Abstract
Research shows that individuals with high levels of communication apprehension (CA) benefit from the less threatening social environment of computer-mediated communication (Campbell & Neer, 2001), but are less willing to express their opinion than those with lower levels of CA (McCroskey, 2009). However, less is known about how the salience of an issue may mediate the relationship between communication apprehension and opinion expression. Impression management theory suggests that individuals manage their behavior so others perceive them positively (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). This desire to be perceived as positive may be a factor in whether a group member decides to express an opinion. However, the importance of the group project to the individual may overshadow the desire to be perceived as positive. This study seeks to determine whether group project salience mediates the relationship between CA and opinion expression in computer-mediated group work. An online survey was sent to students at Midwestern colleges and universities to determine potential associations between CA, willingness to express opinion, and salience of the group project. Variables will be measured using McCroskey's (1982) Personal Report of Communication Apprehension, the Unwillingness to Communicate scale (Burgoon, 1976), and the Impression Management in Organizations scale (Bolino & Turnley, 1999).

Research Questions and Results
RQ1. Is communication apprehension associated with opinion expression?
→ CA is associated with opinion expression, \( r = .40, p < .001 \)

RQ2. Does salience mediate the relationship between communication apprehension and opinion expression?
→ Salience does not mediate the relationship between communication apprehension and opinion expression

RQ3. Is ability to manage impressions associated with communication apprehension?
→ IM is positively associated with CA, \( r = .21, p < .05 \)

Additional Findings: Regression analysis showed that CA alone accounts for 15% of the variance in OE.

Method

Instruments:
Unwillingness to Communicate Scale (UTC) \( (q = .90, M = 58.25, SD = 17.39) \)
Sample Question: "I'm afraid to speak up in conversations."
7-point Likert scale from Strongly Agree—Strongly Disagree

Impression Management: OVERALL \( (q = .84, M = 52.72, SD = 9.20) \)
Sample Question: "Talk proudly about your experience or education."
5-point Likert scale, from Never—Often

Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA) \( (q = .79, M = 35.51, SD = 9.40) \)
Sample Question: "When I had a new idea, I expressed it to the group."
5-point Likert scale, from Strongly Agree—Strongly Disagree

Implications
A benefit of group work is the sharing of multiple perspectives from diverse people. Individuals with CA are less likely to express their opinion, which causes their unique perspective to be absent from the group (Tidwell & Walther, 2002). Therefore, the end product may not reach its full potential.

Our results show year in school and experience in group work play a significant role in determining an individual's communicative behavior in CMC group work. Older students with more group work experience have lower levels of CA, leading to higher levels of OE.

It is critical for universities to include group work in their curriculum early in the students' college career to help students lower CA and increase OE.

Individuals with high CA are less likely to use IM, therefore they have less control over the impressions that others form of them. Because of this, they are less likely to be viewed favorably by their peers.

Literature Review

Communication apprehension (CA) and opinion expression (OE): CA is defined as an individual's level of fear or anxiety with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons (McCroskey, Daly, & Sorensen, 1976). Research suggests that CMC expands the depth of disclosure and expression because individuals feel more comfortable disclosing information and expressing opinion with less self-consciousness, than in face-to-face discussions (Tidwell & Walther, 2002). Several studies have suggested that CMC provides a less threatening environment than face-to-face communication for individuals with high levels of CA because it involves less social and non-verbal cues in interactions (Campbell & Neer, 2001).

References