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Robert W. Brown

*University of Maine - Main*

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BRIDGING THE GAP: INTERGENERATIONAL PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS  
PROFESSIONAL USAGE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING WEBSITES

by

Robert W. Brown

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors  
(Business)

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Advisory Committee:

C. Matt Graham - Honors Thesis Advisor  
Robert W. Glover CLAS - Honors Preceptor of Political Science  
Niclas Erhardt, PhD  
Ebru Ulusoy  
Mark Haggerty, Rezendes Preceptor for Civic Engagement

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to identify the perception gap between Generation Y and older generations with regard to Social Networking Sites (SNS). Particular emphasis was placed upon applications within a professional setting. An overview of the generation gap and other phenomena provided the theoretical framework towards addressing this issue. An empirical study was conducted, with two separate surveys employed (one for Faculty and one for Undergraduates) to answer the following question: Do different generations perceive the same “value” to Social Networking Websites? Responses gathered from Undergraduates/Faculty at the University of Maine, Orono helped to answer this question. Results provided new insight into intergenerational perceptions of SNS use within the workplace, along with viable avenues for future implementation.

*Keywords:* Social Networking, SNS

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## Introduction

The phrase "social networking" encompasses a wide range of recent innovations which have taken the world by storm, introducing numerous mediums of electronic communication and sparking virtual relationships (FannThomas, 2007). Communication, and more specifically social interaction, has undergone a sweeping transformation in the past few decades. Skeels, M. M., & Grudin, J. (2009) highlight the recent trend of Social Networking Websites (SNS). These technologies represent a new frontier; the embodiment of all recent advancements in telecommunications. The advent of computer hardware and software introduced the potential for virtual social interaction, while the invention of the internet marked the beginning of a new era. Devices such as tablets and smart phones have hastened adoption of SNS technologies through their accessibility and ease of use.

According to Skeels, M. M., & Grudin, J. (2009), students have traditionally been the earliest adopters of SNS. More frequently, however, professionals are using them. It is pertinent to note that communication mediums inevitably face opposition, at least initially. Email faced barriers first introduction, as did instant messengers such as ICQ and AOL, which were introduced in the mid-1990s (Lovejoy, T., & Grudin, J., 2003). These technologies are now considered integral to modern business; *without* these internet-based communication mediums, it would be difficult for businesses to remain competitive.

Social networking has since entered into the realm of contemporary business (Crews & Stitt-Gohdes, 2012); this integration has occurred relatively quickly

considering the recent introduction of SNS technologies within the past decade. Websites such as Facebook and LinkedIn are especially popular among professional users. LinkedIn differentiated itself from its competitors early on by attracting professional users. Facebook began with a similar, targeted strategy (catered specifically towards college students) but has since transformed into a general purpose social platform accepting all users, including businesses and professionals.

SNS offers numerous advantages within the workplace, including seamless communication at a fast pace. Simply put, these websites simplify the prospect of networking. Users are free to communicate and share on a global scale. SNS websites, including Facebook, are fundamentally changing the way in which we think, act, and retrieve information. A universal knowledge, known as “ambient awareness,” is beginning to replace traditional, water-cooler gossip. Information shared among individuals within an organization can improve existing relationships, as well as promote general awareness (Skeels, M. M., & Grudin, J., 2009).

People have various underlying motives which drive them to use such technologies; it is these underlying motivations which determine how users will utilize SNS. One such motive involves the desire to reconnect with others. This can be achieved on a personal level or group level; for instance, a businessperson may desire to reconnect with a former colleague or employer. The process is as simple as applying the appropriate search filters (Skeels, M. M., & Grudin, J., 2009). Websites such as Facebook can serve to “break the ice” and subsequently facilitate real-world connections (Madge, C., Meek, J., Wellens, J., & Hooley, T., 2009). For those already connected through a virtual interdependency, motivations include the desire to “stay in touch,” or at least

maintain a transient awareness of their ex-colleagues. This can be facilitated through numerous SNS features, such as customizable news feeds (Skeels, M. M., & Grudin, J., 2009). These factors can create an advantage which serves to strengthen and reshape organizations (Bennett, J., Owers, M., Pitt, M., & Tucker, M., 2010)

The strengthening of existing relationships is perhaps the greatest observable benefit of SNS. This involves more than just merely “staying in touch;” moreover, users are free to share anything and everything with one another in real-time. In the workplace, for instance, this could include relevant documents or new ideas. The applications for collaboration are truly limitless in scope (Skeels, M. M., & Grudin, J., 2009). SNS serves as a critical social tool which facilitates connections among its growing population of users (Madge et. al., 2009). Studies have shown that integration of SNS into the workplace environment provides enhancements to productivity and performance; however, the technology remains largely undervalued by contemporary businesses (Bennett, J. et. al., 2010).

Numerous questions arise with regard to SNS applications within a business setting. Skeels, M. M., & Grudin, J. (2009) cite that employees from all levels of the corporate environment have expressed doubtfulness concerning the legitimacy of SNS, along with the potential for conflict, and hence doubt its potential for applications within the workplace. For this very reason, some individuals choose to ignore SNS, and others may even discourage its use. Skeptic managers may view SNS as a distraction, and subsequently ban them from the workplace.

Consider the following scenario: You, the skeptic employee, receive a friend request from your boss. How do you respond? In this scenario, power and status begin

to influence Facebook behavior. This can quickly transform into an uncomfortable situation, a hindrance towards productivity and performance. It is clear that managers would want to avoid this type of situation. Skeels, M. M., & Grudin, J. (2009) confirm that others may prefer not to mix social and professional lives, and instead keep them separate. For those who regularly use Facebook outside the workplace, this can skew their perception of Facebook use *within* the workplace. In one regard, Facebook users may feel uncomfortable sharing information about their private lives, and subsequently censor their profiles in order to keep them work-appropriate. Others may fear judgment from their coworkers. For many professionals, keeping their private lives confidential is of key importance.

Generation Y, a universally recognized cohort within the western world (Murray, K., Toulson, P., & Legg, S., 2011), is unique from previous generational cohorts due to its preoccupation with the internet and related innovations, such as SNS (Lichy, 2012). Generation Y matured in the era of SNS, and thus face an influx of technological innovations developing at an accelerated pace (Murray et. al, 2011). Gen Y is technologically knowledgeable, and hence drawn toward new technologies (Murray et. al., 2011). Generation Y progressive technological tendencies make this cohort increasingly eager to adopt new technologies within the work environment (Eisner, 2005).

The aim of this study is to address Generation Y's fascination with SNS technology and the potential for conflict with older generations. The goal is to discover whether conflict exists between older and younger cohorts within the workplace

concerning SNS; namely, to answer the following question: Do different generations perceive the same professional value in Social Networking Websites?

## Concepts and Terminology

### The Internet, Intranet, and SNS

The internet created the opportunity to strengthen internal relationships within various organizations with the evolution of the **intranet**. Martini, A., Corso, M., & Pellegrini, L. (2009) state that the intranet evolved as a means of channeling information through organizations; this was primarily a one-way service in which management delivered pertinent information to employees. The business intranet was conceived as a means to improve internal communications. Early intranets were seen as the first step towards unification and a reduction of paper waste; in essence, intranets would improve operational efficiency, and subsequently create a new medium of internal communications (Martini et. al., 2009).

Since its advent, the intranet has evolved into a widely diverse and supportive set of technologies. Intranets are becoming increasingly integrated in all areas of the firm, providing valuable tools which fulfill users' needs, which can involve operational responsibilities, knowledge management (KMS), or customer relationship management (CRM). Intranets can also serve as a platform for collaboration. The distinction between intranets and the rest of the internet is disappearing as systems become more sophisticated; functionality and compatibility are enabling intranets to connect with a wide variety of existing systems. A pattern of integration and cross compatibility is expected to continue as these systems grow and evolve (Martini et. al., 2009).

In a strict sense, a **social network** is a structured group of individuals (commonly represented as a configuration of nodes) which are connected by means of an underlying interdependency (Abhyankar, 2011). An example of interdependency, one which is

frequently cited in the contemporary realm of social media, is "friendship" (Abhyankar, 2011). Friendship can be perceived as an umbrella term which encompasses a larger subset of interdependencies, such as common interest or beliefs (Abhyankar, 2011).

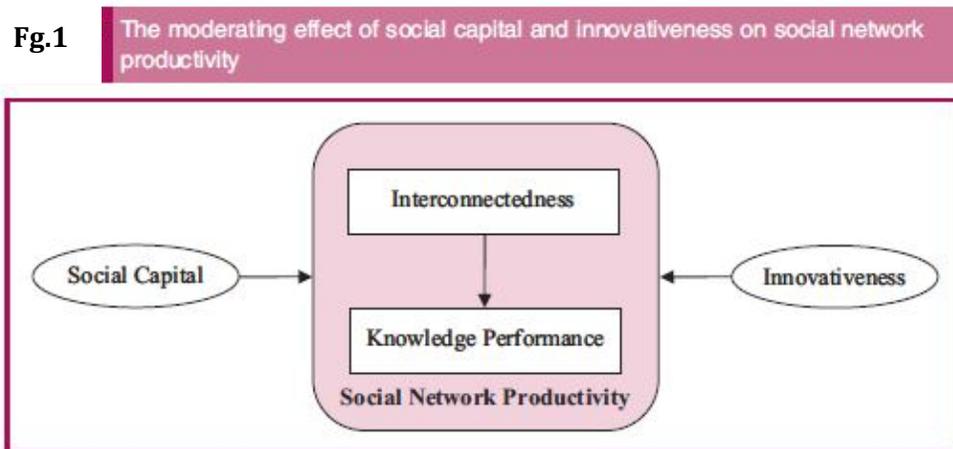
**Social Networking Sites (SNS)** are online communities in which individuals, groups, and firms can engage in social networking on a global scale (Abhyankar, 2011). Although SNS has existed since the early 1990s, the term has evolved over time; moreover, recent innovations in the past decade have captured a much broader audience of internet denizens (Abhyankar, 2011). In this sense, widespread acceptance of SNS is a relatively new advent to society.

SNS offers a wide breadth of features which grant it unique status among communication mediums. Each user is typically granted a personal web space or "profile" which can be personalized with minimal effort (Abhyankar, 2011). Users have the option to add contacts, post pictures, and communicate with other users through a wide variety of channels including private messaging, chat, and public comment walls (Abhyankar, 2011). SNS allows users to form new connections while maintaining old ones (Magnier-Watanabe, R., Yoshida, M., & Watanabe, T., 2010).

SNS has seen integration into the workplace, and provide an alternative to corporate intranets. Due to SNS's ability to foster knowledge creation and innovativeness, this partnership has proved compatible. Employees utilize SNS tools to communicate with peers, superiors, and subordinates, fostering a widespread dissemination of knowledge throughout organizations. Firms can internalize the benefits of multiple systems while enjoying a new standard of cross-compatibility among integrated platforms (Magnier-Watanabe et. al., 2010). Magnier-Watanabe et. al. (2010)

found that "SNS were found to mildly improve efficiency in accessing knowledge or in increasing the number of business contacts."

The following flowchart (Figure 1) communicates the relationship between productivity and the use of SNS technologies:



(Magnier-Watanabe et. al., 2010)

It is visible from the diagram (Figure 1) that environments which possess inherent qualities, such as innovativeness and social capital, can serve as incubators for social network productivity. Synergistic attributes, such as interconnectedness and knowledge performance, stand to benefit from the integration of SNS technology; moreover, a combination of these attributes can improve business performance overall.

### **Discerning Generation Y from Previous Generational Cohorts**

A **generational cohort** is a discernible subset of the global population which has experienced a shared chronological history of events. Cohorts can form at both micro and macro levels. Micro level characterizes individual social interaction within a particular time span. Macro level characterizes large-scale, global occurrences which occurred during the formative years of a given individual's lifespan. Individuals whom

mature within a particular time period share distinct similarities in values, mind-sets, and overall behavior; thus, as part of their respective cohort, individuals tend to exhibit a "generational personality" (Murray et. al, 2011). In the context of this paper, my primary focus is centered upon macro level cohorts.

Contemporary literature identifies four distinct generational cohorts in today's workforce (Lichy, 2012). The four discrete cohorts are as follows: Traditionalists (a.k.a. The Silent Generation), Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y (a.k.a. the Net Generation) (Lichy, 2012; Murray et. al, 2011)

The term "**generation gap**" was introduced in the mid-20th century to describe the differences between Baby Boomers and their World-War II progenitors (Lichy, 2012). The generation gap is described as the intergenerational tension which exists between cohorts (Elkind, 1988). This tension is likely attributed to the diverse plethora of history which occurs within the lifespan of a given cohort; these unique histories foster generational differences, as well as underlying value disparities (Elkind, 1988).

**Generation Y**, comprising individuals born 1982 to 1994, is a widely-recognized generational cohort within the scope of contemporary western civilization (Murray et. al, 2011). Generation Y is discernible from previous generational cohorts due to its obsession with digital technology (Lichy, 2012). Generation Y matured in the era of SNS, and thus faces a blinding array of technological advances unseen by any previous generation (Murray et. al, 2011). Gen Y is the most highly educated cohort in history, and possesses a unique affinity towards technology (Murray et. al, 2011). Members of this generation are especially progressive in the workplace, expecting a role

in decision making and instantaneous feedback (Eisner, 2005). Generation Y serves as the key reference group for the purpose of this study.

**Generation X**, comprising individuals born 1965-1980, is the second-oldest generational cohort in the contemporary workforce (Murray et. al, 2011). "Gen X-ers" are defined in most literature as computer literate (Lichy, 2012) and independent (Murray et. al, 2011). Generation X expects autonomy in the workplace and career advancement (Murray et. al, 2011) as well as an informal workplace atmosphere (Lichy, 2012).

**Baby Boomers**, comprising individuals born 1946-1964, are the largest cohort in today's workforce (Murray et. al, 2011). This generation has been described as 'workaholic' (Murray et. al, 2011) as well as optimistic (Lichy, 2012). Baby boomers believe in hard work and delaying instant gratification for future rewards (Murray et. al, 2011). Baby boomers perceive the work environment as 'sink-or-swim,' i.e. survival of the fittest (Eisner, 2005). Baby Boomers are found to be extremely loyal; they enjoy working in groups and desire to receive due recognition for their efforts.

With many entering retirement age, **Traditionalists**, comprising individuals born 1923-1945, are the oldest cohort in today's workforce. These individuals garner a firm respect for authority (Murray et. al, 2011) as well as a strong sense of loyalty (Murray et. al, 2011). Willingness to conform and self-sacrifice are also key traits of this generation (Lichy, 2012). In the workplace, traditionalists prefer a top-down management style (Eisner, 2005).

The research suggests that all generations have measurable differences, and that **intergenerational conflict** is a prevalent issue within modern society; likewise, the

diverse variety of generational cohorts within today's workforce can introduce this conflict to professional environments (Burk, B., Olsen, H., & Messerli, E., 2011).

### **Popular Social Networking Sites**

**Facebook** is a free SNS platform which describes itself as a “social utility.” Like any social network, Facebook is composed of interdependencies among users in the form of friendships, groups, and umbrella networks. Users create profiles where they can share photos, message one-another (both privately and publically), and play games, among numerous other features. Facebook profiles are more information intensive than LinkedIn; however, the platform limits customization to a greater degree than MySpace. For users seeking to share less information, customizable privacy tools are available. Facebook allows for third-party developers to create custom features and tools for users. If a user has a Twitter account, these feeds can be directly routed to their respective Facebook profile (Skeels, M. M., & Grudin, J., 2009).

Weaver (2008) acknowledges Facebook's significance as a viable platform for group communication. Facebook allows users to create profiles which reflect their real-world identities. Information can be added or deleted at will, whether it is demographic data or personal preferences. Users can further customize their accounts through adding photos or videos, or allowing comments to be posted on their page. Numerous tools are provided in order to allow third-party developers to create desirable applications for users, such as games. Facebook aligns with the recent trend of web 2.0 technologies, facilitating movement from the internet as an information repository (i.e. an encyclopedia) towards an interactive "hub" of communication.

**LinkedIn** is a professional SNS platform where interdependencies (i.e. relationships) are known as connections. Each user creates a unique profile in order to share professional information with other users; occupational experience is of key importance. Users are granted privacy controls as well as the ability to access other user's profiles. There is a paid version which includes advanced search features. LinkedIn allows users to create interdependencies which mimic real-life professional networks. The primary use of LinkedIn revolves around job-seekers and job-hirers looking to fill professional positions. LinkedIn creates a social marketplace where users can advertise themselves, make connections, and potentially get an interview (Skeels, M. M., & Grudin, J., 2009).

## **Problem**

Inter-generational differences (i.e. those which constitute the generation gap), with respect to SNS usage and perceptions, are the primary focus of this study.

Generation Y is the specific focus due to their inclination towards technology; this young generation serves as the benchmark from which to compare older generations. Moreover, the technological gap we seek to identify would be presumed to exist between Generation Y and all older generations of working age.

Managers, through overseeing a multi-generational workforce, run the gamut in the attempt to satisfy a wide range of expectations and desires. In this regard, it can be difficult to please one group without alienating another in the process. SNS has yet to achieve widespread professional implementation. If the Generation Y is genuinely *more* eager to implement these technologies, we will be able to see it in the results, and hence offer practical advice to managers which may provide a solution to this issue.

## **Questions for Research**

The following questions need to be addressed in order to understand the fundamental role which the generation gap plays in influencing the lives of Generation Y employees:

*1) Do Generation Y/older generations see different value for SNS technologies in a professional environment?*

*2) What SNS features are Generation Y/older generations most eager to incorporate into the workplace?*

*3) Can the incorporation of SNS technologies benefit professional environments?*

## **Purpose of Research**

Although generational descriptors are unlikely to change anytime in the near future, technology is in a dynamic state of perpetual evolution. The blinding pace at which technological change occurs is exponentially on the rise; it is likely we will make numerous, remarkable discoveries in the near future.

The relationship between SNS in the workplace setting has been studied previously; most notably, Skeels, M. M., & Grudin, J. 2009 (When Social Networks Cross Boundaries: A Case Study of Workplace Use of Facebook and LinkedIn). Yet dynamic variables, inherent to the emergence of technology, breathe new life into previously misunderstood concepts; likewise, additional studies can serve to confirm previous research and solidify the foundation of existing theory. Looking at this issue from the perspective of student or academic faculty, this study will provide substantial insight into intergenerational perceptions of SNS.

Through studying the perceived usefulness of SNS platforms, we can gain a better understanding of the office as a working whole. Managers can utilize new insights, and seek to improve workplace productivity, further serving the needs of their employees. Moreover, employees can perform their jobs better when given the appropriate tools. It is hoped that this research can assist both parties and ultimately enhance the work environment for both managers and subordinates.

## **Review of Existing Literature**

### **The Generation Gap: Doubts**

Some authors doubt the validity of the so-called "generation gap." Jorgensen (2003) discredits the notion of distinct generational cohorts, and indicates that there is no "clear-cut" way of splitting the population into groups sharing similar values and ways of thinking. In this sense, it is not possible to split the population into Generation Y, Generation X, or Baby Boomers. Individuals possess a general stability of values over time; specific values relating to employment preferences and education display a similar consistency. Jorgensen (2003) cites Hofstede's research in particular, in that cultural reinforcement facilitates consistency in value orientation through established "norms" and ways of thinking. Cultural principles can be further intensified by supporting national identity.

Jorgensen (2003) acknowledges the present reality of "relentless change," in that our modern culture is changing too fast for stable cohorts to manifest themselves. The "rapid uptake" of technology introduced in the past decade has increased fragmentation among identified cohorts.

The mere acknowledgement of the existence of generational cohorts is known as "generationalism." This is a social construction on part of the Baby Boomers, who never expected such a difference in values between themselves and their Generation X children (Jorgensen, 2003). It is visible that generationalism is a controversial theory; however, acknowledgement of the generation gap within contemporary literature far outnumbers those against, solidifying the notion that this issue is endemic to society and very "real."

## **Generational Differences**

Wood (2005) says that the generation gap is not a new concept, nor did cohorts integrate into various corporate levels overnight. Wood (2005) characterizes generational diversity as "the new diversity," i.e. a pervasive inconsistency in ways of thinking among different generations. This gap is affecting the bottom line of many businesses, and has many workers feeling that something isn't quite right (a proverbial "elephant in the room"). Stereotypes and incorrect assumptions are prevalent in today's workplace; these serve to proliferated targeted and unfounded criticism towards generational groups.

Burk, B. et. al. (2011) says that awareness of the so-called generation gap is critical. Generational differences pose a threat to a productive work environment; when co-workers cannot see "eye-to-eye" on a particular issue, this increases the visibility of the generation gap. Burk et. al. (2011) states that value systems have little to do with intergenerational differences; rather, communication serves to broaden the divide.

## **Stereotypes and Confirmation Bias**

It is easy to imagine how conflict can arise through a combination of value discrepancies and stereotypes (Murray et. al., 2011). The mere suggestion that generational cohorts exist can perpetuate stereotypes (Murray et. al., 2011). Lester (2012) hypothesizes that there are more perceived value differences between generations than *actual* value differences. A notable characteristic of stereotypes is that they are often untrue (Murray et. al., 2011). Murray et. al. (2011) defines various constructs (i.e. values) which participants (a proportional cross-section of the typical workplace cohort makeup) were asked to rank on a quantified scale. Murray et. al. (2011) found that

generational cohorts shared more similarities than differences, suggesting the notion that stereotypes are unfounded.

Confirmation bias may contribute to the perpetuity of stereotypes, as it only takes a few "bad apples" to taint an entire population. Likewise, non-stereotypical behavior may go unnoticed for the same reason. It is pertinent to acknowledge that employees must play an active role in objectively recognizing behavior, regardless of overt physical characteristics (e.g. age), in order to gain an accurate representation of their coworkers. Confirmation bias can also manifest a situation in which an individual behaves in a manner which is "expected" by society (Murray et. al., 2011).

Lester et. al. (2012) reported numerous findings relating to generational expectations within the workplace. The value of E-mail and Social Media as communication mediums is reported significantly higher in Generation Y than any other cohort of society. Generation Y also values having fun in the workplace and continuous learning, more so than previous generations; moreover, Generation Y does not view Baby Boomers as the type to associate "work" with "fun." Generation Y views Baby Boomers as inflexible, authoritative, and highly structured. Generation Y does not think that Boomers value technology as a generation, instead expressing a reliance on face-to-face communication. Boomers share an equal plethora of assumptions regarding the typical Gen Y employee. For instance, Boomers underestimate the value of security, professionalism, and formal authority in younger cohorts. Likewise, Boomers overestimate the importance of technology and SNS in younger generations (Lester et. al, 2012).

From the perspective of younger generations, Traditionalists may be cast as dinosaurs; "over the hill" or otherwise resistant to change (Kornadt & Rothermund 2011, as cited in Lester et. al., 2012). Likewise, Generation X is typically seen negatively as "slackers" or untrustworthy in general (Rottier 2001, as cited in Gibson et. al., 2011). However, not all stereotypes held by management are negatively targeted.

Traditionalists, the oldest members of today's workforce, are prized for their experience and loyalty; these are the true "team-players" (Hatfield 2002, as cited in Murray et. al., 2011). Generation X, on the other hand, is valued for their sense of individuality and creativity, paired with superior computer skills (Gibson et. al., 2011). Generation Y is the most internet and tech-savvy generation (Gibson et. al., 2011), an inarguably necessary trait in today's interconnected business world (FannThomas, 2007).

### **Technological Considerations**

Incongruence of communication mediums can create frustration within the workplace. If a particular individual has a "default" means of information relay, and this is subsequently disrupted, this could lead to a communication failure. This failure could be expanded as a flaw in one's ability to utilize technology or work in groups, resulting in improper judgments which could have been avoided. A worker's refusal to use a particular medium of communication (such as E-mail) could lead to a similar discrepancy. This situation can be avoided through an emphasis on continuous learning and acceptance of differences.

Leonard-Barton, D., & Deschamps, I. (1988) found that employees are willing to adopt and incorporate technologies if they are simply made available for use; effectively, new technology "pulls" users in. This is in contrast to the notion of management

“pushing” new technologies onto subordinates, especially against their will. The most tech-savvy employees will usually become the first adopters; however, other employees will follow suit once enough people are using it, and the technology grows central to the business activities central to the office environment.

Fostering efficient teamwork practices is another critical objective in today's business environment. Soós, J. K., Juhász, M., & Hámornik, B. P., (2010) found that timeliness of information contributes towards team efficiency. Information density, i.e. the frequency and volume of information transmitted between group members, provides a good indicator of group performance as a whole; this is proved more effective if the information is oriented chronologically (i.e. past, present, or future). Without a specified time orientation, information density provides little insight into overall performance. Frequent communication, in accordance to a sufficient level of detail, enables higher performance. Teams function best when members can ask questions and receive unambiguous answers; this requires a high degree of specificity with regard to the drafting of questions. SNS offers a multitude of integrated communication mediums; teams can make use of these tools in order to achieve success.

### **SNS Implementation in an Academic Setting**

Usage patterns of SNS among youth typically share a pattern of similarities. Madge et. al. (2009) reviewed the impact of social media (e.g. Facebook) on contemporary society; specifically, the identification of *drivers* for Facebook usage patterns in undergraduate university students (citing social motivations in particular). The study answers three primary questions surrounding SNS: Firstly, how does pre-registration usage (i.e. a history of engagement) influence undergraduate Facebook

behavior? Secondly, how do first-year undergraduates use Facebook for social purposes? Lastly, can the university (i.e. the institution) successfully integrate Facebook into its communications with students?

The authors cite that over 95% of young college students in Great Britain use SNS on a regular basis. This statistic is used to form the questions posed above. The assumption here is that young students enter undergraduate settings with a *history* of SNS usage; subsequently, this solidifies the student's behavior within the SNS environment. Students are *unlikely* to change their usage behavior upon entrance to universities, regardless of the opportunity for academic integration (Lichy, 2012).

Madge, Meek, Wellens & Hooley (2009)'s study found that college-bound students used Facebook to connect with roommates prior to arrival; primarily, as a tool for social integration within the campus setting. The authors cite Boyd (2007), stating that college-bound students share an inherent attraction towards Facebook due to its upbringing on a college campus. Many of these students used MySpace or another SNS prior to "switching" to Facebook. Overall, the study reveals a harmonic coexistence between "real-life" and SNS communications between undergraduate students (as opposed to discrete online and offline worlds). Through Facebook, students can discover information about one another instantaneously, and organize social events/gatherings on the fly. SNS is an enormous figure in the lives of undergraduate students which serves to compliment the social experience. SNS transforms the overall character of social interaction; this is to be expected from any new communication technology, which subsequently *allows* viable communication through alternative mediums.

Kelm (2011) presents a perspective on social media usage within the student population. The author acknowledges the increasingly central role that SNS play in everyday life; subsequently, Kelm (2011) chose to integrate SNS into an MBA curriculum. This idea proved successful, suggesting the possible introduction of similar initiatives in the future. The main driver presented is known as social constructivism (Kelm, 2011). Social constructivism is a pertinent concept when discussing the role (and ultimate potential) of social media. From a social constructivist perspective, knowledge is constructed (and reconstructed) by groups of individuals; thus, as a collaborative venture, knowledge *changes* over time. Kelm (2011) claims that SNS is reconstructing modern knowledge; moreover, our society is entering a new era of information. The author argues that resistance or backlash towards this inevitable progression of knowledge (i.e. banning laptops or smart phones within the classroom) is unhealthy and unnatural; moreover, all of these technologies will inevitably reach full-integration within environments, providing their perception as “beneficial.”

Silius, K., Miilumaki, T., Huhtamaki, J., Tebest, T., Merilainen, J., & Pohjolainen, S. (2010) say that SNS websites can help ease the transition into the college environment. Adjusting to life in college can be confusing for students. Social media systems assist in the support involved study and learning processes; conversely, SNS technologies are still rarely used in the learning process. Silius et. al. (2010) studies the implementation of TUT Circle, a platform created for new students at the Tampere University of Technology. TUT circle is an open source social networking platform created through Drupal®, an open source Content Management Framework (CMF). Drupal® allows for the creation of various tools which facilitate the development of a

SNS platform. Overall, TUT Circle was designed to replicate existing Social Media Websites such as Facebook and LinkedIn. Features include collaborative groups, chat, news feeds, events, blogging, and resource sharing.

Silius et. al. (2010) found that student's primary motivations for SNS use in an academic setting included the pursuit of study enhancement, networking opportunities, and targeted feedback. The researchers concluded that students use SNS technologies as a necessary tool assisting in the transition into a college atmosphere; the implementation of modern SNS systems into the academic world is critical to fulfilling the needs of today's students.

DeAndrea, D. C., Ellison, N. B., LaRose, R., Steinfield, C., & Fiore, A. (2012) say that students may achieve enhanced academic performance from Social Media Websites. DeAndrea et. al. (2012) concurs with Silius et. al. (2010) in that the transition from secondary education to University is often strenuous and unnecessarily taxing on academic performance. For the new student, relevant content is often difficult to locate. SNS technologies can help to facilitate the acquisition of content (given resource sharing capabilities), as well as ease the formation of relevant social networks.

DeAndrea et. al. (2012) conducted a study which utilized Spartan Connect, an online Social Networking platform which connected students according to their geographic location (forming clusters known as "neighborhoods"). Features included student directories, event calendars, file sharing, and blogging. Students were encouraged to network with one another, effectively "friending" their peers in a manner similar to Facebook. A full-text search provided students with an efficient means of locating relevant content. DeAndrea et. al. (2012) concluded that SNS platforms, when

used for academic purposes, are especially beneficial to new students; these technologies can serve to increase the potential of students and improve the foundation for education in the future.

## **Research Justification**

It is evident from the literature that intergenerational differences *do* exist; moreover, these differences can be the source of tension between generational cohorts. It is also evident that mere perceptions can lead to conflict, even more so than real differences. Although some of these “perceived” differences are conjured through stereotypes or confirmation bias, many more share a basis in reality.

Generation Y is young and tech-savvy, more so than previous generations; hence, Generation Y is more willing to accept and implement new technologies. The workplace requires technological congruence in order to reach its maximum potential. Will Generation Y’s preference towards newer technologies, such as SNS, correlate with increased optimism concerning professional implementation of SNS within the workplace? This is the prevalent generational issue which, as discussed before, serves as the primary focus of this paper.

The literature hosts numerous examples of successful SNS implementation within an academic setting, with proven enhancements to learning and engagement. It has been shown that, if there is an intergenerational conflict regarding SNS usage past the informal level, that this can be overcome in a classroom environment. In this respect, academics would serve as a desirable and worthy sampling to study.

In theory, congruence between the world of academia and business may render SNS a viable, albeit contemporary solution to communication failure. Can academics, with their enhanced experience with classroom SNS implementation, offer new insight towards integration in a professional setting?

## **Research Design and Methodology**

We conducted two anonymous online surveys/questionnaires, using the Qualtrics platform, which aimed to study 1) the differences in perceived value of SNS, between older and younger generations, in a professional setting. Select questions addressed 2) Which SNS features sampled cohorts were most eager to incorporate into the workplace. Lastly, we attempted to answer through whether 3) The incorporation of SNS technologies would provide overall benefit to a professional, workplace environment.

It was necessary to obtain data regarding SNS usage behavior, along with demographic data to ensure accuracy and IRB compliance. To qualify, respondents were required to be at least 18 years of age. The sample was composed of respondents ranging from Generation Y to Baby Boomers and beyond; two separate surveys were offered to each respective cohort based on their status as either “undergraduate” or “faculty.”

### **Sampling Considerations**

The university sampling was chosen for two reasons; firstly, the numerous examples of successful integration of SNS into academic environments provided a learning opportunity, in that academics may possess the key to synthesizing SNS beyond the realm of personal interaction. Secondly, the university served as a “convenience sampling;” this provided a group of willing participants who fit the desired multigenerational representation.

There are questions that may arise concerning the validity of the sampling; more specifically, do the results of the two survey samples properly reflect the population (i.e. generations) they are presumed to represent? It is arguable that university faculty face increased exposure to SNS due to their proximity to younger, technologically literate Gen

Y students, and subsequently maintain knowledge of the technology which their peers may not share. In this regard, it is arguable that faculty would be far less skeptical and perhaps more willing to integrate SNS into new environments. This may skew the perceptions of older generations as being more similar to Gen Y; moreover, the “gap” between intergenerational perceptions would appear less evident.

A related concern involved the applicability of faculty and student populations involving a study of “professional environments;” moreover, do these two populations accurately reflect the perceptions of their respective generations? Generation Y students, seeking inevitable employment in the form of internships and professional careers, actively seeks an environment which caters to their preferences. As Generation Y students are likely to pursue professional employment, it makes sense to acknowledge their preferences as valuable in the context of this study. Similarly, faculty provides a multi-generational assemblage of former university students, albeit with more professional experience; this provides a diverse population of critical thinkers from which to compare Generation Y.

In summary, the peculiar nature of the university sampling poses identifiable problems. As researchers, we accept this challenge and justify our decision: If the generation gap is found to significantly hinder workplace integration of SNS, this newfound evidence will negate the sampling anomalies discussed above. Effectively, this provides a benefit-of-the-doubt to skeptics who argue against the notion of generationalism. For the purpose of this study, the argument supporting the basis for the sampling stands firm; while acknowledging that there are identifiable issues concerning the sample, we are still capable of drawing reasonable conclusions.

## **Survey Questions/Measures**

Each section of the survey was composed of dichotomous questions, rank order scaling lists, semantic differential scales, and constant sum percentages. Questions grew in complexity as the survey progressed; for this reason, semantic differentials and ranking scales were used frequently. Situational questions were specifically catered to each cohort in order to maintain relevance to the respondent.

Subjective data was quantified through psychometric methods; heuristics such as the Likert scale were used repeatedly and consistently. Generational “anomalies” were paid special attention with regard to comments left by respondents. Comments may prove critical to understanding the reasoning behavior and underlying motivations of outliers; this, however, comes second to understanding the behavior and perceptions of generations as a whole (thus, comments remained optional). Aggregated data was analyzed and attributed to cohort groups. The identity of research participants remains anonymous.

## **Recruitment Methods**

In order to distribute the survey, we used existing conferences within the FirstClass email client to distribute the survey, along with the invitation message, among students and faculty. The local FirstClass client serves the entire Orono campus of the University of Maine. Viability of conferences was a function of relevance to the target sampling, along with factors concerning high activity among students and faculty. These conferences included the following: Announcements & Alerts, UMaine Forum, Provost/Academic Affairs, Faculty Conference, Maine Business School, Civil Engineering. FirstClass was the sole means of soliciting survey responses.

## Results

### Respondent Demographics

Responses were collected from two separate surveys, one for students (n=190) and another for faculty (n=32). The largest category of faculty respondents (29%) identified themselves as *lecturer*, while *associate professor* and *other* came in second (both at 23%). 16% of respondents were self-identified *full professors*, while the remaining 10% identified themselves as *assistant professors*. The average age of faculty respondents was 47. Of student respondents, 28% identified themselves as *freshman*, 27% *sophomores*, 25% *juniors*, and 15% as *seniors*. 4% of student respondents identified themselves in the *other* category. 21 was the average age of student respondents.

### Findings

**Preferred Medium of Communication.** Among faculty, face to face was the preferred medium of communication (81%), as opposed to online (19%).

#### Of the following methods of communication, which do you prefer?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Face to face		26	81%
2	Online		6	19%
	Total		32	100%

Among students, face to face was the most preferred medium of communication (87%), online (13%).

**Of the following methods of communication, which do you prefer?**

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Face to face		166	87%
2	Online		24	13%
	Total		190	100%

**Active Engagement.** 74% of faculty respondents indicated that they were actively engaged in SNS websites (26% indicated otherwise). 91% of student respondents indicated active engagement in SNS websites (9% indicated otherwise).

**Preferred SNS Platform.** Among faculty, Facebook was overwhelmingly the preferred SNS platform (if not, second choice). LinkedIn and Twitter were also listed among favored choices. Students also chose Facebook as their preferred SNS platform, along with Twitter as a popular second place choice.

**Frequency of Use.** 61% of faculty respondents used SNS platforms daily, while 25% indicated weekly use. 14% indicated SNS use on a monthly basis.

**How often do you use your preferred social networking platform?**

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Daily		17	59%
2	Weekly		8	28%
3	Monthly		4	14%
	Total		29	100%

89% of student respondents used SNS platforms daily, while 9% indicated weekly use. Only 3% indicated monthly SNS use.

**How often do you use your preferred social networking platform?**

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Daily		166	89%
2	Weekly		16	9%
3	Monthly		5	3%
	Total		187	100%

It is visible from the sampling that students are more likely to use SNS on a daily basis; faculty responses exhibit a similar usage frequency, albeit to a lesser extreme than students.

**Time Spent for Informal or Professional Purposes (Constant Sum).** On average, faculty respondents weighted SNS websites as 55% informal (social), 22% professional. Again, on average, student respondents weighted SNS websites as 77% informal (social), 12% professional.

**Time Spent for Informal or Professional Purposes (Likert Scale).** 22% of faculty respondents indicated strictly informal use of SNS websites; 30% said somewhat informal. 33% of respondents indicated informal and professional use. 4% indicated somewhat professional usage, while the remaining 11% was strictly professional. 35% of student respondents indicated strictly informal use of SNS websites; 39% said somewhat informal. 19% of respondents indicated both informal and professional use. 6% said somewhat professional and only 1% indicated strictly professional use.

**Satisfaction with Attitudes at Local Institution.** Current satisfaction among faculty with regard to attitudes concerning SNS websites at the local institution was overwhelmingly neutral (67%), followed by satisfied (19%). Only 4% indicated very satisfied, while 11% indicated dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. Among students, current satisfaction with attitudes concerning SNS websites at the local institution was, again, overwhelmingly neutral (68%), followed by somewhat satisfied (18%). 7% were very satisfied, while the remaining respondents were either somewhat dissatisfied (4%) or very dissatisfied (2%).

**Professional vs. Informal Features.** The highest rated informal SNS feature among faculty was photo sharing, while the most professional was discussion groups/forums. Private messaging was most neutral. Among students, the most informal SNS feature was games, while the most professional was discussion groups/forums. Again, private messaging was the highest ranked feature for neutral purposes.

**Perceived Professional Value.** Among faculty, professional value in SNS websites was weighted towards neutral (31%), agree (41%), and strongly agree (24%). 7% indicated disagreement, and none indicated strong disagreement. The mean value was 3.80.

**Please react to the following statement: I see professional value in the use of social networking websites:**

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Strongly Disagree		0	0%
2	Disagree		2	7%
3	Neutral		9	30%
4	Agree		12	40%
5	Strongly Agree		7	23%
	Total		30	100%

Among students, 64% agreed or strongly agreed that there was professional value in SNS. 14% did not see value, and 22% indicated a neutral stance. The mean value was 3.60.

**Please react to the following statement: I see professional value in Social Networking Websites.**

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Strongly Disagree		8	4%
2	Disagree		18	10%
3	Neutral		41	22%
4	Agree		94	50%
5	Strongly Agree		26	14%
	Total		187	100%

It is visible from the sampling that the majority of both students and faculty see professional value in SNS; moreover, both cohorts share a similar perspective to a certain degree.

**Educational Value.** 66% of faculty respondents saw educational value in social networking websites. 31% indicated a neutral stance, while 3% did not see any value. 38% of student respondents saw academic value in established SNS connections with faculty, while 31% did not. 31% were neutral.

**Enhancement of Student/Faculty Relationships.** 22% of faculty respondents agreed that SNS improved student/faculty relationships, 25% disagreed. 54% were neutral. Among students, 31% agreed that SNS improved student/faculty relationships, 33% disagreed. 36% of students indicated a neutral stance.

**Student/Faculty “Friending” (Cross Tabulation).** Of student respondents, 13% sent friend requests to faculty; however, 46% accepted faculty friend requests.

		Do you send friend requests to faculty?		Total
		Yes	No	
Do you accept friend requests from faculty?	Yes	24	61	85
	No	0	99	99
	Total	24	160	184

Faculty respondents answered in a similar manner. Only 7% sent friend requests to students, yet 33% accepted student friend requests. This is a curious finding.

		Do you send friend requests to students?		Total
		Yes	No	
Do you accept friend requests from students?	Yes	2	8	10
	No	0	20	20
	Total	2	28	30

### Chi-Square Results - Perceived Professional Value of SNS

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	3.950*	4	.413
Likelihood Ratio	3.920	4	.417
Linear-by-Linear Association	.436	1	.509
N of Valid Cases	180		

The chi-square tests reveal a computed value of 3.950, with a likelihood ratio of 3.920 (using a significance level of .05). This computed value is well below the critical chi-square value of 9.49. The test suggests a difference in how students and faculty responded to this question between the two surveys. It is notable that the test reflects the five-point Likert scale used with this question.

## **One-Way ANOVA Results**

Finally, the two samples were analyzed using a series of one-way ANOVA tests. The ANOVA tests identified significant differences between faculty and student responses, given matching inquiry. The results of the one-way ANOVA suggest three significant differences between the two populations. The three differences are listed below:

- 1.) Time Spent for Informal or Professional Purposes (Constant Sum): There was a significant difference in the percent of time using the SNS technology: both professional versus informal use ( $F = 12.132, p = .001$ ).
- 2.) Demographics (Age): There was a significant difference in age between the two groups ( $F = 12.558, p = .000$ ).
- 3.) Enhancement of Student/Faculty Relationships: A significant difference was found between the groups in relation to SNS' enhancement of student/faculty relationships ( $F = 5.328, p = .022$ ).

This test confirms that there are differences in age, usage behavior of SNS technology, and preferences regarding online student/faculty relationships through SNS. Unlike the Chi-Square test, however, there was no significant difference found in relation to perceived professional value of SNS.

## Discussion

Clearly, face to face communication is the preferred medium for both faculty and undergraduate students; however, the results show that a large majority of faculty and students engage in online SNS communication on a daily basis. This is a curious finding, given Generation Y's affinity towards online communication mediums shown in the literature. The result calls into question the difference between "preferences" and the genuine application of said mediums. Although face to face interaction may be *preferred*, it may not always be the most practical means of communication. Face to face interaction involves significantly more time and energy than online communication; moreover, these variables serve as constraints which limit our ability to engage in physical, face to face conversation.

Despite this common affinity, a larger percentage of students indicated SNS engagement, as well as more frequent usage than faculty. Facebook was, indisputably, the most widely preferred SNS platform among student and faculty groups. Although this was not an unexpected finding, given Facebook's global dominance of SNS, it was curious to find that faculty did not display a preference for LinkedIn, which, from a generational standpoint, may provide a greater benefit to those seeking more professional online networking opportunities.

While both groups use SNS for primarily informal purposes, it is evident that both populations see professional value in SNS, and that there is no significant difference seen between the two groups. Although the Chi-Square test suggested a difference between how faculty and students perceived professional value, it is visible from the survey findings that both faculty (64%) *and* students (63%) shared a positive outlook with regard

to SNS viability in a professional setting. In the context of this study, a positive (agree or strongly agree) or negative (disagree or strongly disagree) indication is most critical to ascertain perceptions among groups. It is necessary to recognize that individual propensity towards indicating *either* “agree” or “strongly agree” is not reflected in the Chi-Square test; moreover, the resulting “significant” difference is not visible in the raw data. The ANOVA test *did not* find a significant difference between the faculty mean of 3.80 and the student mean of 3.60. The ANOVA test, which identifies differences in mean values among multiple groups, is more appropriate in the context of this study.

It is significant to reiterate that *both* cohorts indicated discussion groups/forums as the “most professional” of the available SNS features. This confirms an additional degree of congruence between perceptions. The two groups, although separated by significant age differences, see discussion groups/forums as the most viable workplace application of SNS. This finding provides substantial insight, and suggests a potential avenue for future implementation.

The cross tabulations suggest that both cohorts are hesitant to engage in SNS networking with one another. Curiously, none from either sampling indicated “yes” on the sending of requests and “no” on accepting requests. Clearly, there is a difference between what students and faculty perceive as an “appropriate” online relationship; more importantly, the perceptions of the two groups are visibly incongruent. This phenomenon provides an opportunity for further research.

## Conclusion

The results reveal that not only are the majority of students and faculty using SNS on a daily basis, but both of these groups, albeit multi-generational, see potential for professional value in SNS. The agreement among the two groups, at least from an intergenerational perspective, is remarkably strong; although the Chi-Square test revealed an aggregated difference between the two samplings, no significant difference was found through the ANOVA test. Does this imply that the “generation gap” discussed by Elkind (1988) and Burk et. al. (2011) is not the inhibiting factor keeping SNS out of the workplace? If this is true, then it is unlikely that the *generation gap* would provide a comprehensive explanation, and is thus not worthy of addressing. Perhaps the will to separate the professional and private life, power distance (both discussed by Skeels, M. M., & Grudin, J., 2009) and a perceived lack of functionality are the true causes, and, moreover, the most critical inhibiting factors.

Improper sampling assumptions may also have affected the results. As discussed above, faculty members are naturally more exposed to SNS (due to their proximity to young students), and hence may see more value in the technology than their non-academic peers. Faculty may have proven an unrealistically “progressive” sampling; moreover, the perceptions of a far wider population of working professionals could not likely be accurately represented.

Regardless of these results, literature has shown that interpersonal differences can inhibit workplace integration of SNS. When two individuals, a boss and a subordinate, don't see eye to eye, numerous conflicts can occur. The goal is to integrate SNS without negatively impacting the strengths of the existing business; extraneous factors, such as

productivity and efficiency, are not to be hindered in this process. Whatever the solution may be, it must be catered to avoid such negative impacts.

If professional value is perceived and understood, and hence seen as viable, then such hesitation must be overcome in order to achieve large-scale integration of SNS into the workplace environment. A common, agreed upon medium of communication, perceived as professional in nature, could fulfill this goal. In this regard, the professional features chosen by each group may serve to “bridge the gap,” albeit on an individual level; both groups cited discussion groups/forums as having the greatest potential for professional use.

As found by DeAndrea et. al. (2012) and Silius et. al. (2010), SNS has proven valuable in an academic setting *despite* doubts raised in opposition. Perhaps the use of discussion groups/forums can instill a similar confidence in SNS in a professional environment; subsequently, these features may provide the crucial medium in which to integrate Facebook and similar SNS websites into a business setting. If the technology is simply made available (in a manner similar to the one discussed by Leonard-Barton, D., & Deschamps, I., 1988), providing the functional purpose most widely perceived as “professional,” it is likely that this introduction can prove successful.

### **Implications for Management**

It is visible from the findings that generations share more similarities than differences; moreover, SNS implementation should be discussed openly and equally among employees in a multi-generational workplace. Likewise, managers should not deny SNS implementation for fear of “upsetting” older workers; it is more likely that interpersonal preferences will provide the source of conflict. In this regard, bias and

stereotypes need to be absolved in favor of management expertise and people skills. Widespread implementation, as discussed in this paper, cannot be achieved without addressing employee needs on an individual level. This is no simple task; however, interpersonal is a critical skill for all managers, and remains equally relevant in this scenario.

For managers, the most practical factor to consider involves the improvements to productivity and overall performance of the firm (hence, maximizing shareholder value). If SNS is going to cause more problems than it's worth, then it is unlikely it will be implemented. In this regard, full scale integration may not be the best option; instead, managers may prefer to introduce SNS in multiple stages, effectively "testing the waters" in order to determine its overt benefit. Introduction of Discussion Groups/Forums within an existing SNS platform may provide management with a low-risk opportunity to test SNS viability. If effective teamwork practices are fostered through SNS, and business needs adequately fulfilled, managers may then choose to further the integration.

### **SNS Integration in the Future**

With respect to SNS integration within professional environments, a number of prohibiting factors are likely present, and it is likely that complex social barriers hinder professional use of SNS technology. The notion of the generation gap may prove arbitrary in this scenario; in reality, a mix of interpersonal differences, confirmation bias and stereotypes are part of the larger problem. Other issues, such as power distance and the preference to separate personal lives from professional lives, may also hamper widespread integration. This is not simply an issue merely concerning dissatisfaction with a particular technology, or rather, lack of motivation; moreover, the solution must be

crafted carefully, taking into account differences among individuals. Management, once recognizing these differences, can craft a solution which provides the greatest benefit to the firm.

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## **Author's Biography**

Robert W. Brown was a Finance Major/Management Information Systems Concentration at the University of Maine. He was born in Waterville, ME and grew up in the nearby town of Mount Vernon. Robert went to Maranacook Community High School and graduated in 2009. He is a member of numerous collegiate and Greek organizations including Phi Gamma Delta, where he served as Treasurer, and Phi Sigma Pi, where he served as Secretary and President. Robert is also a member of Beta Gamma Sigma, Phi Kappa Phi, Golden Key, and the National Society of Collegiate Scholars.

After he graduates, Robert plans to attend graduate school and attain a Master's Degree in Information Systems.