint recognition can be found in Table 10.

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Table 10

Beta Weights for Constraint Recognition

Variable	B	$SE\ B$	β
Response Efficacy	0.205	0.083	0.262
Self-Efficacy	0.155	0.075	0.219
R^2		0.177	
R^2_{adj}		0.161	
F		10.880	

The next section of the document includes a discussion regarding the theoretical and practical implications of the results, the limitations of the study, and directions for future research. The study concludes with a summary of the project.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

Implications

This study reinforces certain notions about MRT and proposes potential extensions to STP. The framework of publics was used to examine whether participant perceptions of problem recognition, level of involvement, and constraint recognition changed after being exposed to a lean media (Poster) and moderate media (Facebook Live). The hypotheses were predicated on the fact that a significant change in the degree of problem recognition, level of involvement, and constraint recognition, from the pretest to the posttest would result in different compositions of publics. The content in the two media conditions were the same, while the method of delivery was different. Yet, the levels of these independent variables changed from pretest to posttest.

Problem Recognition

Participant perception of problem recognition witnessed a statistically significant increase after interaction with a moderate media (Facebook Live). Problem recognition is closely tied with awareness about issues. Grunig (1976) explained "people do not attempt to change the direction of their movements except in a situation that is problematic to them" (p. 4). SGAs need to employ messaging which conveys the types of problems which the organization can address because "no problem can be resolved until it has been recognized" (Keil, Depledge, & Rai, 2007, p. 398). In this study, the poster stated, "SGA helps solve student concerns and provides funding for student organizations. Common concerns include food at the dining center and on-campus parking." The Facebook Live on the other hand, provided a space for elaboration, with the use of nonverbal cues, verbal emphasis on certain words, and the use of immediacy behaviors. While these factors were not studied in this research, they could lead to an increase in problem recognition.

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Constraint Recognition

Combinations of high or low problem recognition and high or low constraint recognition help predict the type of communication behavior undertaken by publics (Grunig, 1976). There was a greater increase in constraint recognition from the pretest to the posttest in the lean media condition (Poster) compared to moderate media (Facebook Live). The limited capacity of lean media conveys information which makes it easier for receiver to consume the content. However, lean media do not provide opportunity for immediate feedback or clarification (Jourdan, 2006). The Poster explained that SGA meetings are 90 minutes long, and that they are held at 7 p.m. on a Monday night. This information might have contributed to an increase in constrain recognition for the poster condition.

Level of Involvement

Problem recognition and constraint recognition help explain "why a person communicates or does not communicate," while level of involvement explains, "whether that behavior will be active information seeking or information processing" (Grunig, 1979, p. 743). If individuals perceive the message to be important to them, they are likely to become involved with an organization. Conversely, if individuals consume information, they do not engage in action. The moderate media condition (Facebook Live) witnessed a slight increase in level of involvement from the pretest to the posttest. Low participation in SGAs is well documented. Constraints such as time, disinterest in civic engagement might result in this low participation (Verba et al.., 1995). Despite participant perception of these constraints, rich media seem to be more effective than lean media in increasing involvement.

Perceptions of Social norms and STP

Problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement assist in determining the type of public and the corresponding communication behavior. This research sought to expand STP by examining the influence of perceptions of social norms, self-efficacy, and response efficacy on problem recognition, level of involvement, and constraint recognition. Results revealed that participant perception of social norms had a statistically significant impact on problem recognition and level of involvement. Juvonen, Espinoza, and Knifsend (2012) affirmed, "students with friends who are highly involved in extracurricular activities are more likely to participate in activities themselves" (p. 391). The authors also further that peer perceptions can lead to a positive or negative sense of school belonging, which is a significant predictor of student engagement. Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) and Towler (2010) add that teachers' perceptions of engagement also influences student beliefs. For instance, if a professor believes SGAs to be ineffective, and passes that thought onto a student, the student is less likely to become involved in the organization. As Hu and Kuh (2002) added, teachers need to contextualize academic content in relation to practical engagement, to encourage student participation. Changing social norms requires changing individual perceptions, which is easier said than done. An examination of self-efficacy and response efficacy acts as a springboard for impacting this change.

Self-Efficacy and STP

Self-efficacy was a significant predictor for level of involvement and constraint recognition. Self-efficacy was measured by asking participants if they had the time and the ability to attend an SGA meeting or contact an SGA representative with relative ease. Participating in SGAs requires initiative-taking as well as interest in the organization. Lam,

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Wong, Yang, and Liu (2012) explained, "the more the students believed that they were capable of successfully performing the course of action that would lead to success, the more they were engaged affectively, behaviorally, and cognitively in school" (p. 413). As SGAs promote their organizations, it is imperative they include information which makes students believe that they can impact change on campus. SGA efforts to increase self-efficacy could include testimonials where student leaders share their experiences with the process of starting to participate in student government, and their consequent efforts in creating change on campus. While self-efficacy impacts level of involvement and constraint recognition, the direction of this relationship needs to be examined.

Response Efficacy and STP

Perceptions of response efficacy only predicted constraint recognition. However, the relationship between the two is well documented in the literature. Witte (1992) explained that response efficacy is the belief whether a solution will be effective in resolving an issue. Constraint recognition is the degree to which individuals perceive obstacles to achieve a goal (Grunig, 1978). This concept is similar to perceived behavioral control, the belief "about resources and obstacles that can facilitate or interfere with performance of a given behavior" (Ajzen, 2012, p. 18). To increase participation, SGAs need to develop PR materials which portray the organization as an effective mechanism for solving problems.

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Limitations

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Ecological Validity

The first limitation of the study concerns the presentation of the media itself. Breau and Brook (2007) defined ecological validity as, "the degree of similarity between the conditions of a simulation experiment and the real-world phenomenon that the experiment is designed to model" (p. 3). The Poster was presented to the participants online, but in real-life individuals are likely to

view posters on bulletin boards or walls in hallways. Gehrke (2013) clarified that "ecological validity is not an all-or-nothing standard, but like other forms of validity, an objective toward which researchers strive" (p. 11). Future research could incorporate a digital photograph of a poster on a wall to increase ecological validity in the situation.

The Facebook Live is accompanied by some ecological concerns as well. To being with, the video did not represent an actual Facebook Live in that it did not have the Live frame, the interaction ribbon at the bottom, or real-time comments. However, the video did maintain ecological validity by including naturally occurring environmental factors. The Live video was recorded outdoors, on a windy day. At times, the speaker in the video is hard to hear. However, this limitation was reduced by the addition of subtitles. Considerations of ecological validity are imperative to ensure generalization of results.

COVID-19 and Face-to-Face Condition

Gehrke (2013) examined the role of ecological validity in public engagement research, and explained "if the goal is to actually engage publics, not merely to observe them in their pristine state, we presume that engagement not only brings something to publics but, hopefully, also returns with something from those publics" (p. 11). The original design for this study included a face-to-face manipulation condition, as a form of rich medium of information delivery. Unfortunately, the data collection for this condition was halted because of the social distancing protocols enforced during the COVID-19 outbreak. This condition would have allowed for a more dynamic and organic conversation regarding SGAs. The absence of immediate feedback witnessed in the lean and moderate media conditions would not have been a problem in this rich media condition. Recruiting additional participants might have resulted in more significant results as well.

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Participant Demographics

A total of 105 participants were recruited to participate in the Qualtrics survey. 83.8% of participants identified as White/Caucasian, 82.9% identified as Straight/Heterosexual, and 78% identified as Males. As of Fall 2019 American higher education was comprised of approximately 10.5 million White students, and nearly 9.4 million students of color. 11.3 million of these students are female, while 8.6 million identify as male (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). This predominantly white, straight, male sample reduces the generalizability of the results. Lawless and Fox (2013) conducted a study to examine the factors driving female college students' participation in politics. Their research revealed that "respondents who ran for student government during college were seven times more likely than their peers who had not run, to articulate plans for a political career" (p. 9). SGAs provide a safe, low-risk environment for women to run for office. While this study does not make any gender-based claims, attempts to research mechanisms to increase female student participation could potentially help level the political playing field on a local, state, and national level.

Low Reliabilities

The measures for problem recognition and constraint recognition reflected reliabilities lower than the conventionally acceptable Cronbach's alpha of .70. Keyton (2011) explained that low reliabilities of a measure could be a result of several factors external to the study. In this study, participant perceptions about SGAs might have resulted in a lower alpha for problem recognition and constraint recognition. The measure for problem recognition included an item, "I recognize there is a serious problem with recognition with participation with the SGA on my campus". This item was based on scales used by Voss (2009). However, participants could have perceived that low participation in SGA as a problem, but not a serious problem. This might have

led to confusion regarding the item itself. The measure for constraint recognition contained an item, "I do not understand issues related to participation with the SGA on my campus". Perhaps, being presented with specific issues related to participation with SGAs might have improved the reliability of this measure.

Directions for Future Research

Communicative Behaviors and Media

Participants in this study were presented with information about SGAs, they did not have the opportunity to seek it out. Ecologically, the study needs to be contextualized in terms of information processing behaviors. Grunig (1979) explained that information processing behaviors are passive communicative behaviors, such as watching television advertisements or reading a magazine article in a waiting room. STP explains that participants indulging in information seeking behaviors are more likely to actively communicate regarding problems. The relationship between type of media and type of communicative behavior is especially important to research regarding PR and marketing. Organizations engage in messaging with an intent to increase active interaction with their content, whether it informs individuals about a service or persuades consumers to purchase a product. MRT explains that lean media can be used for unequivocal messages, whereas rich media needs to be employed for equivocal messages. Future research could consider the impact of media richness on communicative behaviors.

Civic Engagement

Several typologies of engagement are available in extant research. Finn and Zimmer (2012) posited two types of engagement, affective and behavioral, with the latter consisting of three parts - academic, social, and cognitive engagement. Keeter, Zukin, Andolona, and Jenkins (2002) proposed 19 indicators for civic engagement, which encompass actions such as voting

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and protesting. These typologies of civic engagement could be examined in relation with media to determine methods to increase participation. Student preference and interest in various engagement styles could be researched to develop university-specific programs for engagement. Additionally, Verba et al. (1995) explained that resources such as time, psychological engagement, and lack of access to civic engagement structures, affect engagement as well. The specific impact of these resources, in context of SGAs, can help better understand the current lack of participation. Kuh, Cruse, Shoup, and Kinzie (2008) added that institutional commitment is as important as student initiative in increasing civic engagement. May (2010) explained that higher education institutions have been hesitant to give autonomy to student organizations. An examination of the nature of institutional commitment to civic engagement and SGAs, and the obstacles to achieving this commitment need to be examined to develop context-specific solutions for increasing engagement.

Temporal Examination

Hunt and Woolard (2016) succinctly stated, "civic education requires a long-term strategy" (p. 545). Referring to academic education regarding civic engagement, Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, and Corngold (2007) stated, "during a single course, it is not reasonable to expect students' political engagement will have a notable impact" (p. 151). A temporal analysis of participation in SGA, using STP and MRT might provide researchers an opportunity to track student participation over a longer time period. Attrition is an evident drawback of temporal analyses. However, in the context of political participation research, attrition can provide useful information. As Verba et a. (1995) explained, student impetus to participate in civic processes is driven by three factors: money, time, and perceptions of civic engagement. While SGAs assist in the development of academic and professional skills, the criticisms of SGAs need to be

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examined more thoroughly. Future research should consider understanding whether SGAs lead to burnout or increase or decrease student participation over a time period. Such as study might reveal insights into participant motivation for engagement and obstacles which prevent engagement.

Social Media and Political Participation

Social media platforms provide an opportunity to reach mass audiences in a short period of time. Perrin and Anderson (2019) explained that Facebook, Twitter Instagram, and Snapchat are especially popular among individuals 18-24 years of age. Nearly 12.5 million students in higher ed are below the age of 25 (The National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). As reported by Cooper (2020) an average user spends 11.5 minutes/session on Facebook, 10.5 minutes/session on Twitter, 6.5 minutes/session on Instagram, and 30 minutes/day on the Snapchat. These three platforms provide resources to create and disseminate information using live streaming or video upload options. The amount of richness in these media allows SGAs, to reach target audiences to raise awareness about issues of concern, in a manner where the content is accessible and has high potential for engagement. Future research could conduct a study comparing the preferences, benefits, and drawbacks of different media in communicating political participation.

Student Participation and Twitter

The use of Twitter for social media marketing is both beneficial and dangerous. As Cooper (2020) explained the amount of time individuals spend on Twitter has witnessed an increase, which warrants its use as a medium for PR. However, Bratslavsky, Carpenter, and Zompetti (2019) explained that as a media, Twitter often allows the use of incivility as a strategy to convey information, which makes it a problematic tool for democratic governance.

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Additionally, he 280-character limit for a tweet might lead to ambiguity, especially when conveying equivocal messages. Considering the unique nature of Twitter as a platform and the resulting misleading nature of its content, and its widespread use, a study focused on Twitter and student participation might reveal fascinating insights.

Students of Color and Underrepresented Groups

The participant demographics of the sample in the group were not reflective of the nationwide campus population. The sample in this study was 83.8% White/Caucasian and 78% Male, while the national averages are closer to 52% White/Caucasian and 43% Male (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). The research was conducted at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), which impacted the student participation. While nationwide statistics about sexual orientation are not readily available, it is likely that the sample in this study did not reflect the national student population averages. The role of students of color and underrepresented groups needs to be a part of future research regarding SGAs for several reasons.

Fry (2019) reported that women are on track to represent half of the college-educated workforce in the United States. Dougherty (2019) revealed that for the first time in 96 years, a trio of female students were elected to the executive branch of the SGA at Illinois State University. Georgetown University elected an all-female executive board in 2012, "a board that was dominated by men since 1969" (Mills, 2019). Lawless and Fox (2012) explained that participation in SGAs can increase future participation in civic processes. Hence, it is imperative to include them in future analyses.

Many state and national policies affect college campuses as well. In 2016, the state of South Dakota proposed House Bill 1008 which required "transgender students in South Dakota's public schools to use bathrooms, locker rooms and other facilities based on their gender at birth"

(Wagner & Chappell, 2016). This bill was then discussed in the Students' Association at South Dakota State University (SDSU). Wagner and Chappell (2016) added that the Students' Association at SDSU received feedback from the LGBTQ+ community on campus which made them lobby for the bill to be vetoed by the Governor. The bill was eventually vetoed, and the Governor explained that the voice of the Students' Association was a key factor in his decision making process (Bothelo & Drash, 2016). Similar to SDSU, SGAs across the nation might have an influence over legislative processes. Hence, a study focused on the opinions and perceptions of underrepresented groups toward SGAs might prove beneficial for increasing student representation.

Conclusion

The benefits of participation in SGAs are well documented. The low-risk, supervised environment provided by SGAs provides practical experience with civic engagement. Participation in SGAs also provide several academic, professional, and social benefits. Despite clear advantages of engagement with SGAs, the study witnessed a steady decline in student participation. This study examined whether PR media used to convey information regarding participation could change the composition of student publics as explained in STP. The results revealed that media affect the composition of publics. As a result, SGAs need to use PR materials to raise awareness about the organization, about problems on campus, as well as processes for student initiative-taking. Additionally, STP variables were also affected by perceptions of social norms, self-efficacy, and response efficacy. SGAs can use various media to inform and persuade students to participate with the organization.

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What is SGA?

Student Government Association is an organization composed of student leaders who are elected by the student body. As Senators, these leaders communicate with campus administration on your behalf.

When do we meet?

The SGA meets every Monday at 7 pm in the Jackson Ballroom. Meetings are usually 90 minutes long. We love having students at the meetings, and our agenda can be found here.

What can we help with?

SGA helps solve student concerns and provides funding for student organizations. Common concerns include food at the dining center and on-campus parking. If you have ideas on how to improve the campus experience for students, please reach out to your senators.

How to get involved?

Elections for Student Government Association senators and the student body president and vice president are held in March. Petitions for the election generally become available in February. Scan this QR code for an application:

SCAN ME

Figure A-1. Poster design for manipulation condition