

Strictly business? Personal tweets make profs more "credible"

Those who use their Twitter accounts for both personal and professional purposes often find themselves wondering whether they are damaging their credibility with funny anecdotes or social tweets. According to a study published in the March issue of *Learning, Media and Technology*, however, the answer to that question is a resounding "no."

Instead, students perceive instructors who make social tweets as *more* credible than instructors who remain strictly business, lending support to the idea that knowing a real human is behind the Twitter stream helps people feel more confident about that person's abilities.

Authored by Elizabethtown College professor of communications Kirsten Johnson and undergraduate student Jamie Bartolino, the paper examines how students perceive professors when they follow their social media updates on Twitter. The paper refers to five "factors of credibility" identified in a 1974 study: competence, character, sociability, composure, and extraversion.

They also touch on the importance of "self-disclosure" in the classroom (revealing personal information about yourself to better relate with students). There's a fine line between an appropriate level of self-disclosure and what the Kids These Days™ consider to be "too much information," so Johnson set out to discover whether online self-disclosure is treated the same way as it is in an academic environment.

120 students between the ages of 18 and 23 participated in the study, with 30 percent of the group saying they had a Twitter account. The students were then split into three groups: those who saw only scholarly tweets, those who saw only social tweets, and those who saw a mix of the two. (All of the posts to the sample Twitter accounts were made up by the researchers based on their own experience using Twitter.) Each Twitter account made 22 tweets, and they all included the same number of hyperlinks. The students were then instructed to rate the credibility of the professor based on the tweets they observed.

The group that only saw social tweets ended up rating that professor higher in credibility than the group that saw only scholarly tweets. Researchers also said there was an especially significant difference in ratings when it came to whether a professor was "caring" or not.

"These results support previous research that shows revealing personal information

can increase a professor's perceived credibility," says the paper. "[I]t was interesting to note that the scholarly tweets did not significantly raise competence ratings in the groups that saw the scholarly posts. This could be an indication that caring, not competence, is the most important dimension when it comes to assessing perceived credibility on social networking sites."

Not all students felt good about the social tweets, though. The researchers found that older students tended to rate the professors lower in credibility after having viewed their Twitter accounts. These students were also more likely to think it was a bad idea for professors to have Twitter accounts at all, citing the potential for revealing too much personal information and creating an awkward student/teacher relationship. The researchers also noted that the fake professors were all female, and that another study may want to see whether there's a difference in perception when male professors are used.

So if you find yourself tweeting in a professional capacity and wonder whether it's kosher to post a funny cat photo or to tweet about your kids, don't worry—those posts will likely boost your personability and, in turn, your credibility. At least among the young.