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We would like to thank the following for supporting socially beneficial public relations research that increases understanding, builds relationships, supports ethical socially responsible performance, and advances the development of an increasingly democratic global society:

<p style="text-align:center">**TABLE OF CONTENTS**</p>

Channeling Engagement into Action: The Role of Empowerment in Asian Americans' Social Media Use in Combating Anti-Asian Discrimination during COVID-19

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Abstract
Since the outbreak of COVID-19, Asian American communities have experienced an uptick of anti-Asian discrimination, racism, and hate incidents, yet anti-Asian discrimination and racism has historically been overlooked due to the "perpetual foreigner" stigma and "model minority" myth. Drawing on interdisciplinary insights from psychological empowerment, social media engagement, and collective action, this study examines if and how Asian Americans' various forms of social media engagement activities could lead to their offline collective action in combating anti-Asian discrimination and racism, as well as improved mental well-being. Results revealed a nuanced view on how various types of social media engagement activities may lead to psychological empowerment in this context: *contributing* social media engagement was positively associated with *intrapersonal* empowerment, whereas *consuming* social media engagement was positively associated with *interactional* empowerment. While both types of empowerment significantly contributed to Asian Americans' offline collective action, only intrapersonal empowerment was significantly associated with mental well-being. Implications for public relations professionals were discussed.

Keywords: Social media engagement, psychological empowerment, offline collective action, mental well-being, Asian Americans, discrimination and racism, COVID-19

**Channeling Engagement into Action: The Role of Empowerment in Asian Americans'
Social Media Use in Combating Anti-Asian Discrimination during COVID-19**

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, Asian American communities have experienced an uptick of anti-Asian discrimination, racism, and hate incidents. Between March 19, 2020, and September 30, 2021, there have been 10,370 hate incidents reported on Stop AAPI Hate, a coalition that tracks and analyzes incidents of hate against the Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) communities in the United States (Stop AAPI Hate, 2021). Ranging from individual acts of shunning, verbal harassment, and physical attacks to civil rights violations including refusal of service and workplace discrimination, these incidents have resulted in a detrimental impact on the Asian American communities, causing racial trauma, and increased symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress (Saw et al., 2021).

Social media, as tools for psychological coping, have been used by Asian Americans to consume related content, post information, and participate in community discussions (Yang et al., 2020). Beyond being tools of coping, social media have also been demonstrated to be viable channels to facilitate social movement (Gleason, 2013). Yet to date, few studies have examined if and how Asian Americans' social media use could lead to productive outcomes such as offline collective action and mental well-being. Given the historical roots of anti-Asian stigma such as "perpetual foreigners" and "Yellow Peril," and the myth of "model minority," Asian Americans' experience of discrimination and racism is oftentimes delegitimized, resulting in sparse literature regarding Asian Americans' collective action (Tran & Curtin, 2017). As the fastest-growing racial or ethnic group in the United States between 2000 and 2019 and continuing rising in population (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021), Asian Americans are important publics whose concerns, attitudes, and behaviors should be further studied by public relations scholars and professionals.

To fill in this gap, this study aims to examine if and how Asian Americans' various forms of social media engagement activities could lead to their offline collective action in combating anti-Asian discrimination and racism and improved mental well-being. Drawing on insights from the theoretical framework of psychological empowerment from community psychology (Zimmerman, 1995), this study provides a nuanced view on how various types of social media engagement activities may lead to psychological empowerment via different paths in the context of combating anti-Asian discrimination and racism. Particularly, we examined Asian Americans' social media engagement in two major forms of activities: consuming engagement that comprises passive activities such as browsing and following related content, and contributing engagement involving active activities such as posting and sharing (Muntinga et al., 2011). Integrating the social media engagement literature with the psychological empowerment framework, we proposed different paths of empowerment led by consuming and contributing engagement: *intrapersonal empowerment* that focuses on individuals' perception of their own abilities to bring change, and *interactional empowerment* that focuses on people's understanding of the resources and instruments in their environment that could facilitate change (Zimmerman, 1995). Further, both types of psychological empowerment are examined as processes through which Asian Americans could form offline collective action and improve mental well-being. A conceptual model was proposed and empirically tested using an online survey with 505 Asian Americans of various backgrounds in 41 states.

This study provides important implications for public relations professionals, especially those serving as community activists or working at nonprofit organizations advocating for social and racial justice for Asian Americans. Findings from this study provide guidelines for community members to productively channel their social media engagement into action. Insights

regarding the distinctive paths from consuming and contributing social media engagement to empowerment and outcomes could also help public relations professionals create and implement effective social media strategies to enhance intrapersonal and interactional empowerment, thereby facilitating Asian Americans' offline collective actions and mental well-being.

Literature Review

Psychological Empowerment

Psychological empowerment involves the processes by which individuals gain perceived autonomy and confidence to achieve control over issues affecting their lives, identify and effectuate solutions to address problems affecting their communities, and work toward developing a critical understanding of the broader socio-political environments that the individuals situated in (Lardier Jr et al., 2018; Zimmerman, 1995). Particularly relevant to the context of the current study, community psychology literature has shown the fundamental role of psychological empowerment in securing mental well-being, driving community participation, mobilizing collective action, and creating social change (Christens, 2012). For example, psychological empowerment has been shown to promote ethnic racial minority adolescents' collective identity, connections with their communities, and participatory action to foster community change (Livingston et al., 2017; Molix & Bettencourt, 2010). Given these critical benefits of psychological empowerment, policy makers have been called to initiate and sustain community prevention–intervention programs that focus on enhancing empowering experiences among members in marginalized and disadvantaged communities (Lardier Jr et al., 2018).

In Zimmerman's (1995) seminal work, psychological empowerment has been conceptualized as a higher order multidimensional construct consisting of three components: intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral. *Intrapersonal empowerment* addresses the way in which individuals think about their own abilities to influence or bring changes (Speer, 2000). It includes three aspects: perceived control (i.e., perceived ability to exert influence in various life spheres), competence (i.e., perceived capability to lead tasks and shaping one's sociopolitical conditions), and self-efficacy (i.e., perceived possibility of performing tasks and achieving targeted outcomes; Leung, 2009). *Interactional empowerment* moves the focus of individuals' thoughts from themselves to their sociopolitical environments (Speer, 2000). It refers to people's intellectual understanding of the source, nature, and instruments of social power as well as means and resources to change their socio-political environments (Li, 2016). This cognitive understanding highlights the role of collectivities—collective action (i.e., collective mechanism and community power necessary for social change) and interpersonal relationships (i.e., interpersonal networks and support needed to achieve social power)—in decision-making, problem solving, and resource mobilization (Lardier et al., 2020). Lastly, *behavioral empowerment* refers to participatory and coping behaviors that address needs in a specific context (Zimmerman, 1995). Considering psychological empowerment as a process, this study particularly focuses on intrapersonal and interactional empowerment.

Social Media Engagement and Psychological Empowerment

As powerful tools for social movements, social media assume a critical role in activism by enabling the powerless to voice shared concerns and struggles, seek social support and justice, and organize resources (Chayinska et al., 2021; Leong et al., 2019). Research has shown that racial minorities have frequently used social media as part of their daily activities (Tao & Fisher, 2021); particularly, Asian American adults have been reported as having the highest frequencies of social media use (Charmaraman et al., 2018). Nevertheless, limited studies have been undertaken to understand whether and how Asian Americans' various forms of social media

engagement activities contribute to their psychological empowerment, offline collective action, and mental well-being. In this study, we adopt the well-established framework of social media engagement from public relations literature and focus on two major types of social media engagement activities: consuming (e.g., reading posts) and contributing (e.g., sharing content) engagement (e.g., Muntinga et al., 2011; Tsai & Men, 2013; Smith & Gallicano, 2015).

Both consuming and contributing social media engagement have the potential to satisfy various physiological needs for Asian Americans to cope with racial discrimination, such as reaching out for social support, sharing or documenting experiences, learning coping strategies and resources, and engaging in diversion to alleviate discriminatory stressors (Yang et al., 2020). These need-satisfying experiences are likely transformed to become sources of psychological empowerment for Asian Americans to engage in further collective action offline and secure their mental well-being (Petrovčič & Petrič, 2014). In this study, we propose that both consuming and contributing engagement help enhance Asian Americans' *intrapersonal empowerment*. For consuming engagement, reading self-disclosure stories and call-to-action posts can provide Asian Americans with emotional relief and boost their feelings of competence, self-efficacy, and control (Petrovčič & Petrič, 2014). For contributing engagement, posting, distributing, and commenting on related information can empower Asian Americans by giving them feelings of control and self-efficacy (Yang et al, 2020). This sense of influence is essential in helping mitigate racial discriminatory stressors that seem to be out of their control (Yang et al, 2020). Therefore, we proposed the following hypothesis:

> **H1:** Asian Americans' (a) contributing engagement and (b) consuming engagement related to anti-Asian discrimination and racism on social media are positively associated with intrapersonal empowerment.

Furthermore, we suggest that social media engagement also increases Asian Americans' *interactional empowerment*. When browsing useful social media content on combating racism (i.e., consuming engagement) and joining/leading online conversations on this topic (i.e., contributing engagement), Asian Americans could build a critical awareness of the resources, networks, and actions needed to produce social change (Li, 2016). Therefore, we predict:

> **H2:** Asian Americans' (a) contributing engagement and (b) consuming engagement related to anti-Asian discrimination and racism on social media are positively associated with interactional empowerment.

Psychological Empowerment, Offline Collective Action, and Mental Well-being

Collective action is "any action that aims to improve the status, power, or influence of an entire group, rather than that of one or a few individuals" (Van Zomeren & Iyer, 2009, p. 646). As such, both group-level coalitions and individual-level actions are qualified as collection action, as long as they aim at pursuing a social group's common goals and interests (Van Zomeren & Iyer, 2009). In line with this conceptualization, collective action can take diverse forms, such as joining interest groups, involving in advocacy projects, participating in demonstrations, and signing petitions (Chon & Park, 2020).

Collective action has been demonstrated as an effective way to address group disadvantages and facilitate social change (Jiménez-Moya et al., 2015; Wright, 2013). In this study, we argue that both intrapersonal and interactional empowerment can play a vital role in stimulating Asian Americans' offline collective action to combat anti-Asian discrimination and racism. Previous research has suggested that the empowering process is always accompanied by concrete actions, such as coping behaviors, community involvement, and civic participation (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Hibbs, 2022). When people are empowered on an individual level

(i.e., intrapersonal empowerment), they believe that they could direct their behaviors in various life spheres (i.e., perceived control), possess related skills to solve problems (i.e., perceived competence), and are capable to engage in behaviors that can lead to desired outcomes (i.e., self-efficacy) (Zimmerman, 1995). All these perceptions are key drivers of offline collective action.

Beyond empowerment on an individual level, empowerment from broader sociopolitical environments (i.e., interactional empowerment) can also motivate Asian Americans' offline collective action. Interactional empowerment is gained when individuals are aware of the collective resources needed to accomplish desired goals and know how to access these collective resources (Li, 2019; Peterson, 2014; Zimmerman, 1995). Previous studies (e.g., Livingston et al., 2017) have shown that interactional empowerment was a significant predictor of African Americans' activism to combat racism. Applying this dimension of empowerment to this study's context, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H3: Asian Americans' (a) intrapersonal empowerment and (b) interactional empowerment are positively associated with their offline collective action in combating anti-Asian discrimination and racism.

When Asian Americans feel psychologically empowered, they are more likely to develop better mental well-being. The sense of empowerment can represent a psychological adaptation enabling people to effectively cope with threatening situations (Chang, 2020). Through intrapersonal empowerment, individuals gain a belief that they have the capacity to control their lives and to engage in behaviors that leads to desired outcomes, and thus would have an increased sense of self-worth. Likewise, the sense of community and social support through interactional empowerment could also contribute to peoples' mental well-being (Woodall et al., 2010). Therefore, we suggest:

H4: Asian Americans' (a) intrapersonal empowerment and (b) interactional empowerment are positively associated with their mental well-being.

Apart from psychological empowerment, we expect that Asian Americans' offline collective action can improve their mental well-being. This is because offline collective action is an effective strategy to change the disadvantaged status of a group (Wright, 2013), which can give people hope and make them think positively about their lives. Accordingly, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H5: Asian Americans' offline collective action in combating anti-Asian discrimination and racism is positively related to their mental well-being.

Summarizing all hypotheses proposed in this study, the following conceptual model was proposed (see Figure 1).
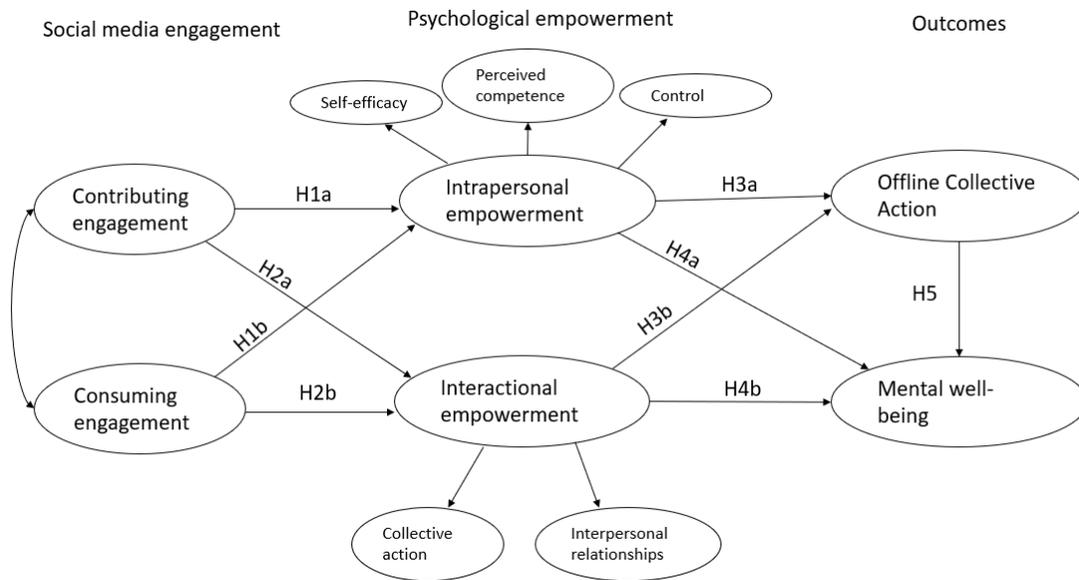
Figure 1. Conceptual model

Method

Population and Sampling

To test the proposed hypotheses and conceptual model, an online survey was conducted in August 2021. The population of this study consists of Asians/Asian Americans who were residing in the United States at the time of the survey. Participants were recruited via Dynata, a global online market research firm. Screening questions were applied to ensure that the participants were within the study population. After applying quality control items, a total of 505 valid responses were retained. The 505 participants represented diverse ethnic backgrounds (e.g., 36% Chinese, 16.2% Japanese, 15.6% Filipino, 11/1% Indian, 6.1% Vietnamese, 5.7% Korean, 1.8% Pakistani, 2.0% mixed, 5.3% other). Among them, 246 (48.7%) were male, 257 (50.9%) were female, and 2 (.4%) were nonbinary. Participants resided in 41 different states, with California (n = 145, 28.7%), New York (n = 47, 9.3%), Texas (n = 45, 8.9%), and Hawaii (n = 41, 8.1%) being the top four. The average age was 46.74 (SD = 18.62). The majority (n = 356, 70.5%) held a bachelor's degree or beyond, and a little over half (n = 282, 55.9%) had an income level of $60,001 or more. In addition, about half (n = 252, 49.9%) of the participants held moderate political views, and most (n = 292, 57.8%) lived in suburban locations.

Study Procedure

Before implementing the main study, a pretest was fielded with 60 Asian American participants on Amazon Mechanical Turk to ensure all measures were of satisfactory reliability and the survey flow was set up correctly. After finalizing the online questionnaire, the main study was then implemented. Screening questions were applied at the outset of the survey to ensure only those who were part of the study population could proceed. After the informed consent page, participants were directed to answer questions included in the study's measurement instrument. Demographic information was collected at the end. All participants in the pretest and the main study were compensated.

Measurement Instrument

Social media engagement was measured using the items adopted from Muntinga et al.'s (2011) and Tsai and Men's (2013) studies. Four items were used to measure Asian Americans' consuming social media engagement (α = .929), and four items were used to measure

contributing social media engagement (α = .943). Intrapersonal empowerment (α = .919) was measured using 12 items from Leung (2009) and Li (2016) after adjusting them for the study context. Interactional empowerment (α = .883) was measured using four items adopted from Speer (2000) and Li (2016). Offline collective action (α = .934) was measured using a five-item scale adapted from Van Zomeren et al. (2013). Finally, mental well-being (α = .951) was measured using 13 items from the Warwick-Edinburgh mental well-being scale (WEMWBS) (e.g., Tennant et al., 2007). See Table 1 for the specific measurement items.

Results

Common Method Bias (CMB)

Since all the constructs in this study were measured through self-reported survey items, examining and addressing the CMB issues is important. Three methods were adopted to identify CMB. First, Harman's single-factor score was generated by using SPSS. Results showed that the total variance explained by the single factor was 31.97%, which was far less than the 50% threshold. Second, a single-factor confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to detect CMB. The results indicated that the one-factor measurement model did not fit the data well: $\chi^2(902) = 11940.78$, CFI = .381, TLI = .351, RMSEA = .156 [90% CI: .153, .158], SRMR = .186. Third, as suggested by Bagozzi and Phillips (1991), CMB is likely to present when any two variables' correlation is higher than .90, and none of the correlation coefficients was higher than .85 in this study. Thus, CMB is not likely to be a problem in the current study.

Model Testing

The proposed model and hypotheses were analyzed via structural equation modeling (SEM) following a two-stage process using maximum likelihood procedures in Mplus 8.7. The measurement model was first tested in a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and then the structural model was assessed. The six constructs (i.e., contributing engagement, consuming engagement, intrapersonal empowerment, interactional empowerment, offline collective action, and mental well-being) were specified as latent variables in the CFA. The results of CFA indicated a satisfactory fit to the data, $\chi^2 (799) = 2107.455$, CFI = .923, TLI = .917, SRMR = .060, RMSEA = .057 [90% CI: .054, .060]. The measurement model was thus retained. The standardized factor loadings of the measurement items were reported in Table 1.

In the second stage, the proposed structural model was tested and demonstrated an adequate model-data fit: $\chi^2 (804) = 2177.653$, CFI = .919, TLI = .913, SRMR = .070, RMSEA = .058 [90% CI: .055, .061]. Each path was then analyzed to test the hypotheses.

Hypothesis Testing

In H1, (a) contributing and (b) consuming engagement were predicted to be positively associated with intrapersonal empowerment. Results showed that contributing engagement was significantly and positively related to intrapersonal empowerment (β = .346, p = .004), but consuming engagement had a non-significant relationship with intrapersonal empowerment (β = .169, p = .161). Therefore, **H1a was supported, but H1b was not supported.**

H2 posited the positive influence from (a) contributing and (b) consuming social media engagement on interactional empowerment. Consuming engagement was found to be significantly and positively related to interactional empowerment (β = .677, p < .001), **supporting H2b.** However, contributing engagement had no significant direct influence on interactional empowerment (β = -.201, p = .104). **H2a was thus not supported.**

H3 predicted that Asian Americans' (a) intrapersonal empowerment and (b) interactional empowerment were positively associated with their offline collective action. The results showed that both intrapersonal empowerment (β = .328, p < .001) and interactional empowerment (β =

.501, *p* < .001) significantly and positively predicted offline collective action, **supporting H3a and H3b.**

H4 proposed the positive influence of (a) intrapersonal empowerment and (b) interactional empowerment on mental well-being. Intrapersonal empowerment was found to be significantly and positively related to mental well-being (β = .464, *p* < .001), whereas interactional empowerment had no significant direct impact on mental well-being (β = -.039, *p* = .506) . Thus, **H4a was supported, but H4b was not supported.**

H5 posited the positive relationship between Asian Americans' offline collective action and mental well-being. Results revealed that offline collective action demonstrated no significant relationship with mental well-being (β = -.020, *p* = .742). **H5 was thus not supported.** See Figure 2 for model results.
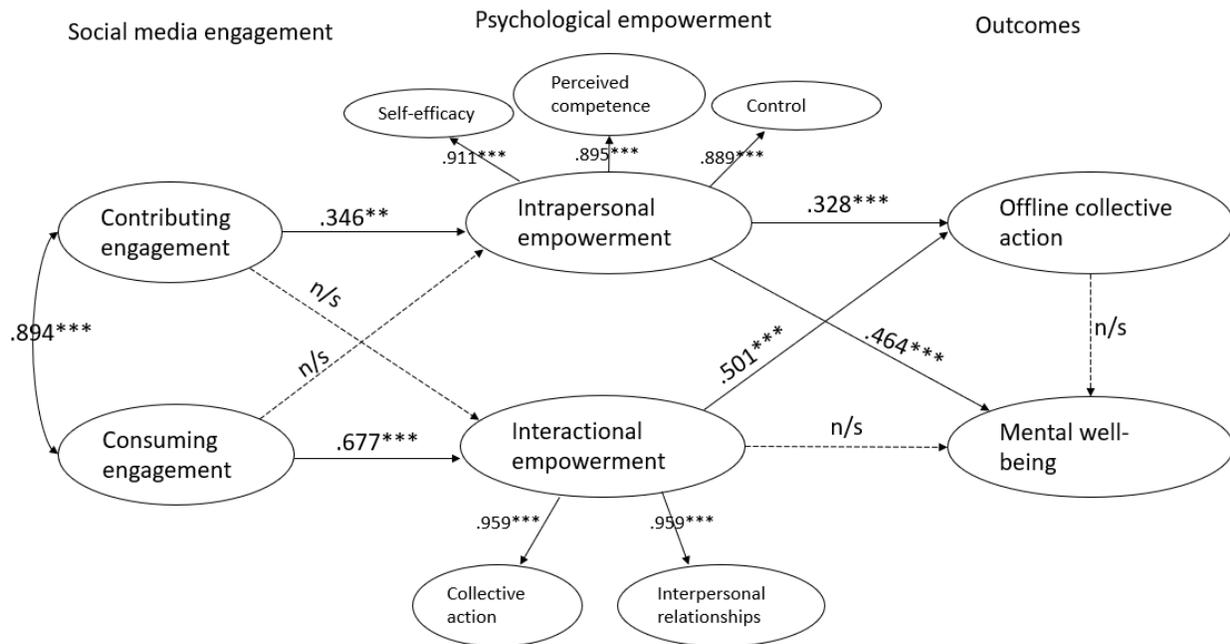
Figure 2. SEM results with path coefficients

Discussion

The Effect of Social media Engagement on Psychological Empowerment

Findings of this study revealed that Asian Americans' social media engagement at different levels had a varied impact on their psychological empowerment. Specifically, Asian Americans' contributing social media engagement was significantly associated with intrapersonal empowerment but not interactional empowerment; conversely, consuming social media engagement was significantly associated with interactional empowerment but not intrapersonal empowerment. These findings suggested a nuanced understanding regarding how social media engagement impacts psychological empowerment in this study context.

Contributing social media engagement, with its focus on active behaviors, provides Asian Americans with an anchor point against which they could think about their own abilities to facilitate change. Intrapersonal empowerment tends to be more individualistic oriented and focuses on mastery and control (Speer, 2000). Contributing social media engagement, in this regard, helps create a sense of control. In contrast, these individual-oriented, active activities may not necessarily provide cognitive resources for Asian Americans to develop an

understanding of the environment and knowledge at the community level, which is required for interactional empowerment (Li, 2016; Speer, 2000).

On the contrary, consuming social media engagement, although focusing on more passive, browsing behaviors, helps provide the information and resources for Asian Americans to better understand the social environment around them. By viewing content, reading comments, and following communities, Asian Americans are more likely to obtain the knowledge and resources necessary to combat anti-Asian discrimination and racism, which are crucial in forming the sense of more communal-oriented interactional empowerment (Petrovčič & Petrič, 2014; Speer, 2000). Because consuming engagement would result in others' influence on self, rather than one's influence on others, it may not necessarily create the sense of control, competence, and self-efficacy needed for intrapersonal empowerment.

Zimmerman (1995) pointed out that the process of psychological empowerment could be context specific. In our study context, contributing and consuming social media engagement may not be mutually exclusive for individuals–for instance, one could be having both consuming and contributing engagement on social media, resulting in different paths to empowerment. When consuming social media content related to anti-Asian discrimination and racism, one could get exposure to the social media accounts that are dedicated to combating discrimination and racism, as well as the comments and articles that are advocating for justice, leading to a greater sense of community. Contributing engagement in this study, on the other hand, emphasizes Asian Americans' perception of their individual impact on combating anti-Asian racism, thereby resulting in stronger senses of competence, self-efficacy, and control.

The Effect of Psychological Empowerment on Offline Collective Action and Mental Well-Being

The significant effects from both intrapersonal and interactional empowerment on Asian Americans' offline collective action in combating anti-Asian discrimination and racism rendered insights into the behavioral component of psychological empowerment, which focuses on the action that could have impact on context-specific outcomes (Li, 2016; Zimmerman, 1995).

Mental well-being is another important outcome in our study. Finding from this study suggested that intrapersonal, rather than interactional empowerment contributed to Asian Americans' mental well-being. This could be due to the individual-oriented focus in the mental well-being construct and measurement we adopted (i.e., The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale) (Tennant et al., 2007). Such sense of well-being could be attributed to one's ability to control the environment (i.e., perceived control) and "the feeling that they can do so" (i.e., competence, self-efficacy) (Diener & Biswas-Diener, p. 127), which are key indicators for the individual-focused intrapersonal empowerment. Whereas for the more community-focused interactional empowerment, one's understanding of the resources available in the environment may not directly result in the change of mental well-being at the individual level. Thus, our findings shed further insights on the nuanced understanding of psychological empowerment, suggesting the adoption of different measurements of well-being that encompass both individual and community-level outcomes.

Practical Implications

This study provides important practical implications for public relations professionals, especially those who serve as community activists or work at nonprofit organizations advocating for social and racial justice for Asian Americans. To facilitate offline collective action in combating anti-Asian discrimination and racism, professionals could use the findings from this study to provide guidelines for Asian American community members to have productive social

media engagement and explain how and why different types of engagement could support the community. Public relations professionals could produce content on social media with instructions on offline community involvement and toolkit for Asian Americans to cope with the discrimination and racism they face. Such content, when consumed by Asian American social media users, could lead to an improved understanding of how the community could use resources and instruments to facilitate change, thereby furthering interactional empowerment.

Importantly, professionals could also adopt different public relations strategies to develop social media content that encourages Asian Americans' contributing engagement. Such strategies could include using conversational human voice, embedding multimedia features and interactive links, and promoting user-generated content. By increasing Asian Americans' contributing social media engagement, professionals could help improve Asian Americans' intrapersonal empowerment, which not only improves offline collective action but also mental well-being.

Finally, organizations and communities could use insights from this study's findings to practice ethics of care for their Asian American publics amidst the discrimination, racism, and hate incidents they may encounter during the pandemic. Internal communication messages could share best social media practices for Asian American publics so they can be more mindful and purposeful about their social media engagement behaviors.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite the important contributions from this study, there are several aspects that should be addressed in future studies. First, the cross-sectional survey method, although helpful in testing the proposed theoretical framework, could not ensure the causal effect. To test the model more robustly, future studies could use a longitudinal design to establish such causality. Second, as mentioned earlier, the scale to measure mental well-being in this study mostly focused on the indicators at the individual level. Future studies could incorporate measurement of well-being both at individual and community levels to further explore the effect from different psychological empowerment types. Finally, this study examined social media engagement and psychological empowerment in the specific context of anti-Asian discrimination and racism during the COVID-19 pandemic. To provide further insights for the psychological empowerment framework, future studies could replicate the model in other social contexts (Zimmerman, 1995) where disadvantaged and marginalized communities channel their social engagement into productive outcomes.

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Table 1. Measurement Items and Standardized Factor Loadings.

	Measurement Items	Standardized Factor Loadings
Social Media Engagement	*On social media, how often do you engage in the following activities during the COVID-19 pandemic?*	
Consuming	1. Viewing video related to anti-Asian discrimination or racism.	.89*
	2. Viewing pictures related to anti-Asian discrimination or racism.	.89*
	3. Following threads on online community forums that discuss anti-Asian discrimination or racism.	.86*
	4. Reading comments on posts related to anti-Asian discrimination or racism.	.87*
Contributing	1. Engaging in conversation related to anti-Asian discrimination or racism.	.88*
	2. Sharing others' posts related to anti-Asian discrimination or racism.	.91*
	3. Publishing posts related to anti-Asian discrimination or racism.	.89*
	4. Commenting on posts related to anti-Asian discrimination or racism.	.91*
Intrapersonal Empowerment	*Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.*	
Self-efficacy	1. I can remain calm when facing difficulties from anti-Asian discrimination or racism because I can rely on my coping abilities.	.63*
	2. I am usually able to handle anti-Asian discrimination or racism.	.77*
	3. I am confident that I could deal efficiently with events related to anti-Asian discrimination or racism.	.80*
	4. Thanks to my resourcefulness, I know how to handle anti-Asian discrimination or racism.	.78*
	5. I consider myself to be generally more capable of handling anti-Asian discrimination or racism than others.	.75*
Perceived Competence	1. I am a leader when it comes to combating anti-Asian discrimination or racism.	.86*
	2. I do not find it difficult to talk in front of a group about anti-Asian discrimination or racism.	.57*
	3. I can usually organize people to combat anti-Asian discrimination or racism.	.82*
	4. Other people usually follow my ideas to combat anti-Asian discrimination or racism.	.82*
Control	1. I enjoy making my own decisions to combat anti-Asian discrimination or racism.	.78*
	2. I prefer the way to combat anti-Asian discrimination or racism in which I have a lot of control over what I do and when I do it.	.68*
	3. I would rather run my own initiatives and make my own mistakes than listen to someone else's orders when combating anti-Asian discrimination or racism.	.72*
Interactional Empowerment	*Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.*	.84*

Collective Action	1.	Power in the online community lies in the relationships between people when combating anti-Asian discrimination or racism.	.87*
	2.	A person becomes powerful through other people in the online community when combating anti-Asian discrimination or racism.	.80*
Interpersonal Relationships	1.	Only by working together can people get power to exert influence in the online community to combat anti-Asian discrimination or racism.	.84*
	2.	Power in the online community is collective, not individual when combating anti-Asian discrimination or racism.	.81*
Offline Collective Action	*Regarding the issue of anti-Asian discrimination or racism, please indicate your willingness to:*		
	1.	Participate in a demonstration against this issue.	.84*
	2.	Participate in raising the collective voice to stop this issue.	.91*
	3.	Do something together with fellow friends and family to stop this issue.	.88*
	4.	Sign a petition to improve the current situation.	.79*
	5.	Participate in a project to improve conditions for Asians, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders.	.89*
Mental Well-being	*Since the COVID-19 outbreak, to what extent do you agree with the following statements.*		
	1.	I've been feeling cheerful.	.82*
	2.	I've been interested in new things.	.65*
	3.	I've been feeling loved.	.73*
	4.	I've been able to make up my own mind about things.	.76*
	5.	I've been feeling confident.	.84*
	6.	I've been feeling close to other people.	.76*
	7.	I've been feeling good about myself.	.86*
	8.	I've been thinking clearly.	.78*
	9.	I've been dealing with problems well.	.79*
	10.	I've had energy to spare.	.76*
	11.	I've been feeling interested in other people.	.68*
	12.	I've been feeling relaxed.	.80*
	13.	I've been feeling useful.	.83*

*$p < .001$

Emerging Technologies Create New Realities in Strategic Communications

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Abstract

In a year that brought the "metaverse" to the forefront, few public relations professionals have considered the emergent and immersive platforms that make up the metaverse as tools and strategies to reach and engage key audiences. The current investigation sought to gauge understanding and perceptions of emerging technologies including augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), virtual worlds (VW), and mixed reality (MR), collectively referred to as cross-reality (XR), as communications tools. A four-part online workshop reviewing XR's use in strategic communication was developed, implemented, and tested to determine interest and understanding of the potential of XR among a team of global communication professionals working at a Fortune 100 corporation in the aerospace industry. The sessions provided use cases that demonstrated immersive experiences, key affordances of the technologies, utilization by diverse audiences, and culminated with the resources needed to create immersive content. The text and observational data yield several insights into how XR can benefit the field of strategic communications, while also highlighting several limitations and challenges to realizing its potential. It is our hope that this investigation will help organizations in other industries better understand how (and why) to integrate XR into their existing communications efforts.

Keywords: cross-reality (XR), virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), virtual worlds (VW), metaverse, emerging communication technology

Emerging Technologies Create New Realities in Strategic Communications

Changing technologies, especially emerging immersive media platforms, are no longer just training and gaming spaces. Today, strategic communicators need to understand the modern media landscape's multiple *realities*: virtual worlds (VWs), augmented reality (AR), mixed reality (MR), and virtual reality (VR). Collectively, these cross-reality (XR) platforms represent powerful communicative tools to reach and engage key audiences in novel ways. Consider, Forbes' recent reference to the D2A (direct to avatar) economy (Hackl, 2021), the Smithsonian's Mars Rover AR app allowing you to "navigate the rover in your kitchen," and Facebook's rebranding to "Meta" signaling the imminent rise of the *Metaverse*: interconnected virtual communities accessible through XR platforms.

Unlike traditional media, XR platforms immerse users into interactive virtual scenarios that can feel real, providing a verisimilitude which has made it increasingly popular among brands seeking to achieve a variety of organizational goals, from job training to employee and client engagement. Indeed, organizations are racing to build the "metaverse," bringing XR platforms and associated technologies to mainstream use and long-awaited mass adoption. This growth was evidenced in mainstream entertainment and media events such as the Ariana Grande and Travis Scott concerts in Epic Games' *Fortnite,* where millions of players co-experienced the live virtual concerts (Esports Charts, 2021; Statista, 2021) across multiple platforms (e.g., PC, phone, gaming consoles). According to Epic Games' Chief Creative Officer, Donald Mustard, these events "create a new medium" for telling stories (Webster, 2021).

Gaming and entertainment are integral to XR adoption, with an anticipated 3 billion users expected to actively engage in virtual worlds in similar capacities (Clement, 2021). From a brand perspective, the impact of this trend is also compounded by the explosive adoption of non-fungible tokens (NFTs), digital assets on a blockchain, creating new value for digital-only goods (Portion, 2021). For example, a "digital-only" (i.e., NFT) Gucci purse sold for more than $4,000 US in Roblox, another VW where users can play, learn, and socialize (The Fashion Law, 2021). Similarly, Nike recently launched its virtual presence in Roblox with NIKELAND, tying their virtual products, environment, and activities directly to their organizational goals (Nike, 2021).

The success of video games in the entertainment industry accompanies the growth of virtual and augmented reality device use in healthcare (Cedars-Sinai, 2020; Delzell, 2021), manufacturing, product design and development, and immersive training and guided maintenance/repair (Unity, 2021). Indicative of a shift towards XR acceptance is the record sales logged by the Oculus Quest 2 VR headset, which became the most-sold piece of entertainment hardware that Christmas (Gallagher, 2022). Yet, despite XR's growing ubiquity and increased affordability, sales and marketing adoption has lagged across various industries. While scholars note several socioeconomic factors shaping current and projected XR adoption (Pimentel et al., 2021), many organizations continue to grapple with ambiguity around what specific XR platforms do, how to build content and integrate it into existing communication strategies, and how to evaluate success (Moffett et al., 2021).

To address this gap, the current investigation sought to gauge understanding and perceptions of XR as communications tools among a team of global communication professionals. A four-part online workshop reviewing XR's use in strategic communication was developed, implemented, and tested within the communications team of a multi-national Fortune 100 company in the Aerospace sector. In the subsequent sections we outline existing literature about XR from a communications standpoint, discuss the formation and deployment of the

workshop, review feedback from participants and leadership, and discuss the applied impact of a workforce equipped to think strategically about XR.

Literature Review

Virtual Worlds

At the nexus of media technology and innovative communication strategy is the metaverse; persistent virtual worlds (VW) accessed using a myriad of communication technologies, namely XR platforms. VWs are defined as a "synchronous, persistent network of people, represented by avatars" Bell (2008). Social virtual worlds include screen-based "legacy" programs such as Second Life and the Sims, and screen and/or headset-based AltSpaceVR, and Virbela. Unlike games that typically immerse users in a virtual environment, there are no "goals" or game mechanics designed to offer reward or incentive in social VWs. Social VWs are more like the physical world where experiences occur organically through the social systems and built environments within them. VWs are commonly used in healthcare, tourism, education, training, and gaming. However, until recently, access to VWs has largely been relegated to less-immersive modalities, such as smartphones and computers, which limit the breadth and depth of users' interactions with virtual content. The emergence of XR platforms, and their unique capacity to sensorially immerse audiences in virtual spaces expands the opportunity for organizations to leverage VWs for more diverse, engaging and meaningful user experiences.

XR and the Virtuality Continuum

XR represents a spectrum of immersive media platforms which are situated between our physical reality on one end, and computer-generated virtual worlds on the other (Milgram & Kishino, 1994; Tham et al., 2018). A user's physical reality is comprised of non-mediated sensory inputs available to us in a spatial environment. However, when such environments are perceived or processed in real-time using audiovisual hardware (e.g., smartphone, head-mounted display), the user is then placed along that XR continuum based on the degree of virtuality, or ratio of real-world to computer-generated sensory inputs produced by any XR platform (Ghazwani & Smith, 2020).

Virtual Reality

VR is characterized by the use of a head-mounted display (HMD), external sensors, and hand controllers to enter and interact with a computer-generated virtual environment (Bailenson, 2018). Early iterations of these technologies date back to the 1800s with the first version of stereoscopic photography, the development of Morton Heilig's "Sensorama" in the 1950s, followed by the introduction Ivan Sutherland's "Ultimate Display," a head-mounted display device that Sutherland suggested would offer "a window into the virtual world" (1965). Today, modern VR hardware (e.g., Meta Quest 2) provide affordable and efficient access into dynamic VWs with rich interactions akin to physical-world experiences. Within these VWs, users are represented by graphical characters (avatars) through which they engage in activities in the environment (Nowak & Fox, 2018).

Beyond the technological characteristics of VR are the psychological processes that such immersion can enable. The lion's share of VR research has focused on VR's ability to elicit a subjective sense of presence (telepresence), which is defined as the illusion of non-mediation, or the sense of being in an environment through a communication platform (Steuer, 1992). Presence is considered a multi-dimensional construct comprised of two primary concepts: spatial presence and social presence. Spatial presence is defined as the psychological state wherein a user feels physically present in a mediated space (Hofer et al., 2012). If users feel spatially present, they then feel physically located in the VW and perceive interactions within that space as realistic

(Hartmann et al., 2016). This factor is particularly important in marketing contexts where the spatial environment is crucial to the brand message or product, such as place marketing (Yung & Khoo-Lattimore, 2017) and disaster communications (Fraustino et al., 2018). As noted by Milgram & Kishino's (1994) virtuality continuum, VR experienced in an HMD provides the highest degree of virtuality because the user's audiovisual inputs are restricted to the VW projected on their headset, rather than those from the physical world.

Where spatial presence highlights the user's ability to create a mental map of a VE's space, social presence is bound to the user's perception of other entities, human-controlled or otherwise, within that VW (Biocca & Harms, 2002). That is, social presence relates to a platform's capacity to facilitate a sense of "being with" mediated others (Oh et al., 2018), or mutual awareness. Previous work has shown that social presence significantly contributes to digital commerce and product involvement (Jin, 2009), satisfaction with virtual concerts (Van Kerrebroeck et al., 2021), non-profit fundraising (Yoo & Drumwright, 2018), and enjoyment among virtual event attendees (Barreda-Ángeles & Hartmann, 2022), among others.

Embodiment: Virtual Identities

In addition to perceptions of place (spatial presence) and people (social presence), another important variable unique to XR experiences pertains to perceptions of self in a VW by way of an avatar. Embodiment of an avatar can influence psychological processing of self, cultivating a subjective sense of ownership over one's virtual body (Bailey et al., 2016), also known as body ownership illusion (BOI), or a sense of body transfer (BT;Slater, 2009). When users feel a strong sense of BT, they feel a genuine sense of being the avatar (Kilteni et al., 2012), which can include both human (Banakou et al., 2018) or/and non-human avatars (Ahn et al., 2016). As scholars argue, minds profoundly reflect the bodies in which they are contained (Shapiro, 2004), and research shows that BT can have profound impact on users' cognitive and behavioral responses (Nowak & Fox, 2018b), with implications for various marketing contexts, such as tourism (Adachi et al., 2020),

Collectively, these affordances give the illusion of non-mediation, making virtual experiences feel real, imprinting onto the user's autobiographical memory (Schöne et al., 2019); VR experiences can be more than just moving images on an HMD, and serve as illusory lived experiences. This ultimately positions XR as a compelling tool to enhance learning experiences in various contexts. However, it should be noted that these affordances are not unique to VR modalities and can also extend to other modalities on the XR spectrum, namely screen-based VWs, MR, and AR, albeit to varied degrees.

Mixed Reality

Like VR, mixed reality (MR) leverages HMDs with pass-through lenses that allow the user to see the physical environment. External sensors are then able to scan the environment, creating a virtual mesh with the spatial data which then allows applications to integrate virtual content (e.g., characters, objects) into the physical environment. Integration can manifest itself in various ways, namely occlusion and contextual awareness. Occlusion refers to the ability for virtual content to hide behind physical objects in the environment, producing a realistic sense of depth. Contextual responsiveness refers to the use of artificial intelligence (i.e., semantic segmentation) to make sense of the user's environment, such as categorizing objects (e.g., door, table), and feeding that information to virtual objects and characters to enable appropriate interactions with those physical objects in space. In this way, MR platforms allow users to immerse themselves in a merged reality where virtual objects and characters integrate themselves naturally into the user's physical space. Users can feel a sense of spatial and social presence

within such merged environments (Rhee et al., 2020), and feel a sense of full or partial BT with a virtual body. Regarding the latter, users can, for example, look in the mirror and see a virtual avatar overlaid onto their physical body, or look down at their limbs and see them overlaid by a specific mesh (Monti et al., 2020). Existing MR devices include Microsoft's Hololens and Magic Leap's ML2, all of which provide moderate levels of virtuality.

Augmented Reality

Two key distinctions between MR and AR relate to functionality and hardware. First, regarding functionality, MR integrates virtual content into the user's environment, whereas AR merely overlays such content onto the user's environment. This difference is largely rooted in the delivery method of AR, which is also largely relegated to mobile devices (e.g., smartphones, tablets) as opposed to HMDs. Where MR HMDs are actively scanning the user's space and embedding content into the merged environment, mobile AR involves the use of live camera feeds on mobile devices and feeding virtual overlays onto that feed which is then relayed to the user via the device's screen. This limits the depth and realism of mediated interactions in mobile AR and is a primary reason why AR is considered low on virtuality. However, the ubiquity of mobile devices positions AR as an accessible and scalable alternative to MR. As such, mobile AR represents the most ubiquitous XR platform, with AR mobile applications like Snapchat touting over 300 million active users in 2021 (Deloitte, 2021). Within these applications, popular use cases for mobile AR include anything from functional uses of QR code-based virtual menus, to entertainment use cases, such as face augmentations and branded photo/video filters.

Collectively, XR platforms offer unique affordances with the capacity to influence how strategic communicators engage target audiences. Despite their immense potential, XR remains a nascent suite of media platforms, and thus there is a gap in knowledge about what XR is and how it can be effectively applied to meet varied communication goals. In the subsequent section we outline the creation of a 4-part workshop series delivered to a Fortune 500 aerospace company's communications teams about XR for communication strategy. We then evaluate the efficacy of this program in increasing familiarity with, and knowledge of, effective use of XR in public relations and marketing contexts, followed by a discussion on future directions for applied research with and about XR.

Method

A mixed-methods approach was employed to gain insight into how communication professionals at a large corporation evaluate XR platforms, and how the workshop influenced the perceived efficacy and viability of XR as a communications tool. Each workshop (4) consisted of an hour-long session reviewing distinct modalities within the XR spectrum, including VWs, VR, MR, and AR. The core learning objectives were: (1) identify the unique affordances of XR, (2) understand how those affordances influence communication outcomes for target audiences, (3) consider appropriate and measurable communication outcomes for XR strategies, and (4) understand the resources needed to implement an XR communications strategy.

The four sessions occurred every week during the month of October (2021). Each session alternated days of the week and start times to allow for global time zones and work schedules including Tuesday, 7:00 AM PST, Thursday, 10:00 AM PST, Wednesday, 12:00 PM PST, and Tuesday, 7:00 AM PST. The global communications team was invited to an October "Cutting Edge Technology Training" course through the company's intranet and the workshop was managed by the University communications team. Polls were implemented to assess familiarity with specific platforms, perceptions of key affordances and their value in specific contexts, and intent to consider these platforms in future communication with key constituents. Qualitative

analysis of the Zoom chat and post-workshop discussions with PR leadership were employed to elicit common themes in participant responses to XR content.

Results

Attendance

The four sessions were attended remotely by an average of 128 full-time employees per session via Zoom. During the first session (topic: overview), 201 participants attended. During session one (topic: Social VWs and VR), 135 participants attended. During session three (topic: AR), 78 participants attended. Lastly, during session 4, 96 participants attended. In the subsequent sections we outline key themes and insights yielded from observational and text data accrued during each session, both from organizational leadership and participants.

Session 1: Immersive Media as Communication Strategy (Overview)

The first session was designed to give a broad overview and introduction to the key concepts and definitions pertaining to XR within the context of communications strategy. Current industry knowledge was ascertained through polls and questions specific to participants' existing goals and target audiences in order to establish context.

Participants described their communications goals representing multiple professional areas including brand awareness, reputation management, employee communications, customer and vendor relations, events, training, and product demonstration. Specific comments about priority outcomes included statements such as, "Shape and influence customer decisions," "demonstrate capabilities," "position the company as a thought leader," "be the first choice for our customers," "customer and vendor engagement/training," "engage audience(s) more deeply in content and better explain new defense technology by "showing" it virtually," "promote technology advancements internally," Expand creative options for internal clients," "influence and empower employees to think and act as One [Company]," and "digital transformation/demonstrating we can integrate new technology into our products/programs." When asked who their primary audiences were, responses included key decision makers, clients, and internal stakeholders. This also reflected the multitude of internal and external communications roles represented in the session audience.

To address the objectives of the training, at the conclusion of this session, attendees were asked how likely they were to consider immersive media in their communications strategy and in what ways. Their responses included utilizing AR for construction site visualization, using XR in internal communications, helping onboard and connect with new hires who have worked remotely due to COVID-19, using the tools to build virtual sets, and a way to enhance several tools currently used for client development. One participant indicated they were already building XR into two of their communication plans and stated, "we're so excited."

Session 2: Building Brands and Community in Virtual Reality and Social Virtual Worlds

The purpose of session two was to introduce the uses of VR and social VWs representative of the cases provided in the literature review. The use of avatars and built VWs for creating communities, hosting convenings, and building brand presence has been successfully modeled with cases such as AfroTech's 2021 annual conference hosting more than 10,000 people in Virbela a social VW that markets itself as "the enterprise metaverse." The event also featured 175 brands including Disney, Microsoft, Tesla, and Netflix (Virbela, 2021).

To establish an original baseline of understanding of XR, participants were asked first if they had avatar. Responses were more in the form of questions than answers. Although responses included "no idea" and "new term for me," several respondents were familiar with Bitmoji and the use of avatars to create profiles in games on Wii and Xbox. Additional comments revealed

knowledge through game platforms. One knowledgeable participant addressed the future of avatars when stating, "avatars are what's happening now. I.E.on the blockchain... Twitter is soon to adopt." Enthusiasm among their peers was reflected in comments such as "that's so cool," "excited to learn."

Again, to measure our learning objectives, at the end of the session participants were asked to reflect on their own potential use cases of VR and virtual worlds. Responses pointed to an interest in virtual worlds for exhibitions and as professional and social gathering places. Internal communications professionals indicated an interest in better understanding how to use these platforms to connect their globally dispersed workforce in more meaningful and creative ways than traditional tools and contemporary video meeting formats.

Session 3: Augmenting your Communication Strategy

Session 3 focused on achieving five primary outcomes. First, it sought to provide operational definitions of mobile AR platforms, allowing the audience to differentiate AR from other platforms on the XR continuum. Second, it emphasized the importance of identifying existing commercial-grade AR hardware (e.g., smartphones) and software platforms (e.g., Snapchat). Third, it aimed to ensure audiences could articulate the unique affordances of AR. Fourth, highlighted case studies sought to impart insights on how to successfully integrate AR content into existing communication strategies. Lastly, it sought to ensure attendees were aware of resources for building AR content on their own. The session highlighted key features of AR and their relevance to the aerospace industry, such as the capacity to showcase 3D models of products in the user's physical space at scale. Drawing from industry use cases, such as NASA's Mars Rover, attendees embraced the potential for AR to provide their constituents with pseudo-realistic interactions with their products. However, as noted in the presentation, a key limitation to mobile AR remains the accuracy of tracking across devices such that 3D models placed in the user's environment often jitter as the user moves throughout the space. One participant asked, "How do you deal with customer or client expectations regarding achieving perfection in AR?". Other attendees noted that the need for perfect tracking may matter more or less depending on the industry, whereas customers investing in high-value products (e.g., aircraft) may be swayed by the quality and accuracy of virtual models, those in the retail clothing sector may be less affected. As one attendee put it, "...the trying on of clothes in AR...yeah it didn't track perfect but still had successful engagement". This insight emphasizes the importance of communicators understanding the impact of technological limitations (e.g., tracking) on product evaluations, and how this may vary based on product involvement, cost, etc.

Broadly, attendees were familiar with AR and how it manifests itself in their day-to-day lives, primarily through the lens of leisure and entertainment rather than a functional purpose specific to their careers. For example, several attendees referred to *Pokemon Go* during the discussion. Other attendees discussed the value of AR in their personal consumer decision-making processes. For example, one participant discussed using AR to buy a watch, while another participant mentioned how they would appreciate using AR to assist them to get the proper bike frame based on their body.

A major focus of the AR session focused on going beyond AR as an entertainment tool and emphasizing its capacity to meet various communication goals. While the affordances of AR were clear and understood by participants, as evidenced by the degree to which the audience resonated with presented case studies, there were still questions around how to gain buy-in from internal decision-makers to integrate AR into their existing projects. As one participant

mentioned, "How do we present AR project ideas to our internal program customers as a viable tool? What's the best way to utilize this information in our own day-to-day work?"

Session 4: Mixed Reality – Advancing Communication Strategy Via Blended Experiences

As with previous sessions, attendees were given insight into how to differentiate MR from other XR platforms, and how this emerging modality is being used in strategic communications. Given that this was the final session, a portion at the end was focused on the future of XR, namely emerging trends to account for from a communications perspective. This session yielded several insights about the strategic potential of MR's technological capabilities, and the perceived scalability of the platform.

With regards to the potential of MR, polling revealed that a major draw of MR was its capacity for semantic segmentation, which is the automatic categorization of moving or static imagery (Dong et al., 2021). Various MR case studies highlighted the capacity for MR hardware to segment and understand the user's contextual environment, which allows for a unique degree of personalization, a dominant content strategy across many marketing contexts (Kalyanaraman & Sundar, 2006).

Attendees also emphasized, both through polling and chat dialogue, the importance of copresence with other users in shared spaces. The scenarios were varied, including everything from product demonstrations with remotely located customers to meetings with team members across various time zones. The workshop highlighted the potential for XR platforms to allow copresence across platforms such that some users could be in a VR headset collaborating with other users via mobile AR or MR. An integral factor to ensuring such scenarios are possible with XR is *interoperability*. Interoperability refers to the capacity for multiple pieces of software to "cooperate despite differences in language, interface, and execution platform" (Wegner, 1996). While current systems did not provide an optimal level of interoperability, attendees noted that this was a key affordance to XR adoption in their teams.

Conclusion and Discussion

The objective of this corporate training was to familiarize a global communications team with emerging XR technologies in the context of strategic communication. The sessions provided use cases that demonstrated immersive experiences, key affordances of the technologies, utilization by diverse audiences, and culminated with the resources needed to create immersive content. The text and observational data yield several insights into how XR can benefit the field of strategic communications, while also highlighting several limitations and challenges to realizing its potential, all of which we attempt to outline in the subsequent sections.

Positioning XR as a Viable Communications Tool

The sessions effectively highlighted a significant gap in understanding of XR and its capabilities within a representative sample of US industry professionals. Prior to the training, participants were not at all or somewhat familiar with XR platforms, with the majority reporting they did not regularly use XR for personal or professional reasons. However, the data demonstrates the efficacy of the workshop to help articulate the unique affordances of each XR platform, thereby helping teams tie specific features to desired outcomes. At the conclusion of the training series, they did report their understanding of XR's unique affordances and their impact on key outcomes increased. For example, participants lauded MR's capacity for co-location as integral to collaboration, and VR's elicitation of presence (sense of being there) as central for engagement. This suggests that the workshop effectively built familiarity with the suite of XR platforms and positioned XR as a viable tool for communications professionals across various disciplines (e.g., client relations, internal communications, content creation).

Additionally, the corporate VP of Communications wrote, "I am very excited and know it will create buzz, participation and interest across our team." In a debrief after the final session, the leadership team reported unprecedented global attendance based on prior participation in any continuing professional education event. Likewise, they reported greater attendance from their visual communicators than any previous event, reporting they found it historically difficult to get them to attend such functions.

Challenges

XR Industry Nomenclature

Perhaps not surprisingly, results suggest that the industry's nomenclature confused many participants. Participants reported difficulty differentiating between AR and MR before and after the workshop. The XR continuum is designed to help audiences discern the differences between VR, MR, and AR in terms of virtuality and other unique features. However, discussions with and among the attendees highlighted a consistent issue in the field of communication technology: consumers often are unable to articulate or identify the differences between AR and MR. The similarities between the two platforms, namely the notion that virtual content is present alongside the user's physical environment, was a point of confusion for many attendees. When presented with case studies of AR marketing campaigns, several participants asked whether the highlighted example was in fact indicative of MR. This also brings into question the lack of industry consistency in how these technologies are referenced in scholarship and popular press. For example, where some scholars and industry leaders refer to MR as "mixed reality" 'others use "merged reality", or altogether different terminology, such as "augmented virtuality" (Stamm et al., 2016). There is an evident need for industry leaders to establish uniformity in how these platforms are referenced to reduce confusion and encourage both adoption and effective use.

Technological Saturation

Other challenges voiced among participants was a sense of technology overload. One participant asked, "But doesn't a proliferation of virtual spaces cause confusion and tech exhaustion with the experiences? I mean, if we're burned out on just navigating between Skype, Zoom, Slack and Teams, how much worse is the burnout factor with umpteen virtual worlds to keep track of?" Another issue raised was technological barriers built into firewalls. For example, one participant lamented, "We partner with an org that is using Virbela to do their virtual events. The only bummer is our -- computers can't support it." This speaks to the disparate requirements and compatibility of platforms, computer operating systems, firewalls, and programs.

Limitations and Future Work

Ironically, as a workshop addressing technological innovation and adoption, one of the limitations faced related to the workshop technology. Workshops were delivered via Zoom which is not capable of integrating Likert scale questions in the polls. Polls are also not saved in recordings thus screen-captures are needed for future review. Additionally, we were not able to connect participant responses to other markers such as their job title, team, etc. We also experienced a very low response rate to the post-event survey thus our data was limited to in-event responses and follow-up interviews.

As noted in the results, attendance dipped significantly for the 3rd session on AR. One potential reason for this may be that the employees already felt adequately informed on the nature of AR versus other more novel platforms. AR remains the most widely used XR platform (Deloitte, 2021), due in large part to the success of applications like *Pokemon Go* and *Snapchat*.

Additionally, follow-up interviews with leadership also revealed their employees "increased their interest in XR for business use and inspired them to think of ways to integrate

XR in their current roles, however, they did not feel confident about pitching the technology for communications purposes." Future consideration may extend the training to create a proposal building exercise that builds competency and confidence in connecting XR to communications audiences and outcomes.

Finally, as we look forward, when Facebook, now Meta, announced it was shifting its focus "to help build the next evolution in social technology," (Meta, 2021) in effect, the metaverse, it signaled the beginning of a media hype cycle that mirrors hype around Second Life in 2007 (Chow, 2021). Just as our participants were challenged by XR terms, technology central to the creation of the metaverse (Ball, 2020), few have yet to agree on a universal definition of the metaverse. It will be important understand these technologies, their use, and the audiences who expect to have access to them while navigating the risks of early adoption as the technologies and terms evolve. Communicators cannot ignore XR's potential, just as we could not ignore the internet in its early years.

It is our hope that this investigation will help organizations in other industries better understand how (and why) to integrate XR into their existing communications efforts. The future workforce expects to function in these environments. Gerzema and Johnson (2022) recently reported seven in ten Americans under 40-years-old understand the concept and want to interact in the metaverse with greater than 80 percent looking for social interaction and brand experiences there. As Insider Intelligence editors (2022) recently proclaimed, "Despite not quite existing yet, the metaverse may be already too big to fail."

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"I'll be Right there with You to Help You": How TikTok Health/Fitness Creators Use PR Strategies to Engage With Followers

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Abstract
Social media is constantly evolving, making authenticity essential for creators to stand out and establish relationships with their followers. TikTok, one of the newest social media platforms, is growing tremendously by the day, and with that comes the necessity of reinventing and producing creative and engaging new content. Using quantitative content analysis, the researchers examine 180 videos from six TikTok content creators in the health and fitness niche to identify PR strategies that encourage audience dialogue and engagement, spread information and educational content, and mobilize followers. The findings contribute to understanding how these PR strategies allow creators to develop genuine and relatable short-form content that helps them build relationships and meaningful connections with their audience. In addition, results are a helpful starting point to set the stage for later research to capitalize on the use of TikTok for fostering authentic relationships and to explore further how different approaches impact the creator's authenticity and visibility to followers and, consequently, brand partnerships.

"I'll be Right there with You to Help You": How TikTok Health/Fitness Creators Use PR Strategies to Engage With Followers

Content is a large part of society's everyday life - if we are not consuming it, we are creating it. In a world filled with content from all parts, standing out, building relationships with followers, and mobilizing others is a challenge. Therefore, a unique opportunity for growth and creativity is set whenever a new social media platform arises. TikTok, one of the latest platforms, allowed content creators to reinvent and produce creative and engaging new content. As a result, TikTok was the most downloaded app of 2021, with 656 million downloads (Cyca, 2022). This tremendous growth shows this new platform's potential and relevance in our current socialized world.

TikTok represents a new way for creators to build their brands and interact with followers, allowing PR professionals to understand how creators use different strategies and content themes on TikTok to develop authentic brand narratives. This platform holds thousands of diverse niches and industries, being among the most popular: health and fitness; and wellness and nutrition. There are endless opportunities for content development and authenticity inside these two niches. Trends, challenges, and trending sounds are only one of the ways creators can benefit and implement their creativity. However, TikTok is not only attractive due to its endless content possibilities, but it is also a rewarding platform for content creators. TikTok provides opportunities for monetization for all creators, both niche and mainstream. This together with specific UX and design creates an ideal combination that allows creators to benefit financially in a platform that is organized - unlike nearly every other social media platform (Friedman, 2022).

Even though TikTok is starting strong, there are still many unknown things about the platform. Because this platform is so distinct and newer than others, such as Facebook and Instagram, some aspects were not as explored and researched as they could have been. For instance, TikTok's algorithm is a personalized system that makes content recommendations specific to each user. It decides which videos a user might like based on their interests and displays them on the user For You page. As a result, the For You page is highly personalized for each user (Zote, 2022). However, there only a few studies that analyzed TikTok's algorithm, and blogs, press releases and journals only provide some information (Klug, Qin, Evans, Kaufman, 2021). Therefore, this new platform gives researchers and content creators a lot of ground to explore and understand works best within and what does not. That is why research is needed to analyze the most effective strategies and features and their impact on building engagement and successful relationships. Our study fulfills this gap by identifying insights into PR strategies, authenticity traits, and features used by health/fitness creators that help develop messages in emergent social media platforms like TikTok for connecting with audiences.

Background

Growing Popularity of TikTok Among Businesses and Content Creators and the Need for Authenticity

With the heightened popularity of TikTok compared to other social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, many businesses are turning to TikTok as an advertising channel (Latour, 2021). Together with business interests, content creators are also migrating their efforts to TikTok. But sharing the same videos like those shared on other platforms alone is not enough, as authenticity plays a big role in what is best consumed by TikTok users and what is not. "Psychologists view authenticity as involving interactions between one's experience, self-awareness, and behaviors. Agreement across these dimensions (e.g., behaving in accordance with one's beliefs and values) is thought to increase feelings of authenticity" (Barta & Andalibi, 2021,

p. 5). Authenticity and joy are unique and ownable aspects of the TikTok community, not only for users but also for brands and businesses looking to make an impact (TikTok for Business, 2021). It is important to notice that authenticity seems to play a bigger role in TikTok compared to other platforms. TikTok for Business conducted a research together with Nielsen to better understand people's perceptions of content and brand authenticity on TikTok compared to other top social and video spaces. The research showed that "an average of 64% of TikTok users say they can be their true selves on TikTok, while an average of 56% of TikTok users say they can post videos they wouldn't post elsewhere. This sentiment isn't limited to a particular locale, language or culture" (Nielsen Custom Authenticity Study commissioned by TikTok, 2021, para. 5).

The impact that authenticity has on engagement is key, especially since it is such a valued trait by TikTok users. Different authenticity traits contribute to relationship building between followers and brands/creators. By bringing enthusiasm and energy to your branded content, emotional uplift is increased and you're more likely to encourage participation (Baker, 2021).

These authenticity traits also play a big part in advertising promotional content.TikTok launched Spark Ads that were created so advertisers can choose organic and already popular content to promote their product or brand (Latour, 2021). This is an authentic way for companies to partner with creators to increase engagement and sales. Instead of it being a generic sponsored advertisement for a product the creator can use their platform and original content to organically promote a product while still using a call-to-action that go right to the product's website (Latour, 2021).

This new opportunity is a great attractor for content creators to use their creativity and produce authentic content that may be picked by brands to be advertised. Overall, TikTok has thousands of outstanding features that are attractive to businesses and content creators that are distinct from other platforms and, therefore, explain the growing popularity of this new app.

How TikTok Contributes to the Fitness/Wellness Industry

One of TikTok's most popular niches is fitness and wellness. Some might say that this growth has to do with the pandemic and how users started looking for ways to be healthier, stronger, and safer after our world was shut down. TikTok thrived during the COVID pandemic as people were looking for new ways to distract themselves. TikTik's content is fun, relatable, and easy to look at, making it perfect for lockdown viewing (Jeffries, 2020).

This need for easy-to-digest content was beneficial for people wanting to keep their healthy routines or even start their health journey. The growing interest in this niche impacted the fitness and wellness industry because now more than ever, a large number of educated content creators were sharing useful information, and industry brands that focused their efforts on other platforms started migrating to TikTok as demand increased (Forest, 2021).

For fitness and wellness brands, the platform algorithm provides a prime opportunity to tap into a genre currently exploding on the platform; FitTok, which is composed of fitness, nutrition and wellness content. FitTok is the second most popular genre on TikTok, as the hashtag #fittok has more than 681.5 million views. FitTok's goal is to inspire others to do something through motivational content such as workouts, fitness challenges, recipes and nutritional advice. Through this light-hearted content, FitTok is able to spread the idea of fitness in a way that makes the idea of an active life more accessible, contributing to the popularity of the genre (Chersey, 2021).

All in all, there is still a lack of studies that examine the fitness/health area and the types of strategies, features, and authenticity traits commonly used. Sue et al. (2020) study analyzed

the professional athletes shift in marketing strategy when the pandemic hit. This research highlighted the important of authenticity and different social strategies in keeping their audience engaged as most sports leagues went into hiatus. Sue et al. (2020) findings reveal that athlete-generated TikTok videos are characterized as playful and authentic. "While athletes are recent adopters of TikTok, this emerging social media platform can be profitably integrated into their online branding strategies. Communicating via TikTok presents opportunities for athletes to foster existing fan relationships, promote branded content, and appeal to new fan segments" (Su et al., 2020, p. 436). Overall, more studies need to be done in this area in order for creators and brands to have a better understanding of the best practices for videos inside the FitTok niche.

Methodology

Data Collection

This work uses a quantitative content analysis approach to analyze themes and strategies on TikTok. A total of 180 videos from six TikTok content creators posted between July – August 2021 were examined. Three of these accounts were included in the fitness niche and the other three in the Wellness/Nutrition niche. We selected 30 consecutive videos per account. For our sample, we chose diverse creators based on their follower count and content type. The chosen creators were:

- Fitness/Sports niche
    - @demibagby - 14.2M followers, 282.5M likes
    - @antonielokhorst - 4.3M followers, 76.2M likes
    - @bloglilates - 2.6M followers, 58.8M likes
- Wellness/Nutrition niche
    - @taylorcassidyj - 2.1M followers, 57.8M likes
    - @drleslie - 906.9K followers, 25.5M likes
    - @stephgrassodietitian - 1.8M followers, 16.9M likes

The selection of these creators was based on their influence inside their niche. According to Media Kix (n.a), these accounts were considered top TikTok influencers, and once we analyzed each of them, we found them relevant to our research as their content was diverse and seemed authentic.

Variables

We developed a codebook based on inductive and deductive reasoning involving expert consensus. The codebook focused on

1. Technical aspects of the video (e.g., captions, hashtags, filters, emoji, etc.),
2. Authenticity traits (e.g., voice-over, person talking directly to the camera, person doing an action not directly talking to the camera, etc.),
3. Content topics/themes (e.g., partnership, playfulness, assistance/advice, asking questions, challenges, trends, etc.), and
4. Public Relations strategies (information/education, dialogue/engagement, mobilization/action, etc.).

To establish intercoder reliability, about 25% of the videos were randomly selected and independently coded by each coder. The inter-coder reliability tests performed on each variable indicated scores ranging from 0.77 – 0.99 agreement (Cohen's Kappa), indicating an adequate level of inter-coder reliability. The remaining videos were divided and independently coded by the two authors.

Findings and Discussion

At the time of coding (late August 2021), Health/Fitness TikTok videos received an average of 494,637 views (min: 4108, max: 8,900,000), 47,964 likes (min: 78, max: 1,000,000), 276 shares (min: 3, max: 4681) and 813 comments (min: 0, max: 31200). About 99% of the videos included textual information (99%), 89% contained at least one hashtag, and 78% had music. Few videos incorporated other resources to amplify content, such as filters (9%), original sounds (31%), and emoji (48%).

TikTok videos were examined for three authenticity traits: Voice over-own and pictorial slideshow (13% of the videos), a person talking directly to the camera (25%), a person doing an action with music in the background, and captions appearing in the video (66%). Information and dialogue/engagement strategies were mainly used when a person was doing an action with music in the background which was the most used type of authenticity trait. But when a person was talking directly to the camera, an information strategy was predominantly employed (44%). Younger consumers gravitate towards genuineness, so TikTok content creators should produce more authentic and dialogic content since TikTok presents opportunities for fostering an engaged fan relationship and tapping into new audiences (Su et al., 2020).

As shown in table 1, several categories of video themes were identified, being the most recurrent: Giving advice or helping others (34%) and asking questions to the followers (32%). TikTok is an excellent platform to answer questions for the public especially to explain specialty-specific procedures and education (Comp et al., 2021). Authors noticed also that content creators were asking questions to their followers, looking for recommendations, for example, if they were planning to travel to a different place. Fitness/Health creators were engaging and encouraging questions that also promote action and mobilization, such as "how many of the following you can do?", "do you accept this challenge", or "can you do this without any help?" TikTok recently expanded the maximum video length to 10 minutes, allowing more opportunities to promote microlearning, for instance, using a series of educational activities videos to break down complex topics into small portions. This is an excellent strategy to enable video content themes that encourage learning and education to help others. Microlearning strategies have improved knowledge, engagement, and collaborative learning (Comp et al., 2021). TikTok makes learning practices more social, open, and collaborative (Escamilla-Fajardo et al., 2021), so content creators should be taken advantage on this. Giving advice/helping others posts used mainly an information strategy (82%), asking questions employed a dialogue/engagement strategy (86%), and funny/silly posts predominantly encouraged a dialogue/engagement strategy (47%).

Here are some examples of popular themes by health/fitness creators:

- Giving advice: Tips for staying safe on a hike, expiration of makeup products, food that dietitians always keep in the kitchen, songs for that helped with self-love.
- Asking questions to followers**:** Fitness/Sports accounts engaged with followers asking questions like "true or false" or "have you ever tried this?"
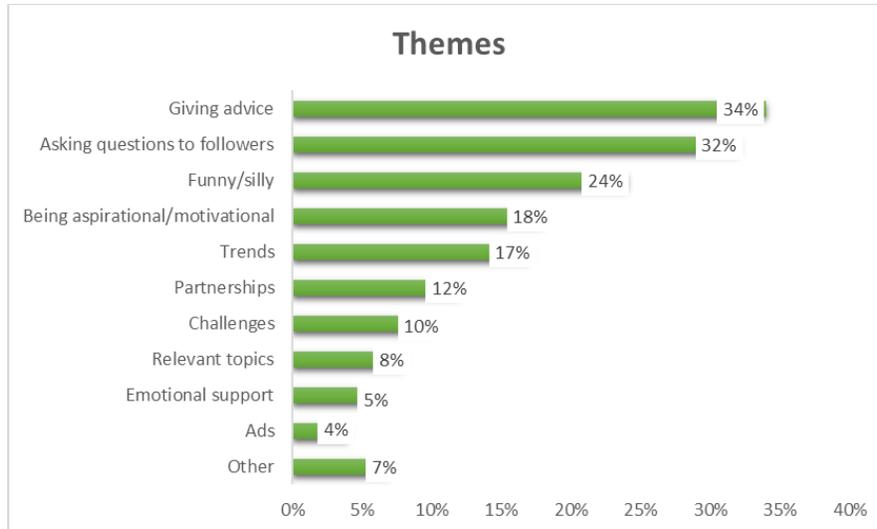
Figure 1. Recurrent themes/topics

The public relations strategies most used were encouraging dialogue/engagement (43%), promoting information/education (37%), and mobilizing followers (32%). Dialogue/engagement allows the development of an authentic and more robust relationship between customers/fans and brands/creators since this brings the attention of audiences by keeping the brand or content creator in mind (Khan, Rahman, & Fatma, 2016). Fans/customers engage with brands or content creators due to diverse reasons, such as product or service offerings (Brodie et al., 2011), media (Calder et al., 2009), activities, and events (Vivek et al., 2012).

Regarding mobilization, the authors identified examples of call-to-action, such as inviting users to follow the coverage of an event, sending questions, uploading lip-syncs of the published content, or participating through a hashtag or in a live stream on TikTok. Here are some examples of popular strategies by health/fitness creators:

- Connections/relationship: "I'm doing something cool, and it's about because y'all," "I'll be right there with you to help you," "You're amazing, you're still here loving and being kind."
- Dialogue/engagement: "Ask me more questions in the comments. Happy to help", "Let's talk about it", "Let me know what you think.

Figure 2 shows the public relations strategies used by health/fitness creator accounts:
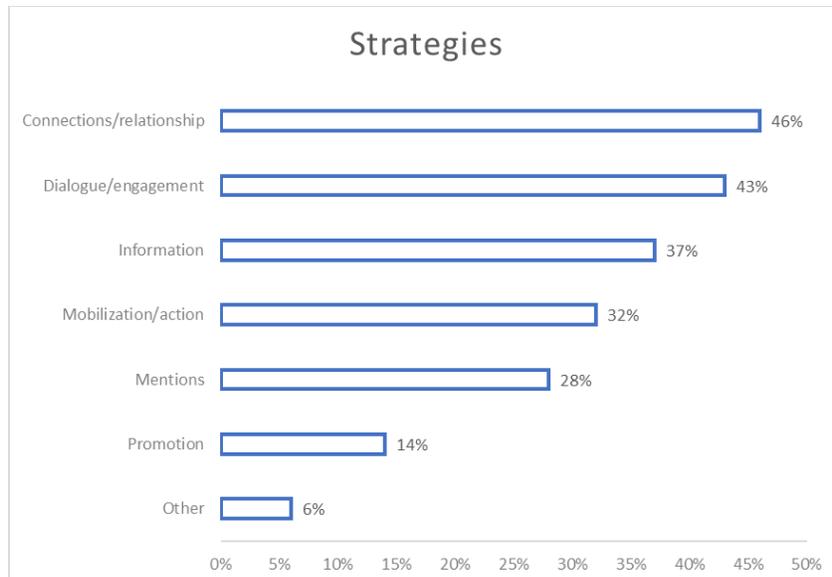
Figure 2. Recurrent PR strategies

The information strategy was predominantly employed in topics about advice/helping others (82%), the dialogue/engagement strategy on asking questions (50%), and the mobilization strategy on advice/helping others (32%). To amplify the content posted, hashtags were mainly added when accounts used dialogue/engagement strategies (44%). Studies point out the importance of using hashtags to classify the content in the platform and for participating in challenges and trends, which results in engagement and content circulation (Vasquez-Herrero 2020). Our findings reveal the importance of using PR strategies that encourage audience dialogue and engagement, spread information and educational content, and mobilize followers. These strategies allow creators to develop genuine and relatable content that helps them build relationships and meaningful connections with their audience.

This paper analyzed content themes and PR strategies performed by health and fitness content creators on TikTok. This study can guide future research applications on TikTok and PR since there is limited literature about this topic due to the novelty of the platform (Zhang & Wu, 2019). TikTok provides an interesting value proposition since it combines elements and functions from other popular apps (Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter) and its simplicity and personalization make the platform unique and attractive (Ma & Hu, 2021).

This study has some limitations that suggest avenues for further studies. For instance, further research can provide more in-depth analysis to understand PR strategies that impact engagement in other industries (not health/fitness-related accounts) or using a larger sample. Furthermore, this work has also implications in the practice of public relations as it reveals the importance of using PR strategies that encourage audience dialogue and engagement, spread information and educational content, and mobilization of followers. Using these strategies through relatable and genuine content ("I'll be right there with you to help you."), creators can provide content experiences that result in connections and relationship building with followers.

We scroll through many posts a day. To stand out, organizations have to understand what consumers expect in terms of content. Our paper contributes to the literature of social media and public relations in studying how organizations can leverage the opportunity to work with content creators by understanding the different strategies and tactics commonly used in order to connect with audiences.

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Linking Environmental CSR and Employees' Voluntary Workplace Green Behavior: Mediating Roles of Communal Relationship and Employee Empowerment

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Abstract

Given the growing concern about environmental issues, corporations worldwide are increasingly embracing environmental protection responsibility. Employees' voluntary green behaviors in the workplace play a vital role in helping corporations fulfill their environmental commitment. Integrating the literature on environmental corporate social responsibility (CSR), relationship management, and employees' green behaviors, this study examines whether and how environmental CSR can influence employees' voluntary green behaviors. The results showed that environmental CSR positively influenced employees' green behaviors, and communal relationships mediated this impact. In addition, the communal relationship was positively related to employee empowerment. The findings of this study provide important implications for corporate leaders and public relations professionals in terms of how to effectively motivate employees' voluntary green behaviors.

Keywords: Environmental corporate social responsibility, communal relationships, employee empowerment, voluntary workplace green behaviors

**Linking Environmental CSR and Employees' Voluntary Workplace Green Behavior:
Mediating Roles of Communal Relationship and Employee Empowerment**

In the context of growing public concern about environmental problems such as environmental degradation, natural resources consumption, and climate change, companies are increasingly embracing environmental responsibility and implementing sustainable initiatives (Islam et al., 2019). As a crucial asset for the success of a company's action (Manzoor, 2012), employees play a vital role in establishing a green and sustainable company through their proactive environmentally-friendly behaviors —voluntary green behaviors—in the workplace (Norton et al., 2015). Prior studies have made progress in advancing the research on employees' voluntary green behaviors in the fields of human resource and environmental management by focusing on the impact of green training, green values cultivation, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) (e.g., Amrutha & Geetha, 2021; Chaudhary, 2020; Dumont et al., 2017). However, the literature on employees' voluntary green behaviors in the public relations discipline is still lacking.

Apart from these studies that focus on direct employee green education and CSR, the employee-organization relationship (EOR) may also serve as an important motivator of employees' voluntary green behaviors in the workplace as high-quality EOR has been found to elicit employees' citizenship behaviors (Kang & Sung, 2017; Men & Stacks, 2014). Therefore, this present study focuses on the role of the communal relationship between organizations and employees in fostering employees' voluntary green behaviors.

Furthermore, although research has demonstrated the positive impact of communal relationship in fostering employees' work engagement and positive communicative behaviors, few studies to date have connected communal relationship to CSR and employees' workplace behaviors in the context of sustainability/environmental protection. Recognizing the role of CSR as a relationship management strategy, we seek to establish the linkages between environmental CSR, communal relationship, and employees' voluntary green behavior. Also, despite employee empowerment being demonstrated as a crucial variable in the internal communication literature (Men & Stacks, 2013), its effect on employees' voluntary green behaviors has been seldomly examined.

With these considerations in mind, this study thus aims to examine the impacts of environmental CSR on employees' workplace voluntary green behaviors via employee-organization communal relationship and employee empowerment by surveying 393 full-time employees working in various industries in the U.S. The findings will contribute to a better understanding of the role of CSR activities as a relationship management strategy to affect employees' perceptions and behaviors. The current study will also provide helpful strategic guidelines for corporate leaders and communication practitioners to develop effective interventions to motivate employees' green behaviors that contribute to organizational sustainability.

Literature Review

Environmental CSR

CSR has been interpreted as a corporate performance that shows a company's responsiveness to its perceived social obligations (Brown & Dacin, 1997; McGee, 1988). It consists of a number of voluntary corporate activities and emphasizes the company's social responsibilities that go beyond the interests of the company and what is required by law (Mcwilliams & Siegel, 2001; Morteza & Raechel, 2014). Environmental issues such as global warming and water/air pollution have received a growing societal concern for decades. In this

regard, companies are expected to reform and adopt policies regarding environmentalism and sustainability by implementing environmental CSR and/or sustainable development strategies (Rousseau, 2017). Environmental CSR thus became a pillar of CSR programs, which refers to a company's effort toward the quality of the natural environment and the better environment for society/future generations (Islam et al., 2019).

After the call of Ferguson (1984), public relations scholars started to pay attention to the ethical perspective of CSR practices (Lee, 2017) through the lens of both inside and outside stakeholders of the organization (Carroll, 1991). Employees, an internal stakeholder of a company, is crucial to companies' CSR practices as they are not only a key component for establishing a good corporate image (i.e., eco-friendly) (Simmons, 2009) but also a crucial element for helping achieve a company's goal (i.e., implementing environmentalism/sustainability) (Tian & Robertson, 2017). However, research on how CSR affects internal stakeholders (i.e., employees) is still sparse in the extant CSR literature (Onkila, 2015). Hence, this study focuses on environmental CSR from the employees' perspective and explores how their behaviors in the workplace would be affected when their company takes responsibility for environmentally sustainable issues.

Voluntary Workplace Green Behavior

Previous literature provided multiple concepts regarding employees' green behavior such as employee pro-environmental behavior and employee ecological behavior (e.g., Okumus et al., 2019; Paille et al., 2013) to describe this discretionary organizational citizenship behavior regarding environmental sustainability issues (Amrutha & Geetha, 2021). Most existing studies focused on the consequences of employees' green behavior; however, the factors that help form the employees' voluntary green behaviors need to be further studied (Tian & Robertson, 2017).

Moreover, extant studies also introduced concepts of employees' in-role and extra-role green behavior. Specifically, in-role green behavior is related to environmental corporate management policies/guidelines, which is a part of employees' formal job duty; In contrast, extra-role green behavior refers to "improve(ing) the environmental performance of organizational resources" wherever possible at the workplace (Amrutha & Geetha, 2021; p. 3). Thus, the extra-role green behavior is a more proactive performance, and it is under the volition control of employees (Kim et al., 2017). According to Amrutha and Geetha (2021), the extra-role green behavior may include "turning off lights when not in use, reusing discarded papers to draft memos, using stairs instead of elevators, etc" (p. 3). In this sense, employees' voluntary workplace green behavior—an employee performance that beyonds the requirement of the company (Norton et al., 2015)—can be regarded as a type of extra-role green behavior (Dumont et al., 2017). Accordingly, this study adopts Kim et al. (2017)'s definition of voluntary workplace green behavior as "discretionary pro-social behaviors which are not under the control of formal environmental management policies, yet remains vital for environmental sustainability of employer organizations" (p.4).

Our study proposes that an environmental CSR practice positively influences employees' workplace voluntary green behavior. Previous research provided preliminary evidence to this expectation, which indicated that employees' CSR perceptions significantly influence their in-role and extra-role behaviors in the workplace (e.g., Farooq et al., 2016; Vlachos et al., 2014). In particular, employees' judgments toward CSR positively affect employees' extra-role CSR-specific performance (Vlachos et al., 2014). In other words, when employees consider their company as socially and environmentally responsible, they tend to exhibit eco-friendly behaviors to support the company's environmental CSR objective.

Moreover, this hypothesis can be supported by the social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), which refers to an individual's perceptions of the oneness with or belongingness to the social categories that he/she perceives him/herself is one of the members. Once an individual classifies him or herself in a social group, he or she would engage in behaviors that are in line with the salient aspects of their identities. In the context of an organization, employees would identify themselves with their company. In this regard, if employees consider their company as environmentally socially responsible, they would behave in a consistent way with their company (i.e., performing green behaviors) (Talat et al., 2019). Thus, the following hypothesis is suggested:

H1: Environmental CSR positively affects employees' voluntary workplace green behavior.

The Mediating Role of Communal Relationship

The importance of establishing a good quality of employee-organization relationship (EOR) and its positive outcomes (e.g., work engagement and satisfaction) have been extensively demonstrated by previous literature (e.g., Alegre et al., 2016; Kang & Sung, 2017). Communal relationship is one of the core indicators of a positive EOR. It has been long suggested in the discipline of strategic communication as a critical strategy in corporate communication and management (Iqbal et al., 2018; Lee, 2020). Hon and Grunig (1999) conceptualized communal relationship in the context of public relations, considering both parties in a communal relationship would "provide benefits to the other because they are concerned for the welfare of the other—even when they get nothing in return" (p.3). In other words, the performance of rendering help/benefits to others originates from altruism psychology without any particular self-oriented intentions (Kanungo & Conger, 1993). This study draws upon Hon and Grunig's (1999) study and conceptualizes a perceived communal relationship as employees' perception of their organizations' effort to provide unconditional benefits, based on its concerns to the employees' welfare.

The current study posits that environmental CSR will contribute to the communal relationship between companies and their employees. Previous research demonstrated that CSR is especially effective to bring positive/solid relationships between the public and the organization when organizations foster the communal relationship, compared to other employee-organizational relationships (i.e., the exchange relationship) (Bolton & Mattila, 2015). This phenomenon occurs when some CSR activities (e.g., philanthropic CSR) are derived from an altruistic motive (Kanungo & Conger, 1993), aligning with the nature of the communal relationship. According to the rule that the two parties involved in a communal relationship anticipate nothing when they benefit each other, public relations scholars contend that it is vital for organizations to pursue and develop the communal relationship, which can be fostered when organizations taking social responsibilities (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Hung, 2005). Therefore, it is evident that environmental CSR is closely related to the communal relationship: Employees may perceive their organizations make efforts to establish a communal relationship when they see their organizations take social responsibilities regarding environmental protection and sustainability.

Meanwhile, our study also assumes that a perceived communal relationship positively affects employees' voluntary green behavior. A number of studies provided evidence, pointing out that perceiving a good quality of communal relationship motivates employees' organizational citizenship behaviors (e.g., employee advocacy) (Lee & Chon, 2020). This association is supported by social exchange theory (SET) (Blau, 1964): Employees would feel responsible for

repaying their organization after being benefited. Since parties who follow communal norms act with reciprocal psychology (Lee, 2020), a communal relationship is closely tied to employees' positive attitudes and performances. As an employee's voluntary behavior to benefit an organization, employees' green behavior can thus be engaged in light of a positive perception of a communal relationship. Specifically, when employees perceive that their organization makes efforts to benefit them without anticipating reciprocations, they would tend to contribute to their organization with indebtedness. Thus, the following hypothesis is suggested:

H2: A perceived communal relationship mediates the relationship between environmental CSR and employees' voluntary workplace green behavior.

The Mediating Role of Empowerment

In linking environmental CSR and employee voluntary green behavior, we suggest another mediator, employees' psychological empowerment. Psychological empowerment has been highlighted as an essential predictor of employee behaviors in the workplace. It has been conceptualized as a form of intrinsic motivation to an individual's work, with four dimensions of meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact (Spreitzer, 1995). *Meaning* refers to an employee's perceived value or importance of his or her job and working goal or purpose. *Competence* indicates an individual's self-efficacy, including confidence in the skills and knowledge that he/she has in performing activities in a work role (Bandura, 1986). *Self-determination* refers to an employee's perceived autonomy in their decision-making process when performing their work (Deci & Ryan, 1985). *Impact* is the extent to which an employee feels that he/she can produce expected effects in accomplishing tasks and make a difference in organizational outcomes. These four elements reflect an active orientation towards a work role (Spreitzer, 1995) and enable processes that make employees initiate tasks and persist (Conger & Kanungo, 1988).

In this study, we expect that empowerment can be significantly enhanced by the environmental CSR. Abundant literature provided evidence that companies proactively involved in CSR activities would gain positive outcomes regarding employees' attitude and performance, such as enhancing trust (Sulaiman & Muhamad, 2020), job satisfaction (Vlachos et al., 2013), and job commitment (Ellemers et al., 2011). Environmental CSR, as a type of organizational support of society, is expected to establish the company's supportive image in employees' mind, and thus increase employees' confidence that they could gain corporate support when they voluntarily engage in green behaviors in the workplace. Employees may also perceive their job has value, emanating from the contribution of protecting the environment/sustainability that their companies made. Furthermore, environmental CSR activities include the dimensions of allowing and encouraging employees to behave eco-friendly/sustainably (Islam et al., 2019), which should foster employees' perceptions of competence and provide opportunities for them to understand the impact they have on their job.

Employees' psychological empowerment, in turn, leads to employees' voluntary workplace green behavior. Evidence that would support this argument is that employees who feel a sense of empowerment tend to behave in an active manner toward their work and perform "above and beyond" the call of duty (Speitzer, 2008). Similar statements can also be found. For example, empowered employees are intrinsically motivated to engage in altruistic and voluntary behaviors (Park et al., 2014) and believe that their behavior will positively influence their company. Voluntary workplace green behavior, an employees' proactive action to perform eco-friendly/sustainably, aligns with the above arguments. In addition, profound literature has indicated that employee empowerment is a crucial factor to enhance employees' motivation level

(Jackson et al., 2014; Matthews et al., 2003), which also provides a foundation for employees' voluntary green behavior. Thus, the following hypothesis is suggested:

> H3: Employee empowerment mediates the relationship between environmental CSR and voluntary workplace green behavior.

Communal Relationship and Empowerment

We further posit that a positive communal relationship may increase employee psychological empowerment in their job. A plethora of studies demonstrated that a good quality of EOR brings positive employee outcomes in the workplace (e.g., Kang & Sung, 2019; Kim & Rhee, 2011). Accordingly, empowerment, which is in the same vein with perceived EOR (i.e., communal relationship) as a psychological state, would be inspired by a positive communal relationship. In other words, empowered employees who perceive the value of their job (i.e., meaning), consider they have autonomy to their tasks (i.e., self-determination), have confidence regarding their work ability (i.e., competence), and believe they can achieve expected outcomes in accomplishing tasks (i.e., impact) would benefit from a perceived good quality of communal relationship. Thus, the following hypothesis is suggested:

> H4: A perceived communal relationship positively affects employee empowerment.
>
> See figure 1 for our hypothesized model.

Method

Participants

To test the proposed model, a web-based survey was conducted through online panels from a research company, Qualtrics, which has access to over two million panelists in the U.S. The recruited participants were full-time employees who worked in the U.S. from various industries. To gain a representative sample in terms of gender, age, and race/ethnicity, we carried out a stratified random sampling with the assistance of the Qualtrics. The research company sent out online invitation emails to panelists who were qualified for the survey (e.g., full-time employees in the U.S.) to participate in a 15-minute survey.

The sample consisted of 393 employees with 51.9% ($n = 204$) males, and 48.1% ($n = 189$) females. In the data, Caucasian accounts for a large portion of the participants (68.4%, $n = 269$). Approximately 95.1% ($n = 374$) of the participating employees held a bachelor's degree or higher, and 59.3% ($n = 233$) of the participants worked at a manager or equal (e.g., supervisor) position. Respondents worked in various industries, including manufacturing (25.2%, $n = 99$), information and telecommunication (17.6%, $n = 69$), management (9.9%, $n = 39$), and constructions (7.4%, $n = 29$).

Measurement

In this study, all the items were adopted from previous literature. A 5-point Likert-scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), was used. Environmental CSR ($\alpha = .884$) was measured with five items adopted from Islam and Asad's (2019) study. Sample items include "My organization makes investment to create a better life for future generations," "My organization is concerned for the environment," "I think my organization encourages its employees to behave in ways which will benefit the environment." The measure of communal relationship was adapted from the Hon and Grunig's (1999) scale, which includes 10 items in total ($\alpha = .971$). Examples include: In light of my organization's green practices/initiatives, I believe "My organization takes care of its employees even when doing so brings few returns," "I feel cared for by my organization unconditionally," "My organization helps employees without expecting something in return." Moreover, a total of 12 items ($\alpha = .897$) was adopted from Spreitzer (1995) to measure employee empowerment. Sample items include "The green behavior

I act on is very important to me," "I am confident about my ability to perform green behaviors," "I have significant autonomy in determining how I perform my green behavior." To measure employee voluntary green behavior in the workplace, a total of 18 items were from the studies of Amrutha and Geetha (2021), Graves et al. (2013), and Kim et al. (2017). Examples include: At work, I try to "Avoid unnecessary printing to save papers," "Use personal cups instead of disposable cups," "Use stairs instead of elevators when going from floor to floor in the building."

Results

Preliminary Data Analysis

The results of the descriptive analysis (Table 2) showed that participants in this study overall had high levels of environmental CSR (Ms > 4.0), communal relationship (Ms > 4.0), empowerment (Ms > 4.1), and green behavior (Ms > 4.0). Correlations between the proposed variables were all positive and significant ($p < .01$). See Table 1 for the descriptive statistics and correlations.

Hypothesis Testing

To test the hypothesized model, we ran a two-mediator model using SPSS PROCESS macro Model 6. Indirect effects were tested using 95% bootstrapped (Boot) confidence intervals (CI) based on 10,000 resamples (Hayes, 2015). In this model, the independent variable was the environmental CSR, and the outcome variable was the employees' voluntary green behavior in the workplace. The mediators were the communal relationship and employee empowerment with a sequential relationship.

The result showed a significant direct effect of environmental CSR on employees' voluntary green behavior in the workplace ($b = .532$, $p < .001$). In other words, environmental CSR was significantly and positively associated with the employees' voluntary green behavior during their work. **Thus, H1 was supported.**

To test H2, we analyzed the mediation role of communal relationship in the linkage between environmental CSR and employees' voluntary workplace green behavior. The results indicated a significant association between environmental CSR and communal relationship ($b = .856$, $p < .001$) and a significant association between communal relationship and green behavior ($b = .230$, $p < .001$). Moreover, the mediation analysis showed that communal relationship significantly mediated the influence of environmental CSR on employees' voluntary green behavior in the workplace ($b = .197$, SE = .057, 95%CI [0.086, 0.313]). **Thus, H2 was supported.**

H3 hypothesized that employee empowerment mediated the relationship between environmental CSR and employees' voluntary green behavior. The results indicated that environmental CSR was significantly related to employee empowerment ($b = .438$, $p < .001$). However, empowerment did not have a significant relationship with employees' voluntary workplace green behavior ($b = .091$, $p = .086$). The indirect effect of empowerment was thus insignificant ($b = .040$, SE = .033, 95%CI [-0.023, 0.106]). **Thus, H3 was not supported.**

In H4, this study hypothesized a positive relationship between communal relationship and employee empowerment. The results showed that communal relationship was positively and significantly related to employee empowerment ($b = .445$, $p < .001$). **Thus, H4 can be supported.**

See table 2 and table 3 for more statistics and 95% CI for each parameter.

Discussion

The present study explored the linkages between environmental CSR and employees' voluntary workplace green behavior with two mediators: communal relationship and empowerment. The findings of this study reveal the positive effect of conducting environmental

CSR activities on employees' voluntary green behavior, as well as the vital role of communal relationship in the corporate management process.

Theoretically, this study advances the current research on employees' voluntary behavior by examining it in the field of public relations. Considering the positive effects of environmental CSR and the scarce literature of how employees' behavior would be affected by environmental CSR activities, we demonstrated that employees' good perception of environmental CSR positively influences employees' voluntary green behaviors in the workplace.

Moreover, the findings of the present study contribute to the existing EOR and communal relationship literature by identifying its crucial role for both company's activities and employees' behaviors. Specifically, a positive corporate initiative (i.e., environmental CSR) would contribute to establishing a good quality of communal relationship; and a perceived communal relationship would improve employees' behaviors (i.e., green behavior) in the workplace.

While most findings are in line with our expectations, the following results were unexpected. The results indicated that empowerment cannot significantly mediate the relationship between environmental CSR and employees' green behaviors. One possible reason for the insignificant role of empowerment might be that its impact was overshadowed by the environmental CSR and communal relationship. Indeed, when we statistically regressed green behaviors on empowerment via a simple linear regression, the significant effect of empowerment emerged. That is to say, even without psychological empowerment, environmental CSR and communal relationships can stimulate employees' voluntary green behavior.

Additionally, the present study demonstrated that a perceived communal relationship could empower employees in their work. This finding indicates that when employees feel that their company considers their welfare without expecting returns, they are more likely to consider their work as meaningful, impactful, autonomous, and feel confident of their working abilities.

The findings of this study also provide practical insights for organizational leaders and public relations practitioners. First, executive leaders would consider environmental CSR as a crucial corporate management strategy when solving environmental issues, as it can bring various positive outcomes to the company. As shown in this study, conducting an environmental CSR can cultivate a communal relationship between employees and the organization, and lead to an employees' voluntary green behavior to help achieve the company's environmental protection goal. Moreover, this study emphasized a vital role of communal relationship, which implies that establishing a good quality of employee-organization relationship should be considered in a company's day-to-day management. Additionally, the current study suggested multiple approaches to empower employees in the workplace, such as conducting environmental CSR activities and building a communal relationship.

Limitations and Future Studies

Despite the effort made to optimize this study, there are limitations to notice. First, the findings of the present study are based on self-reported data through a cross-sectional survey; thus, the causal relationship in this study would be interpreted with caution. Future studies may conduct longitudinal research to have a long-term observation to test the proposed model. Second, this study explained communal relationship and empowerment as mediators between environmental CSR and employees' voluntary green behavior, yet we found the direct effect of environmental CSR on green behavior was still significant. Future studies may focus on other mediators that could explain the mechanism of environmental CSR activities on voluntary green behaviors. Finally, the study did not include covariates when analyzing data, such as demographics of employees (e.g., education levels, salary levels, and age) and features of the

organizations (e.g., industry, size, and financial performance). Future studies may add these variables to help control more possible unfavorable effects on the variables of interest and provide more information than the focal hypotheses we proposed.

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Figure 1. The hypothesized model
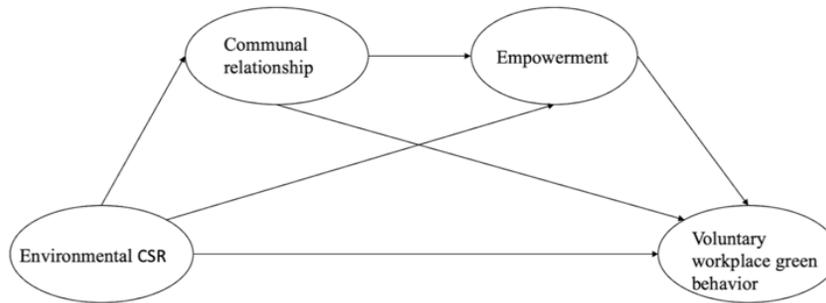
Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations

Variables	*N*	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4
1. Environmental CSR	393	4.064	0.517	1			
2. Communal relationship	393	4.079	0.522	.849**	1		
3. Empowerment	393	4.124	0.491	.863**	.864**	1	
4. Green behavior	393	4.090	0.480	.867**	.819**	.805**	1

** *p* < .01.

Table 2. Regression results of the model

Variable	B	t	p	95% CI (LL)	95% CI (UL)
Communal Relationship on					
Environmental CSR	.856	31.74	.000	.803	.909
Empowerment on					
Environmental CSR	.438	10.963	.000	.360	.517
Communal Relationship	.445	11.234	.000	.367	.523
Green Behavior on					
Environmental CSR	.532	11.120	.000	.438	.626
Communal Relationship	.230	4.824	.000	.103	.324
Empowerment	.091	1.724	.086	-.013	.196

Note. CI = confidence interval; LL = Lower limit; UL = Upper limit.

Table 3 Conditional direct and indirect effect of CSR on green behavior

Type of effect	Effect (index)	SE	95% CI (LL)	95% CI (UL)
Direct effect of environmental CSR on green behavior	.532	.048	.438	.626
(Mediator = Communal Relationship) Indirect effect of environmental CSR on green behavior	.197	.057	.086	.313
(Mediator = empowerment) Indirect effect of environmental CSR on green behavior	.040	.033	-.023	.106
(Mediator1 = Communal Relationship; Mediator 2 = empowerment) Indirect effect of environmental CSR on green behavior	.035	.029	-.021	.095

Note. CI = confidence interval; LL = Lower limit; UL = Upper limit.

Proving the Value of PR: Does PR or Advertising Lead to Greater Purchase Intent?

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Abstract
Which has a greater impact on purchase intent—exposure to positive news or advertising? Analysis of U.S. survey data covering 30 brands across 3 industries answers this question. The results show respondents have higher purchase intent when exposed to positive news, demonstrating the value of public relations relative to advertising.

Keywords: Public Relations, Advertising, Purchase Intent, Lower-Funnel Metrics, News

Proving the Value of PR: Does PR or Advertising Lead to Greater Purchase Intent?

For decades, public relations professionals have used various methods to show the relationship between consumers' exposure to positive brand news and a change in their behavior but quantifying the impact has been challenging, particularly relative to the impact of traditional advertising. While PR professionals have defended the value of PR to influence potential consumers due to perceived authenticity and organic appeal, historic research has yet to quantify the magnitude of this assumed impact. As a result, PR activities have focused on influencing top-of-the-funnel metrics, such as awareness, and marketing budgets have been highly skewed toward advertising—in 2020, ad agencies earned 3.7x the revenue of PR agencies (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). However, a quantitative approach can show that PR influences lower-funnel metrics as well, such as purchase intent, and, in most cases, even more than advertising.

This study uses YouGov survey data aggregated over multiple household brands and product categories to test the hypothesis that consumers who recall being recently exposed to positive news about a brand (but not ads) will have a significantly higher purchase intent for the brand than those who recall being recently exposed to ads (but not positive news). This study confirms this hypothesis and quantifies the relative impact of recent exposure to each form of marketing, as well as the synergistic effect of exposure to both.

Why does this research matter? This research directly impacts the bottom line of the marketing profession and makes a strong argument for increasing the relative share of budgets allocated to PR versus traditional advertising, which could allow brands to earn a higher return on their marketing investment and positively impact all stages of the customer journey.

Literature Review

Traditional Public Relations v. Advertising

Following decades of research, public relations practitioners believe their efforts result in better and greater impact than advertising. The public relations approach claims to be more trustworthy and credible than advertising due to an "absence of a vested interest" or personal gain from a third-party endorser; at the same time, consumers often meet advertisements with skepticism and dismissiveness (Hallahan, 1999, p. 334). Similar assumptions find basis in the idea that audiences avoid advertisements as they often feel frustrated when they are forced to interact with content they do not deem pertinent to their current activity.

The theory of psychological reactance explains how readers and viewers avoid ads and prefer news to influence decisions. While advertising may lead to higher brand awareness when not ignored, consumers prefer to seek out information that informs their decisions. They have come to find unwanted ads so distracting that they will pay extra to avoid them (Dyer, 2021, p. 141). Researchers find this relationship especially relevant in an online space where ads are seen as clutter that slow down internet speed and inhibit users from accomplishing a given task (Cho, 2004). Hallahan finds that advertisements result in a lower recall rate as "readers might have shut down processing of those messages" (1999, p. 339). Expanding on this finding, Jo finds that people focus more carefully on messages presented in news editorials than messages presented in advertising, which can explain why consumers have difficulty recalling information provided in an advertisement (2004).

Even though current research demonstrates multiple points where public relations has greater impact on consumer behavior than advertising, corporate spending has yet to reflect that difference. U.S. Census Data show that revenue of U.S. PR agencies has consistently been significantly lower and more variable than that of ad agencies—suggesting that public relations

is seen as a lower priority. The disparity between ad agency and PR agency revenue peaked in 2020 with a ratio of 3.7:1, as shown below (Table 1).

Table 1
Ad Agency versus PR Agency revenue (2013-2020)

Year	Ad Agency Revenue ($B)	Ad Agency Revenue Growth	PR Agency Revenue ($B)	PR Agency Revenue Growth	Ad:PR Ratio
2013	35.7	NA	10.6	NA	3.4
2014	38.1	7%	11.4	7%	3.4
2015	40.7	7%	11.8	4%	3.4
2016	43.6	7%	13.5	14%	3.2
2017	46.2	6%	12.5	-7%	3.7
2018	50.2	9%	13.8	10%	3.6
2019	51.2	2%	14.1	2%	3.6
2020	54.5	6%	14.5	3%	3.7

While this disparity may provide evidence that public relations is undervalued, there are still barriers that may impede consumers from public relations efforts. Not all news is made equal, so not all news has the same impact when it comes to public relations. Researchers find that the perceived quality of the argument in a news editorial can affect how audiences react to it, with compelling arguments having a more positive impact than weaker arguments (Jo, 2004). Another barrier that the field of public relations faces is a growing distrust of news media and its professionals. Hallahan finds that although people were more distrustful of advertising, they preferred to obtain product information from ads rather than news, as they considered advertisements to be a more reliable source (1999). While, historically, news sources would be trusted as objective and non-paid conduits for information, these sentiments are now challenged as consumers question media professionals' and publishers' biases, expertise and ethics (Hallahan, 1999).

While most research supports the notion that public relations may produce better results than advertising, some research challenges the concept that there is a significant difference. Hallahan argues that some researchers have not been able to quantifiably prove that public relations yields a greater impact than advertising (1999). Michaelson and Stacks' study into the relationship between public relations and advertising finds that public relations is more effective in providing knowledge and building relationships between brands and consumers, but that overall, the "relative value of public relations and advertising is similar" (2009, p. 1). Another study finds that the way consumers process product information is not reliant on content type (Jo, 2004). Jo's research explains that quality of the argument is more important than the form in which the reader receives the content (2004). For example, a credible professional sharing tips will likely find success in either paid or non-paid content. Although this research denies a clear distinction between the impact of public relations and advertising, researchers still argue that neither of these methods should be ruled out of a brand's product campaign (Hallahan, 1999). A strategic campaign where advertising and public relations work with each other could optimally increase brand awareness and improve consumers' attitudes toward a brand.

Process of Integration and Measurement

Thorson and Moore recognized the changes in the advertising industry in the late 1970s through the 1980s when "advertising was fast losing its golden halo, ad agencies went on a

merger and acquisition binge... in an attempt to offer their clients more than just advertising" (2013, p. 12). These decisions were not made because of an appreciation or understanding of the differences in PR and traditional advertising, instead, these acquisitions were made to keep up with the changing world and avoid money loss for companies and clients. Two market changes in the 1970s drove the shift from traditional advertising to a stronger focus on brand perception. The first was the declining cost of using databases to store and retrieve audience information, and the second was the increasing cost of mass media advertising, especially in television (Thorson & Moore, 2013). PR professionals were able to reach smaller, targeted audiences while avoiding the excessive costs of traditional advertising methods. Brands began to realize the importance of relevant communication and the value of having a cohesive brand image across all media channels, giving rise to the field of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) in the 1980s.

The concept of IMC continues to evolve with time, from focusing on internal changes to looking at how the integration affects customers. IMC focuses on long-term brand recognition, loyalty and publicity, with an emphasis on the customer's needs and wants rather than just booming a message to a mass audience (Thorson & Moore, 2013). With the growing landscape of digital media, the debate around the appropriate roles for traditional advertising and public relations will continue, and Supa questions what an integrated relationship should look like in both professional and educational contexts (2016). Through an empirical study surveying the views of both PR and advertising practitioners, Supa found that "overall, there is a significant difference between the fields in terms of how they perceive task responsibility among many of the tasks commonly associated with professional communication within an organization" (2016, p. 413). Although the two fields recognize the differences in their tasks, both groups of marketing professionals "seem willing to embrace the concepts behind integration, such as collaboration and combined decision-making" (Supa, 2016, p. 414).

With shifts in the power balance between consumers and media, consumers are taking more power back and with that putting a greater pressure for advertising to lean into more consumer-focused marketing approaches in an integrated format. Dyer identifies key learnings for marketers from direct-to-consumer brands that found success without advertising—most notably, these brands show that "traditionally held beliefs about advertising being the only path to brand building were incomplete." Brands that seek other avenues to reach consumers find success through innovation and appeal to consumers who are tuned out to the "noise" of advertising (2021, p. 21). While successful brands may not eliminate advertising, they may approach integrated communications with a public relations-led approach that focuses on the audience over the concept.

With moves toward integration, there are benefits, like reaching consumers from multiple directions, and there are also challenges, like measuring the impact of two distinct types of content (paid vs. organic). Researchers and practitioners may see measurement and data collection become increasingly more difficult as the two fields combine due to this lack of consistency in content type. Xavier et al. recognize media monitoring as the most generic form of PR impact evaluation, but they find weaknesses in evaluating the effect of various content types without a formal strategic measurement framework (2005).

To create comparable metrics, PR professionals and researchers have made misguided attempts to measure their results using metrics such as Advertising Value Equivalency (AVE) without considering the difference of content or actual effects of the content. Advertising and PR display key differences in paid components and psychological effects of being paid vs. organic.

While organic tends to garner more trust, both approaches seek to influence behavior by creating awareness that shapes attitudes and perceptions that influence behavior. While measurement practices may have included simple processes lacking uniformity (Spears & Singh, 2004) or may have failed to account for the content of publicity (Xavier et al., 2005), professionals continue to move toward more sophisticated and relevant measurement practices that more closely connect to behavior, such as a consumers' purchase intent (Saima & Kahn, 2021). With the demand of showing marketing value with lower-funnel metrics, practitioners are forced to look beyond upper-funnel and watered-down metrics like impressions.

Purchase Intent as a Measure of Success

Researchers Isyanto et al. define purchase intent as the combination of both a consumer's plan to purchase a product and how much of the product the consumer may need in a particular moment (2020). Purchase intent is not to be confused with purchase action. The consumer plan is influenced by both PR and advertising through differing external and internal factors. Advertising may drive mass consideration, but news content generated from public relations may more effectively target intent. While purchase intent is not equal to purchase, the metric obtained through survey research can be used as a proxy to predict purchase. Public relations and advertising both produce content designed to influence potential consumers; however, this influence may vary depending on where consumers are in their journey from awareness to purchase.

External and internal factors both influence consumers' purchase intent. Hasan and Sohail find that factors like brand trust and brand interaction contribute to purchase intent, especially when tested against the physical or emotional proximity of a consumer to a brand (2021). As expected, consumers are influenced by more than the media they consume—whether it be mass or tailored communication—they are influenced by locality, community and previous experience. Advertising and public relations implement a variety of strategies to drive consumer purchase intent. The internet, composed of social media and digital campaigns, is one of the largest channels that both industries use. Researchers De Bruyn and Lilien show that elements like word-of-mouth marketing, brand affinity and unsolicited advertisement influence purchase intent in the digital space (2008). Similarly, Iyanto et al. explain that influencers, when used as a third-party, lead to higher purchase intent, as these voices incorporate elements of community and appeal to consumers, echoing public relations' use of human-led news stories, especially in the digital space (2020). Both studies find that communication through social media channels mimics relationship factors that drive purchase intent. Public relations uses social media to encourage these conversations between consumers and brands, building trust more effectively than advertising by showing a back-and-forth interaction rather than a one-sided display that consumers may see as an interruption on their purchase journey.

Trust and community thrive best when tied into relationships that consumers build, either with each other or with celebrities and influencers. Attributes identified as leading to greater purchase intent are more prominent in news media with the inherent third-party credibility, but third-party credibility is evolving as consumers are regaining power in deciding the content creators they welcome into their daily lives. Researchers Um and Jang found that consumers receive news-based, third-party endorsement with more openness to trust the content because of its relation to the context as "news" (2020). The concept of influencers is highly linked to news media with organic, influential voices communicating with key audiences.

Research reveals multiple factors that influence consumer purchase intent, which have historically made it difficult to measure PR-driven results. It also continually shows the value of

a public relations approach, but only in a qualitative manner. This study uses survey data to quantitatively measure the value of PR over advertising with the hypothesis that exposure to positive news content about a brand will be associated with significantly higher purchase intent for that brand than exposure to advertising content.

Methodology

To answer the primary research question of whether positive news (i.e., PR) leads to higher purchase intent for a brand than advertising, this study uses a quantitative methodology based on four weeks of YouGov BrandIndex survey data[1] generating 48,866 responses. The survey captures brand metrics like ad exposure[2], positive news exposure[3] and purchase intent (PI)[4]. Thirty consumer brands are included from three industry categories—10 from each—based on 2020 ad spend[5] and 2020 news article volume[6] (the top 5 of each, per category). The table below lists the categories and brands selected for inclusion in this study (Table 2).

Table 2
YouGov US BrandIndex industry categories and selected consumer brands

CPG/Food	OTC/Drug	Skincare and Cosmetics
Ben & Jerry's, Breyers, Coffee-Mate, Lucky Charms, M&M's, Oreo, Reese's, Snickers, Special K, Yoplait	Advil, Aleve, Benadryl, Claritin, Excedrin, Motrin, Mucinex, Robitussin, Tylenol, Zyrtec	Bath & Body Works, Clinique, Cover Girl, Dove, Garnier, Maybelline, Neutrogena, Olay, Sephora, Ulta Beauty

Respondents are categorized into four, mutually exclusive groups based on whether they recall any exposure to ads (Y/N) and/or positive news (Y/N) for a brand in the prior two weeks, as follows: (Group A) Saw neither ads nor positive news, (B) Saw ads only, (C) Saw positive news only, (D) Saw both ads and positive news. For this study, the four groups' brand purchase intent is compared pairwise (i.e., Group B vs. A, C vs. A, D vs. A, C vs. B, D vs. B, D vs. C) to test whether the first group's Purchase Intent (PI) is significantly higher than that of the paired group. For example, in test C vs. B, the null hypothesis is $PI_c = PI_B$ and the alternative hypothesis is $PI_c > PI_B$.

This approach results in six, pairwise, one-sided Z-tests. An uncorrected p-value significance threshold of 0.05 yields a Bonferroni-corrected significance threshold of $0.05/6 = 0.00833$. The differences in PI for the four groups are compared within the following cohorts: overall, by industry category, gender, age range and customer status (ever bought vs. never bought). The gender, age range and customer status comparisons are done both overall and by industry category.

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[1] 48,866 responses from July 8 through Aug 5, 2021. Source: YouGov America Inc. 2021 © All rights reserved

[2] Ad Exposure (multi-select): Which of the following products have you seen an advertisement for in the PAST TWO WEEKS?

[3] Positive News Exposure (multi-select): Which of the following consumer brands have you seen any POSITIVE content for in the PAST TWO WEEKS, excluding advertisements: (e.g., news stories in print, online, social media, TV, etc.)

[4] Purchase Intent (pick 1 from brands you would consider): Although these products have different uses, from which of these brands would you be most likely to buy?

[5] Kantar-reported ad-spending for 2020 (traditional media—excludes digital/social)

[6] Meltwater news article counts for 2020

The most important comparison for answering the primary research question is the PI difference between groups B and C (i.e., those who saw ads-only and those who saw positive news-only), but group D (respondents who saw both) is also analyzed.

Results

Primary Findings

Overall, and in all three industry categories, purchase intent (PI) is significantly higher among respondents who saw positive news but not ads for a brand (i.e., group C) versus those who saw only ads and not positive news (i.e., group B). The full results, both overall and industry category-level, are summarized in the table below for all respondents and among gender, age and customer status cohorts (Table 3).

Table 3

PI for groups A-B-C-D among gender, age and customer cohorts—overall and by industry.

Gender/Age/ Cust. Status by Industry	(A) Saw None		(B) Ads-only		(C) News-only		(D) Saw Both	
	n	PI	n	PI	n	PI	n	PI
Overall	**38761**	**5%**	**4741**	**10%** A	**2556**	**16%** AB	**2809**	**24%** ABC
Males	16440	4%	1823	10% A	1001	14% AB	1087	24% ABC
Females	22321	5%	2911	10% A	1556	17% AB	1721	25% ABC
18-34	6006	5%	2024	9% A	717	13% AB	764	25% ABC
35-49	7877	5%	960	12% A	618	18% AB	692	25% ABC
50+	24871	5%	2987	10% A	1221	16% AB	1353	24% ABC
Customer	19560	8%	3259	13% A	1592	21% AB	2285	28% ABC
Non Cust.	19201	1%	1482	3% A	964	7% AB	524	10% AB
CPG/Food	**9992**	**4%**	**1472**	**9%** A	**972**	**12%** AB	**982**	**18%** ABC
Males	4268	4%	616	9% A	441	13% A	449	21% ABC
Females	5724	4%	849	8% A	532	12% A	534	17% ABC
18-34	1636	5%	1472	9% A	280	12% A	255	28% ABC
35-49	1978	5%	307	12% A	206	15% A	262	16% A
50+	6370	4%	924	8% A	486	11% A	466	15% AB
Customer	6419	6%	1189	10% A	662	14% AB	861	20% ABC
Non.Cust.	3573	1%	283	4% A	311	9% AB	122	11% AB
OTC/Drug	**17551**	**5%**	**1587**	**8%** A	**805**	**18%** AB	**691**	**25%** ABC
Males	7501	4%	681	10% A	304	15% AB	301	23% ABC
Females	10050	5%	907	7% A	501	20% AB	390	26% AB
18-34	2647	5%	248	8%	196	16% AB	167	23% AB
35-49	3565	5%	275	11% A	222	18% A	182	26% AB
50+	11339	5%	1065	8% A	387	19% AB	343	26% AB
Customer	9011	8%	992	12% A	486	24% AB	521	30% AB
Non Cust.	8540	1%	595	2% A	319	8% AB	170	9% AB
Skincare	**11219**	**5%**	**1682**	**13%** A	**778**	**18%** AB	**1135**	**29%** ABC
Males	4671	4%	527	12% A	256	13% A	337	28% ABC
Females	6547	6%	1155	13% A	522	20% AB	798	30% ABC
18-34	1723	5%	304	10% A	241	12% A	343	24% ABC
35-49	2334	5%	379	12% A	190	20% AB	249	32% ABC
50+	7162	6%	999	14% A	347	21% AB	543	31% ABC
Customer	4131	13%	1078	19% A	445	27% AB	903	34% ABC

Gender/Age/	(A) Saw None		(B) Ads-only		(C) News-only		(D) Saw Both	
Cust. Status by Industry	n	PI	n	PI	n	PI	n	PI
Non Cust.	7088	1%	603	3% $_A$	334	5% $_A$	232	9% $_{AB}$

Note. Subscripts (A,B…) indicate a PI value significantly higher than the denoted group(s) (*p*<0.00833 Bonferroni-corrected, 0.05 uncorrected)

Unsurprisingly, across all categories and brands, PI is highest of all among respondents who saw both ads and positive news for the brand (i.e., group D). While the main comparison of interest for this research is between groups B and C (i.e., respondents exposed to ads-only vs. positive news-only), this finding shows the value of an integrated approach for communications.

As shown in the table above, overall, group C's PI is significantly higher than that of groups A and B for both men and women, and for all three age cohorts, but the lift is highest for women (+7% pts. over group B), and for middle-aged (35-49) and older (50+) adults (+6% pts. over group B). As noted, group D has the highest PI, and it is consistent across genders and age cohorts at 24-25%. Across every gender, age and customer status cohort, positive news exposure has a greater impact on purchase intent than ad exposure.

In the CPG/Food category, the difference in PI is relatively small between groups C and B—only +3% pts.—which holds true across all gender and age cohorts. The highest PI for CPG/Food brands is among the age 18-34 consumers in group D (28%), but it drops off precipitously for the two older cohorts (16% for the 35-49 cohort, and 15% for the 50+ cohort), suggesting young adults may be particularly open to trying packaged foods when they see both ads and positive news—in other words, frequency of exposure has more impact on that cohort than the form it takes, at least in the CPG/Food industry. Notably, the difference in PI between customers and non-customers is low compared to the other categories, suggesting relatively low brand loyalty among consumers within the CPG/Food category.

For the OTC/Drug category, the difference in PI for women is quite low for those in group B (+2% pts.) and substantial for those in group C (+15%), relative to group A. The skew is less dramatic for men (+6% pts. for group B and +11% pts. for group C). This suggests that women are more discerning shoppers in the OTC/Drug category—skeptical of ads and more persuadable by positive news. It also suggests that advertising has little persuasive power for Drug/OTC products that would typically be purchased by women.

Lastly, for the Skincare/Cosmetics category, the difference in PI between groups C and B is lowest for young adults and men (1-2% pts), whereas the differences are significant for women (+7% pts), middle-aged adults (+8% pts) and older adults (+7% pts), suggesting positive news is an important factor for those groups. Group D respondents have the highest PI in the Skincare/Cosmetics category (29%), versus the CPG/Food (18%) and OTC/Drug (25%) categories, indicating the strong potential for synergy between PR and traditional advertising in the Skincare/Cosmetics category. Customers have high PI across all groups, indicating high brand loyalty in the Skincare/Cosmetics category.

Secondary Findings

Although purchase intent is the primary brand metric of interest for this study, YouGov provides a variety of other metrics addressing different phases of the purchase journey, including buzz (i.e., awareness), consideration, metrics related to brand health and word-of-mouth. Just as with purchase intent, these additional metrics can also be analyzed through the lens of exposure to positive news versus advertising.

Analyzing the differences in YouGov's six brand health metrics across the four groups reveals that positive news exposure has a greater impact than advertising exposure on all brand health metrics, with the greatest differences in perceived Reputation and Value, as shown below (Table 4).

Table 4

Brand health metrics for groups A-B-C-D.

Brand health metrics	(A) Saw None (n varies)	(B) Ads-only (n varies)	(C) News-only (n varies)	(D) Saw Both (n varies)
Satisfaction[7]	55%	65% A	76% AB	85% ABC
Impression[8]	35%	54% A	62% AB	82% ABC
Quality[9]	34%	51% A	59% AB	78% ABC
Recommend[10]	26%	43% A	57% AB	77% ABC
Value[11]	17%	33% A	48% AB	66% ABC
Reputation[12]	23%	37% A	45% AB	68% ABC
Brand Index[13]	32%	47% A	58% AB	76% ABC

Note. All differences statistically significant ($p<0.00833$ Bonferroni-corrected, 0.05 uncorrected)

Additionally, the results in the table below (Table 5) show that positive news exposure has a greater impact than advertising on Buzz (32% vs. 28%)—defined as whether the respondent has heard or read anything positive about the brand in the past two weeks—Consideration (47% vs. 37%)—defined as the competitive set of products a person might buy the next time they're in the market—and on Word-of-Mouth (23% vs. 19%)—defined as whether the respondent has talked or texted about the brand with family or friends in the past two weeks.

Table 5

Other brand metrics for groups A-B-C-D.

Additional metrics	(A) None (n=38761)	(B) Ads-only (n=4741)	(C) News-only (n=2556)	(D) Both (n=2809)
Buzz[14]	5%	28% A	32% AB	64% ABC
Consideration[15]	22%	37% A	47% AB	68% ABC
Word-of-Mouth[16]	6%	19% A	23% AB	50% ABC

Note. All differences statistically significant ($p<0.00833$ Bonferroni-corrected, 0.05 uncorrected)

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[7]Satisfaction (multi-select): Of which of the following products would you say that you are a "SATISFIED CUSTOMER"?

[8] Impression (multi-select): Overall, of which of the following products do you have a POSITIVE impression?

[9] Quality (multi-select): Which of the following products do you think represent GOOD QUALITY?

[10] Recommend (multi-select): Which of the following products would you RECOMMEND to a friend or colleague?

[11]Value (multi-select): Which of the following products do you think represents GOOD VALUE FOR MONEY?

[12]Reputation (multi-select): Which of the following companies would you be PROUD TO WORK FOR?

[13]Brand Index: Average of the Satisfaction, Impression, Quality, Recommend, Value and Reputation scores.

[14]Buzz (multi-select): Over the PAST TWO WEEKS, which of the following products have you heard something POSITIVE about (whether in the news, through advertising, or talking to friends and family)?

[15]Consideration (multi-select): When you are in the market next to purchase <CATEGORY> products, which of the following would you consider buying?

[16]Word-of-Mouth (multi-select): Which of the following products have you talked about with friends and family in the PAST TWO WEEKS (whether in-person, online or through social media)?

These results demonstrate that exposure to positive news about a brand can provide greater lift than advertising across all phases of consumers' purchase journey—from awareness to consideration, purchase and through to post-purchase evangelism—and build a more positive impression of the brand in consumers' minds.

Discussion

Limitations

Across the industries and brands tested, the PI for a brand is generally more associated with positive news exposure than ad exposure, but there are a few outlier brands for which the pattern flips and exposure to ads is more associated with a higher PI. Identifying the specific factors associated with this reversal is a topic for future studies, but there are several possibilities that are inherent to limitations of this study:

1. Brand-level spending on positive news (i.e., PR) and advertising during the four-week survey period is an unknowable and a confounding factor. To control for this, the brands included in the study were selected based on their 2020 ad-spend and news article volume to achieve a good mix of brands with different relative levels of spending on advertising and PR. Furthermore, no attempts have been made to draw conclusions from differences in metrics at a brand-level.

2. Different brands appeal to different demographic segments of consumers, by age, gender, etc., and those demographic segments may respond differently to ad and positive news exposure. In fact, the results presented above suggest that they do, but this study was only powered to allow for demographic comparisons at the industry-level, not at the individual brand-level.

3. It is important to recognize that other factors affect consumers' perception and purchase intent beyond exposure to positive news and advertisements. The influence of external factors, such as consumers' self-perception in communities, affects how a consumer responds to content exposure (Notarantonio, 2009). Consumers may have a pre-conceived opinion about a brand based on personal experience that could affect how receptive they are to positive news about the brand, and even whether they intentionally seek it out. In this study, any a priori biases respondents may have had about the brands are unknown.

The evolving distinction between public relations and advertising in general acts as another factor to consider. Historically, advertising and public relations were separate disciplines identified with distinct lines and practices, but the pervasiveness of the internet has brought tighter integration, social media, influencers and native advertising—advertising that blends in with surrounding content—that blur the lines between the two disciplines (Campbell & Grimm, 2018).

In this study, significant differences can be seen between the three industries that were included, suggesting there may be other industry categories where the differences between PR and ad exposure are less significant or even reversed. Researchers may consider looking at a wider sample of brand categories to confirm findings across more industries. In addition, researchers might consider any specific advertisements or communications activations occurring at the time of study. While this study clearly answers the research questions, further studies could look deeper into the actual financial gap between news and advertising agencies to recalculate suggested alterations based on influence on purchase intent. Studies could look at actual purchases through data provided by companies and through consumer surveys to further confirm the findings.

Lastly, the outbreak of COVID-19 is an uncontrolled variable both in its effect on brands' outreach strategies and on consumers' behavior. Although the survey data were collected during a relative lull in the pandemic, it is unlikely the behavior of both brands and consumers was entirely normal. The researchers would like to replicate the study when COVID-19 is no longer a major factor in daily life to confirm the findings.

Conclusions and Implications

The study's results support the hypothesis that consumers exposed to positive news about a brand (but not ads) have significantly higher purchase intent for the brand than those exposed to ads (but not positive news). PR's influence on purchase intent is 2.1x greater than advertising. It is also noteworthy that consumers exposed to both positive news *and* ads have higher purchase intent than those exposed to only one or the other. This research demonstrates that PR can positively impact all stages of the customer journey and should be used as such—with appropriate budget allocation—in combination with traditional advertising. It should drive a shift in thought processes, communication channels and measurement practices for marketing and communications departments, and help brands develop outreach strategies fueled by a more holistic understanding of how PR impacts purchase intent, word-of-mouth, buzz and brand health metrics relative to advertising.

While public relations practitioners and others in the industry have often recognized the value of PR to persuade over advertising, this study quantifies those beliefs in a way that makes them actionable to drive change. Quantifying the value of public relations over advertising with a lower-funnel metric like purchase intent emphasizes the need for a public relations approach to reaching potential consumers. Consider that if corporate budgets mirrored the relative contribution of PR and advertising in driving purchase intent suggested by this study, PR spending in the U.S. would be 2.1x higher than ad spending, instead of ad spending being 3.7x higher than PR spending, as reported in 2020 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

These findings can immediately impact the industry through educating senior business leaders to prioritize investments that lead to desired behavioral outcomes more effectively, as well as academic leaders to empower the rising generation of communications professionals to lead the new "frictionless" way of communicating messages that drive change.

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Enhancing Young Consumer's Relational and Behavioral Outcomes: The Impact of CEO Activism Authenticity and Value Alignment

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Abstract
This study surveyed 373 U.S. consumers on how perceived CEO activism authenticity and consumer value alignment (e.g., a match between personal values and a CEO's stance on a sociopolitical issue) influence young consumers' identification with the CEO's organization, foster quality consumer relationships with the CEO's organization, and increase purchase intention. The results of structural equation modeling analysis showed that the perceived authenticity of CEO activism positively influenced young consumers' relationships with the organization and their intent to purchase. Value alignment also demonstrated a strong positive effect on consumer organizational identification. Furthermore, high-value alignment and organizational identification both contributed to the quality of consumer relationships with the organization. Organizational identification and consumer relationships with the organization were revealed as partial or full mediators in the relationship between value alignment/ CEO activism authenticity and consumers' purchase intention.

Keywords: CEO activism, perceived authenticity, value alignment, organizational identification, consumer-organization relationships, purchase intention

Enhancing Young Consumer's Relational and Behavioral Outcomes: The Impact of CEO Activism Authenticity and Value Alignment

CEO activism is worthy of special attention because young consumers, like millennials and Gen Z, believe that business leaders have a responsibility to take a stance on important social issues (Weber Shandwick, 2017). Beliefs and ideologies are foundational to CEO activism. However, differing beliefs between the CEO and consumers around a contentious social issue can generate value conflicts that may further impair consumer identification with the CEO's organization. A considerable amount of research suggests that organizational identification benefits consumers' attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, such as consumer-organization relationships (Park & Jiang, 2020; Ran & Zhou, 2019).

Further, young generations are leaning into consumer choice to pressure businesses to act in accordance with their values (Bloomgarden, 2019). Through their purchase behavior, consumers tend to support corporate advocacy activities that align with their values through purchase behavior (Neureiter et al., 2021). Thus, businesses cannot overlook the values and beliefs of their consumer base when their CEO takes a stance (Mayer, 2017). Moreover, when CEOs become activists for controversial issues, their underlying motivations come under increased scrutiny and skepticism. Thus, nurturing and communicating the authenticity of CEO activism is important to gain and keep the trust of consumers, especially young consumers (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Building on previous research in signaling theory and social identity theory, this study intends to examine how consumers' perceived value alignment and authenticity of CEO activism influences Millennial and Gen-Z consumer' (18-40 years old) identification with the CEO's organization. Additionally, this study aims to investigate quality consumer relationships with the CEO's organization, and their purchase intention as potential outcomes of CEO activism. This study will theoretically contribute to corporate advocacy at the leadership level and add to the growing body of knowledge on CEO activism and leadership communication. The findings will also provide tangible practical recommendations to inform CEOs on the best practices of activism in an era when businesses and leaders are increasingly expected to take the lead on social change (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Literature Review

Perceived Authenticity of CEO Activism

Authenticity has been described as being frank, showing candor, or displaying moral courage (Bowen, 2016). Since authenticity relies on the perceptions of the recipient to determine the level of authenticity, the audience or observer of the behavior is paramount (Shen & Kim, 2012). For public relations practitioners and scholars, establishing an authentic organization serves as a guiding principle, wherein organizations, "let the public know what's happening with honest and good intention; provide an ethically accurate picture of the enterprise's character, values, ideals and actions" (Arthur W. Page Society, n.d.). These perceptions of authenticity carry over into the leader of the organization, who is often the most visible individual, both internally and externally. When a CEO communicates about activism, consumers will draw on available clues such as consistency (Cording et al., 2013) and realness (Novicevic et al., 2006) to evaluate the authenticity of the leader's communication and organization's initiatives.

Perceived Value Alignment with CEO Activism

As CEOs navigate relationships with their stakeholders through their activist behavior and related perceived authenticity, consumers are simultaneously navigating their responses to organizations based on their respective stances. When consumers align with organizations'

stances on polarizing issues, they may engage in behavior such as a "buycott" where they choose to align and subsequently purchase from that organization (Neureiter & Bhattacharya, 2021). In this scenario, consumers are psychologically responding to the CEOs actions. If they perceive an alignment with the CEO's activism, research suggests they also have a sense of pride and identification with the parent organization (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021). Additionally, recent studies have indicated that millennials in particular place a high importance on value-aligned leadership behavior (Maier et al., 2015), with additional scholarship indicating that stakeholders may thrive when they perceive alignment with the values of an associated organization or organization's leadership (Mullins & Syam, 2014).

Consumer-Organization Relationships

The relationship between an organization and its varied publics has been long studied in public relations scholarship (Cheng, 2018), stemming from Ferguson's 1984 (2018) call for the field to focus on this dynamic. Organization-public relationships (or OPRs) are measured by four relational indicators: trust, commitment, satisfaction, and control mutuality (Huang & Zhang, 2013). These elements can be understood as "the degree that the organization and its public trust one another, agree on one has rightful power to influence, experience satisfaction with each other, and commit oneself to one another" (Huang, 2001, p. 12). Men and Jiang (2016) suggested that different approaches in segmenting the public will lead to diverse applications of the OPRs model. For this study, the focus is on consumers, who are an oft-examined external public for an organization, and therefore can be further understood under the umbrella of OPRs but also more specifically as the consumer-organization relationship, which maintains the favor of the aforementioned relational tenets. Consumers and organizations rely on social and learned norms to guide their relationships with one another (Hur & Jang, 2016). In these unspoken, contractual, often psychologically-driven relationship systems, consumers and their organizations may form a communal bond that resembles a friendship based on its connected and emotional nature (Aggarwal & Larrick, 2012).

Perceived authenticity of CEO activism and consumer-organization relationships. Increased perceptions of authenticity have the power to bolster the relationship between the communicator and the recipient, such as between an organization's leader and the organization's consumers (Carroll, 2015). Perceived authenticity involves an assumption of good faith and trusting that the behavior exhibited aligns with the character of the person or entity (Kim et al., 2017). Previous scholarship in the area of corporate social responsibility suggests that perceived authenticity can act as a linchpin for improving the quality of the relationship between an organization and its stakeholders, including consumers (Joo et al., 2019). Due to the interconnected nature of a CEO and his or her organization, it is pertinent to examine how the CEO's actions such as their activism impacts the consumer-organization relationship (Lee, 2022). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

> H1: Perceived authenticity of CEO activism is positively related to young consumers' relationships with the CEO's organization.

Value alignment with CEO activism and consumer-organization relationships. Similarly, young consumers who perceive value alignment with the CEO activism offers strong implications for the strength of the relationship between young consumers and the organization. For instance, it has been found that when a consumer is aligned with the values of a brand, they are more likely to show commitment to and identification with the brand (Keh & Xie, 2009), and subsequently, strengthening the relationship from a consumer-organization perspective. By fulfilling consumers' personal value, CEO activism causes people to associate positive feelings

with the CEO and the represented organization (Zhang & Bloemer, 2008). This especially may be the case with younger consumers, such as millennials, who place higher value on the alignment between individuals and organizations (Dannar, 2013). Thus, this study proposes the following hypothesis relating perceived value alignment with CEO activism:

H2: Perceived value alignment with regard to CEO activism is positively related to young consumers' relationships with the CEO's organization.

Consumer Purchase Intention

Purchase intention involves the reason and situation to buy a brand, product, or service by consumers (Sharma & Klein, 2020). The theory of planned behavior can be applied to understand the effect of CEO activism on consumer purchase intention. Based on the theory, "people intend to perform a behavior when they evaluate it as positive, when they experience social pressure to perform it, and when they believe that they have the means and opportunities to do so" (Ajzen, 2005, p. 118). Previous studies on the potential influence of CEO activism on consumer purchase intention have shown that CEO activism and corporate advocacy can positively influence consumer purchase intention (Chatterji & Toffel, 2019; Dodd & Supa, 2014). According to the signaling theory, the content and attributes of a product or brand are transmitted to consumers as signals and can affect their purchase intention (Sharma & Klein, 2020). CEO activism that sends positive signal to young consumers may elicit positive reactions, to include purchase intention. For instance, when consumers perceive CEO activism intentions to be authentic, genuine, and innovative, they tend to develop favorable attitudes towards the CEO and their organization (Park & Jiang, 2020). Thus, it is more likely for consumers to show supportive attitudes (in terms of purchase intention) toward the organization when they perceive CEO activism to be authentic and motivated by genuine care and responsibility (Korschun et al., 2019). Thus, this study proposes the following hypothesis.

H3: Perceived authenticity of CEO activism is positively related and young consumers' intention to purchase.

In addition, previous literature has demonstrated that consumer purchase intention, as a type of consumer response, can be influenced by the perceived congruence with the organization (e.g., Dodd & Supa, 2014). Accordingly, when there is a value alignment between the CEO's and the consumer's stance on controversial issues, CEO activism tend to generate consumer support and goodwill for the organization (Chatterji & Toffel, 2019; Dodd & Supa, 2014). For example, consumers are more likely to purchase the product or service from the organization as a way to support the organization and the cause (Chatterji & Toffel, 2019). As young consumers often have higher involvement and sensitivity with social issues, they are more likely to take a CEO's activism into consideration when they consider which brands to buy (Chatzopoulou & de Kiewiet, 2021). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Perceived value alignment with CEO activism is positively related to young consumers' intention to purchase.

Consumers' perceived relationships with an organization is a critical factor that can influence their behavior, such as purchase intention (Lee et al., 2012). Previous research has found that consumers were more likely to purchase products and services from the company when they perceived a strong relationship with the company (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). Also, based on the planned behavior theory, consumer purchase intention can be influenced by organizational attitudes toward the purchase action (Ajzen et al., 2004). Quality consumer-organization relationships indicated by trust, commitment, satisfaction, and mutual control may

inspire consumers to develop favorable attitudes toward the organization, which increase their intention to purchase from the organization. Thus, this study predicts the following hypothesis.

      H5: The consumer-organization relationship is positively related to young consumers' intention to purchase.

The Mediating Role of Organizational Identification

      Organizational identification can be understood as a cognitive construct that focuses on the perception between the self and the organization, along with a sense of belonging to the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Consumers may identify with organizations via their perception of oneness or connection based on shared attributes (Dutton et al., 1994). In other words, there is a sense of emotional attachment developed by consumers when they believe their personal values are similar with the organizational identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). The extent to which consumers identity with organizations depends on how much the process of identification contributes to their self-esteem (Rim et al., 2016). For instance, young consumers are more willing to identify with organizations that own socially desirable attributes, such as authenticity (Kim et al., 2018).

      Perceived authenticity of CEO activism and organizational identification. As a favorable organizational characteristic, authenticity is valuable to both internal and external stakeholders; people are innately willing to be affiliated with authentic and ethical organizations (Creyer & Ross, 1997). When consumers perceive CEO activism to be authentic, they are likely to believe their organization also has a positive reputation and goodwill within society, which in turn strengthens their emotional connection to the organization (Kim et al., 2018). Further, young consumers are more willing to identify with organizations that undertake advocacy activities because it may accomplish their self-difference and self-enhancement (Marin & Ruiz, 2007). While an enhanced self may facilitate consumers' sense of attachment to the organization, it also increases the identification with the organization (Dutton et al., 1994). As a result, the following hypothesis is proposed:

      H6: Perceived authenticity of CEO activism is positively related to young consumers' identification with the CEO's organization.

      Value alignment and organizational identification. Based on social identity theory, an emotional connection can be cultivated if one identifies similarities within a group's values and attributes (Dutton et al., 1994). Specifically, perceived value alignment can make consumers relate their own self-worth with the organizational identity, which further enhances their feelings of emotional connection to the organization and motivates them to strive for shared goals (Fombelle et al., 2012). Consumers who perceive value alignment with CEO activism define themselves along the same lines of the CEO. These consumers also tend to identify with their organization because it is easier to integrate important aspects of personal values with the organization (Fombelle et al., 2012). This is particularly true with younger generations who tend to identify themselves with organizations with similar values (Safeer et al., 2021). Thus, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

      H7: Perceived value alignment with CEO activism is positively related to young consumers' identification with the CEO's organization.

      Organizational identification, consumer-organization relationships and purchase intention. Many studies have suggested that organizational identification can influence individual attitudes, such as satisfaction and organizational commitment, toward organizations (Keh & Xie, 2009). Social identity theory suggests that highly identified consumers are more likely to maintain the relationship with the organization because they entrust their self-concept

and self-esteem to the organization's identity and therefore, believe they will benefit from the long-term relationship (Kane et al., 2012). Similarly, consumer purchase intention can result from perceived identification with the organization, which depends on a series of identity evaluations, such as prestige and attractiveness (Wu & Tsai, 2007). Identified consumers have a clear stake in the organization's long-term success, which may boost their willingness to purchase from the organization as a critical way to show their support (Lee et al., 2012; Wu & Tsai, 2007).

> H8: Young consumers' identification with the CEO's organization is positively related to their relationships with the CEO's organization.
> H9: Young consumers' identification with the organization is positively related to their intention to purchase.
> Given the interplay between CEO activism (i.e., perceived authenticity and value alignment), organizational identification, and consumer outcomes (i.e., consumer-organization relationships and purchase intention), this study further proposes that organizational identification mediates the relationship between CEO activism and consumer outcomes.
> H10: Organizational identification mediates the association between perceived authenticity of CEO activism and young consumer outcomes (i.e., consumer-organization relationships and intention to purchase).
> H11: Organizational identification mediates the association between value alignment with regards to CEO activism and young consumers outcomes (i.e., consumer-organization relationships and intention to purchase).

Method

To test the hypothesized model (Figure 1), a quantitative online survey was conducted in May 2021. The final sample comprised young adult consumers in the United States under 40 years of age. Respondents were recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). After data cleaning, a total of 373 qualified and complete responses were obtained for the data analysis. Participants in this study included 63.8% (n = 238) males and 34.9% (n = 130) females. The sample had an average age 28.33 years (SD = 5.68). Among these participants, 65.4% were Millennials and 34.6% were Gen Z. Participants identified CEOs taking a public stance on the following issues: racial discrimination = 23.86%; public health = 19.3%; climate change = 16.62%; lesbian/gay/bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) = 16.35%; gender discrimination = 9.65%; income fairness = 5.36%; immigration = 2.68%; gun control =, 2.68%; and others = 3.48%.

Figure 1. *Conceptual Model of CEO Activism and Consumer Outcomes*
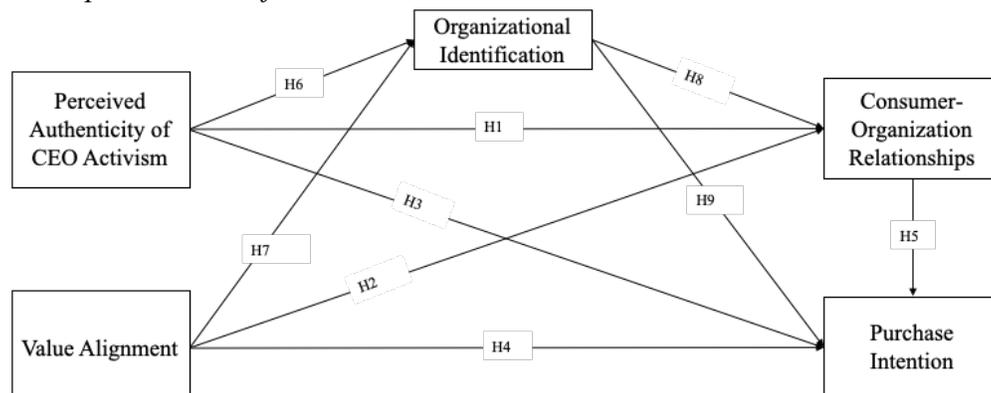
Survey Procedure and Measures

The measurement items of the key concepts were adapted from previous studies to fit the current study context. Specifically, this study adapted the operationalization of perceived brand authenticity from Akbar and Wymer (2017) to measure perceived authenticity of CEO activism. Two dimensions that characterize perceived authenticity of CEO activism were measured with nine items, namely, originality (e.g., "insincere-sincere," $\alpha = .89$) and genuineness (e.g., "follower-pioneer," $\alpha = .93$). Furthermore, perceived value alignment was assessed with three items adapted from Cable and DeRue (2021) and one item adapted from Jensen et al. (2019) (e.g., "My stance on this social issue is similar to the stance of the CEO on this issue," $\alpha = .95$). The scale of organizational identification comprised six items adopted from Mael and Ashforth (1992) (e.g., "I am very interested in what others think about this organization," $\alpha = .95$). Consumer-organization relationships were measured by 20-items from Hon and Grunig (1999). The 20-item scale used to evaluate the quality of consumer-organization relationships, consisted of four dimensions: trust ("This organization has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do," $\alpha = .93$), control mutuality (e.g., "This organization really listens to what people like me have to say," $\alpha = .93$, commitment (e.g., "I would rather work together with this organization than not," $\alpha = .95$), and satisfaction ("I am happy with this organization," $\alpha = .94$). Finally, intention to purchase was measured with three items developed by Kim and Ferguson (2019) (e.g., "I would like to pay for products/ services from this organization," $\alpha = .93$).

Results

The hypothesized model was analyzed and tested by employing the two-step structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis using AMOS 26. The test of the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) indicated an acceptable fit to the data: $\chi^2(20) = 77.71$, $p < .001$, $\chi^2/df = 3.89$, TLI $= .97$, CFI $= .98$, SRMR $= .02$, RMSEA $= .09$ (90% CI $= .07$, $.11$). A second step evaluation of the structural model with age types, familiarity with the CEO and controlling for the CEO's organization also yielded a satisfactory fit to the data: $\chi^2(32) = 93.59$, $p < .001$, $\chi^2/df = 2.93$, TLI $= .97$, CFI $= .98$, SRMR $= .02$, RMSEA $= .07$ (90% CI $= .06$, $.09$), and was thus retained as the final model to interpret the paths (see Figure 2).

Hypothesis Testing

The first two hypotheses predicted that perceived authenticity of CEO activism and perceived value alignment were positively related to young consumers' relationships with the CEO's organization. Results support both hypotheses. Specifically, young consumers' perception of authenticity of CEO activism is positively associated with their relationship with the CEO's organization ($\beta = .31$, $p < .001$). Consistently, perceived value alignment with the CEO's organization demonstrated a positive association with young consumers' relationships with the CEO's organization ($\beta = .48$, $p < .001$).

In addition, hypotheses 3 through 5 examined whether young consumers' perceived authenticity of CEO activism, perceived value alignment, and quality relationships with the CEO's organization positively associated with their intention to purchase. Results supported hypothesis 5, but failed to hypothesis 3 and 4. Specifically, young quality consumer-organization relationships were positively related to young consumers' intention to purchase ($\beta = .84$, $p < .001$). However, young consumers' perception of authenticity ($\beta = -.02$, $p = .84$) and value alignment ($\beta = .09$, $p = .12$) showed no direct association with an intention to purchase.

Figure 2. *Results of the Hypothesized Model with Standardized Path Coefficients*
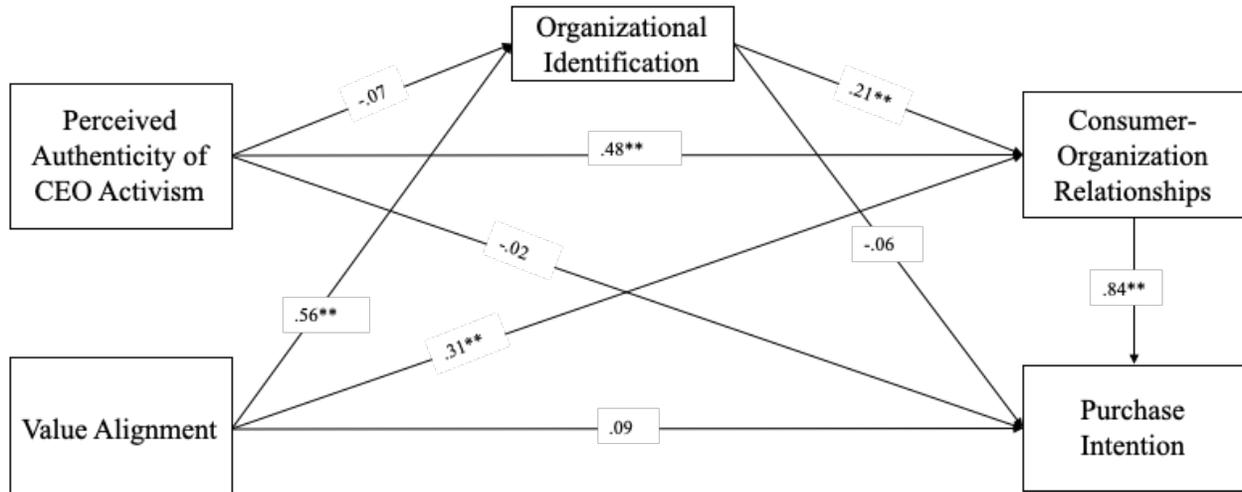
Hypotheses 6 and 7 suggested that young consumers' identification with the CEO's organization was positively related to their relationships with the CEO's organization and intention to purchase. Results showed that young consumers' identification with the CEO's organization was significantly and positively associated with quality consumer-organization relationships (β = .21, p < .001), thus supporting Hypothesis 6. However, contrary to our expectation, the results did not support hypothesis 7 based on the non-significant direct association between young consumer's identification with the CEO's organization and their intention to purchase (β = -.06, p =.11).

Hypotheses 8 and 9 proposed that young consumers' perceived authenticity of CEO activism and perceived value alignment were positively related to their identification with the CEO's organization. Results confirmed hypothesis 9, but failed to support hypothesis 8. Particularly, young consumers' perception of aligned values and their identification with the CEO's organization were positively related (β = .58, p < .001). However, no direct association was found between young consumers' perception of authentic CEO activism and their identification with the CEO's organization (β = -.07, p = .44).

Indirect (mediation) effects. A formal test of indirect effects using a bootstrap procedure (n=5,000 samples) was conducted to test Hypotheses 10 and 11. Results showed the significant indirect effects in paths from perceived value alignment with regards to CEO activism to consumer outcomes (i.e., consumer-organization relationships and intention to purchase) through organizational identification (β = .10, p < .001 [95% CI: .05; .15]). Therefore, Hypothesis 11 was supported. However, results suggested that there were no significant indirect effects in paths from perceived authenticity of CEO activism (β = -.01, p = .46 [95% CI: -.06; .03]) to consumer outcomes (i.e., consumer-organization relationships and intention to purchase) through organizational identification. Therefore, Hypothesis 10 was rejected.

Discussion

CEO activism serves as an effective signal for the CEO's organization to manifest its values, authenticity, and attract like-minded young consumers. This highlights the underlying mechanism of perceived authenticity and the holistic nature of consumers' relationships in today's modern organizations. These results align with previous scholarship, wherein Men

(2021) found that CEO authenticity positively bolstered the relationship between startup employees and their leadership. Although employees are considered internal stakeholders and consumers primarily external, the findings of this study reinforce that a CEO's perceived authenticity plays a dynamic role in the relationship between the CEO and the organization with far-reaching stakeholders. Moreover, consumers who perceive a match between their personal values and an organization's values will generally show greater goodwill toward the organization and strive to maintain a partnership with the organization to achieve their common goals (Cazier et al., 2007). Thus, when CEO activism signal values aligned with young consumers, an indicator of commonality are found between the CEO's organization and young consumers, thus contributing to quality consumer-organization relationships (Zhang & Bloemer, 2008).

Additionally, results of the present study suggested an indirect link between young consumers' perceived value alignment with CEO activism, organizational identification, and their relational and behavioral outcomes. Particularly, organization identification is a cognitive process in which individuals evaluate the overlap of self-identity and organizational identity, and consumer-organization relationships serve as the affectional foundational for consumers' subsequent engagement in purchasing behaviors (Keh & Xie, 2009). According to social identity theory, consumers are demanding more out of organizations than simply expecting qualified products to satisfy more important self-definitional needs (Marin & Ruiz, 2007). This is especially the case for young consumers who are socially conscious and express their identity by identifying with cause-related business initiatives (Achieve, 2017). Therefore, by engaging in socially meaningful and responsible initiatives that aligned with values endorsed by young consumers, CEO activism can increase the attractiveness of the organizational identity and thus, the CEO's organization become a target for identification (Elbedweihy et al., 2016). As consumers' identification process deepens, they develop deeper emotional commitment and attachment to the CEO's organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), therefore allowing purchase intention to be affected in some way (Wu & Tsai, 2007).

Contrary to our expectation, perceived authenticity of CEO activism did not demonstrate a unique significant contribution to consumers' identification with the CEO's organization. This discrepancy may be explained by the fact that organizational identification is more likely to be driven by inward assessment of shared values with CEO activism rather than by outward assessment of perceived genuineness and originality of CEO activism.

Implications of the Findings

This study offers several, distinct theoretical contributions. First, this study advances leadership communication scholarship by illustrating the benefits of authenticity and values alignment in shaping perceptions about the organization and subsequent supportive behaviors from consumers. This study empirically shows that CEO activism is a relevant, influential aspect of leadership communication in serving as a bridge between organizations and stakeholders. From a relationship management perspective, this study extends previous literature regarding the positive predictors and antecedents that lead to quality consumer-organization relationships, especially from the lens of young consumers. Practically, this study first provided strategic value to CEOs and their organizations alike. In today's interconnected, globalized environment, leaders must increasingly consider their various styles and approaches in how they address social issues on behalf of their organizations. Consumers need to feel that they are aligned with the value of the CEO and their organization and that the activism efforts of CEOs are enacted from a place of authenticity. Specifically, a CEO should have a record of consistent behavior and sincere initiative when cultivating a relationship with consumers. In addition, organizations and CEOs

should also take proactive measures to understand their key stakeholders and target audiences regarding the social values and beliefs they advocate and be cautious when deciding to engage in certain activism behaviors that may be controversial.

   This study has several limitations for consideration in future research. First, this study conducted a cross-sectional survey to test the theory-based priori model, which limits its ability to provide causality conclusions. Future research may consider using experimental or longitudinal method to investigate the causality between perceptions of CEO activism and consumer outcomes. Also, this study focused solely on young consumers in the United States. Individuals in Eastern cultures may be less sensitive to controversial social issues (Farooq et al., 2019) and therefore, future studies could expand on this research to explore the potential cultural differences.

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What Makes People Support You:
New Approaches to The Conceptualization and Measurement of Social Legitimacy

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Abstract
The concept of legitimacy has long captured the attention of many researchers across disciplines, being deemed a reservoir of public support (Deephouse et al., 2017). However, an extensive literature review revealed it is challenging to say that legitimacy is both theoretically and conceptually robust, particularly with regard to its conceptualization and measurement. The current research proposes a new conceptual framework and measurement tool for social legitimacy to fill the gap. Based upon a systematic review of legitimacy literature across disciplines, the current study proposes a new conceptualization of social legitimacy, consisting of three components of system conformity, behavior desirability, and value proximity. Then, following Mackenzie et al.'s (2011) guide, a four-step scale development procedure was carried out, including item generation and content validation, model specification, scale purification, and scale validation, resulting in a 24-item scale for social legitimacy. This study contributes to understanding the role of social legitimacy essential for securing public support, one of the ultimate goals of public relations, and provides a basis for organizations to examine their legitimacy base accurately.

Keywords: social legitimacy, public support, theory building, scale development

What Makes People Support You:
New Approaches to The Conceptualization and Measurement of Social Legitimacy

Legitimacy has long been believed to be a deep well of public support and a competitive advantage for an organization (Deephouse et al., 2017; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). The concept of legitimacy has emerged since the time of the sophists of Greece concerning the foundations of political authority and state (Zelditch, 2001), but the need for securing legitimacy is no longer limited to the political sphere. For example, the confusion brought by the public health measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic has raised questions about the legitimacy of not only governments but also public health organizations and the pharmaceutical industry (UN News, 2020). The Artificial Intelligent (AI) industry also faces legitimacy challenges due to concerns about mass unemployment, privacy issues, and national security (Gagliani, 2018), which is an example of new technology or venture's legitimacy seeking effort (Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002). More recently, the case of Robinhood's GameStop sandal showed us how easily an organization lost its legitimacy when deviating from social expectations from (Moore, 2021). The cases illustrated above show that the question of legitimacy may arise in various contexts of public relations, as a criterion for social judgment, especially when dealing with complex sociopolitical issues linked to the nature of an organization.

Despite its long history of popularity across the fields, the knowledge of legitimacy still has several problems to be addressed (Alexiou & Wiggins, 2019; Suddaby et al., 2017). One is the problem arising from the terminological confusion in the extant literature. Bitektine (2011) found 18 different legitimacy types in organizational research and related disciplines. Díez-de-Castro et al. (2018) identified 37 types, thus calling the current complexity a *"legitimacy jungle"* (p. 3). Furthermore, compared to the vast amount of conceptual discussion, far less effort has been made to develop a reliable and valid measure of legitimacy. Across disciplines, by far, only five studies (Alexiou & Wiggins, 2019; Bitektine et al., 2020; Chung et al., 2016; Randrianasolo & Arnold, 2020; Tankebe et al., 2016) attempted to develop a measure of legitimacy as individual perception through a formal scale development procedure.

Thus, the current research aims to fill the gaps in a theoretical system of legitimacy and to provide a solid conceptual framework that can be applied to public relations research. To that end, this research started with a systematic review of legitimacy literature across disciplines, such as political science, social psychology, management, and public relations. Then, the scale development procedure was carried out following the rigorous scale development guidelines proposed by Mackenzie et al. (2011). The two-wave data collection method was used to evaluate and validate the refined social legitimacy scale. Given that social legitimacy is specified as a reflective first-order/formative second-order construct in this study, the confirmatory factor analysis was carried out using a PLS-SEM path modeling. The results demonstrate the 24-item social legitimacy scale to have strong construct validity. The findings suggest that, with a proposed conceptualization and measure of social legitimacy, public relations scholars and practitioners will be able to advance their knowledge of social legitimacy by examining which areas of systems, behaviors, and values are weak or strong.

Literature Review

Confusions in the Current Legitimacy Conceptualization

Through a careful review of the legitimacy conceptualization, we found that the current confusion is largely due to the scattered typologies thus identified the following three common typology bases: (a) who/what is being under the legitimacy judgment? (i.e., *object of legitimacy evaluation*); (b) who is the evaluating actor(s) of legitimacy judgment? (i.e., *subject of legitimacy*

evaluation); and (c) what criterion is being used for legitimacy judgment? (i.e., *evaluation criteria*). Each typology base refers to a different aspect of legitimacy judgment. To avoid confusion in conceptualizing legitimacy, it is important to recognize these typology bases separately and use them in the right place.

A more serious problem in the current knowledge of legitimacy lies in the inconsistency of dimensions interlocked with the fundamental understanding of the legitimacy construct. Two of the most widely accepted conceptualizations are those of Scott (1995) and Suchman (1995). Both proposed a three-dimensional typology based on evaluation criteria, such as regulative, normative, and cognitive legitimacy (Scott, 1995) and cognitive, moral, and pragmatic legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). Researchers later have modified, merged, or partially adopted these typologies and produced various definitions of legitimacy. For instance, *pragmatic legitimacy* is often equated with *institutional legitimacy* (Huy et al., 2014; Tost, 2011), and *normative legitimacy* is often seen as overlapping with *moral legitimacy* (Chung et al., 2016; Koppell, 2008). Some propose an additional typology reflecting a new emerging social norm (i.e., evaluation criterion), such as *relational legitimacy* (Huy et al., 2014) or *environmental legitimacy* (Vergne, 2011).

The current evaluation criteria-driven conceptualization approaches have limitations that make the concept of legitimacy depend on the context of the times and circumstances. Suddaby et al. (2017, p.451) contend that legitimacy has been conjunct with "so many theoretical and empirical contexts" and thus been layered with "considerable surplus meaning that has allowed it to be used, and misused, in many ways." To secure the construct clarity, although the evaluation of organizational legitimacy may vary according to time and place, the defining framework must be free from the context so that it can be universally applied to other times, places, and organizations. In the next section, a new conceptualization is proposed to address this issue.

Reconceptualization of Social Legitimacy

A central idea of the legitimacy concept is that it is a product of individuals' perception, i.e., the evaluation of an object. In that respect, legitimacy is defined simply as a socially constructed judgment (Zelditch, 2001) or a generalized perception of a social entity (Suchman, 1995). The problem with the existing conceptualization of legitimacy is that the different typology bases are used indiscriminately without distinction. To provide a good definition (see Suddaby, 2010), we begin by drawing a clear line between the *perceptual facets of an object* (Ruef & Scott, 1995) and the *evaluative criteria for legitimacy judgment* (Díez-Martín et al., 2013).

Among previously used terms, actional legitimacy (Boyd, 2000), legitimacy of the claim and claimant (Kelman, 2001), or issue legitimacy (Chung et al., 2016) refers to a specific aspect of an object. Santana (2012) distinguished the aspects of legitimacy as the *legitimacy of an entity, legitimacy of behavior, and legitimacy of a claim*. Each dimension indicates observable aspects of an object or event. Santana's (2012) analytic frame sheds light on the area neglected in current legitimacy conceptualization, that is, how individuals recognize the legitimacy object. According to Santana's framework, actional legitimacy can be considered as the legitimacy of the behavior, while issue legitimacy is close to the legitimacy of the claim. In this paper, we propose three perceptual facets of an entity as *system, behavior, and value* (see Figure 1), modified from Santana's (2012) framework.

Criteria-based typology is the most common approach used to conceptualize justification, but typologies based on this approach do not provide a clear and parsimonious guide for legitimacy construct. For example, normative legitimacy (Scott, 2001) is sometimes tied to

organizational systems or behavior. Some scholars have used cognitive legitimacy (Alexiou & Wiggins, 2019; Bitektine et al., 2020; Randrianasolo & Arnold, 2020), but it further obscures the distinction between existing types and causes confusion. We distilled the existing criteria and came up with the most universal and clear ones to distinguish the evaluative criteria from the facet of an object. As a result, the following three criteria were identified: *conformity, desirability, and proximity.*
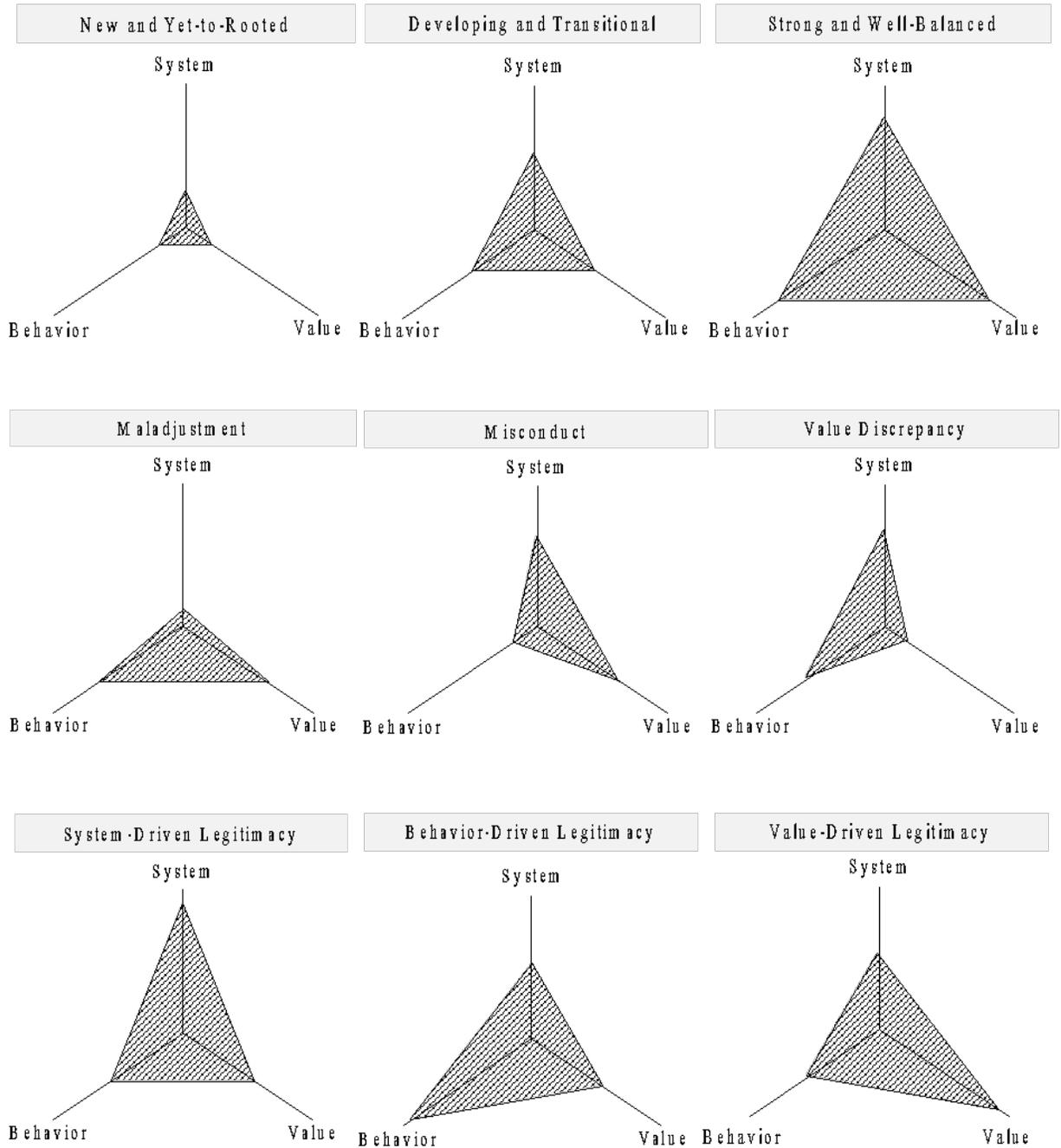
Figure 1. Social Legitimacy as a Multifaceted Evaluation and Possible Scenarios

Given that it seems natural that a particular criterion often acts more on a specific aspect of an object, by juxtaposing these two aspects (*perceptual facets* and *evaluative criteria*) of legitimacy judgment, we propose a conceptual structure of social legitimacy. In short, this study defines social legitimacy as the stakeholders' multifaceted evaluation of the degree to which an organization meets social expectations, consisting of evaluations of the organizational system (i.e., *system conformity*), behavior (i.e., *behavior desirability*), and value (i.e., *value proximity*). It is important to note that these three criteria are not discrete nor mutually exclusive; rather, one of them may play a more dominant role in the process of social legitimacy judgment. Figure 1 also demonstrates different scenarios of social legitimacy depending on the organizational maturity, legitimacy crisis, and legitimacy strategy.

Scale Development and Validation

The scale development process of this research involves a series of steps as follows: item generation, content validation, model specification, scale evaluation and purification via EFA, and scale validation via CFA.

Item Generation

To construct a pool of items that capture all essential aspects of the conceptual domain of social legitimacy (DeVellis, 2017; Netemeyer et al., 2003), both deductive and inductive approaches were incorporated. First, a pool of items was generated from the existing scales and measures. This first phase resulted in a pool of 74 items. Then, nine graduate students attending two universities in the Midwest of the United States were invited to further item creation process. After reading the given definitions, the students were asked to write as many items as possible representing each dimension of the legitimacy construct on a separate sheet. Through this process, 141 statements were generated. Unnecessary items were eliminated following Shimp and Sharma's (1987) criteria. As a result, 102 items were retained, resulting in a total of 176 items, including items compiled from pre-existing measures.

Content Validation

The remaining items were subject to two sorting tasks. First, another group of five doctoral students familiar with the scale development process was invited. The students were provided with the definitions of multifaceted legitimacy and were asked to conduct a sorting task. Through the item removing process, a total of 72 items remained. In the second sorting task, a panel of experts, selected for their familiarity and knowledge of legitimacy or scale development, were invited. Eight experts from different fields, such as public relations, organizational studies, business, and sociology, voluntarily responded to the request. The experts were asked to rate each item, using a 7-point scale, on its relevance and importance in relation to each dimension. They were also encouraged to provide any feedback for improvements, such as clarity, conciseness, grammar, reading, level, redundancy, and the suggestion of new items. The purification procedure resulted in a final list of 37 items.

Model Specification

While many social science studies have developed numerous measurement indicators as reflective models, the necessity or possibility of formative models was not actively considered (Jarvis et al., 2003). As misspecification of measurement models increases the potential for biased estimates of structural parameters (Podsakoff et al., 2003), distinguishing between formative and reflective measurement models is a vital preliminary step in the scale development process (MacKenzie et al., 2011). A reflective measurement model assumes that the indicators of a construct are caused by that construct. In contrast, a formative measurement model assumes the measured variables are considered to cause the latent variable. As evidenced by its definition, the

three components of legitimacy are defining the characteristics of social legitimacy, not caused by social legitimacy. Each component may be combined with the others in different ways to create a meaning for the construct. Social legitimacy is deemed aggregate in form, and its dimensions are formative. We, therefore, propose that legitimacy can be best captured by a reflective first-order and formative second-order measurement model—the Type II model according to Jarvis et al.'s (2003) classification of reflex and formative models.

Scale Evaluation and Purification

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and Cronbach's alpha reliability test were conducted to evaluate the construct's dimensionality and purify the scale (MacKenzie et al., 2011). An online survey was administered to a convenience sample of US residents via *Prolific*. Participants were randomly assigned to a screen with the logo of one of two organizations, Police and Facebook. These organizations were chosen because they represent the public and private spheres, respectively, and are familiar to the public. Following the logo, a brief description of the focal organization's well-known legitimacy crisis was presented at a similar length, followed by an attention check question asking to correctly identify the type of crisis described in the vignette. Then, participants were asked to evaluate each item for the focal organization, using a seven-point Likert scale with endpoints strongly disagree/strongly agree. Finally, demographic information was gathered, such as age, gender, education, and political disposition.

Out of 460 initial responses, 41 responses were dropped due to the attention check failure. Thus, the final sample comprised 419 responses. 55.8% of the respondents were female, with 43.7% of male and 5% of others. The distribution of the sample by age group was as follows: 16.9% of 18-24 years, 33.4% of 25-34 years, 24.6% of 35-44 years, 12.9% of 45-54 years, 7.9% of 55-64 years, and 4.3% of 65 years and older. Most of the respondents were White (74%), followed by 11.2% of Black or African American, 9.5% of Asian, 0.2% of American Indian or Alaska Native, and 5% of Other. As for political disposition, 20% of the respondents identified as Republicans, 49.6% as Democrats, and 30.4% as Independents.

To establish the dimensionality of the data, all items were subjected to EFA using SPSS. First, all 37 items correlated at least 0.3 with a least one other item, suggesting reasonable factorability. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.98, above the commonly recommended value of 0.6, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant (χ^2 (666) = 18142.28, $p < .001$). The communalities were mostly above 0.6, confirming that each item shared some common variance with other items. One value proximity item was removed due to low communality being 0.47. Given these overall indicators, factor analysis was deemed appropriate for the remaining 36 items. Initial eigenvalues indicated that the first three factors explained 64.59%, 5.92%, and 3.12% of the variance, respectively, which explained 73.63% of the variance in total. When the factors were allowed to emerge freely, with eigenvalues were greater than 1.0, the results did not support the expected dimensionality. The dimensionality of legitimacy proposed in this research is derived from a solid theoretical discussion across disciplines, so we conducted EFA by fixing the number of factors to three. When the number of factors was fixed at 3, the extracted factors corresponded well to the dimensions derived from the conceptual discussion. Table 1 shows the results of EFA. Principal components analysis was used along with the varimax rotation solution. A total of 13 items were eliminated because they did not contribute to a simple factor structure and failed to meet several criteria. Items that showed high cross-loadings across multiple dimensions were removed.

Table 1. EFA Results

Item	Statements [The Organization…]	Mean	SD	Factor loading
System Conformity (α = .933)				
SC1	follows normative rules of society.	4.09	1.56	.715
SC2	abides by government laws.	4.28	1.51	.760
SC3	follows government regulations.	4.33	1.48	.732
SC4	(its) internal rules and principles do not conflict with the law.	4.08	1.54	.671
SC5	adheres to the established international principles and	4.05	1.50	.733
SC6	conventions	4.49	1.40	.710
SC7	(its) governance is aligned with social standards.	4.13	1.62	.698
SC8	tries to adapt to changes in the external environment. (its) management system reflects normative expectations of society.	4.18	1.54	.766
Behavior Desirability (α = .973)				
BD1	does not do anything that may harm the public.	3.14	1.72	.722
BD2	behaves in a transparent manner.	3.60	1.80	.621
BD3	behaves in morally right.	3.71	1.72	.628
BD4	has good moral and ethical standards that support the public	3.70	1.78	.613
BD5	good.	3.83	1.81	.660
BD6	behaves responsibly.	3.59	1.78	.682
BD7	treats people fairly.	3.46	1.72	.757
BD8	treats everyone with dignity. respects people's rights in achieving its goals.	3.70	1.75	.605
Value Proximity (α = .972)				
VP1	pays attention to the values that are important to me.	3.37	1.76	.760
VP2	and I share the same beliefs in many areas.	3.33	1.78	.738
VP3	upholds the values that are important to me.	3.55	1.81	.721
VP4	cares about people like me.	3.57	1.78	.831
VP5	puts the interests of people like me first.	3.45	1.76	.845
VP6	strives to further the interests of my community.	3.76	1.73	.748
VP7	(its) ideas benefit people like me practically.	3.83	1.73	.856
VP8	tries to act in the best interest of those affected by its actions. -	3.85	1.75	.654

Scale Validation

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to examine the reliability and validity of the measurement model. Another online survey was administered to 900 participants among US adults, but this time via Amazon MTurk to diversify a pool of panel population. Considering that the three-factor structure was extracted only in the police condition, we kept using the same vignette for Police while developing a new one for the private sector, Robinhood. Through the data screening procedure, 36 responses were removed, resulting in a final sample of 830 respondents. Respondents exhibited an even gender split of 49.0% male, 49.2% female, and 1.8% other. The age distribution of the respondents was similar to that of the first survey. Meanwhile, ethnicity showed a highly white-centered distribution with 77.6% White, 12.0%, Black or African American, 0.8% American Indian or Alaska Native, 5.9% Asian, 0.2% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 3.4% Other. For the political disposition, 17.0% of the respondents identified as Republicans, 52.8% as Democrats, and 30.2% as Independents. The statistical software SmartPLS 3 was used for PLS-SEM analysis. A two-step approach was used to test a reflective first-order/formative second-order model.

First-order Reflective Measurement Model Evaluation. Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to ensure the high loadings on the postulated factors and low cross-loadings. The three first-order reflective factors showed strong loading across all items, ranging from 0.66 to 0.96. Table 2 reports the means and standard deviations of each item, along with first-order factor loading via CFA, and the significance of the loadings and other indices. Discriminant validity was assessed by comparing the square root of AVEs with the correlations among the factors. The three first-order reflective factors exhibited convincing evidence of convergent validity with strong and significant factor loadings ($p < .001$). AVEs were greater than 0.50 (Fornell & Larker, 1981), ranging from 0.69 to 0.82, and composite reliabilities ranged from 0.95 to 0.97 (Hair et al., 2017). Some values of the square root of AVEs were greater than the correlation values of the factors concerned (Fornell & Larker, 1981). As an additional measure for discriminant validity, the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) was examined. The HTMT values of this study were less than 1, indicating the discriminant validity has been established.

Second-order Formative Measurement Model Evaluation. To assess the higher order of formative measure, the 3-step assessment procedure was adopted (Hair et al., 2017). First, the convergent validity was assessed via redundancy analysis. Alexious & Wiggins's (2019) 12-items legitimacy measure was used. Ideally, the path coefficients should be above 0.80, which translates into an R^2 value of 0.64 (Hair et al., 2017). The path weight was 0.93 (R^2 of 0.85), confirming convergent validity. Second, the formative measurement model was assessed for collinearity issues (Henseler et al., 2015). Unlike reflective indicators, formative models do not necessarily correlate. In this model, the formative factors were highly correlated (0.85-0.93); therefore, further collinearity issues were assessed using the repeated indicator approach. All VIFs were between 3.68-6.39, indicating that the correlations between the formative factors were not problematic. The final step involves the examination of the significance and relevance of the formative constructs (Hair et al., 2017). For formative research, outer weights are evaluated to examine the indicators' relative contribution to the construct. Bootstrapping procedures are used to determine the significance of the weights (Hair et al., 2017). Factor weights ranged from 0.17 to 0.68 ($p < 0.01$). Outer loadings ranged from 0.89 to 0.99 and were all significant ($p < 0.001$).

In order to specify the structural model, firstly, latent variable scores for the three reflective dimensions were generated and used to serve as manifest variables in the higher-order measurement model. For the reflective constructs (acceptance and support), all factor loadings were above acceptable levels (ranging from 0.74 to 0.94) and significant. Legitimacy was evaluated by its formative weights, which were ranged from 0.11 to 0.70 (outer loadings ranged from 0.89 to 0.99 and were significant. In addition, the test for discriminant validity between the three constructs was conducted via HTMT, and no violations were evident (HTMT.$_{57}$; below .85). PLS was used to evaluate the structural (inner) model. The results of bootstrap sampling revealed that all paths were significant ($p < .001$) and in the direction as expected. Predictive accuracy was evident with legitimacy and other constructs (i.e., acceptance and cooperation), with strong R^2 values of 0.74 and 0.37, respectively. Therefore, nomological validity was well demonstrated in the manner in which it is intended, which indicates that the legitimacy measurement model can be put forward for further empirical testing.

Table 2. First-Order Reflective Indicators Factor Loadings via CFA

Item	Statements: [The Organization]...	Mean	SD	Loading	*t*	VIF
System Conformity (*α* = .945)						
SC1	Follows normative rules of society.	3.67	1.71	0.87	55.4	3.81
SC2	Abides by government laws.	3.98	1.73	0.83	49.6	4.08
SC3	Follows government regulations	3.95	1.74	0.83	50.9	4.39
SC4	(Its) internal rules and principles do not conflict with the law.	3.63	1.72	0.80	40.6	2.69
SC5	Adheres to established international principles and conventions.	3.67	1.70	0.87	55.2	3.33
SC6	(Its) governance is aligned with social standards.	3.59	1.76	0.92	66.0	3.44
SC7	Tries to adapt to changes in the external environment.	4.47	1.59	0.66	26.1	1.76
SC8	(Its) management system reflects normative expectations of society.	3.82	1.71	0.84	47.1	3.29
Behavior Desirability (*α* = .974)						
BD1	Does not do anything that may harm the public.	2.86	1.66	0.83	54.1	3.49
BD2	Behaves in a transparent manner.	3.13	1.80	0.87	69.1	4.01
BD3	Behaves in morally right.	3.25	1.77	0.94	131.6	6.45
BD4	Has good moral and ethical standards that support the public good.	3.31	1.83	0.95	126.7	6.32
BD5	Behaves responsibly.	3.37	1.79	0.95	135.3	6.47
BD6	Treats people fairly.	3.19	1.76	0.91	105.0	6.01
BD7	Treats everyone with dignity.	3.15	1.75	0.87	70.5	5.04
BD8	Respects people's rights in achieving its goals.	3.30	1.83	0.93	111.0	5.81
Value Proximity (*α* = .964)						
VP1	Pays attention to the values that are important to me.	3.22	1.82	0.93	98.3	6.50
VP2	And I share the same beliefs in many areas.	3.25	1.79	0.90	71.0	5.20
VP3	Upholds the values that are important to me.	3.32	1.85	0.95	120.4	6.90
VP4	Cares about people like me.	3.34	1.86	0.87	60.0	5.70
VP5	Puts the interests of people like me first.	3.23	1.85	0.85	53.8	5.31
VP6	Strives to further the interests of my community.	3.49	1.84	0.90	78.8	4.75
VP7	(Its) ideas benefit people like me practically.	3.57	1.84	0.85	59.3	4.25
VP8	Tries to act in the best interest of those affected by its actions.	3.52	1.86	0.77	33.3	2.05

All values are significant at *p* < .001.
Model Fit Indices: SRMR = 0.02 (cut-off: < 0.05 or <0.08), NFI = 0.94 (cut-off: > .90).

Discussion

In view of the criteria for theory evaluation (Bacharach, 1989), the current legitimacy research deems to have a lack of discussion on its variable scope, which interferes with the applicability of a theoretical system. To fill the gap, this research dismantled the existing knowledge of legitimacy and proposed a new framework of social legitimacy composed of three components: system conformity, behavior desirability, and value proximity. Also, following a guideline for rigorous scale development (Mackenzie et al., 2011), the authors developed a 24-item scale for a first-order reflective, second-order formative construct of social legitimacy.

It is worth noting that in both the EFA and CFA datasets, the three factors only well appeared in Police. In Facebook (Study 1) and Robinhood (Study 2), value proximity and behavior desirability were grouped into one factor, apart from the system conformity. These results imply two possibilities. First, the developed scale might be more suitable for the public

sector than the private sector. As conceptualized, if social legitimacy can appear in various combinations depending on the type and degree of the three components, it can be argued that the basis of social legitimacy may show different trends depending on the public and private domains. The other possibility is that social legitimacy may be classified into two dimensions, institutional and strategic, consistent with Suchman's (1995) two aspects of legitimacy. Private companies tend to be flexible to change their core values within a relatively short period to meet external stakeholders' expectations (Deegan, 2002). In this sense, organizational value could be recognized as a strategic dimension along with the behavioral aspect.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

From a conceptual point of view, this study embodied the concept of legitimacy as a multifaceted evaluation of organizations, breaking away from the existing tradition that focused on the evaluation criteria. With its multiple components, the new measure allows for a rich understanding of the mechanisms of social legitimacy judgment. One may argue that value proximity is just another name of pragmatic legitimacy. Value proximity has similarities with pragmatic (Alexiou & Wiggins, 2019; Suchman, 1995) or relational legitimacy (Huy et al., 2014; Tost, 2011) observed in the existing literature. It also encompasses the practical benefits provided by the organization. However, the operational definition of value proximity is different from that of pragmatic or relational legitimacy in that it (a) puts more focus on the shared values in addition to the beneficial relationships, and (b) posits dyadic relationships between an organization and evaluators.

In addition, the insights of this paper provide valuable implications for practitioners looking to (a) systematically understand a legitimacy base of an organization, (b) investigate multiple stakeholders' expectations of organizational legitimacy, and (c) derive legitimacy management strategies through identifying the areas of improvement. As illustrated in Figure 1, a key factor among the three components of social legitimacy (system conformity, behavior desirability, and value proximity) may vary across time, space, and industry. That is, legitimacy is not a fixed character, nor is it monolithic but multifaceted. Using the definitions of each component, practitioners can easily map out an organization's legitimacy matrix, further clarify goals for legitimacy building, and establish a plan to track progress. Furthermore, practitioners can accurately diagnose the cause of a legitimacy crisis when it occurs.

Last but not least, both researchers and practitioners can use the proposed measurement tool as a framework for multi-stakeholder analysis. Public relations presupposes the relationships between the organization and multiple stakeholders, but the approach to measuring and diagnosing the factors that affect these various relationships from the organizational point of view needs further development. When multiple stakeholders have opposing positions in the organization, especially in case of conflict or crisis management, it is important to analyze the characteristics of each relationship and its expected impact. The proposed framework and scale allow diagnosing each stakeholder's current perception of the organization by analyzing multifaceted aspects of social legitimacy. By doing so, it is possible to identify which stakeholders are more likely to support you.

Limitations and Future Research

When interpreting the results of this study, it should be noted that there is a potential for sample bias with respect to the collected datasets. While gender was relatively evenly distributed in all samples, Whites were overrepresented (74% of Study 1, 77.6% of Study 2), and Republicans were underrepresented (20% of Study 1, 17% of Study 2). Considering that the contexts presented in the surveys are situations where there can be significant differences of

opinion across groups, depending on ethnicity or political orientation, the possibility of having a systematic error in the statistics of this study should not be overlooked. Quota sampling can be one solution to be considered in further studies to avoid this sampling bias and provide more representative results. Another approach may involve taking into account individual characteristics (e.g., ethnicity or political disposition) in analysis.

Second, in order to properly understand the relational aspect of legitimacy perception, it is necessary to conduct a study on the stakeholders who have formed a specific type of relationship with the organization. Future research can consider focusing on or comparing employees, customers, investors, or regulators for the social legitimacy judgment of an organization. On the other hand, in the case of a government or public institution, the beneficiaries of a policy or various stakeholders with different views can be considered.

Third, examination across different scenarios of legitimacy crisis (e.g., maladjustment, misconduct, and value discrepancy; see Figure 4) and different stages of organizations (e.g., new venture versus industry leader; see Figure 3) will all assist in extensively validating the scale from many different perspectives. These questions could be better investigated through experimental studies. Polynomial analysis of three dimensions of social legitimacy may also advance our knowledge by examining how these three aspects of social legitimacy interplay together or separately.

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Having the Courage to Be Disliked: Exploring Communication Strategies to Enhance Authenticity in Corporate Social Advocacy

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Abstract
This study investigates corporate social advocacy (CSA) communication strategies that increase authenticity and decrease hypocrisy in an organization's behavior perceived by individuals. This study explored individuals' thoughts about CSA motives by conducting a survey using a combination of open- and close-ended questions. Based on the results of the survey, this study further developed news-release-like stimuli and an experimental study design to examine a 2 x 2 experimental survey—which manipulated (a) whether or not transparently articulating CSA motives that people may suspect and (b) CSA issue fit. The partially significant results indicated what message elements CSA messages need to include to strengthen authenticity and mitigate hypocrisy. Also, this study suggested revised study designs for future research to develop communication strategies with respect to whether and how to plan and implement corporate advocacy initiatives.

Keywords: Authenticity, hypocrisy, transparency, issue fit, motives, corporate social advocacy

Having the Courage to Be Disliked: Exploring Communication Strategies to Enhance Authenticity in Corporate Social Advocacy

"They are public relations efforts." This is the most striking answer to one of the questions—why would you say that corporate social advocacy (CSA) is not authentic?—in the first study of this study to understand people's thoughts about authenticity in CSA by asking about the motives of companies that take a stance on a sociopolitical issue. When Delta Air Lines Inc. and the Coca-Cola Co. pushed back against Georgia's new voting law in March 2021, many people expressed strong suspicion about their supposed motives for promoting voting rights and democratic values. They criticized the companies as "mercenaries oriented toward their own bottom lines" (Olen, 2021). As consumer skepticism toward company advocacy grows, should public relations professionals keep paying attention to CSA?

The answer is yes. First, a company should not ignore the potential financial gains from taking a stance on a controversial issue. In fact, Nike's controversial campaign helped boost its online sales 31% during the 2018 Labor Day weekend, compared with the previous year (Martinez, 2018). CSA research has also suggested significant associations between taking a stand on a controversial issue and potential financial gains (e.g., Browning et al., 2020; Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015; Hong & Li, 2020; Hydock et al., 2020). Second, despite consumers' increasing criticism and skepticism regarding CSA, their expectations of a business's role in society have only continued to grow. According to the annual reports of Edelman (2019) and USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations (2021), not only stakeholders but also public relations professionals anticipate a greater increase in developing purpose-driven communication campaigns or taking a public position on sociopolitical issues.

Third, and more importantly, despite potential misunderstandings or difficulties, many companies still continue to perform corporate advocacy by taking a prominent stand on current sociopolitical issues (Beard, 2021). In this sense, the next question for this study will be how advocacy strategies can help companies' advocacy programs perceived as more authentic and less hypocritic, instead of reinforcing individuals' perceptions of companies' CSA behaviors as a way of supporting its bottom line.

Enhancing authenticity is critical in the impact of CSA communication. As an organization's voluntary prosocial action, its stand-taking on a controversial issue needs to be understood as 'doing what it believes is right' for bettering society, thereby in turn being considered 'doing good' to publics. Based on the understanding of CSA definitions and its attributes in the public relations literature (e.g., Browning et al., 2020; Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015; Yim, 2021), an organization inevitably deals with risks caused by speaking out on a controversial issue when engaging in CSA. Thus, unlike traditional corporate social responsibility initiatives—namely, doing well by doing good—, the 'doing-well' part is not supposed to be guaranteed by a 'doing-right' CSA campaign. On the other hand, an organization may be able to strengthen its reputational and financial outcomes by advocating a particular issue stance more closely aligned with some stakeholders. However, it should be noted that such CSA consequences could likely hurt an organization's true motives for society.

In this sense, if it is necessary to emphasize a truthful intention of CSA, exploring and implementing CSA communication strategies that enhance authenticity matters to public relations researchers and professionals. If it is possible to know which advocacy message elements need to be more emphasized to increase authenticity and decrease hypocrisy, those advocacy strategies could provide practical insights to help develop communication management strategies for how to deal with risks and backlashes that occur, especially when some consumer

groups do not agree with the company's advocacy stance. To contribute to theoretical developments in transparency and authenticity and suggest practical implications in CSA communication management, this study explores how individuals understand CSA motives and investigates how messaging elements—transparency in CSA motives and issue fit—influences individuals' perceptions about authenticity and hypocrisy in an organization's behavior.

Literature Review

Authenticity in CSA

Authenticity has been emphasized in the public relations literature and industry as the enhancer for an organization's relational, reputational, and financial outcomes (Jiang & Luo, 2018; Lim & Young, 2021; Men & Stacks, 2014; Shen & Kim, 2012). To understand the concept of authenticity and examine its effects on organizational communication and relationship management, public relations scholars have put great effort into conceptualizing this multifaceted concept drawing on the multidisciplinary literature, including philosophy, psychology, public relations, marketing, and leadership management (e.g., Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Molleda, 2010; Shen & Kim, 2012).

Bowen (2010, p. 578) defined the concept of authenticity as "being the same on the inside as one appears to be outside an organization." Shen and Kim (2012) conceptualized an organization's authentic behavior addressing three constructs: *truthfulness* (i.e., acting in accordance with an organization's self), *transparency* (i.e., acknowledging both positive and negative outcomes of organizational behaviors), and consistency (i.e., aligning with its values and beliefs). Based on the understanding of the definitions, I identify authenticity in the public relations context: *self-awareness* and *consistency*. *Self-awareness* indicates that an organization should be aware of its true-self—namely, its values and beliefs that an entity stands for. *Consistency* refers to the extent to which an organization acts in accordance with its values or beliefs, regardless of the consequences of its behavior as the outcomes of its true-self-realization. It involves how closely organizational behaviors are related to values and how continuously an organization has been engaged in the behaviors.

It is necessary to more specifically conceptualize authenticity in the context of CSA. Given the definitions of CSA in public relations literature (e.g., Browning et al., 2020; Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015), CSA initiative focuses on particular values that is as important as an organization should speak out on a controversial issue despite taking risks caused by taking one side and alienating the other. In this sense, it is critical for an organization to know well about what an organization believes is right and necessary for society (Ciszek & Pounders, 2020). Such awareness of and actualization for a good purpose could be a key to enhance authenticity in CSA.

CSA Motives Perceived by Individuals

However, only having a truthful purpose for a social cause would not be sufficient to develop CSA communication strategies for authenticity in CSA communication context. Although an organization is firmly grounded on its values and belief for CSA, individuals' understanding of an organization's CSA motives are likely to vary. Drawing on the attribution theory, Kim et al. (2020) focused on four motives that led to positive and negative WOM intentions: egoistic-, strategic-, value-, and stakeholder-driven motives. As self-centered motives, egoistic-driven motives involve an organization's behavior merely for utilizing a stand-taking on a social issue, and strategic-driven motives are related to increasing a company's benefits from CSA. In contrast, value-driven and stakeholder-driven motives are regarded as other-centered. If an organization has a truly good intention for bettering society when implementing CSA, it is

likely to be considered a value-driven motive. The stakeholder-driven motives indicate a situation in which an organization engages in CSA due to pressure from consumers' demand on social participation. The results of Kim et al.'s (2020) study demonstrated that only value-driven motives were positively associated with positive WOM about an organization.

More interestingly, unlike findings about value-driven motives, Groza et al. (2011) addressed that individuals' perceptions about strategic-driven motives in CSR would affect positive attitudes toward a company because such intentions could attract more customers. Empirical studies about organizational advocacy have also suggested some associations between corporate social advocacy and profit potential—e.g., increase purchase intention (e.g., Browning et al., 2020; Dodd and Supa, 2014, 2015; Hong & Li, 2020) and brand choice (Hydock et al., 2020) from consumers whose stances were congruent with an organization's stance.

The definitions of CSA from multifaceted theoretical perspectives hint at major motives in CSA regarding controversial sociopolitical issues. CSA research from institutional/normative perspectives approaches organizational advocacy as exerting CSR to solve a sociopolitical problem (e.g., Eilert & Cherup, 2020; Rim et al., 2020; Yim, 2021). Looking through instrumental viewpoints, scholars point out that an organization does not deploy a direct link to its financial profit when implementing its action regarding a sociopolitical controversy (e.g., Hydock et al., 2019). Firms and CEOs have apparently stated that their social advocating actions are solely meant to support a particular value of a sociopolitical issue that they believe is important to step in (e.g., interview with Ben & Jerry; Beard, 2021).

However, publics' perceptions about ulterior motives for CSA may weaken an organization's commitment to doing good for society and community as a good citizen as consumers develop skeptical responses to or hypocritical perceptions about CSR motives (e.g., Alhouti et al., 2016; Wagner et al., 2009; Yoon et al., 2006). Although it is impossible to precisely discern and differentiate all of the motives that an organization would have actually considered for its CSA, it is critical to investigate individuals' perceptions about CSA motives to understand associations between those CSA perceptions and authenticity. Thus, this study proposes the following research question:

RQ1: How do individuals understand the motives of organizations' CSA behaviors?

Transparency in CSA Motives and Authenticity

In a situation in which an organization cannot avoid skepticism from consumers and simply ignore their increasing demand on corporate prosocial actions, an important question will be how to emphasize a truthful purpose for a social cause through CSA, which can enhance authenticity perceived by individuals.

Transparent communication regarding motives for a public stand-taking on a sociopolitical issue could be a way to promote its commitment to an organization's prosocial action and mitigate perceived hypocrisy of its behavior. A wide array of public relations studies has addressed the strength of transparency in corporate communication management (Rawlins, 2009) and demonstrated associations between transparency and authenticity (e.g., Jiang & Luo, 2017), as well as between transparency and relational outcomes, such as trust (e.g., Auger, 2014). According to Rawlins (2009), transparent communication satisfies stakeholders' information needs for helping them make accurate decisions by providing substantial information involves providing truthful, substantial, and useful information in an objective, balanced, and accountable manner.

In the CSA context, given the definition of transparent organizational communication, it appears necessary to inform stakeholders that an organization strives to advocate a particular

social value despite backlash or damages to its bottom line. In addition to clearly delivering such a sincere intention through a CSA program, it might be adequate to openly and proactively tell stakeholders a company expects to see some benefits from CSA initiatives. If stakeholders are informed of both positive and negative aspects regarding a company's CSA initiative, a transparent CSA message can possibly provide more chances for the company to add more confidence in its true CSA motives for bettering society and prevent any negative consequences, such as a boycott. Furthermore, if transparency can positively work in CSA messages, its impact would be likely to increase authenticity and decrease hypocrisy as previous studies demonstrated significant associations between transparency and authenticity. Thus, this study proposes the following research question:

> RQ2: How will openly articulating CSA motives (i.e., strategic-driven motives) influence
> individuals' perceptions about authenticity and hypocrisy in a company's behavior?

CSA Issue Fit and Authenticity

In this study, CSA issue fit refers to the degree in which a controversial sociopolitical issue that an organization advocates aligns with that organization's core values perceived by individuals. For example, consumers are likely to consider Nike's a Just-Do-It campaign supporting a former NFL player Kaepernick's protest against racial inequality to involve a high CSA issue fit because Nike's core values are engaged in manufacturing and supplying athletic shoes, apparel, sports equipment. On the other hand, if Nike takes a stance on the recent abortion ban issue, consumers are likely to evaluate its CSA as a relatively low CSA issue fit.

Perceived issue fit relies on how individuals understand a company's core business values and its identity. The alignment with core values could be considered high when an organization clearly show its core values, and individuals perceive its identity close to the values. In the context of authenticity, an organization's CSA holds a high issue fit only when an organization's CSA behavior is based on self-awareness and consistency.

Defining authentic stand-taking as being "characterized by high consistency and high congruence" (p. 6), Yim (2021) demonstrated associations between individuals' perceptions about authentic CSA and their willingness to recommend and purchase a company's products and post a positive message on social media to support the company's CSA. Lim and Young (2021) showed that high issue fit and authenticity were associated with a positive effect on issue-specific reputation. Wagner et al.'s (2009) study indicated that a company's message strategies regarding social responsibility actions influences the level of hypocrisy. Taken together, it would be possible that when an organization's CSA issue fit is more closely related to its core values, individuals evaluate the organization's authenticity as high and its hypocrisy as low. Thus, this study further proposes the following research question:

> RQ2: How will CSA issue fit into a company's business values influence individuals'
> perceptions about authenticity and hypocrisy in the company's behavior?

Method

This study explores CSA message elements—transparency in CSA motives and CSA issue fit—to increase authenticity and decrease hypocrisy about an organization' s behavior. First, to understand individuals' perceptions about authenticity in CSA (*RQ1*), this study conducted a survey study using close- and open-ended questions. Second, to examine associations between different CSA message elements and the levels of authenticity and hypocrisy (*RQ2 and 3*), the study manipulated whether the message transparently articulated possible benefits from its stand-taking (transparency in strategic-driven CSA motives vs.

emphasis on value-driven CSA motives) and whether a company involved in CSA closely related to its core business value (high fit vs. low fit).

Study 1

To answer the first research question, this study asked several questions about (a) participants' knowledge about companies' recent CSA initiatives regarding racial and gender equality, abortion ban, gun control, and voting rights issues, (b) their thought about CSA motives, and (c) why they think CSA motives are authentic or inauthentic. Questions are as follows: "which of the following do you feel informed enough that you can talk more about with your friend?," "would you agree with your friend's thought, by taking a stance, the companies are presenting their commitment to bettering society and community," "would you think companies have other more important motives than their commitment to engaging in society and community for such actions?," "what's your thought about the motives?," "would you think that such companies' actions are authentic?," "why would you say that such behaviors are authentic/inauthentic?" Data were collected from 49 participants through MTurk in February 2021.

Study 2

Through MTurk, this study recruited 210 participants older than 18 years old and live in the United States and offered $0.50 for completing the survey in January 2022.

To increases ecological validity, this study used a real-world company, Dick's Sporting Goods. The study chose two sociopolitical issues that had been actually used in recent CSA programs—gun control and abortion ban. Since the company is a sporting goods retailer offering an extensive assortment of sports items, including guns, this study chose a gun control issue as a high issue fit. As for a low CSA issue fit, the abortion ban issue was selected because this issue has been considered as important and polarizing as the gun control issue in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2018).

For the stimuli of a 2 x 2 experimental survey, I drafted four news-release-like messages regarding two issues and two transparency message elements (see Appendix). To examine the transparency manipulation, participants were asked questions using a seven-point semantic differential scale: "please mark your thoughts based on what you just read. The company is murky/transparent, not open/open, unclear/clear in revealing reasons for supporting gun control." For the issue fit manipulation, the survey asked "please indicate your agreement with the following: the company's support for gun control is directly related to its core business" under a seven-point Likert scale, from strongly disagree (coded 1) to strongly agree (coded 7).

Once participants agreed to IRB informed consent, they answered three-item, seven-point semantic differential scale measuring their pre-existing attitude toward a company ($\alpha = .83$, $M = 5.77$, $SD = 1.05$). The participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions (2 transparency message strategies x 2 issue fits). After reading a stimulus, they were asked to answer questions about authenticity and hypocrisy in a company's behavior under a seven-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. For authenticity measurement items, this study modified multidimensional measures developed by previous studies (Shen & Kim 2012) based on the authenticity literature (e.g., Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Seven items were measured as follow ($\alpha = .83$, $M = 5.63$, $SD = .79$): "the company always tells the truth," "the company's actions are genuine," "the intention of the company's behavior is real," "the company is willing to accept any negative consequences from what it does," "the company's behavior aligns with its core business values," "the company's beliefs and actions are consistent," "the company matches what it says with its action." For hypocrisy measures, Wagner et al.'s (2009) six items were used

(α = .93, *M* = 5.18, *SD* = 1.35): "Dick's Sporting Goods acts hypocritically," "what the company says and does are two different things," "the company pretends to be something that it is not," "the company doesn't exactly what it says," "the company keeps what it will do," "the company doesn't put its words into action."

Participants' existing thoughts on an issue and views about a company's stance on the issue were asked for control variables. At the end of the survey, respondents answered a single seven-point semantic differential item rating themselves on a scale of liberal (coded -3) to conservative (coded 3), which would be utilized as a control variable. The sample leaned slightly conservative (*M* = 0.51, *SD* = 1.67). Demographic information (age, race, gender, and education level) was also collected.

Results

The results of the study 1 indicated that only two participants out of 49 did not know any of CSA initiatives shown in the choices of the first question about their CSA knowledge. 41 participants answered companies' CSA commitments were to better society. Most participants are aware of companies' current advocacy activities and agree with the companies' commitment to bettering society. However, at the same time, 43 participants said that they thought there must have been other motives, getting more profit and attracting more consumers.

In terms of authenticity and inauthenticity perceptions, most of the participants (35 people) answered such corporate advocacy behaviors were authentic because they thought companies tried to help and support society (good will), and not many companies do such actions (leadership/pioneer) although they could likely lose some segments of customers (taking risk). For instance, the participants said "it [is] trying to support the community," "they are concerned for the lives of civilians and less casualties when shootings do break out," and "they want to help society in all ways possible."

The respondents also answered that the other motives (i.e., increasing profits and attracting more customers) would make such advocacy actions not authentic. For example, participants answered "they just want to appeal to a certain segment" and "they only care about profits. if it makes them lose profits then they will change their stance."

To analyze the data from study 2, data were analyzed using IBM SPSS, version 28. Four different conditions were as follows: transparency and high fit (*n* = 51; condition 1), no transparency and high fit (*n* = 53; condition 2), transparency and low fit (*n* = 54; condition 3), and no transparency and low fit (*n* = 52; condition 4). This study conducted univariate outliers of a total survey duration and a stimulus reading duration by calculating z-scores. There was no outlier in excess of |3.29| (p < 0.001, two-tailed test) in those variables (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). For manipulation checks, T-test analysis demonstrated significant differences among the CSA issue fit conditions, *t*(208)= 2.11 , *p* < .01 in the expected directions. However, the transparency condition manipulations were not significant based on the T-test analysis, *t*(208)= .43 , *p* = 06.

As a result, this study performed an independent samples T-test to examine how different issue fits are associated with the levels of authenticity and hypocrisy. A relationship between issue fit and authenticity was not statistically significant, *t*(208)= .11 , *p* = 06. Also, a relationship between issue fit and hypocrisy was not statistically significant, *t*(208)= -.25 , *p* = .33. To further check if there was a significant relationship between condition 1 (transparency and high fit; *n* = 51) and condition 4 (no transparency and low fit; *n* = 52), the result of the T-test was statistically significant, *t*(101)= .47 , *p* < .05.

Discussion

This study explored individuals' perceptions about companies' recent CSA initiatives, CSA motives, and why they thought the motives were authentic or inauthentic in the study 1. Based on the results of the study 1 about the understanding of CSA motives perceived by individuals, the study 2 conducted an experimental survey by developing news-release-like stimuli to manipulate four different CSA message elements (transparency in strategic-driven CSA motives and CSA issue fit) and a study design that tested perceived authenticity and hypocrisy.

The study 1 demonstrated that although approximately 81% of respondents agreed that organizational commitment to bettering society is a possible motive for a company, about 88% of respondents pointed out other motives that companies might conceive when taking a particular stance. Most of the participants' answers talked about making more profit for the company, and those were the main reasons why the participants thought CSA initiatives were not authentic. The findings suggest that self-centered CSA motives, especially *strategic-driven motives*, are the most closely related to individuals' perceptions about an organization's behavior. At the same time, the results from study 1 show that it appears difficult to say individuals do not admit an organization's truthful commitment to social participation through CSA. In fact, in existing CSA statements published by for-profit companies, most of the companies clearly state their stance on a social cause (e.g., gun control or voting rights) and reasons why the cause is important for society that made them to speak out (e.g., community safety or strengthen democratic values). Nonetheless, based on the results from study 1, delivering true value-driven motives regarding CSA would not have been sufficient to enhance perceived authenticity and lower inauthenticity or hypocrisy.

As a result, this study attempted to examine whether or not a CSA message could have an influence on the perception levels of authenticity and hypocrisy when it reveals strategic-driven motives—i.e., attracting more consumers, having competitiveness in the industry, and earning financial profits. Drawing on attribution theory and transparency theory in public relations, this study developed a study model to test whether an organization could increase authenticity and decrease hypocrisy with a CSA message opening articulating strategic-driven motives about its stand-taking on a high fit issue.

The initial study model was expected to be able to the interaction effects of two different message elements—transparency in CSA motives and issue fit. However, the data analysis for manipulation checks showed a significant difference only in the fit conditions—Dick's Sporting Goods' support for gun control (high fit) vs. reproductive health rights (low fit). The failure of a manipulation check in the transparency conditions suggests two important implications. First, stimuli need to be revised to clearly compare two different motives: strategic-driven and value-driven motives. Condition 1 and 3 in study 2 tried to include what the company expected to see as benefits from CSA not as much as dropping external validity. It is important to clearly state strategic-driven motives, but none of real-world companies would only emphasize such self-centered motives without value-driven motives. For those reasons, this study wrote strategic-driven motives with value-driven motives as such: "we expect that our commitment to supporting gun control can build much stronger relationships with some people who have the same position on the issue. It might be possible to appeal to more customers, increase our competitiveness in the industry, and even increase financial benefits. We strongly believe that we can help solve the problem by putting our consistent effort into gun control, such as stopping

selling assault-style rifles and imploring elected officials to enact gun reform and pass gun control regulations."

After this paragraph, stimuli provide more information about why the company takes a public stance to show its authentic motives. Such element might have made participants feel open, clear, and even transparent enough to see there was not a significant difference in the stimuli. Even though the T-test for the transparency condition manipulations was statistically insignificant, transparency conditions' ($M = 5.80$, $SD = .90$, $n = 105$ condition 1 and 3) mean and standard deviation values were higher than the other two conditions ($M = 5.74$, $SD = .92$, $n = 105$ condition 2 and 4). Thus, it will be necessary to revise stimuli and manipulation check questions for a future study.

Second, it is necessary to consider a real-world situation in which none of companies might not want to openly articulate strategic-driven motives in their CSA statements. Considering the findings of study 1, it seems important to tackle whether an organization necessarily tell motives that people might think as ulterior motives. If so, it is questionable about how to actually articulate such motives in a CSA statement. Recent studies about the consequences of taking a controversial position focused on the possibility of hostile situations, such as boycotts by key stakeholders with opposing positions and the spread of negative word-of-mouth reviews (e.g., Kim et al., 2020; Rim et al., 2020). Those approaches to the negative aspects of corporate advocacy cannot provide sufficient practical suggestions with respect to whether and how to advocate for a sociopolitical issue when planning and implementing advocacy as a communication management strategy. For this reason, this study attempted to examine the associations between different motives in CSA messages and authenticity and hypocrisy.

For future research, it is necessary to revise this current study's model and further investigate how differently consumers' evaluations of advocacy affect pro-company support and changes in prosocial behavior when a company openly communicates its risks of taking a public position on a polarized issue. Most existing advocacy statements focus on expressing a public position on a controversial sociopolitical issue and then providing additional points about why the company supports the values underpinning that issue. If a study can demonstrate that different CSA message strategies affect individuals' perception of authenticity/hypocrisy and trust/distrust and how those perceptions lead to their pro-company support, the finding of the study could suggest theoretical and practical implication in CSA communication.

Thus, the next study needs to examine associations between authentic advocacy strategies and behavioral outcomes, which can be applicable and actionable for professionals to develop communication strategies with respect to whether and how to plan and implement advocacy initiatives. Studies demonstrating significant relationships between different CSA message strategies and relational or reputational outcomes, mediated by authenticity, could suggest PR practical insights: which stakeholders will be most influenced by advocacy actions, how they will be influenced, to what degree, and with which social issue. Also, such results in future research would help professionals decide which message element should be emphasized over others to increase authenticity in advocacy messaging. Measuring perceived gaps between a company's and audiences' stances could help predict responses to advocacy messages. The results will be able to help professionals develop criteria for evaluating advocacy programs to strengthen a company's strategic choices and validate the values that the company believes it ought to promote and advance for societal improvement.

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Appendix

Stimuli Examples

DICK'S Statement on America's Abortion Ban Issue

As a leading sporting goods retailer offering an extensive assortment of sports items, we at DICK'S Sporting Goods believe that we should protect reproductive health rights by taking a public stance on supporting the pro-choice position.

What We Can Accomplish

Our company is built on the belief that doing what's right is ultimately what makes us successful. We believe in our responsibility to prevent social problems related to women's rights and health. Our commitment to supporting the pro-choice position can allow us to give something back to our society.

More importantly, we believe that we can help solve the problem by putting our consistent effort into support women's reproductive or maternal healthcare rights, such as sponsoring nonprofits for safe motherhood and family planning services and imploring elected officials to enact reproductive health reform.

Protect Reproductive Health Rights

We know that advocating the pro-choice position would lead to boycotts and viral videos of our products and make some customers on the other side of the contentious issue feel uncomfortable and even angry. Due to such potential negative impacts, other companies might be hesitant to decide to do something about it. However, we firmly believe that we should take proactive steps to protect individuals' rights and freedoms relating to reproductive health.

A Final Word

Now more than ever, people are looking to the business community for energy and action in solving socio-political issues. At DICK'S Sporting Goods, we constantly strive to do what we believe is right for bettering our society.

Condition 1 [Transparency in Strategic-Driven Motives and High Fit]

DICK'S Statement on America's Gun Control Issue

As a leading sporting goods retailer offering an extensive assortment of sports items, including guns, we at DICK'S Sporting Goods believe that we should keep our communities safe by taking a public stance on supporting gun control.

What We Can Accomplish

We expect that our commitment to supporting gun control can build much stronger relationships with some people who have the same position on the issue. It might be possible to appeal to more customers, increase our competitiveness in the industry, and even increase financial benefits.

We strongly believe that we can help solve the problem by putting our consistent effort into gun control, such as stopping selling assault-style rifles and imploring elected officials to enact gun reform and pass gun control regulations.

Protect Our Communities

We know that advocating gun control would lead to boycotts and viral videos of our products and make some customers on the other side of our gun control position feel uncomfortable and even angry. Due to such potential negative impacts, other companies might be hesitant to do something about gun control. However, we firmly believe that we should take proactive steps to protect our communities from gun violence.

A Final Word

Now more than ever, people are looking to the business community for energy and action in solving socio-political issues. At DICK'S Sporting Goods, we constantly strive to do what we believe is right for bettering our society.

Condition 4 [Emphasis on Value-Driven Motives and Low Fit]

Debunking Misinformation in Times of Crisis: Exploring Misinformation Corrective Strategies for Effective Internal Crisis Communication

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore misinformation corrective strategies for effective internal crisis communication. Using an experimental study (N = 1196) among full-time employees in the United States, this study found that corrective strategy using more elaborate facts was effective to protect internal reputation and that timely, proactive communication was a significant factor for employees' cognitive and behavioral outcomes to debunk crisis misinformation. This research can help crisis communicators better understand how to prevent negative outcomes that undermine the effectiveness of evidence-based communication efforts. Specifically, the findings suggest the use of more-proactive internal crisis communication to correct misinformation and prevent damage caused by employees' misconceptions and related communication behaviors. Furthermore, the study theoretically extends the debunking crisis-misinformation literature by elucidating the cognitive and behavioral processes of crisis misinformation in the internal crisis communication.

Keywords: internal crisis communication, misinformation corrective strategy, *stealing thunder*, employee counterarguing, and employee megaphoning

Debunking Misinformation in Times of Crisis: Exploring Misinformation Corrective Strategies for Effective Internal Crisis Communication

Misinformation is harmful or inaccurate information that is shared. It impedes intended information, may encourage unhealthy behaviors that endanger people, and threatens an organization's survival (Coombs et al., 2021). Misinformation becomes especially dangerous in times of organizational crisis, placing the organization in a situation that reduces the effectiveness of its crisis communication and resulting in incorrect beliefs that elicit detrimental impacts on organizational reputation and profit (Austin et al., 2021). Thus, scholars have focused on communication strategies for debunking misinformation to help crisis communicators understand how to prevent negative outcomes that undermine the effectiveness of evidence-based communication efforts (Boman & Schneider, 2021).

Such research has suggested adopting a twofold corrective-information (debunking) strategy: simple rebuttal (e.g., brief corrective information) and factual elaboration (e.g., a detailed debunking message with more-elaborated narratives) (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). Crisis communication researchers have demonstrated that the misinformation corrective strategy using factual elaboration effectively debunked incorrect beliefs based on misinformation and, subsequently, influenced crisis response effectiveness by reducing crisis responsibility, improving organizational reputation, and increasing preventive behaviors (Jin et al., 2020; van der Meer & Jin, 2020). However, the effectiveness of a debunking misinformation strategy has been unexplored yet in the context of internal crisis communication.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore effective strategies to debunk crisis misinformation by applying the proactive self-disclosure strategy (*stealing thunder*) with the misinformation corrective strategy (*simple rebuttal vs. factual elaboration*) to the context of internal crisis communication. This study also aims to elucidate the debunking misinformation process by examining how the crisis misinformation debunking strategies influence employees' cognitive reactance and, in turn, prevent damage caused by employees' misconceptions and their communication behaviors in a crisis.

Literature Review

Crisis Misinformation

Misinformation refers to "false information that is disseminated regardless of intent to mislead" (The Debunk Handbook, 2020, p. 5). Scholars also have highlighted misinformation as unintentional false information and includes errors or inaccuracies; this distinguishes it from a similar concept, *disinformation,* which refers to false information deliberately shared to deceive or mislead individuals or organizations (Wardle & Derekhshan, 2017). Van der Meer and Jin (2020) defined *crisis misinformation* as "false information about a crisis, initially assumed to be valid but can be later corrected or retracted, that can lead to factual misperception held by people" (p. 561). Crisis misinformation not only damages organizational reputation and organizational financial performance, but is also very difficult to correct and/or often continues in the publics' beliefs (e.g., crisis misperception) and subsequently detrimental behaviors (e.g., discouraging preventive behaviors) (Barua et al., 2020).

Misinformation Corrective Strategy for Debunking Crisis Misinformation

For effective misinformation correction, scholars have largely identified two strategies: *prebunking* (or the process of inoculation), which includes explanation misleading or manipulative argumentation at the time of the initial exposure to misinformation (i.e., a forewarning); *debunking,* which uses an alternative story that fills the coherence gap otherwise left by providing detailed refutations (e.g., why it is misinformation and what is actually true)

(Lewandowsky et al., 2012). The debunking strategy is generally more effective for misinformation correction than forewarning because forewarnings (prebunking) only have "a limited capacity to minimize adoption of misinformation" (Walter & Murphy, 2018, p. 438).

In the context of crisis misinformation, recent studies have suggested two different messages as *a misinformation corrective strategy—simple rebuttal* and *factual elaboration*—originated from Lewandowsky et al.'s (2012) recommendations for misinformation correction (Jin et al., 2020; van der Meer & Jin, 2020). Simple rebuttal refers to a "simple, brief rebuttal" by using fewer arguments in refuting the misinformation, while factual elaboration reinforces the correct facts by providing a more detailed and elaborate explanation (Lewandowsky et al., 2012, p. 122). Jin et al. (2020) found that a company's misinformation correction with a factual elaboration was more effective to protect organizational reputation than simple rebuttal, but the effectiveness of simple rebuttal significantly increased when with an employee backup message.

Timing Strategy (*Stealing Thunder vs. Thunder*) for Debunking Crisis Misinformation

Proactive timing strategy of crisis-related information disclosure has been recommended as the *optimal crisis response strategy* for effective crisis communication (Claeys & Coombs, 2019). An organization can reduce the negative effects of a crisis by proactively releasing crisis information to the publics before others, such as the media and third parties (i.e., *the stealing thunder*) (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). However, an organization can wait to disclose the crisis information until other organizations request the information, meaning *the thunder strategy* (Claeys et al., 2013). Stealing thunder has been found to be a critically important factor for inducing positive crisis outcomes from employees, e.g., protecting internal reputation, activating constructive suggestions internally, and enhancing employees' organizational support in internal crisis communication (Kim et al., 2019; Kim & Lim, 2020). Extant misinformation studies have also indicated timely, proactive misinformation correction as timing plays a critical role in influencing the success of misinformation correction (Walter & Tukachinsky, 2020). Delayed correction of misinformation can aggravate the effectiveness of correction because people can integrate the misinformation into their memory (Walter & Murphy, 2018). Therefore, this study examines how the timing strategy can function as a debunking strategy of crisis misinformation.

Outcomes of Debunking Crisis Misinformation in the Internal Crisis Communication

Employee Counterarguing

Counterarguing is defined as the formation of ideas that contradict or are inconsistent with the persuasive argument and acts as a significant impediment to persuasive attempts (Slater & Rounter, 2002). Persuasion research has demonstrated that a more persuasive message could suppress the effects of counterarguing as "the deeper people process the message and the less they counterargue" (Nabi et al., 2007, p. 38). In this regard, counterarguing can be regarded as an indicator of resistance of persuasiveness in misinformation correction message (i.e., accepting misinformation correction) (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). Jin et al. (2020) also found debunking strategy using factual elaboration is more effective in correcting the crisis misinformation, leading to higher message quality of the organizational corrective communication.

In addition, a timing strategy might include the organization's persuasive objective in the crisis communication message both implicitly and overtly (Lee, 2016). Individuals who deliberately disclose unfavorable facts about themselves are seen as more persuasive (e.g., Williams et al., 1993). Arpan and Pompper (2003, p. 235) argued that practitioners who provide a prompt self-disclosure may dispel reporters' expectations, resulting in enhanced acceptance of crisis communication messages. For these reasons, this study postulates employees' counterarguing should be an immediate outcome of debunking crisis misinformation because

employees who accept and closely process the correction message of misinformation are less likely to counterargue against the debunked message. Therefore, this study asks the following research questions:

RQ1: How will a misinformation corrective strategy affect employees' counterarguing against their organization's debunking crisis misinformation?

RQ2: How will a timing strategy affect employees' counterarguing against their organization's debunking crisis misinformation?

Internal Reputation

Employees' perception and view of their organization, defined as internal reputation, can influence their attitudes toward organizational commitment and intention to stay (e.g., Men, 2014). Crisis communication researchers have demonstrated the crisis response strategy can protect or restore post-crisis reputation, thereby leading to public support for organizations (e.g., Park & Cameron, 2014).

Scholars have also suggested a post-crisis reputation is the key outcome of debunking crisis misinformation because organizational reputation, as an intangible asset to organizations, should be strategically protected against the crisis misinformation. Coombs (2014) recommended denial messages to fight crisis misinformation (debunking misinformation) as an effective strategy to reduce reputational damage in a crisis. Regarding the misinformation corrective strategy, Jin et al. (2020) found that factual elaboration in correcting misinformation was likely to generate better organizational reputation.

Concerning the stealing thunder strategy, previous research has demonstrated that self-disclosing a crisis can result in a less negative post-crisis organization reputation (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012) and can mitigate the impact of negative publicity on the organization by diverting customers' attentions (Claeys et al., 2016). In the internal crisis communication context, Kim and Lim (2020) confirmed that a more proactive timing strategy (stealing thunder) can help organizations protect the internal reputation from employees in a crisis.

Since no previous research has investigated the proactive timing strategy function for internal reputation regarding crisis misinformation, it is necessary to find further empirical evidence. In addition, the effectiveness of corrective strategy of misinformation using simple rebuttal or elaboration facts has remained uncertain in the internal context of crisis communication. Therefore, this study asks the following research questions:

RQ3: How will a misinformation corrective strategy affect employees' post-crisis internal reputation regarding their organization's crisis misinformation?

RQ4: How will a timing strategy affect employees' post-crisis internal reputation regarding their organization's crisis misinformation?

Employee Communication Behaviors

Regarding the behavioral outcome, researchers in misinformation research have underlined its importance by examining how misinformation determines the publics' behaviors. Some researchers have found that publics who perceive misinformation are more likely to increase information seeking behaviors (Weidner et al., 2019) and less likely to engage in positive word-of-mouth (Visentin et al., 2019). In contrast, Van der Meer and Jin (2020) demonstrated that the factual elaboration misinformation corrective strategy motivates publics' intentions to take preventative behaviors. Thus, the empirical evidence remains uncertain as the mixed findings are discovered.

For the effect of timing strategy on behavioral outcomes, in the internal context of an organization, Kim et al. (2019) found that organizational management's proactive timing

strategy (stealing thunder) indirectly influences employees' willingness to support their organization in a crisis. Kim and Lim (2020) also revealed that stealing thunder directly and indirectly increases constructive and reduces destructive employee voice behaviors during a crisis.

Nonetheless, previous research has not examined employees' communication behaviors associated with crisis misinformation although employees actively engage in positive and negative communication behaviors during an organizational crisis (Lee, 2017). By doing that, employees can either act as *organizational ambassadors*, defending their organization with positive organizational information, or *organizational adversaries*, exacerbating the negative situations with negative information or their negative emotions (Heide & Simonsson, 2021; Kim & Rhee, 2012). Accordingly, this study asks the following research questions:

> *RQ5: How will a misinformation corrective strategy affect employees' positive and negative communication behaviors regarding their organization's crisis misinformation?*
> *RQ6: How will a timing strategy affect employees' positive and negative communication behaviors regarding their organization's crisis misinformation?*

Mediation Effects of Counterarguing and Internal Reputation

Previous research has revealed the mediating role of counterarguing for the effect of persuasive messages on the publics' supportive behaviors (Krakow et al., 2018; Nabi et al., 2007). Regarding the link between post-crisis reputation and behavioral outcomes, previous crisis research has found that the publics who perceive an unfavorable reputation for an organization are less likely to intend their support toward the organization (Coombs, 2019). In internal crisis communication, Kim and Lim (2020) demonstrated the mediation effect of post-crisis internal reputation on the effects of proactive timing strategy on constructive and destructive employee voice behaviors. Applying these results to the debunking misinformation process in the internal context of crisis communication, this study asks the following research questions to illuminate the indirect effects of the misinformation corrective and timing strategies on behavioral outcomes:

> *RQ7: How will employee counterarguing mediate the effects of misinformation corrective and timing strategies on post-crisis internal reputation and employee positive and negative megaphoning?*
> *RQ8: How will internal reputation mediate the effects of misinformation corrective and timing strategies on employees' positive and negative megaphoning?*

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Method

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A 2 (timing strategy: stealing thunder vs. thunder) x 2 (misinformation corrective strategy: simple rebuttal vs. factual elaboration) experimental study with between-subject groups was conducted with full-time employees ($N = 1115$) in the United States.

Participants

An online survey firm, Qualtrics, was hired to recruit individual full-time employees, as participants, who work for a variety of U.S. corporations. The total sample was 1115 ($N = 1115$), deleting non-qualified data ($n = 81$). The participants' age ranged from 18- to 80-years-old ($M = 45.64$, $SD = 15.45$). Almost a half of the participants, 49.96% ($n = 557$), were female. More than 80% (82.60%, $n = 921$) identified White as their race/ethnic group, followed by 9.15% ($n = 102$) Black, 3.68% ($n = 41$) Hispanic/Latino, 3.14% ($n = 35$) Asian, and 1.44% ($n = 16$) of other races (e.g., Native American).

Stimuli Development

Prior to proceeding with experimental conditions, all participants were instructed to a hypothetical crisis situation. The situation described their company facing racial discrimination accusation by their co-workers, alleging that the company violates federal and state laws by discriminating against workers and applicants who are people of color in hiring, evaluations, promotions, and pay and by creating a hostile work environment. The workplace discrimination is considered to be a critical internal crisis (Lee, 2020). Four different stimuli were developed. Three independent experts reviewed, edited, and confirmed the validity of situation as well as the appropriateness of writing style. The conditions for misinformation corrective strategy were manipulated by changing the amount of the corrective information using rebuttal. In the factual elaboration condition, the corrective information was provided with detailed rebuttal for why it is misinformation (e.g., a third party's investigation) and what the company has done (e.g., the recent diversity report as evidence for balanced workplace) for the corrective information. In the simple rebuttal condition, a simple denial message (e.g., the alleged racial discrimination experienced by your company's employees is not true but is misinformation) was provided without the detailed information. In addition, timing strategy conditions were manipulated by altering the communication source that corrected the misinformation first. The scenario stated that the CEO in the participants' company voluntarily corrected the misinformation in the stealing thunder condition, while participants read a statement from a third party (news media: NPR) discovered the misinformation and the CEO in the participants' company confirmed and responded to it by denying the racial discrimination accusation.

Study Procedure

The entire research procedure, instruments, and ethical treatment for the participants were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). All participants agreed to voluntarily participate in the research through an informed consent. A pretest ($N = 100$) was conducted to ensure randomization and instruments for accuracy and believability (content credibility) of the hypothetical scenarios as well as clarity and comprehension of the question used in the study. No issues were found in the pretest. The main test ($N = 1196$) was then implemented. The participants in both the pretest and the main test were different, and were paid five dollars as compensation. The participants ($N = 81$) who failed to spend sufficient time (minimum time: 10 minutes) or spent an extremely long time (more than 70 minutes) were excluded (Sheehan, 2018). The participants' attention was also checked, and all participants provided the correct answer (100%) in both pre- and main tests.

At the beginning of the study the participants' attitudes toward diverse workgroups were measured as a control variable. After reading the brief scenario of racial discrimination accusation, the participants were randomly assigned to one of four different groups. The participants then provided answers for another control variable (prior history of crisis misinformation), main dependent variables (counterarguing, internal reputation, and positive and negative megaphoning), and demographic information. On the last page, participants were debriefed regarding the fictional scenarios created only for the purposes of the experiment.

Measures

All items used a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7), mostly adopted from previous research. Employee counterarguing was measured by four items (Cronbach's alpha () = .63, $M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.05$) (e.g., I found myself actively disagreeing with the CEO) from Nabi et al. (2007). To measure post-crisis internal reputation, this study adopted the SCCT scales (Coombs & Holladay, 1996) that comprised four items (= .95, $M = 5.62$, $SD = 1.39$) (e.g., my company is concerned with the well-being of its employees).

Employee communication behaviors were measured by Kim and Rhee's (2012) two types of megaphoning measures, with seven items for positive megaphoning ($= .92$, $M = 4.81$, $SD = 1.50$) (e.g., I would write positive comments or advocate posting for my organization on the internet) and five items for negative megaphoning ($= .94$, $M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.98$) (e.g., I would talk about the mistakes and problems of our management to family and friends).

For the control variable this study included attitudes toward diversity workgroups because the misinformation and corrective information used in the study involved a diversity issue (racial discrimination) in the workplace. An individual's relevant attitude toward an issue provided in misinformation can influence the process of misinformation correction (debunking), rather than the effectiveness of misinformation correction (Ecker & Ang, 2019). This study adopted Nakui et al.'s (2011) attitudes toward diverse workgroups scales (ADWS), consisting of 17 items ($= .89$, $M = 4.89$, $SD = 1.02$) (e.g., I would talk about the mistakes and problems of our management to family and friends).

Prior history of crisis misinformation was included as another control variable because the crisis is an intensifier of a crisis situation, negatively affecting publics' post-crisis reputation and subsequent behaviors (Coombs, 2019). Therefore, prior history of crisis misinformation was measured by a question about whether the participants had a similar incident experiencing misinformation about racial discrimination with answers falling on a 7-point scale that ranged from NO (1) to YES; more than five times (7) ($M = 1.86$, $SD = 1.53$).

Results

Manipulation Checks

The manipulations for both the misinformation corrective and timing strategies were also checked through the independent-samples t tests. The manipulations were successful. Regarding the misinformation corrective strategy, participants who read a factual elaboration rebuttal message from the CEO in their company were more likely to perceive the detailed information (e.g., confirmation of third party's investigation and the recent diversity report as evidence for balanced workplace), compared to those read a simple rebuttal message, $t(1113) = 6.92$, $p < .001$ ($M_{elaboration} = 5.44$, $SD_{elaboration} = 1.51$, $M_{simple} = 4.74$, $SD_{simple} = 1.83$). For the timing strategy, the participants in the thunder condition reported the third-party (NPR) as the information revealer ("NPR reported the misinformation issue first, and your company then confirmed it.") and the mean scores of participants were significantly higher than those in the stealing thunder condition (their company's voluntary disclosure), $t(1194) = 5.28$, $p < .001$ ($M_{thunder} = 5.47$, $SD_{thunder} = 1.53$, $M_{stealing\_thunder} = 4.94$, $SD_{stealing\_thunder} = 1.80$).

Testing Research Questions

This study ran a series of OLS multiple regression analyses using STATA 15 to test research questions. Two categorical variables from experimental conditions, corrective misinformation strategy (factual elaboration = 1, simple rebuttal = 0) and timing strategy (stealing thunder = 1, thunder = 0), were recoded as dichotomous variables to be analyzed and interpreted in the regression models. The independent variables in the regression models accounted for a significant portion of the variance in employee counterarguing (CA), $R^2 = 0.04$, $F(5, 1109) = 16.55$, $p < 0.001$; internal reputation (IR), $R^2 = 0.17$, $F(5, 1109) = 58.02$, $p < 0.001$; positive megaphoning (PM), $R^2 = 0.30$, $F(5, 1109) = 150.69$, $p < 0.001$; and negative megaphoning (NM), $R^2 = 0.33$, $F(5, 1109) = 114.63$, $p < 0.001$.

Regarding RQs 1 and 2, the results showed that the corrective misinformation strategy (factual elaboration) was not statistically significant ($b = -0.11$, $t = -1.37$) and the timing strategy (stealing thunder) was negatively significant for CA ($b = -0.19$, $t = -2.19$), controlling for the

effects of other independent variables. But the IR regression model (RQs 3 and 4) revealed that the statistically significant and positive effects of both strategies, the corrective misinformation strategy (factual elaboration) ($b = 0.20$, $t = 1.98$) and the timing strategy (stealing thunder) ($b = 0.30$, $t = 2.84$), controlling for the other effects. In the regression models of PM and NM (RQs 5 and 6), timing strategy (stealing thunder) appeared as the only statistically positive factor for PM ($b = 0.22$, $t = 2.11$), not negative NM ($b = -0.07$, $t = -0.54$). The corrective misinformation strategy was not statistically significant for both PM ($b = 0.15$, $t = 1.41$) and NM ($b = 0.06$, $t = 0.45$) when other effects were controlled.

To examine the mediation effects of CA and IR (RQs 7 and 8), a path analysis using AMOS 26 program was conducted through a bias-corrected bootstrapping procedure ($N = 5,000$). Control variables were included in the path model. The path model achieved an acceptable model fit, $\chi^2 = 11.27$, $df = 8$, $\chi^2/df = 1.41$, $p = .19$, CFI = .99, TLI = .99, RMSEA = .02, and SRMR = .01(Hair et al., 2018). The mediation effects of CA for between the timing strategy and three endogenous variables such as IR, PM, and NM were statistically significant. The indirect effects of timing strategy for IR (stealing thunder → CA → IR; $\beta = .03$, $p < .05$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.16]), PM, and NM were statistically significant through CA (stealing thunder → CA → PM; $\beta = .01$, $p < .05$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.16], stealing thunder → CA → NM; $\beta = -.02$, $p < .05$, 95% CI [-0.13, -0.03]). IR also mediated the effects of the timing strategy on PM and NM (stealing thunder → IR → PM; $\beta = .24$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.29, 0.39], stealing thunder → IR → NM; $\beta = -.05$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.14, -0.04]). Regarding serial mediation effects, the indirect effects of timing strategy were statistically significant for PM and NM through CA and IR (stealing thunder → CA → IR → PM; $\beta = .03$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.09], stealing thunder → CA → IR → NM; $\beta = -.03$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.03, -0.00]).

Regarding the impacts of control variables, the path model showed that attitude toward diverse workgroup was statistically significant for IR through a positive path ($\beta = .41$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.37, 0.45]), PM ($\beta = .32$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.28, 0.37]), and NM through a negative path ($\beta = -.48$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.53, -0.42]). Prior history of crisis misinformation was statistically significant for CA ($\beta = .18$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.14, 0.21]), PM ($\beta = -.12$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.15, -0.08]), and NM ($\beta = .19$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.14, 0.23]) (see Figure 1).
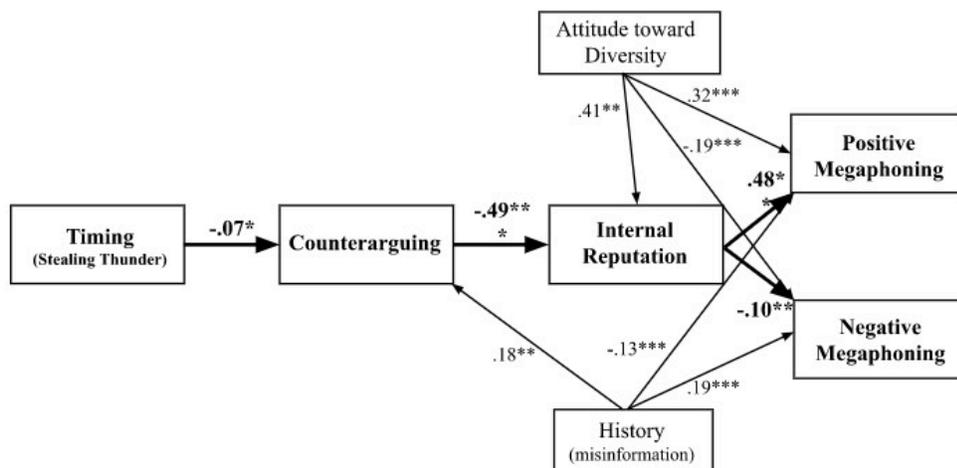
Figure 1. Bootstrapping (N=5,000) results of mediation path model. Timing was dummy coded (stealing thunder = 1, thunder = 0). For the sake of brevity and clarity, only statistically significant paths were drawn. Model fit indices: $\chi^2 = 11.27$, $df = 8$, $\chi^2/df = 1.41$, $p = .19$, CFI = .99, TLI = .99, RMSEA = .02, and SRMR = .01. ***$p < 0.001$, **$p < 0.01$, *$p < 0.05$.

Discussion

The positive effect of elaboration facts on post-crisis internal reputation can be explained by the fact that a detailed refutation explaining why the misinformation is false and providing alternative factual information can replace the debunked misinformation while a simple retraction can create a gap that requires a causal explanation (Ecker et al., 2022). In this sense, this study suggests that employees who receive a more detailed factual information to debunk misinformation can replace the causal explanation for the crisis misinformation and are then likely to positively perceive their organizational reputation. Thus, this study supports and advances debunking misinformation strategy using denial (rebuttal) recommended by situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), to protect organizational reputation by providing empirical evidence for an organization to manage internal reputation from employees misled by crisis misinformation.

The negative effect of stealing thunder on employee counterarguing indicates that employees who receive timely proactive correction of misinformation from organizational management can reduce cognitive resistance to the corrective message, but instead increase their absorption and conscious engagement in the message in a crisis (Slater & Rouner, 2002). Crisis managers' timely proactive misinformation correction can take the edge off employees' confusion, ambiguity, and disorientation from their organization's crisis communication, leading to the spread of further misinformation (Heide & Simonsson, 2021).

Applying the proactive timing strategy to the context of misinformation crisis, this study provides further empirical evidence that can embolden crisis managers to effectively manage their organizational reputation when debunking misinformation with their employees. In addition, the stealing thunder strategy directly affected positive megaphoning, not negative. This result suggests that crisis managers' timely and proactive communication can facilitate employee communication behaviors that voluntarily collect valuable (corrective) information for their organization and share the corrective information to defend and advocate for their organization related to the crisis misinformation (positive megaphoning).

More importantly, employee counterarguing against the corrective crisis misinformation was found to mediate the effects of stealing thunder on generating positive post-crisis internal reputation and, in turn, enhance positive employee communication behaviors (e.g., advocating for the company), and suppress negative ones (e.g., sharing harmful information about the company). The findings suggest the use of more-proactive internal crisis communication to correct misinformation and prevent damage caused by employees' misconceptions and related communication behaviors. Hence, the findings can extend effectiveness of *optimal crisis response strategy* (stealing thunder) to a misinformation crisis in the internal context of an organization.

Regarding the findings of control variables, this study suggests that understanding employee attitudes toward a specific issue (including racial or gender discrimination) in the workplace is important to amplify the effectiveness of debunking strategies (including elaboration facts and stealing thunder) in a misinformation crisis. In addition, the findings about the impacts of prior history of crisis misinformation indicate how the prior history can intensify the negative outcomes that impede achieving the effectiveness of debunking strategies through elaboration facts and stealing thunder. In this regard, this study suggests the importance of making practical efforts for crisis prevention and preparedness (e.g., policies) that help an organization detect warning signals and predict potential danger to effectively combat crisis misinformation (Simonsson & Heide, 2018).

Implications

        To advance theoretical development in crisis misinformation, this study suggests that rebuttal using elaboration facts and the stealing thunder should be applied as the effective debunking misinformation strategies in the context of internal crisis communication. This study also highlights the importance of employee counterarguing against the corrective information that directly affects internal reputation and indirectly influences employee communication behaviors. To manage internal reputation and employee communication behaviors, this study recommends crisis managers should promote employees' acceptance of debunking message in a misinformation crisis by providing corrective information in a timely, proactive manner.

        Practically, this study can help crisis communicators better understand how to prevent negative outcomes. This study suggests that crisis managers can lessen the continued influence of misinformation through voluntary employee communication behaviors defending and advocating for their organization related to the crisis misinformation. Additionally, crisis managers can learn how further crisis situations (e.g., *backfire effect)* can be prevented. By correcting the misinformation in a timely proactive manner, the crisis managers can prevent such a backfire effect by reducing employee counterarguing against the corrective message, as well as ward off further crises by suppressing employees' negative communication behaviors like sharing harmful information about the company in a crisis.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

        This study has its limitations. First, the findings could be limited to a particular set of messages used in this study. Misinformation easily draws public attention and remembered with visual aids (e.g., graphics) (Ecker et al., 2022). Future research could include some visual or semantic aids in the debunking crisis misinformation, thereby increasing external generalizability of the findings. Second, other individual factors such as individuals' involvement with the issue could affect the debunking process of crisis misinformation and influence its outcomes (Vafeiadis et al., 2019). Relatedly, the levels of involvement for the issue of racial discrimination in the workplace could be different and might have influenced results in this study. Future research is recommended to consider employee involvement and organizational culture related to the issues addressed in crisis misinformation. Third, the findings were based on a cross-sectional research with single experiments. Longitudinal research is suggested in the future study, thereby revealing how debunking crisis misinformation based on elaboration facts and stealing thunder influence misinformation correction over time, especially continued misinformation influence.

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Ethical Dilemmas in Digital Communication – An Empirical Investigation of Ethical Decision-Making Processes

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Abstract
The paper discusses how communication practitioners deal with new ethical dilemmas in the field of digital communication. Referring to moral psychology, dealing with dilemmas is modelled as a cognitive decision-making process. The results of an online survey reveal how communication practitioners assess new ethical problems when economical, legal and ethical expectations conflict.

Keywords: PR ethics, ethical decision-making, ethical dilemmas, digital communication, communication management, public relations

Ethical Dilemmas in Digital Communication – An Empirical Investigation of Ethical Decision-Making Processes

Digital technologies and practices allow communication practitioners to target different stakeholders efficiently and effectively. Communication measures can be personalized and are highly scalable in the digital environment (Weiner & Kochhar, 2016); decision-makers in public relations (PR) and communication management are able to plan digital measures cost-effectively and modify them in real time. *Big data analyses* or *social media analytics* are by now established approaches in PR and communication management that are here to stay. At the same time, communication professionals perceive communication practices such as *microtargeting* or the use of *social bots* as increasingly problematic from an ethical point of view (Zerfass et al., 2020). However, the debate on moral grey areas in digital communication has only just begun (e. g., Barbu, 2014; Podesta et al., 2014).

Moral grey areas are characterized by diverging expectations and claims of different actors. In so-called dilemma situations, every single alternative course of action is related to negative outcomes (Maclagan, 2003). Especially for those working with these techniques, it becomes increasingly difficult to make morally correct decisions. Referring to microtargeting, for example, it might be challenging for a communication professional to decide whether to respect the individual claim for privacy of a social media user or to collect and use data for economic purposes on behalf of his or her organization (Newell & Marabelli, 2015).

In moral psychology, dealing with ethical dilemmas is referred to as ethical decision-making. Ethical decision-making is understood as a cognitive process, including the steps of recognizing a moral problem, making a judgement, building an intention to act, and act ethically or unethically (Rest et al., 1986). Particular attention is paid to the initial step of recognition, also called moral awareness, as this is the triggering moment of the whole process (Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008). For communicators, this process can become problematic, as, within an organization, moral beliefs (their own and those of their superiors or the organization) are often in conflict with economic and legal expectations (Schwartz, 2017).

The academic and practical debate on ethical dilemmas in PR and communication management has hardly taken up this empirical-descriptive perspective. Current research in the field highly focuses on normative solutions for ethical dilemmas such as codes of ethics or guidelines (e.g., Bowen, 2004; Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001; Parsons, 2008). Additionally, organizational influences and individual moral concepts are often neglected. The current research addresses this gap and explores how communication practitioners deal with ethical dilemmas in digital communication practice. First, an overview on current dilemmas in the field of digital communication is provided. Referring to ethical decision-making models from moral psychology as well as to interdisciplinary research results, a conceptual framework to assess ethical dilemmas in digital communication is introduced. The process of ethical decision-making is then empirically analyzed by conducting an online survey among German communication practitioners. Finally, the paper discusses theoretical implications and offers practical starting points for organizations and communication practitioners when dealing with current ethical challenges.

Ethical Dilemmas in the Digital Age of PR and Communication Management

Changing conditions for PR and communication management

Organizations and their communication units today operate in a complex and volatile environment (Ragas & Culp, 2021). Digitalization affects the parameters of organizational actions and influences "structures, processes, ways of working, finance, media use, culture and

communication" (Kirf et al., 2020, p.1). This also applies to the steering and shaping of communication activities and processes in organizational contexts, referred to as communication management. Specifically, communication management is defined as the process of planning, organizing, and evaluating corporate communications (Zerfass, 2008, p. 89). Owing to digitalization, communication management is subjected to continuous change and is influenced by transforming conditions of media reception (Adi, 2019). While traditional gatekeepers such as journalists have lost their monopoly (Ferreira, 2018), stakeholders today no longer see themselves as passive consumers, but actively participate as prosumers in the formation of public opinion. This digital public sphere is a new playground for organizational action, which makes it important for communication professionals to understand the illustrated developments (Röttger et al., 2014). Potentially, PR and communication management can be more efficient and dialogue-oriented through digital applications (Winkler & Pleil, 2019). Organizations can use diverse data, e.g., derived from social media analytics, to engage in dialogue with increasingly fragmented, heterogeneous, and interconnected target groups (Weiner & Kochhar, 2016; Wiencierz & Röttger, 2017). Although the digitalization and use of technologies present many opportunities for PR and communication management, there are also challenges for the profession and its members that need to be discussed on an ethical level.

Ethics in PR and communication management

The terms ethics and morality are often used interchangeably; however, a distinction is necessary. *Morality* refers to a collection of different values, norms and belief systems embedded in social processes that define "right and wrong" for individuals and communities. *Ethics*, on the other hand, is concerned with the philosophical discussion and reflection of morality (Crane & Matten, 2004, p. 11). In this paper, the term *ethical dilemma* is used to reflect situations in which every single alternative course of action is related to negative outcomes, no matter which alternative is chosen (Maclagan, 2003).

The ethics discourse in the field of PR and communication management can mainly be assigned to PR ethics, as it represents the core of previous theory building (Rademacher, 2020). PR ethics is discussed on a macro level of the profession, a meso level of organizations, and on a micro level in terms of individual ethics (Bentele, 2015). Nevertheless, PR ethics is mainly understood as ethics of action, which includes the articulation of norms, values, and concrete recommendations for action. National and international associations, such as the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) play an important role in this process as they provide codes of ethics for students, organizations, or practitioners. These guidelines can be helpful resources for communication practitioners in dealing with dilemma situations. However, communication professionals encounter dilemma situations in their everyday work which are characterized by ambiguity, particularly in today's complex world (Bauman, 1995).

Ethical dilemmas in digital communication

The digital environment, especially due to its multitude of actors, high speed, and mass of information, clearly increases the complexity of situations and makes moral behavior more difficult (Kvalnes, 2020). Within this context, various new ethical dilemmas can emerge which are summarized in Figure 1; categorized according to an ideal-typical communication management process. On a meta level, ethical dilemmas in PR and communication management often arise from the conflict between truth (transparency, disclosure of the sender) and secrecy (deception, lies, manipulation), autonomy (privacy) and control (data collection and analysis, security) as well as between equality and discrimination. Although the illustrated ethical considerations remain the same, digitalization causes new grey areas. These refer, for example,

to the collection and analysis of personal data, the collaboration with social media influencers or the use of social bots.
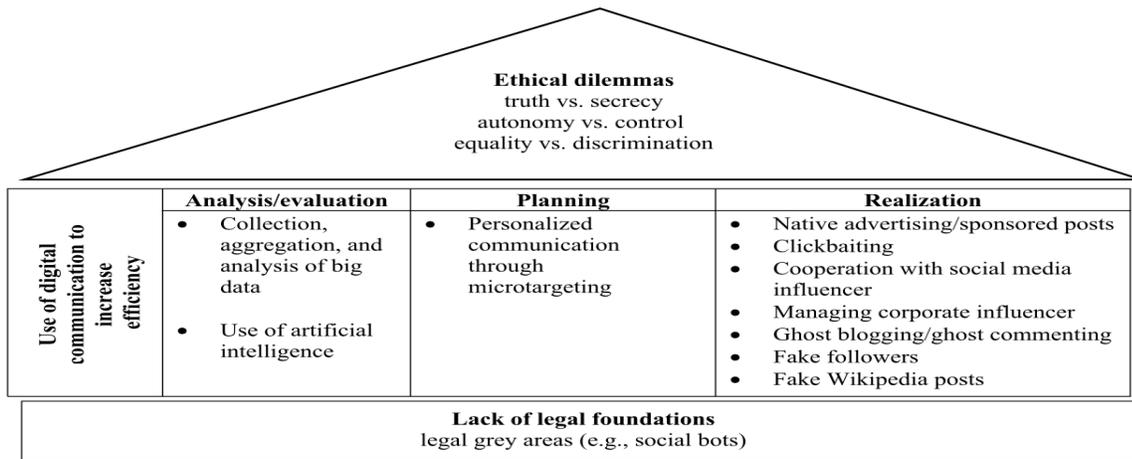
Figure 1. Ethical dilemmas in digital communication in the interplay of ethics, economics, and law

Also, the use of misleading headlines (clickbaiting), deliberate faking of reviews on rating websites (ghost blogging) or Wikipedia are considered to be ethically challenging (DiStaso, 2013; Gallicano et al., 2014; Zannettou et al., 2019). Nevertheless, all these examples point to a more general tension between legal, economic, and ethical expectations (Schwartz, 2017). A fundamental dilemma arises between the economic demand for effective communication and an ethical approach to new technological opportunities. A lack of legal foundations often means that decisions about "right" and "wrong" must be made by communication professionals themselves. Therefore, the personal moral awareness and attitude of individual actors become more important.

In the field of PR and communication management, ethical dilemmas in digital communication have mainly been analyzed with qualitative designs, often focusing on discussions on a normative level (e.g., Place, 2019; Schauster & Neill, 2017). What is still missing, however, is a descriptive analysis on how communication professionals assess dilemma situations and how they deal with it.

Dealing with Ethical Dilemmas: The Ethical Decision-Making Process

In moral psychology, dealing with ethical dilemma situations is being discussed as *ethical decision-making*. The research field on ethical decision-making has developed steadily over the past 20 years and provides insights from numerous interdisciplinary studies (Elm & Radin, 2012). The most prominent theory in this area is Kohlberg's stage theory of moral development (Kohlberg, 1969, 1981), which builds on Jean Piaget's initial work (Piaget, 1965). Kohlberg assumes that ethical decision-making is primarily related to an individual's stage of moral development which evolves over time (Kohlberg, 1969, 1981). Based on this approach, Rest et al. (1986) developed a four-component model which illustrates ethical decision-making as a cognitive process with different phases. The model includes (1) moral awareness, i.e., the recognition that a problem has moral implications; (2) the evaluation of a situation (also "moral judgement"); (3) the derivation of an intention to act; and (4) the actual ethical or unethical behavior (Schwartz, 2016).

Moral awareness is of central importance in this model (Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008). Rest et al. (1986) describe the process of becoming morally aware as: "identifying what we can do in a particular situation, figuring out what the consequences to all parties would be for

each line of action, and identifying and trying to understand our own gut feelings on the matter" (p. 3). Only if emerging dilemmas are recognized and negotiated, a potential resolution can succeed. Failure to recognize ethical challenges in time can have costly consequences for organizations and their communicators, especially in terms of reputation (Bowen, 2007).

In 1986, Treviño applied the concept of ethical decision-making to the context of organizations and management to present the person-situation interactionist model. She assumes that decisions in ethical dilemma situations depend not only on the stage of moral development, but also on other individual factors as well as previous personal and professional experiences (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; Treviño et al., 2006). She particularly emphasizes the social context of a decision and refers primarily to the organizational environment in which an actor operates (Treviño, 1986). Following models take factors such as *moral intensity* of the actual moral problem or the *framing* of a situation into account (Jones, 1991; Schwartz, 2016). Thus, when evaluating the situation, an actor must not only be fundamentally able to recognize the problem, he or she must also first activate an ethical frame of information processing rather than an economic or legal frame (Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008).

As ethical dilemmas in digital communication are characterized by uncertainty and ambiguity, it is not intended to make a judgement about "ethical" or "unethical" in this research. Rather, the focus is on the process of ethical decision-making, especially the first step of becoming morally aware. Since this is expected to be influenced by the organizational environment, the following research question (RQ1) will be investigated:

RQ1: Which organizational factors enhance the moral awareness of communication professionals?

With reference to interdisciplinary research results, a framework that allows the exploration of ethical dilemmas in digital communication practice is developed (see Figure 2). Based on the framework, hypotheses and further research questions are derived. The starting point of this framework is an ethical dilemma situation from digital communication practice, which occurs in an organizational context. Referring to Rest et al. (1986), the process of decision-making is represented in four steps.
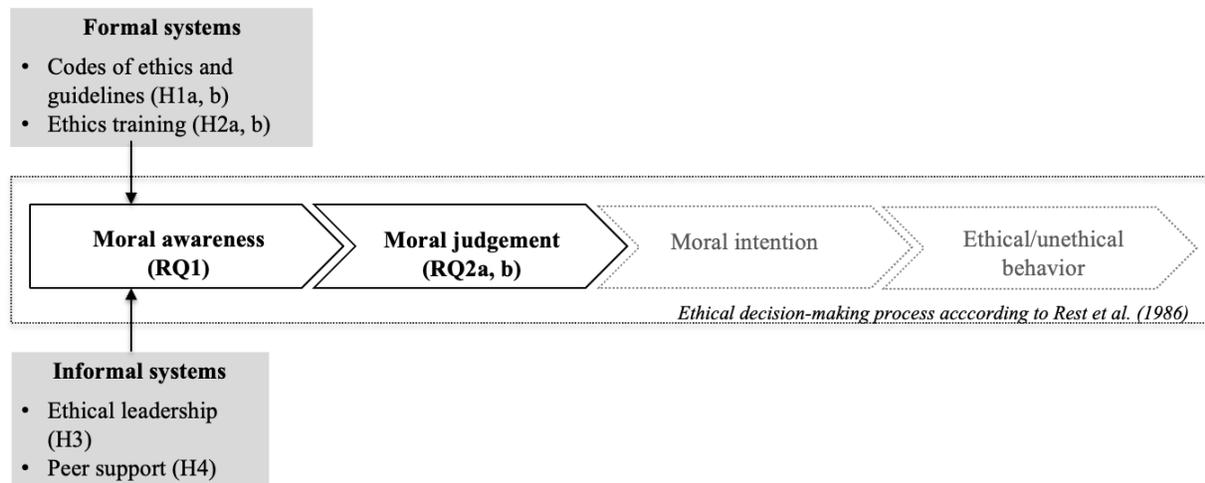
Figure 2. Framework for assessing ethical dilemma situations in digital communication

The whole process, and consequently also the initial step of moral awareness, is related to organizational factors (Treviño, 1986), which can be divided into formal and informal systems.

Formal systems of an organization include official guidelines, such as codes of ethics or compliance policies that formulate rules and expectations for the individual (Tenbrunsel et al., 2003).

At the same time, organizations can help employees and offer or promote ethics trainings. Interdisciplinary research suggests a positive correlation between the knowledge of codes of ethics and the moral awareness of organizational members (McKinney et al., 2010; Weaver & Treviño, 1999). In general, however, these codes should also be linked to processes and structures in the organization that allows organizational members to discuss dilemma situations. Furthermore, various studies show that communicators receive very little education and training in ethics (Adi, 2019; Tench et al., 2013), although they themselves see great value in it. Qualitative research indicates that communicators who have received training feel better confident to give ethical advice to other individuals (e.g., Lee & Cheng, 2012; Neill & Weaver, 2017), and are better prepared to recognize critical situations (Place, 2015).

In addition to formal systems, there are numerous informal systems in organizations that indicate what behavior is desirable and considered appropriate (Treviño, 1990). Especially, ethical leadership and peer support are important resources when dealing with dilemma situations. Ethical leadership refers to the role modeling and demonstration of certain values by superiors to which the organizational member is expected to adhere (Brown et al., 2005). Studies from management research show a positive correlation between ethical leadership and moral awareness (e.g., Moberg & Caldwell, 2007; Sweeney et al., 2010), and qualitative research from our discipline suggests that the articulation of personal values and ethical standards by supervisors helps communicators identify moral problems (e.g., Schauster, 2015). Peer support, on the other hand, describes the possibility for the organizational member to receive help from colleagues in ethically difficult situations (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). Prior research suggests that peer support correlates with moral awareness (e.g., Treviño et al., 2006). Based on the presented literature, hypotheses H1 – H4 were developed to assess the relationship between organizational factors and moral awareness:

H1: Communication professionals who can rely on (a) an organizational code of ethics or (b) a code of ethics for communications will have a higher moral awareness than communication professionals who cannot rely on (a) or (b).

H2: Communication professionals who attended (a) an external ethics training or (b) an internal ethics training will have a higher moral awareness than communication professionals who did not attend (a) or (b).

H3: Perceived ethical leadership is positively related to the moral awareness of communication professionals.

H4: Perceived peer support is positively related to the moral awareness of communication professionals.

In addition to the developed hypotheses, this work examines how communication professionals evaluate specific digital communication practices, referring to the step of moral judgement. It is not only examined how communicators evaluate them, but also analyzed how they arrive at their judgements. In particular, it is to be found out whether they pay more attention to ethical, economic or legal aspects in these situations (Schwartz, 2017). As this research addresses "new" dilemmas in digital communication, the initial steps of moral awareness and judgement are analyzed; neither the intentional, nor the behavioral level is further investigated. Based on these considerations, the following research questions are developed:

RQ2a: How do communication professionals judge specific digital communication practices?
RQ2b: How do communication professionals arrive at their judgements in dilemma situations?

Methodology

To answer the research questions, a quantitative online survey among communication practitioners in Germany was conducted. The results of eleven questions were incorporated into the analyses presented below. Additionally, demographic data were gathered for all participants. All questions were derived from the above-mentioned literature. The questionnaire leans toward an experimental design using scenarios to activate the ethical decision-making process.

Scenarios as research tool. Ethical dilemmas are usually operationalized and explored through scenarios. In this study, three dilemma scenarios were presented in which fictional characters are dealing with ethical dilemma situations. After reading through each scenario, the respondents were asked to answer questions related to the decision-making process. All scenarios take up real communication practices that were legally compliant at the time of disseminating the questionnaire. In this study, c*lickbaiting*, *microtargeting* and the use of *social bots* were addressed, thus creating a range of different topics. Table 1 below provides an overview of the presented scenarios.

Table 1. Scenarios presented in the questionnaire

Ethical dilemma	Brief description of the situation
Scenario I: Use of deceptive headlines to generate clicks (clickbaiting)	At her supervisor's insistence, communication manager Susann has to increase the traffic on the company's own blog. By using lurid headlines in social media teasers, she wants to maximize the number of clicks. Despite the success of her plan, she has a queasy feeling about it.
Scenario II: Violation of user privacy (microtargeting)	Communication manager Oliver uses personalized campaigns on Facebook to present tailored ads to women, matching to their pregnancy week. Lately, he receives many complaints from users, demanding more transparency. Oliver is not aware of any guilt and refers to the terms and conditions.
Scenario III: Influencing and deceiving the public (social bots)	Communication manager Maria is under pressure from her supervisor to make a campaign a success. In cooperation with an external agency, she decides to buy in [fake] comments and likes. After a short time, the plan works.

Moral Awareness. Often, moral awareness is measured by directly asking a person whether a situation represents an ethical dilemma or holds an ethical component (e.g., Blodgett et al., 2001; Fleischman & Valentine, 2003). This approach, however, confronts the respondent with a moral dimension that he or she might not have recognized on his or her own. That is why the participants in this study were asked to indicate what would be decisive from their point of view when judging a behavior as moral or immoral. They had to choose up to three answer options representing the dimensions of law, economy, and ethics. Only if the respondents select the answer option(s) for the ethical dimension, their moral awareness is considered activated. The questions on moral awareness served a dual purpose as the answers do not only indicate if the moral awareness is activated, but also how communication professionals usually arrive at a judgment in dilemma situations (see Table 3 on page 16 for details).

Moral judgement. The judgement of whether a certain behavior is considered moral or immoral is operationalized by asking directly how the participant personally judges Susann's/ Oliver's/Maria's behavior.

Codes of ethics and ethics training. Respondents are asked to indicate whether their organization has (a) a general code of ethics and/or (b) a code of ethics specific to PR and communication management. They are further asked to report whether they have ever participated in an external and/or internal ethics training (items based on Zerfass et al., 2020).

Ethical leadership. This construct is measured with the Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS) according to Brown et al. (2005). One example from nine items is "My supervisor discusses business ethics and values with employees". The scale corresponds to a 5-point Likert scale.

Peer support. Peer support is measured with four items. Referring to Berthelsen et al. (2018), one sample item is "If necessary, I can ask my colleagues for help and support." The scale corresponds to a 5-point Likert scale.

Sample

The online questionnaire was circulated during October 2020. It was distributed via email and social media platforms and promoted by representatives of national branch associations and networks. In total, 147 respondents completed the questionnaire. After excluding participants who were not clearly identified as part of the target population, 118 responses remained for data analysis. 64.4% of these respondents were female and 35.6% were male, with an average age of 36.9 years and an average work experience of 10.4 years. Over half of the respondents work in a company (52.2%), 33.1% work in a communications agency or consultancy, 11 % in a public institution, and 3.4% in a non-profit organization. Almost one third works in a leading position (30.5 %), either as team leader or head of communications; the rest works as a team member or consultant (50.8%) or in other positions (18.6%). The data were analyzed with SPSS, Version 26, using Spearman's Rank correlation coefficient (rs) and Mann-Whitney-U tests depending on the variable.

Findings

Moral awareness

To answer RQ1, the first step of the illustrated ethical decision-making process was analyzed. The results reveal that most respondents show a high level of moral awareness (74.6%), while only few have a medium (16.1%), low (5.9%) or no moral awareness (3.4%). With respect to organizational factors related to it, it first becomes clear that organizations do not have enough formal offers in store for their employees. While 62.7% of the respondents can rely on an organizational code of ethics, only one third (29.7%) reports from a code of ethics for communications.

In contrast, informal relationships between respondents and their colleagues as well as supervisors are evaluated as very good. Communication professionals receive support from their colleagues ($M = 4.29$, $SD = .67$, $n = 111$) and have a trustful relationship with their supervisors ($M = 3.85$, $SD = .90$, $n = 101$). As a correlation analysis shows, perceived ethical leadership and moral awareness are significantly related ($rs = .274$, $p \leq .01*$, $n = 101$). This can be considered a medium effect (Cohen, 1992); H3 is confirmed. Thus, supervisors help communication professionals to recognize and overcome moral issues. Contrary to the assumptions made previously, no link to moral awareness is found for either organizational codes ($U = 1021.00$, $Z =-1.172$, $p = .241$, $n = 105$), nor codes for communications ($U = 903.50$, $Z = -1.445$, $p = .148$, $n = 95$), nor internal ($U = 1050.00$, $Z = -.379$, $p = .705$, $n = 118$) or external ($U = 737.00$, $Z = -1.601$,

$p = .109$, $n = 118$) ethics training. Also, peer support is not significantly related to moral awareness ($rs = .178$, $p = .062$, $n = 111$).

The results indicate that the majority of the surveyed communication professionals are able to recognize the moral dimension of a problem besides the legal and the economic dimension. However, organizations do not yet support their employees sufficiently with formal offers and guidelines. At the same time, colleagues and supervisors help each other on an interpersonal level which emphasizes morality as a social learning process.

Moral judgement

To answer RQ2a and RQ2b, the second step of the ethical decision-making process was analyzed. It was first assessed how communication professionals evaluate three scenarios in which fictional actors engage in *clickbaiting* (Scenario I), use *microtargeting* (Scenario II), and work with *social bots* (Scenario III). The results reveal that the overwhelming majority of the respondents consider *clickbaiting* and the use of *bots* to be immoral, while *microtargeting* is considered moral (see Table 2 below).

Table 2. Average judgement per scenario

Scenario I-III	Moral	Immoral
I: Clickbaiting	12.7%	87.3%
II: Microtargeting	74.6%	25.4%
III: Social Bots	17.8%	82.2%

Note. n = 118, Q2b, 3b, 4b: And how do you personally rate Susann's/Oliver's/Maria's behavior? From my point of view, her/his action was… "moral"/ "immoral".

Furthermore, the results provide information on the aspects that appear important to the communication professionals when dealing with dilemma situations (see Table 3). The study reveals that communication professionals clearly put emphasis on the moral dimension. Especially, they give general and corporate values the highest priority when dealing with ethical dilemmas (79.2%). Furthermore, the respondents strive to comply with the law (73.7%) and emphasize internal guidelines (52.8%). On average, conformity with personal values (28.8%) and the achievement of economic (17.2%), or communicative advantage (17%) are rated as less important when evaluating dilemma situations.

Table 3. Important aspects for communication professionals when dealing with dilemma situations

Dimension	Items	Scenario I	Scenario II	Scenario III	Average
Ethics	…whether she/he adhered to general/corporate values	82.2 %	79.7 %	75.4 %	79.2 %
	…whether she/he adhered to my personal values	33,1 %	22,0 %	31,4 %	28,8 %
Law	…whether she/he complied with laws	64.4 %	81.4 %	75.4 %	73.7 %
	…whether she/he complied with internal regulations	45.8 %	55.9 %	56.8 %	52.8 %
Economics	…whether he/she created economic advantage for our company	16.9 %	16.9 %	17.8 %	17.2 %

…whether he/she created communicative advantage for our company	21.2 %	15.3 %	14.4 %	17.0 %

Note. n = 118, Q2a ,3a, 4a: Now please imagine that your colleague Susann/Oliver/Maria meets you in the hallway the next morning and asks you if you think it was right the way she/he acted. From your point of view, what would be the decisive factor in judging that? Please select up to three options.

Discussion

The results of the study show that communication professionals are generally able to take the ethical dimension into account when a dilemma situation arises. This is the first and major step when dealing with ethical dilemmas (Rest et al., 1986). Only when communication professionals recognize ethical dilemmas, it is possible to find a solution and avert potential harm to an organization (Bowen, 2007). When it comes to resources they can possibly rely on in difficult situations, it is apparent that communication professionals are looking for guidance and orientation within their organization. They strive to meet the requirements of their employer and abide by the rules set forth. The study indicates that communication professionals are not alone with their problems and receive support from their colleagues and superiors when needed. As ethical leadership is significantly related to moral awareness, it is crucial to take a closer look at the interpersonal level when dealing with ethical problems. Superiors act as role models and pass on organizational values and norms. The findings emphasize that moral action is not so much a matter of simply following rules but should be rather understood as a socialization process (Moberg & Caldwell, 2007).

Nevertheless, formal systems such as rules and guidelines can help organizations to communicate clear expectations to their members (Tenbrunsel et al., 2003). The results of the study indicate a discrepancy between the desire of communication professionals for orientation and the lack of guidance offered by organizations. They provide their members too little formal assistance in the form of special guidelines or ethics trainings, although these are important means of communicating values. In the future, organizations should support their communication professionals more in dealing with ethical challenges and communicate clear rules and requests.

Since only one of the expected factors is significantly related to moral awareness, it is assumed that the situational context could play a decisive role in the evaluation of dilemma situations. Not only individual dispositions or organizational structures help communication professionals to recognize and solve ethical problems. Rather, communication professionals need to be empowered and enabled to assess unique and ambiguous situations and make good decisions on their own. Instead of focusing on (normative) solutions such as codes of ethics, it might be fruitful for future research to focus more on the situational context when analyzing the ethical decision-making process.

This is especially important as communication modes and channels continue to evolve in the future. These developments will always be accompanied by new ethical challenges, some of which have been discussed in this research. The findings reveal that the analyzed communication practices *clickbaiting, microtargeting* and the use of *social bots* are evaluated quite differently. This could result from the fact that the three scenarios represent different norm violations. While *clickbaiting* and the use of *social bots* aim at deceiving internet users, highly personalized ads (*microtargeting)* might be interpreted as more transparent as the sender of the information is visible and can be prosecuted for missteps. Nevertheless, microtargeting can be interpreted as an obvious invasion of users' privacy, which seems to be considered less problematic than the deliberate deception of users described in the other scenarios.

133

This result is still remarkable and should be followed up. Communication professionals might underestimate that the violation of users' privacy can also lead to resistance what cannot be in their interest. In this context, it should be further analyzed whether communication professionals are possibly already used to *microtargeting* due to their daily job or whether the practice is generally considered accepted.

Conclusion

New technologies and digital media are increasingly creating ethical challenges for communication managers (Zerfass et al., 2020). The goal of the study was to find out how communication professionals deal with dilemma situations when they encounter them in their everyday work. To this end, emerging ethical dilemmas in digital communication were first derived from an extensive literature review and presented in an understandable way.

Since the debate on ethical dilemmas in our field is mostly normative and often researched with qualitative designs, this paper presented a descriptive-empirical quantitative approach. Based on theories and models from moral psychology, dealing with dilemmas was modelled as a cognitive decision-making process with different phases, and illustrated in a framework which was then used for further investigation.

The first contribution of the study lies in the integration of moral psychological theories and cognitive decision-making models into the body of knowledge of PR and communication management. Furthermore, an applicable instrument with three dilemma scenarios was designed and empirically tested. First findings from Germany indicate that communication professionals seem to be well equipped to handle dilemma situation on a personal level. However, gaps were identified on a meso level of organizations. Future research should replicate the study in other countries of the world to gain more insights on how practitioners deal with dilemmas in digital communication, especially with respect to different cultural and organizational backgrounds.

Nonetheless, a few limitations need to be considered when interpreting the results of the study. The first limitation points to the sampling. As the professional field of PR is open and no registry of all practitioners exists, it was not possible to gain representative data. In addition, social desirability may also have had an impact on the response behavior of the participants. In particular, the topics of ethics and morality are highly charged, requiring special attention to this aspect when examining the results.

Finally, the study offers practical starting points for organizations and communication professionals. Ethical challenges are a relevant problem for the profession today and in the future. A dynamic digital environment and advancing technologies will always provide new moral grey areas. It seems all the more important that the results of the study are taken as an opportunity to further professionalize academic education and training. Only if communication professionals are empowered to make informed choices by themselves and receive the necessary support, they will be prepared for the unpredictable future of digital communication.

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ESG and its Communication in Organizations in Brazil

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Abstract
To explore the multiple interfaces of the three ESG pillars (Environmental, Social, and Governance) with organizational communication and public relations, Aberje – the Brazilian Association for Business Communication surveyed its members in 2021. The main goal was to understand how companies in Brazil are organized regarding communication and corporate practices within the scope of the three ESG pillars. While considering the need of the organizations for new narratives of legitimization, the article also explore the interactions between the various agents involved in the topic, inside and outside the financial markets.

Keywords: ESG; organizational communication; public relations; new narratives; legitimation

ESG and its Communication in Organizations in Brazil

ESG stands for Environmental, Social, and Governance. In practice, ESG means a set of factors and criteria that make an investment more sustainable in valuing environmental, social, and corporate governance issues. It is a type of strategy in which profit is still the objective, even if the way to achieve it is different: the money is reallocated to projects that aim at a fairer and more egalitarian world, with greater responsibility for the use of natural resources and preservation of the environment.

The ESG agenda has recently gained traction in global financial markets. It was no different in Brazil. The survey "ESG and its Communication in Organizations in Brazil" was conducted to explore the multiple connections of the three pillars with organizational communication, public relations, and the complex interactions between the various agents involved in the topic within all market industries. The survey addresses issues whose objective is to map the communication and corporate practices present in companies in Brazil within the scope of the three ESG pillars. In addition to presenting the data collected by the survey carried out by Aberje, this article also connects with the idea of legitimation narratives used by organizations developed by the Brazilian researcher Tereza Lúcia Halliday.

About the survey

The survey was conducted by Aberje – Brazilian Association for Business Communication and its design and planning team: Paulo Nassar, CEO of Aberje and Full Professor of ECA-USP, and Hamilton dos Santos, Executive Director of Aberje, M.A, and Ph.D. candidate at FFLCH-USP; and the coordination team: Carlos A. Ramello and Dario Rodrigues da Silva. Data collection occurred between August 17 and September 21, 2021, through self-completion in an online system. The sample is non-probabilistic for convenience. Seventy-nine companies participated in the study, including associates and non-associates with Aberje. Of the 79 companies participating in the survey, 90% are private, with 58% being multinational and 32% national. They are distributed in practically all industries, chiefly Energy (11%), Vehicles and Parts (8%), and Transportation and Logistics (8%). They employ approximately 550,000 people directly. Most are located in the state of Sao Paulo (56%); however, there are representatives from almost all states of Brazil.

Most of the participating companies (49%) have Brazil as the origin of their capital. The others have capital distributed among 13 other countries. Regarding annual gross revenues, 37% preferred not to inform. Among the companies that reported it, 18% have annual gross revenues of more than R$ 15 billion, and 30% have revenue ranging from R$ 100 million to R$ 7 billion.

The Legitimizers in the Communication of Organizations

Brazilian author Tereza Lucia Halliday lists the various methods of legitimizing organizations by language in organizational communication. In the "symbolic construction of organizational reality," the metaphor will be one of the most effective methods. The best way to bring a substantially abstract idea closer to individual human understanding is to establish a symbolic relationship with the human body. For this reason, organizations often use biological metaphors, personification, and allusion to other subjects to initiate the process of justifying their existence, that is, their legitimation process (HALLIDAY, p.23-34, 1987).

The study of these metaphors can be done in various types of communication in organizations, especially in advertising and institutional pieces where there is a concern to lend human feelings, values, and attributes to abstract ideas. Moreover, the phraseology needs a context to locate itself. For this reason, Halliday brings up the three great legitimizers used for this: usefulness, compatibility, and transcendence.

Regarding usefulness, as the word itself shows, we will find the qualities of what is useful to someone in its meaning. Being a product or service, what the company provides to its customer should serve in some beneficial way. However, this would be a superficial level, according to Halliday. For the author, usefulness has a deeper level, which encompasses the notion of helping:

"Helping means contributing to, promoting progress or advancing something, aiding something. The usefulness of companies has this character of aid in that they contribute to the achievement of priority social objectives of economic development, social well-being, preservation of the national culture types." (HALLIDAY, p.38, 1987)

These two dimensions – which justify the pragmatic existence of usefulness – are also expressed by familiar places rooted in the narratives surrounding us today. We could add and expand the examples of these useful objectives with 'job supply and creation' and 'access to consumer goods.' When using its employer persona, a company also becomes a source of reliable information – a place providing direct security and benefits to its employees. Usefulness can be identified in a broad way and also in a highly individualized manner. In the Brazilian context, for example, companies that offer daycare centers for the children of their employees or extend the benefits of health plans for spouses, among other HR initiatives, can be identified as highly interested in legitimizing their usefulness – conquering not only the adherence of their employees but also the general public. These companies will end up in rankings that will elect "the best companies to work" and build many arguments to justify their activities.

On the other hand, compatibility as a legitimizer complements the argumentative web regarding those with whom companies do not have a direct link, whether they are employers, consumers, or suppliers. Since the relationship does not exist directly, there is a need to prove that balanced coexistence is possible, such as that of a neighbor. Still using a biological metaphor, it would be the discovery of the alterity of the company, where its relationship with external matters needs to be good; otherwise, it could cause unnecessary conflicts.

"We are separated by our individuality, divided by place of origin, religion, political party, lifestyle, ideology. Without divisions between men, there would be no need for identification or rhetoric. In other words, in any situation where there is a 'division' between people and their ideas, rhetorical acts as a corrective to re-establish the union through the identification." (HALLIDAY, p.39, 1987)

Recently, the most palpable example of the use of compatibility themes has been issues related to gender, race, and sexual orientation equality. The topic has become crucial in the direct levels of relations with employees and consumers, but also at non-relational levels of companies. There is a public expectation about actions beyond the rhetoric so that some kind of compatibility can actually be achieved, whether of employees or consumers. Using hashtags that borrow the motto "we are all" in campaigns is an example of the extensive use of compatibility narratives used today.

In its turn, transcendence, as the word itself says, "goes beyond" immediate impacts and justifications such as usefulness and compatibility. Transcendence has a relationship with the sacred, which is the opposite of the secular. To establish this relationship that concerns the ways of man to exist in the world, the opposition of profane/secular and sacred brings to light two processes that are at the same time opposite and complementary: sacredness and secularism.

From the myths of the origin of the world called "archaic societies," religious men establish their relationship with the world ritually. In the organization of time in cycles, the consecration of physical spaces, and the establishment of rites for phases and passages, they

consolidate their way of existence. The process of secularism – despite reversing the idea of approximation of the sacred and establishing secular, worldly relations, which have no meanings beyond its ends – will not escape repeating and reproducing the same methods of the time, space, and transposition organization. An "imemorial inheritance" manifests in the subject and the most mundane environment (ELIADE, 2018).

In the organizational environment – more specifically that of multinational companies, which are the object of Halliday's study – the promotion of transcendent themes will be given in:

> "[...] 'encounter of opposites in the dialectics of sacred symbols' when they justify actions that imply profit, exploitation of the labor force or abuse of the environment, in the name of 'progress,' 'the common good,' and 'a better future for humanity.' In this way, they settle differences, questions, and ambiguities for their external audiences and their members, whether they be executives, workers, scientists, technicians, or administrative personnel. The organizational transcendence has an appeasing function also with the internal audience." (HALLIDAY, p.41, 1987)

Naturally, the evolution of this theme over the years meets the main concerns of society in general, as a collective, while the very nature of work and the economy change. Nevertheless, when we got closer to the concepts developed by Halliday, we identified a range of factors that are inserted in the ESG pillars. We are very close to the Governance pillar when we talk about a usefulness narrative. The contribution, or usefulness, of a company to society and economic development is to have a robust system of governance, where issues such as compliance, anti-corruption, and the guarantee of a fair exchange between the labor force and the employer are complete. However, it is not enough to have them – we need to communicate on them. For Nassar and Parente, "companies need to place public demands in a legal, legitimate, and competent narrative" (NASSAR and PARENTE, 2020). It is from this essentially communicative need that organizations search for its legitimation through the discourse and development of a narrative of their own, usually linked to their culture.

The same happens when companies develop a narrative in search of compatibility, which approaches the Social pillar of ESG. Contributing to society in general, in addition to the selfish goal of profit, becomes part of the agendas of private organizations, organizational communication and public relations. They have, in their core, a professional practice of dialog with the various social agents and the public of the organizations. Not only issues of diversity, inclusion, and equity but also contributions to cultural, educational, welfare, and mental and physical health issues will be the focus of organizations' communicative actions. For Kunsch,

> "This dissemination of new patterns of habits, behaviors, and decisions – from microsocial to macrosocial levels – necessarily depends on the communication of new values. However, it has not yet reached a level where unified communications are produced around the global change in sustainable patterns and behaviors." (SOARES apud KUNSCH, 2009, p.29)

On the other hand, the transcendental issue – very close to the idea of purpose that is now fashionable in the organizational environment – will bring this more significant concern about the problems we face not as individuals but as a global society. Today, the transcendent themes of companies are translated into broad concepts such as sustainable development, corporate social responsibility (CSR), corporate social advocacy (CSA), and the triple bottom line (ELKINGTON, 2011), which approaches the E pillar of ESG. These themes will develop mainly in multinational organizations, which have a greater need for legitimacy because they are in different places from their origin. Transcendental themes will be central to their legitimate

narratives. If the world has problems, business objectives need to be in the same direction and move along the same paths, at least rhetorically. As Nassar argues:

> "If formerly governance practices (G) focused on the company's financial health were more valued, over the last decade, we have seen the influence of the environmental and social part (E and S) increase considerably not only in reports but in business routines. In this sense, pressure from investors on ESG excellence contributes to leveraging strong businesses and testing their adaptability to the 2030 Agenda. From this perspective, communication is substantial." (NASSAR, 2020, p. 9)

Despite its complexity, the theme has very well-marked coverage in the recent past of the global business environment. An understanding of the "resurgence" of ESG acronym in the financial market and a contextualization about its impacts on the Brazilian reality is necessary. Establishing these starting points is essential to understanding the background on which Aberje's research is based.

The emerging context of ESG

The acronym ESG was created in 2004 in a UN publication in partnership with the World Bank, "Who Cares Wins – Connecting Financial Markets to a Changing World" (UNITED NATIONS, 2004). It arose from a provocation by then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to 50 CEOs of large financial institutions about integrating social, environmental, and governance factors into the capital market. The document proposed a new way for investors and financial institutions to evaluate companies when investing. In practice, it was the suggestion of a new booklet of rules and recommendations for ESG issues to be taken into account.

Despite the publication's efforts and launch, the theme did not immediately become a priority in the investor and business guidelines. It took a move from the top of the organizations to make ESG criteria one of the main themes discussed in the business world. In 2019, the Business Roundtable – an organization that brings together leading CEOs from the largest companies in the United States, such as Amazon, Apple, JP Morgan Chase, Xerox, AT&T, Ford, and Walmart – changed this perspective. In a memo, the organization took a new position on the purpose of the companies in general. If the idea of profit generation to the shareholders prevailed as a consensus in the past, now the idea would be radically changed, turning to other stakeholders.

Formally, Business Roundtable adopted the idea that companies needed to look beyond themselves and their balance sheet. Then, 181 CEOs signed the Statement on the Purpose of a Corporation, in which they committed themselves to leading their companies to prioritize sustainable development and corporate social responsibility. The signatories included Apple's Tim Cook, JP Morgan's Jamie Dimon, Johnson & Johnson's Alex Gorsky, and BlackRock's Larry Fink. In the words of the current head of the organization and also CEO of JP Morgan, Jamie Dimon:

> "The American dream is alive, but it is wearing. Big employers are investing in their employees and their communities because they know that this is the only way to succeed in the long term." (ÉPOCA NEGÓCIOS, 2019)

The effects would quickly reach the Brazilian market, causing euphoria and anxiety among executives as early as mid-2020. In an article published in Exame magazine – one of the main business outlets in Brazil – the executive director of the Brazil Network of the UN Global Compact, Carlo Pereira, mentions how several business leaders sought to better understand how to suit the acronym due to the pressures of the financial market. This scenario of confusion, however, was precisely due to a question of communication. In Carlo Pereira's view, "there is an

avalanche of ESG information and difficulty of understanding because the vast majority of articles published in newspapers and magazines focus on the financial sector, almost a dialog between funds, managers, and banks. This promoted a desperate rush in the Brazilian market" (PEREIRA, 2020).

The new acronym, however, seemed to sound like a replacement or evolution of an issue already established in the business environment and communication in these organizations: sustainability. This idea is refuted in the same article by Pereira, when he says that "ESG is not an evolution of corporate sustainability, but rather business sustainability itself! In Brazil, due to the warming of the theme, many talk about a transition from one term to another, as if they were different things" (PEREIRA, 2020).

Sustainability, more than a specific area of companies, needs to be aligned with their business and be part of how organizations think and exist. Therefore, communication addresses how such organizations adopt sustainability for themselves. It goes from speeches (made up of the meanings of the organization's theme and its collective positioning) and narratives (personal senses that each one attributes to the theme) to the disclosure of specific reports, such as GRI (Global Reporting Initiative) – an international, non-profit organization and pioneer in the development of a comprehensive Sustainable Reporting Framework –, SASB (Sustainability Accounting Standards Board), System B – a global community of leaders who use their businesses to build a more inclusive, equitable, and regenerative economic system for people and the planet –, ISE (Corporate Sustainability Index) – a B3 indicator of the average performance of the rates of the assets of companies selected for their recognized commitment to corporate sustainability – among others. For Marina Grossi:

> "Communication is at the heart of the themes of sustainability and exposes the narrative of audience education and/or seduction to the theme, whether through sharing corporate actions, new policies, denunciations, coverage of tragedies, and above all, giving visibility to innovations that will move from the vanguard to malaria and historical reference." (GROSSI, 2020, p.7-8)

According to the study "The Evolution of ESG in Brazil," produced by the Brazil Network of the Global Compact and by the Stilingue platform, during 2020, the conversations on the theme on social media increased seven times, totaling over 22,000 contents on the subject (PACTO GLOBAL and STILINGUE, 2021). The study also showed that the talk about the topic had been pulled mainly by the press. Hence, there is still a space to be occupied by the corporate communications and public relations departments, which have taken time to assimilate the new language of the financial market.

Another factor central to the drive of the agenda in the business environment was the covid-19 pandemic. These impacts were recorded, for example, in an interview with Geraldo Soares, the investor relations superintendent of Itau Unibanco, the largest private bank in Brazil, to the journal Organicom. For Soares,

> "When the pandemic came, that changed. The pandemic has shown everyone the problems that companies had in sustainability. Because sustainability is not just social and environmental, it is the company's sustainability. Is it prepared to maintain its relationship with its customers at this time? Is it ready for digitation to protect its employees? Then ESG entered the room. The pandemic brought two powerful things: the digitization of communication and the ESG, which came into play once and for all. Funds not talking about ESG now have it as their agenda". (PARAVENTI, FARIAS and LOPES, 2021)

It is worth noting that, although these ESG rating agencies have their methodologies to compose their classification, there is no consensus in the market on the best framework currently applied. Furthermore, since this classification system is not mandatory and the acronym ESG is not a seal or title granted by an institution, companies may declare whether they adopt ESG-related actions in their sustainability reports and, in some cases, may interpret what suits them.

ESG Communication in Brazil

By identifying the euphoria about ESG in the business community from its inception, Aberje quickly sought to position and guide its network of professionals and associated companies to deepen the debate further. It could all be done without losing the historical perspective of all these themes - which found in ESG a powerful synthesis - that were already being promoted within the association. In 2020, Aberje announced the development of content, spaces for debates, and training to prepare organizational communication and public relations professionals to act more strategically in their organizations.

At the end of 2020, during the 47th Aberje Prize ceremony, it announced that it would dedicate the "Theme of the Year" – an institutional action for the transversal development of a topic of relevance to the community associated with the activities of Aberje – to ESG. In early 2021, Aberje published a matrix summarizing its theme of the year: "Communication and Ethical Capital." The choice of the topic, according to the association, "was based on ESG [...] tariff, guidelines that have been gaining strength in financial markets around the globe and that will increasingly guide the actions of the companies" (ABERJE, 2020). For Paulo Nassar, CEO of Aberje and full professor of ECA-USP:

> "The promise of new sources of financing for the Brazilian economy, channeled by the ESG agenda – which at various points converges with the ideals defended by Aberje – opens the perspective of a new basis for the multiplication of corporate and organizational narratives." (ABERJE, 2020)

However, these new perspectives opened by the ESG agenda lacked a reliable basis for the actions that were taking the scenario to date. Having this concern to provide data that could show a general picture of ESG communication in the country, Aberje then carried out the survey "ESG and its Communication in Organizations in Brazil," published in October 2021 (ABERJE, 2021). The main findings contributing to a better understanding of the Brazilian scenario and how organizations structure, measure, and communicate the issues related to the ESG pillars are highlighted below.

The euphoria surrounding the topic was also identified in the research when verifying that ESG pillars are present as priority in most (95%) of the corporate agendas of the organizations participating in the survey, being: among the top 3 priorities in 38% of them, among the top 5 priorities in 35% of them; and as top priority in 22% of them. As a result, 91% of organizations have programs focused on ESG factors. Among them, 81% are formal programs, and 10% are informal. Companies that do not yet have programs focused on ESG factors, which represent 9% of the total, claim that they are already in the implementation phase.

Key Objectives

Among the various objectives of the organizations with the implementation of policies and programs oriented towards ESG factors, the following stand out: to cause a tangible positive impact on society (declared by 62% of the organizations); to align with the objectives, mission, and values of the organization (61%), and ensuring the organization's compliance (37%). Other goals that can also be highlighted are meeting customer/consumer expectations (27%) and investor expectations (24%).

Importance of ESG Factors

What ESG factors are most important to your Organization?

● 164
Governance

● 152
Enviroment

145
Social

1º	37%	23%	40%
2º	25%	44%	31%
3º	35%	32%	32%

■ E – Environment (Ambientais)
■ S – Social (Sociais)
■ G – Governance (Governança)
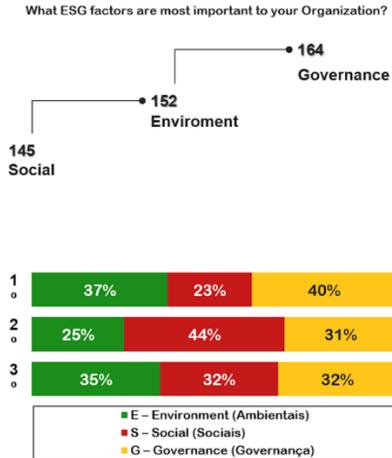
Table 1: Which ESG factors are most importante to your organization?

Corporate Governance first appeared when asked about the most critical ESG factor, with a total score of 164 points. In the second position, with a score of 152 points, the Environmental factor, and finally, in the third position, with a score of 145 points, the Social aspect.

Structures Responsible for ESG

The survey also reveals that organizations have a formal structure responsible for monitoring and managing ESG issues. In 67% of the participating organizations, there is a formal structure accountable for monitoring and addressing ESG issues. In 9% of organizations, the structure is defined for each ESG factor; in 27%, there is no formal structure since the theme is transversal to the whole organization. These existing formal structures are configured as an internal department in 79% of the organizations, and as a committee of internal areas in 21% of them.

In 50% of the companies, the formal structures responsible for monitoring and managing ESG-related issues – as an internal department or committee – have direct reporting of subordination to the Presidency/CEO of the organization. In a single respondent company, the report is to the Communication area. In the composition of the committees, the department of communication participates in all of them (100%) followed by Human Resources in 91%.

Table 2: Does your organization have a formal structure responsible for the monitoring and managing ESG issues?

NO, THE THEME IS TRANSVERSAL 27%

YES, FOR EACH ESG FACTOR 9%

NO 5%

DID NOT ANSWER 1%

YES 58%
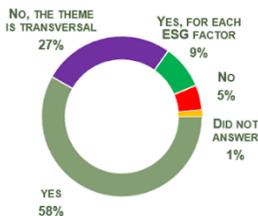
UN Global Pact

About 68% of the responsive organizations participate in the UN Global Compact as signatories, participants, members, or thematic patrons. Most UN Global Compact member organizations already use the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to set their corporate

performance targets (63%). Of those who do not use it, 8% want to use it this year, and 14% do not want to use it until next year.

SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals

"Clean, affordable energy" and "decent work and economic growth" are among the SDGs that most organizations use or intend to use. All 17 SDGs, more or less frequently, are being used or intended for use by the organizations participating in the research. Those with higher frequencies are ODS7 – Clean and affordable energy (49%), ODS8 – Decent work and economic growth (48%), ODS13 – Action against global climate change (47%), ODS9 – Industry, innovation, and infrastructure (47%), ODS12 – Responsible consumption and production and ODS5 – Gender Equality (43%). The least frequent are ODS14 – Life in the water, and ODS15 – Earth life, with 18% each.

Among the Sustainable Development Goals, which are being or intend to be used?

ODS 14 - Life below water	18%
ODS 15 - Life on land	18%
ODS 16 - Peace, justice and strong institutions	19%
ODS 2 - Zero hunger	23%
ODS 1 - No poverty	24%
ODS 17 - Partnerships for the goals	29%
ODS 4 - Quality education	32%
ODS 11 - Sustainable cities and communities	32%
ODS 10 - Reduced inequalities	33%
ODS 3 - Good health and well-being	34%
ODS 6 - Clean water and sanitation	34%
ODS 5 - Gender equality	43%
ODS 12 - Responsible consumption and production	46%
ODS 9 - Industry, innovation and infrastructure	47%
ODS 13 - Climate action	47%
ODS 8 - Decent work and economic growth	48%
ODS 7 - Affordable and clean energy	49%

Table 3: Among the Sustainable Development Goals, which are being or intend to be used?

ESG-related Metrics

The ESG-related metric most used by organizations is reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Among them, 16% of participating organizations do not use metrics for monitoring and reporting ESG-related issues. Changes in the organization's energy efficiency (39%), the general use of water by the organization (30%), measurement of progress against the SDGs (28%), and results of brand and reputation research (27%) are also used. In 20% of organizations, the classifications in rating agencies are used. The Corporate Sustainability Index ISE-B3 and the Dow Jones Sustainability Index (DJSI) are the most widely used.

146

Use of ESG-related metrics

ESG-related metrics are mainly used to communicate sustainable performance to customers and society. Among them, 15% of the participating companies do not use ESG-related metrics. The others, in most cases, use in communicating sustainable performance to clients and society (62%), in guiding business and in making decisions (52%), and in setting organizational goals for performance and growth (51%). They are also well used in measuring the impact of business strategy (44%) and communicating sustainable performance to investors (42%).

Barriers and Obstacles

Limiting funds for project implementation is the main barrier/obstacle to ESG programs (35%). The answer is followed by a lack of uniformity of understanding of the terms of sustainability among stakeholders (28%) and difficulty in measuring performance and quantifying the benefits of projects (27%). Lack of monitoring mechanisms (20%) and professionals specialized in implementing sustainability (16%) projects are also obstacles and barriers.

20%	27%	28%	35%	16%
LACK OF EFFECTIVE AND TRANSPARENT MONITORING MECHANISMS	DIFFICULTY MEASURING PERFORMANCE / QUANTIFYING BENEFITS	LACK OF UNIFORMITY IN UNDERSTANDING SUSTAINABILITY TERMS AMONG STAKEHOLDERS	LIMITATION OF FUNDS FOR PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION	LACK OF SPECIALIZED PROFESSIONALS FOR PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION
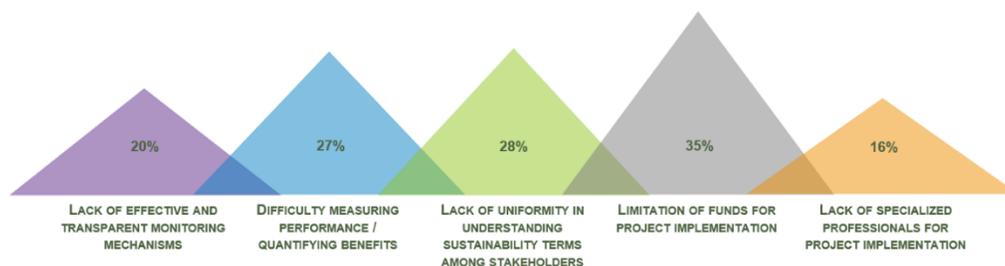
Table 4: What are the main barriers/obstacles to implementing your Organization's ESG projects?

Public Questioning

Customers, suppliers, and business partners question organizations about their sustainability achievements in 86% of participants; 53% do so frequently, and 33% more rarely. Press outlets also ask organizations about sustainability achievements in 84% of cases. In 43% of the organizations, this occurs more rarely, whereas, in 41%, this occurs frequently.

Means of Disclosure

News on digital channels, maintaining digital content channels, and open social media profiles are the most widely used means to inform what you are doing in sustainability. The five primary means used by organizations to announce what they are doing in the field of sustainability are:

1. *News (content) about the organization in digital channels, 89%;*
2. *Own digital content channels for strategic audiences, 75%;*
3. *Profiles in open social media, 72%;*
   (LinkedIn at 68% and Instagram at 52% are the most commonly used)
4. *Participation in entities, associations, and trade unions, 59%;*
5. *News (content) about the organization in printed channels, 53%.*

Sustainability Reports

Organizations draw up and disseminate periodic sustainability reports, which are integrated into the financial report. Eighty-one percent of organizations regularly draw up and publish sustainability reports. Most of the time, these reports (55%) are integrated into the organization's financial report. As for standards. 48% of the reports follow the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) framework, 6% of the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB), 5%

of the International Integrated Reporting Framework (IRRC), 4% of the Task Force on Climate-Related Financial Disclosure (TCFD), and 4% of the Climate Disclosure Standard Board (CDSB).

Final Considerations

Among the various data collected by the survey – which may base on different interpretative approaches – the idea that companies use ESG factors to have a positive impact on society reveals not only a characteristic of society itself – more demanding with companies acting in general – but also a concern with the collective that until a few decades ago was not so natural in business speeches and narratives.

However, it is necessary to question whether companies' declared concerns about ESG factors are existing concerns, considering that one of the main barriers to the achievement of projects in the area is the lack of funds for projects. Suppose ESG factors appear exactly as a language for the financial market to be able to "measure" better these actions. In that case, a vacuum to be filled encourages more significant investment.

What research brings with it is precisely this first panorama of the current Communication actions related to the ESG pillars, just after the buzz created by the changes proposed by the business leadership. From the point of view of the communication, it is necessary not to allow it to be carried out by unethical practices or practices that do not match the realities of organizations.

The adoption of an ESG agenda by companies and its well-done communication brings competitive advantages, improved reputation and image, expanded dialogue with its diverse audiences, and, especially, higher profitability. More than a reasonable discourse on sustainability, it is necessary for organizations to communicate evidence-based and verifiable data on sustainable performance. And for each audience, we speak specifically in a way that is understandable to them; that is, sustainability or ESG is not communicated in the same way for all audiences with which a company interacts. This is the magnitude of communication: making oneself understood in different realities, ensuring that everyone is part of this dialogue

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Insights from PR Leaders: Navigating Obstacles, Leveraging Opportunities, and Leading Teams to Capitalize on Data and Analytics

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Abstract
While there are many possibilities for using data and analytics to inform public relations practice, many communicators are unprepared to do so in this increasingly complex and growing space. Researchers interviewed 29 senior-level public relations practitioners who have experience working with data and analytics. The study sought to answer two primary research questions: (1) What are the perceived opportunities and challenges with data and digital analytics? and (2) How can public relations leaders create an environment to encourage discovery and innovation connected to data and analytics? Participants explained the challenges of managing data streams and alignment as well as the opportunities of leading with data and showing how public relations activities influence organizational outcomes. Participants also described how they are developing data competency among their teams by fostering a creative and curious culture, creating diverse teams, and championing employees.

Insights from PR Leaders: Navigating Obstacles, Leveraging Opportunities, and Leading Teams to Capitalize on Data and Analytics

Although research has been emphasized as essential for informing public relations process and strategies for decades, digital platforms and the amount of data shared each day have created both a need and an opportunity for new data-driven research approaches in public relations that more clearly demonstrate the connection of public relations efforts to organizational objectives (Weiner & Kochhar, 2016). Greater integration of efforts across paid, earned, shared and owned (PESO) channels (Dietrich, 2020) and communication disciplines is accelerating the need for practitioners to curate, analyze, and draw insight from disparate forms of data (Brown-Devlin, 2021; Wolf & Archer, 2018).

Sommerfeldt and Yang (2018) opine the public relations field is at a crossroads due to "the availability of big data and analytic tools that allow practitioners and scholars to assess publics' online behavioral patterns at an unprecedented scale" (p. 61). Despite the myriad of possibilities afforded by data and tools, the 2021 North American Communication Monitor (Meng et al.) indicated 40% of public relations practitioners are unprepared in data competency; 29% are under-skilled while 11% are critically under-skilled. According to Brown-Devlin (2021), "Simply stated, data without easily explained, actionable insights are useless, and effective communicators are crucial in unlocking a dataset's meaning" (p. 29). Public relations practitioners need to have technological literacy and managers even more so.

Through 29 in-depth interviews with public relations senior-level practitioners who have experience working with data and analytics, this study seeks to examine the opportunities and challenges of working with data and how public relations leaders can create an environment conducive to discovery and innovation through data for their employees.

Literature Review

Technology and the explosion of data are transforming public relations practice (Weiner & Kochhar, 2016). PR practitioners can examine data from social platforms, email campaigns, websites, mobile phone apps, internal platforms, unstructured data streams from other departments and more, to inform strategic and tactical decisions. For example, practitioners can use digital media for environmental scanning and issues management (Kent & Saffer, 2014; Triantafillidou & Yannas, 2014), helping them avert potential crises, monitor real-time crises, and combat disinformation and misinformation (Weiner, 2021). Wiencierz and Röttger's (2019) research in Germany indicated practitioners use AI to create detailed public profiles of key audiences, including region, demographics, and interests. Social media listening and analytics (Coursaria & van Osch, 2016) and A/B testing (Weiner, 2021; Wiencierz & Röttger, 2019) can inform messaging and narratives. Network analyses can identify and amplify influencers and journalist outreach (Galloway & Swiatek, 2018; Wiencierz & Röttger, 2019). AI can be used to develop and monitor chatbots and gamification to train and motivate employees (O'Neil et al., 2021). Website analytics can elucidate digital campaign effectiveness. Predictive analytics can anticipate outcomes, such as trends, sales or crises. In summary, while these examples are not comprehensive, they do show the breadth and depth of ways in which data and digital media can be used in public relations practice.

Despite the plethora of possibilities afforded through data and digital tools, most public relations practitioners indicate they are unprepared in data knowledge and skills (Lee & Meng, 2021; Virmani & Gregory, 2021) When public relations practitioners were asked to rate the top challenge of implementing AI across the enterprise, 31% said lack of knowledge about the tools, and 29% said more knowledge and training is needed (Virmani & Gregory, 2021). In the

Weisenberg et al. (2017) quantitative survey with 2,710 communication practitioners in Europe, only 22% indicated familiarity with the concept of Big Data among the communication discipline and many expressed a need for training in Big Data.

Two-thirds of communication practitioners responding to the 2021 North American Communication Monitor said practitioners have a "great need" (Meng et al., p. 105) to develop their competencies in order to help organizations remain nimble. An important note for managers: "More than three-quarters said organizations should be responsible for providing training and development opportunities for their communication staffs" (p. 105).

Lee and Meng (2021) explained communication practitioners can build data competency by fostering the following skills: cognitive analytics, data management, technology literacy, sense making skills for data transformation, and crisis management digital skills. The skills needed for cognitive analytics include cognitive flexibility, planning, creativity, critical thinking, research, and understanding the media and business. The sense-making skills needed for digital transformation include adaptability and ability to change, mindset change for lifelong learning, emotional intelligence, decision-making abilities, analytic skills, and digital campaign experiences (p. 9). Notably, the South Korean practitioners who were interviewed for their study said having the right mindset was more important than actual skills to work with data and tools.

In summary, while there are many possibilities for using data and analytics to inform public relations practice, many communicators are unprepared to do so in this increasingly complex and growing space. As indicated by the literature review, there are not many empirical studies about how communication managers are adapting to and leading the digital revolution. This study therefore seeks to answer:

RQ 1: What are perceived opportunities and challenges with data and digital analytics?
RQ 2: How can public relations leaders create an environment to encourage discovery and innovation connected to data analytics?

Method

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, researchers used purposive and snowball sampling to recruit 29 senior-level communication professionals with data and analytics experience, many of whom are Institute for Public Relations Measurement commission and AMEC (International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication) members. Table 1 describes their titles and years in the communication industry. Researchers interviewed participants via Zoom and Microsoft Teams between Nov. 5, 2021 and Jan. 12, 2022. Interviews lasted approximately one hour. Interviews were recorded and transcribed via Rev.com. Researchers performed open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) as they searched the transcripts for themes related to the research questions. The codes were then analyzed for connections to one another through axial coding and grouped into categories. The categories were evaluated through repeated read-throughs and discussions, and the central theses emerged.

Findings

Through 29 interviews with senior-level public relations practitioners, categories emerged related to predictions for data use within the field, opportunities seen, obstacles faced, and creative ways to inspire teams as they search for insights from data. To maintain anonymity, participants are cited by number with additional details available in Table 1.

Table 1 *Interview Participant Information*

Participant	Current Job Title	Years of Comm Industry Experience
1	Manager, Analytics & Insight	15
2	Communications Manager, Measurement & Insight	16
3	Managing Director, Analytics-Based Strategy	25+
4	Associate Manager, Digital Analytics	5
5	Data Consultant	20+
6	Director of Communication Intelligence	25+
7	EVP, Head of US Analytics	12
8	Assistant Athletic Director for Digital Strategy and Analytics	8
9	Associate Director, Data Science	10
10	Founder & Chair; CEO; Chair	20+
11	Chief Visionary Officer and Founder	25+
12	Partner / Senior Vice President, social media	19+
13	VP, Social and Content Marketing Lead	15
14	Chief Growth Officer	28
15	Audience Development Director	20+
16	Head, Media Analysis	13+
17	Founder and CEO	25
18	CEO	30
19	Founder & Chief Strategy Officer	30
20	Director of Data Science	7
21	CEO	30
22	Founder	42
23	Chief Data Officer	15
24	EVP and Chief Marketing & Comms Officer	30+
25	Chief Marketing and Comms Officer	22
26	Senior Vice President and Chief Communications Officer	31
27	Director	10
28	Founder and CEO	22
29	CMO	20+

Capitalizing on the Opportunities

When asked how data and digital analytics presented opportunities for public relations, three key themes emerged: (1) accessing a wealth of data to better inform and measure public relations strategies and tactics; (2) enhancing abilities for environmental scanning and issues and reputational management; and (3) capitalizing on counseling, storytelling, and analytics expertise for public relations professionals to elevate organizational leadership.

Working Smarter to Better Inform and Measure Results

Overwhelmingly, participants touted how data and digital analytics enhanced abilities to work smarter and implement more effective public relations strategies and tactics that produced

documented results. Participants discussed how data and digital analytics create opportunities to be more "predictive and prescriptive" (1) in communications measurement. They described the benefits of measuring and improving a campaign in real time. Respondents explained digital analytics offer a deeper dive into testing and evaluating content through using the data to understand audiences' interests, preferences, and behaviors. An agency associate director (9) said this ability to rapidly improve content is one of the greatest benefits of analytics for public relations because it enhances relationships with audiences through "giving people more of what's useful to them more quickly and truly creates better experiences."

Participants frequently used the term "leveraging" when they spoke of data and insights, and they discussed the importance of tying everything back to business objectives. According to one chief marketing and communications officer, "it's about leveraging data to be smarter, more efficient, and, as a profession, better enable [public relations] to tie our work to business outcomes and ultimately show how the work that we're doing is helping to advance bottom-line business objectives" (25). Though she works in a not-for-profit space, one communication manager agreed: "at the end of the day, we are in the business of leveraging insights to inform the future. This isn't just gathering data" (16).

Further, respondents said data and digital analytics are beneficial for identifying and engaging relevant journalists and other influencers who can help an organization connect with audiences. "We should be able to say, 'These are the top 50 people in order that matter to you by topic,'" explained an agency senior executive (10). "The other thing is you can see who's actually influencing a journalist…" (10).

Numerous respondents emphasized the opportunities of capitalizing on analytics to inform and measure public relations through tracking and analyzing data. A senior executive for a digital communication agency (11) noted the benefits of analyzing content strategies: "'Here's this amazing piece of content that I did, here were the results and here's what I'd like to do next…here's how we can improve it for next time.' That's a powerful position to be in." A senior executive at an integrated communications agency (12) concurred, "We talk about that [measurement] quite a bit or tracking links on a lot of our media hits to actually talk about the conversion factor, which has proved to be very valuable from a media relations perspective." Some respondents are more confident with using analytics to directly connect the impact of public relations strategies and tactics on business or organizational outcomes while others are more comfortable with saying measurement of public relations can show "influence" on outcomes. An agency executive (28) explained, "we're not saying that we generated it, but that we influenced it."

Being More Proactive with Issue and Reputational Management

Respondents discussed another data-related opportunity involving the value of digital analytics for guiding environmental scanning and issues management and enhancing reputation. They explained how analytics can help public relations professionals become more proactive with managing risks for an organization through identifying and monitoring opponents to assess how they act and the likelihood of potential attacks against an organization and describing it as maintaining a "different state of preparedness than you were in the past" (10). The ability to closely monitor and analyze data generated from social conversations and behaviors on digital platforms can be extremely valuable to protect an organization's reputation. A senior executive in social and content marketing in the finance industry (13) shared how analyzing social media conversations often leads to identifying critical issues, noting: "We flag it up . . . where we are

the first people on the front lines giving that information for the corporation…you're essentially mitigating all of the risk for the company."

Pursuing Leadership Opportunities in Analytics

Respondents discussed opportunities for public relations to lead analytics in an organization through combining the ability to understand data with counseling and storytelling skills. A senior agency executive of a digital communication agency (11) said, "Public relations is completely a great place to lead analytics . . . I mean, we are supposed to be the best at telling a story, understanding an audience, and analytics help us be better." Storytelling is critical in making the data meaningful and helping others understand it, particularly with the C-suite. A chief marketing officer (29) explained, "PR professionals . . . who make friends with numbers have a huge edge because they understand storytelling . . . when it's done well, when it's well-crafted . . . that's what drives people."

Further, public relations professionals' expertise in understanding audiences and building relationships can play a critical role in making data and digital analytics more aligned and meaningful for an organization. An executive in communication intelligence (6) noted, "if we take public relations more serious as relationship building . . . and understanding the other side more empathetically . . . adding that to the tech capabilities, I think, will create real opportunities to move forward."

In addition to opportunities for a PR department to lead the way within an organization's data analysis efforts, knowledge of digital analytics can also open pathways to leadership for individuals. According to one CMO, "Based on what I've seen in the communications industry and space, numbers and analytics are almost always the surest path to leadership. I think that's one of the great gifts that the social space has given us" (29). A senior vice president and chief communications officer said, "There are opportunities within the space to allow for a fruitful career from start to finish, with entry level analyst roles to manager and team lead positions to chief data or analytics officers in a growing number of organizations" (26).

Recognizing and Overcoming Obstacles

While data and digital analytics present many opportunities for public relations planning and measurement, numerous challenges may emerge, as well, including: (1) a lack of understanding about connecting, aligning, and applying the data; (2) dealing with data gaps across the organization and in global markets; and (3) apprehension about working with numbers and staying current with an ever-changing digital landscape.

Managing and Aligning Data

Vast quantities of data and confusion about the relationships among data points were a key concern among participants. A manager of analytics and insights (1) noted, "Digital has allowed us to have more information than we could ever process." A global manager of media analysis (16) explained, "when you have so much data . . . it's very easy to not be able to see the wood for the trees." To avoid analyzing a "fire hose" of data, s/he emphasized the importance of planning, otherwise "you can't see what's important and . . . you can also start drawing the wrong dots . . . between things." (16). Many participants discussed the importance of understanding relations between data and how a lack of understanding can lead to the wrong conclusions. Further, participants shared the challenge of aligning the different sources of data. A director of data science (20) elaborated on the challenge of determining credible and valuable insights from mountains of data: "You have to figure out how to ingest it, how to store it, how to structure it in order to actually get to something that's meaningful to you." To overcome this challenge, respondents said "structure comes from understanding" (21) what drives and impacts a

successful communication process and influences opinions and behaviors and how to connect to business objectives. Further, collaboration and peer review play important roles in mitigating wrong conclusions with data analysis. Peer review can involve "having your colleagues see what conclusion they come to with the same data and then overlaying that together" (16).

Accessing Consistent Data

Respondents discussed the obstacles of accessing and aligning data across an organization and domestic and global markets, as well as ever-changing technology access issues. Privacy laws, differences in platforms and other issues create obstacles for data alignment. An associate manager in digital analytics (4) for a global agency said, "It's very easy to get U.S. data; it's very easy to get U.K. data, but if you start wanting to get into some other specific markets, it gets more difficult because a lot of platforms were and are U.S. born and U.S. based." The changes in technology also have created challenges with data access. The "death of cookies" (4) was cited as an example, as well as changes with Google Analytics in hindering the ability to track an individual user and understand behavior.

Nurturing a Culture to Stay Current in an Ever-Changing Digital Landscape

The challenges of motivating staff members to embrace numbers and find the time for training and investing in resources to ensure a sound data infrastructure within an organization must be overcome to stay current with data and digital analytics. An agency senior executive (10) noted, "I think the biggest challenge is making sure that people actually invest the time to understand how to get to insights and how to actually make it part of their life." According to a participant who works in sports-related communication, "you have very few people who come out of school with the skills that combine any of these things we're talking about—data analysis, data sets, data driven, methodology measurement. There's very few that come out of school with that combined with communication" (20). An SVP/CCO said, "many organizations understand that this is a journey that will take time, commitment and investment, and that investment includes developing new talent with on-the-job training" (26).

Other respondents discussed how the changes in technology and the competitive landscape create difficulties for people to stay current. "Being comfortable with iteration change and being curious are just really key," a data consultant (5) explained. An agency director (27) concurred: "keeping up to the speed with the rate of evolution. There are so many new tools. There are so many new things happening in this space digitally."

A fear of math and comfort with words were common reasons leading to challenges with learning analytics, but for those communicators who shy away from data, a CMO warned: "businesses run on numbers, so if you are unwilling to grapple with the numbers, it's highly unlikely that you will advance in your career at the same rate as someone who is willing to grapple with the numbers" (29). Respondents said training for data analytics should address the need to motivate staff to become more comfortable with telling the story behind the numbers. The respondents recommended a need to view data and digital analytics as tools and the resources to more effectively plan and measure public relations campaigns. They also advised the critical need for senior leadership support of data and digital analytics to ensure appropriate financial support for training and technology, as well as a commitment to create a work culture inspiring employees to embrace data.

Ways to Create an Environment to Encourage Discovery and Innovation

RQ2 focused on understanding practitioners' efforts to create an environment that encourages discovery and innovation through data and analytics. Overall, participants talked about approaches that relate to one of three major themes: (1) fostering a culture that enables risk

taking, creativity, and curiosity; (2) creating and enabling diverse team structures; and (3) supporting and championing employees.

Encouraging Risks, Creativity, and Curiosity

Many participants talked about creating a culture among their teams to encourage risk taking when working with digital data and analytics. One respondent (25) explained that s/he tells employees "it's okay to try something and fail, right? You'll never learn if you're not willing to try and fail." Others talked about "making it safe for people to share their ideas" (29) and "not showing or in any way suggesting that time spent is a waste, or that it's the wrong answer . . . because there's not necessarily any perfectly right or perfectly wrong answer" (21). Participant 25 explained that above all else, discovery and innovation can only occur when employees are reminded "there should be honesty, this rigorous honesty that underpins all the work"—even if the insight reveals a failure in approach.

Some respondents explained the importance of rewarding employees for risk taking and curiosity. Participants mentioned giving awards, such as the "mistake of the month" (22), the "biggest flop of an idea" (21), and the "Genius Award," which rewards someone "who did something different, someone who found a different solution, someone who thought differently" (7). Respondents also discussed the importance of creating a culture that engenders both curiosity and creativity among employees. In one respondent's words, "discovery and innovation driven by insights, again, can't just come out of digital crunching and sausage-machine work with good algorithms" (5). Critical thinking and creativity fuel the process.

Participants frequently articulated the importance of asking good questions. Participant 19 mentioned the "5 why consulting tool," saying "it takes five whys to get to the real truth, the real value, the real metric, the real outcome, the real impact, the real, whatever they're aiming for." Another individual (18) said analysts need to demonstrate curiosity by being "good probers of the data." Respondent 18 talked about considering context and looking for the intersections between quantitative and qualitative data points and being a "contrarian" and "to not work on assumptions." According to another participant, "you need to question yourself, constantly be critical, constantly be curious" (5).

Creating and Facilitating Diverse Team Structures

Respondents talked about the importance of recruiting employees with a curious mindset and a desire to learn. Moreover, not all new employees need to have a communication or data science background, explained some participants. The degree is less important than whether they "have an inquisitive mind" (27). Respondents also explained the importance of facilitating communication and meetings among people of different departments, experiences, and party lines. Participant 1 commented that "a lot of companies are very siloed in their data, and we've got to be able to look at the data holistically." Some participants described the value of internally selling ideas and approaches revealed through data analytics. According to respondent 6, early findings shared with a client can spur new ideas: "oftentimes doing that, they'll then come back to me and say, 'Oh, this is super interesting. What if we did this?'" This show-and-tell mentality can often fuel innovation across department lines and with clients.

Supporting and Championing Employees

Participants discussed a number of ideas to support and champion employees in their data-innovation journey: training and self-learning, granting employees the time to explore the data, and mentoring and coaching.

Training and Self-Learning. Participants discussed many approaches to develop cultures that "create expectations around learning and growing" (9) in an effort to keep up with the ever-

changing digital landscape. Leaders give employees the freedom and time to do short, online training courses or to attend conferences showcasing upcoming developments. Participant 12 explained that at her/his agency, they reserve routine 30-minute blocks of time for employees to show and tell small developments and/or tools they are working with. Many times, during the process of self-learning, employees grow and feel empowered. One respondent (14) explained that training "gives them an opportunity to go out and do some things for themselves and be the hero on the team for finding something." Participant 15 talked about creating a "sandbox environment" to encourage employees to get out of their current wheelhouse.

Importance of Time for Insight Creation. Repeatedly, participants talked about taking the time to ask good questions and examine the data in order to discover insights. Respondent 20 said that leaders need to "allow time to think about problems and think about how you might innovate in a way to solve something." Others explained that good data insight and discovery involves more than simply putting out a report or slides. Participant 18 said that discovery and innovation require taking the time to look at data patterns on a weekly basis, and not monthly or at the end of a campaign. Some participants cautioned organizations from overburdening employees with constant deadlines that leave little room for innovative problem solving and discovery. Participant 21 explained:

> I think it's simply having people not burnt out, not ground down by really heavy project loads and constant tight deadlines. It's giving people space to be creative and do something differently, including out of work, encouraging them to follow a passion. Some of our people have gone back to the university to study fine arts, for example…. I'm a huge fan of that, because that's actually something that's going to help their minds when they come back to do work, even if that means that they're only available for shorter periods. I think that mindset of being available at all times at the push of a button, and it's 60, 80-hour weeks, I think that's gone. I don't think you can expect really high-quality creative analytics in that environment, with that pressure.

Mentoring and Coaching

Respondents talked about working with team members, both in terms of helping them to analyze the data and in identifying possible training paths for digital tools and analytics. Respondent 27 talked about mentoring people to adopt a "discovery mindset." Some participants coach employees in one-on-one sessions to dig deep in their analysis and to gain confidence, sometimes by simply asking "why" questions. Respondent 7 from a global agency said she facilitates team building sessions whereby team members get three minutes to present what they think is most important, with the idea that employees following afterwards must build upon that to help employees learn and discover. Some participants talked about hosting discussions with employees to better understand what interests them and to help with their professional development. Respondent 4 of a global agency said she seeks to cultivate passion in projects to motivate employees. She said: "One of my analysts I work with told me . . . they like working with me because I'm always excited about things." She went on to say: "because it's a career, you're doing this 8 hours a day, 40 hours a week, it shouldn't be that much of a chore. It is work, but there's enough data in there and a lot of work that you can make it what you want it to be."

Discussion and Conclusion

This research provides a contemporary and rich examination of how public relations leaders are navigating the opportunities and challenges of working with data and analytics and leading teams to engender discovery and innovation in organizations. While participants aptly described the challenge of managing the enormity and complexity of data across departments

and markets amidst ever-changing technology, perhaps most illuminating are their explanations of how they are leading.

According to participants, three primary skills comprise the trifecta of data leadership in public relations practice: strategic counseling, storytelling, and data expertise. Public relations practitioners do not need to operate or train as data scientists (Neill & Schauster, 2015). The greatest need for talent is for people who can blend data skills and public relations storytelling and strategy—the sweet spot. This research suggests that public relations professionals' expertise in understanding audiences and relationship-building can help align data and digital analytics and discern meaningful insights across various departments or areas of an organization, as well as domestic and global markets.

Respondents described using data to help their teams be more efficient and to demonstrate the impact and influence of their public relations strategies and tactics on organizational outcomes (Weiner, 2021). They also explained using data to identify and understand their audiences, construct stories, and motivate and amplify stakeholders, reinforcing what prior research (e.g., Wiencierz & Röttger, 2019) has shown is possible.

While public relations practitioners have expressed a lack of data knowledge and skills (Meng et al., 2021; Virmani & Gregory, 2021), participants in this study described how they are developing data competency among their teams by fostering a creative and curious culture, creating diverse teams, and championing employees. Here, practitioners frequently discussed the importance of hiring individuals who are innately curious, reinforcing research that suggests that having the right mindset is more important than the data skill set (Lee & Meng, 2021). Fostering curiosity among teams can also be piqued by encouraging employees to be a "contrarian," to consider the context of the data, to ask the "why" questions and to be given the freedom to fail. Some respondents described giving awards for the biggest failure or flop idea as a means of encouraging people to take risks to foster innovative thinking. Employees who are encouraged to be creative outside of work with their hobbies may also be more equipped to address data ambiguity and discover insight. Discovery can also be accelerated by encouraging employees from different departments and experiences to work together when analyzing data.

Participants also talked about the importance of granting employees the gift of time for both insight ideation and training. Some practitioners are providing in-house training while others are paying for third-party training and/or conferences. Public relations leaders are also coaching and mentoring their employees in their data journey.

Public relations practitioners in organizations of all types and sizes may want to implement some of these valuable ideas as they seek to either jumpstart or finetune how they are leading their team to work with data. Public relations educators should encourage risk taking, curiosity and creativity among their students when teaching research and analysis. Given that so many participants talked about the importance and difficulty of finding insight in data, future research could more fully examine how that process happens.

In conclusion, Sommerfeldt and Yang (2018) noted public relations is at a "crossroads, where data-driven insights are taking the field into new directions" (p. 61). This study builds a case toward a path leading to elevating the public relations field.

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Are We Legit? Measuring Perceptions of Organizational, Issue, and Actional Legitimacy Across CSR Partnership Types

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Abstract
This study examines how different types of CSR partnerships influence organizational, issue, and actional legitimacy. Results indicate that CSR partnership types affect perceptions of organizational, issue, and actional legitimacy via motives and that sport-governing body partnerships are seen as less legitimate than other partnerships. Study results provide meaningful insights for practice, specifically concerning what partnership types are seen as the most legitimate. This study also underscores the importance of highlighting the altruistic nature of the partnership's CSR efforts in communication with stakeholders. A newly developed scale for actional legitimacy offers a step toward finding a tool for measuring an organization's actions.

Keywords: CSR, legitimacy, partnerships

Are We Legit? Measuring Perceptions of Organizational, Issue, and Actional Legitimacy Across CSR Partnership Types

What makes an organization legitimate, and why should organizations care? Some scholars argue that legitimacy is earned by meeting stakeholders' standards for what is considered to be an acceptable organizational operation (Deegan, 2002). Therefore, it is socially constructed through stakeholder perceptions of the organization (Suchman, 1995). Organizations strive for legitimacy since a company that is not perceived to be legitimate is unable to operate or grow; in other words, organizations need to be legitimate to exist (Castelló & Lozano, 2011; Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). It is therefore not surprising that organizations tend to engage in (and communicate about) activities that can legitimize them based on societal and stakeholder expectations (Dacin et al., 2007) in the face of challenges such as gaining, maintaining, or repairing legitimacy (Suchman, 1995).

Scholars have argued that legitimacy has traditionally been underexamined in public relations scholarship (Merkelson, 2010). However, scholarship over the past decade has advanced our knowledge and application of legitimacy as a concept, particularly through its focus on the relationship between organizations and the stakeholders who grant their "license to operate." Some scholars have suggested that communicating credibly about an organization's corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities can help an organization gain or regain legitimacy with the public (Seele & Lock, 2015) or that CSR communication itself is a prerequisite to being seen as socially valid (Arvidsson, 2010). Castelló and Lozano (2011) argue that CSR communication plays a critical role in the ability to justify their societal contributions legitimately. As CSR has long been a societal expectation and a core part of an organization's business strategy, it can undoubtedly play a pivotal role in legitimacy creation and maintenance.

Extant public relations and management literature has examined legitimacy creation in CSR scholarship in various contexts and primarily through the lens of identifying antecedents and outcomes of legitimacy. Some topics examine include how media companies can gain legitimacy through CSR communication (Bachman & Ingenhoff, 2017), issue legitimacy and environmental legitimacy (Bortree, 2009), CSR information disclosure and legitimacy (Branco & Rodrigues, 2006), the role of CSR communication on social networking sites and perceived legitimacy (Yang & Ji, 2019), CSR authenticity and legitimacy (Lin et al., 2020), perceived credibility as a predictor of legitimacy in CSR communication (Lock & Schulz-Knappe, 2018), and testing different types of CSR philanthropy and sustainability in emerging economy firms in China (Zheng et al., 2015).

While the concept of legitimacy has now been examined in a robust body of literature, scholarship has not yet examined legitimacy creation through different CSR partnership types—a gap in the literature that this paper aims to discuss and empirically investigate. Study results provide meaningful insights for the profession, specifically concerning what partnership types are seen as the most legitimate. Theoretically, this study also takes a preliminary step toward contributing to legitimacy-focused research through the creation and initial testing of a new scale for measuring actional legitimacy.

Creating Legitimacy Through CSR Partnerships

With the ever-increasing societal expectations of how companies should contribute to societal good, engaging in CSR partnerships has become a best practice and a core part of companies' strategies. With regard to partnership type, while the corporate-nonprofit partnership model has been the most commonly identified and widely studied alliance, there have been an increasing number of partnerships involving two corporations (corporate-corporate partnerships)

and partnerships involving sport entities. Thus, understanding legitimacy creation from the perspective of practitioners at each type of organization is particularly important as stakeholder perceptions may vary and may impact the ways practitioners proceed with a partnership.

Corporate-Nonprofit Partnerships

Corporate-nonprofit partnerships provide an opportunity for corporations to build social capital and demonstrate their ability to innovate and benefit greater society (Holmes & Smart, 2009) by bringing together resources from different stakeholder groups (Shumate & O'Connor, 2010). Thus, corporations and nonprofits can work cooperatively to accomplish mutually beneficial goals (Harrison, 2019; Rumsey & White, 2009). These partnerships also present unique challenges because the different ways these sectors operate (e.g., differences in capacity) may create tension in the relationships that may not be present in other types of cross-sector alliances (Seitanidi & Crane, 2009; Shumate & O'Connor, 2010). Thus, understanding how legitimacy is created in this type of partnership is crucial and ongoing.

Importantly, corporations must demonstrate that they are partnering with a nonprofit out of society-serving motives and not self-serving (e.g., to boost sales or reputation) (Mantovani et al., 2017). When consumers perceive a corporation's nonprofit alliance as self-serving, stakeholder skepticism is heightened, leading to backlash on the corporation and supportive intentions (Ellen et al., 2006; Mendini et al., 2018). Despite the risk of seeming insincere, corporations seek out and promote their nonprofit partnerships as a way to build both social and alliance legitimacy (Yang & Ji, 2019). Accordingly, this paper aims to further understand the ways these partnerships influence different types of CSR legitimacy.

Corporate-Corporate Partnerships

Partnerships *between* corporations have become commonplace and have been examined in recent scholarly literature (e.g., Glavas & Fitzgerald, 2020; Scandelius & Cohen, 2016) as well as business publications (Aspen Institute, 2013). Although research has demonstrated that CSR partnerships have often been beneficial for companies (Hall, 2006; Rim et al., 2016), this finding has been solely grounded on the fact that the corporation has benefitted from its partnership with a nonprofit. What remains unknown is whether the same outcomes would be applicable in corporate-corporate partnerships, and more specifically, whether companies can create legitimacy through their CSR communication efforts through this type of partnership.

Sport Partnerships

The emphasis on CSR in sport has become an ever-present reality, from the NFL's Play 60 health initiative (e.g., Hills et al., 2019) to environmental sustainability initiatives (Trendafilova et al., 2013). Longitudinal analyses of programs like NBA Cares have shown that these impacts include the achievement of business objectives (Lacey & Kennett-Henzel, 2010), and thus sport organizations may operationally benefit from practicing CSR. One important factor in legitimacy creation may be sport entity-cause congruence, which leads to more positive perceptions of CSR and supportive consumer outcomes (Joo et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2019). Sport team executives report that engaging in CSR helps build legitimacy for their organizations to be seen as "good citizens" (Babiak & Trendafilova, 2011).

However, sport CSR is a relatively underdeveloped area of research (Trendafilova et al., 2017). Some scholars argue that sport entities, not corporations, may be *the* home for

legitimacy creation of CSR across sectors: Sport both has an obligation to practice CSR given its position of power and wealth in society, and it may also help make CSR more accepted as a business practice in other areas of society (Godfrey, 2009). Thus, this study also asks how stakeholders view CSR practiced by sport entities (in comparison to corporations or nonprofits) given their unique roles in legitimizing CSR and their own organizations.

A Path Forward to Measuring Company Actions

Legitimacy has long been studied as a concept integral to an organization's survival in society, but few scholars have attempted to measure legitimacy empirically (Chung et al., 2016). From a public relations and management perspective, scholars have acknowledged the role of communication in an organization's ability to build and maintain legitimacy (Boyd, 2000; Suchman, 1995). Chung et al. (2016) developed a five-item organizational legitimacy scale based on Suchman's (1995) conceptualization of organizational legitimacy, which focuses on the public's perception that organizational behaviors are "desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions and of an individual's interests" (p. 574).

Based on the role of communication in building legitimacy, scholars have acknowledged that another type of legitimacy, issue legitimacy, can play a role in the public's perceptions of the organization (Boyd, 2000; Brummer, 1991). Specifically, "issue legitimacy deals with legitimating a specific issue or an organizational behavior" (Chung et al., 2016, p. 406). Chung et al.'s (2016) scale was the first to empirically measure issue legitimacy. The authors proposed a six-item scale based on the general public, inspired by the conceptual work on issue legitimacy by Boyd (2000) and Coombs (1992).

Boyd (2000) introduced the concept of actional legitimacy based on the notion that actional legitimacy focuses on specific corporate actions and functions at the microlevel of analysis. According to Boyd (2000), actional legitimization involves appropriateness, responsibility, and conscientiousness, and acknowledges that the public's dialogue can affect corporate actions. However, to date, no valid measurement has been established for actional legitimacy. Since there has not been a valid measurement scale established for actional legitimacy, the authors take initial steps to test a new scale that can be applied to CSR communication literature and used to measure organizational actions. Furthermore, this study examines how perceptions of company motives play a role in legitimacy creation. The following hypotheses are proposed:

> H1: Perceptions of a) organizational legitimacy, b) issue legitimacy, and c) actional legitimacy will vary among CSR partnership types.
> H2: Intrinsic and extrinsic motives will mediate the effect of CSR partnership types on perceptions of legitimacy.

Method

A one-factor (partnership type: corporate-corporate vs. corporate-nonprofit vs. sport-governing body) between-subjects online experiment was conducted to test the proposed hypotheses.

Stimulus Material

The stimulus was a manipulated message presented in the form of a message description/prompt about a partnership and efforts regarding a sustainability-focused issue. Three different message descriptions/prompts were created based on real-life partnerships and issues. In the first condition, the message focused on a partnership between two

corporations (Proctor & Gamble and Eastman) and the partnership's efforts to contribute to plastic recycling efforts. In the second condition, the message focused on a partnership between a corporation (Amazon) and a nonprofit organization (The Nature Conservancy) and the partnership's efforts to contribute to climate change mitigation efforts. In the third condition, the message focused on a partnership between a motorsport team (Formula 1) and a sports governing body (Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile) and the partnership's efforts to contribute to renewable energy efforts. To maintain control over the effects of the stimulus, the word count in each version was similar (i.e. within a few words), and each prompt included factual information about each partnership and its efforts to contribute to the sustainability-focused issue.

Participants and Procedure

The main experiment was conducted online through *Qualtrics* with a sample of U.S. residents recruited and compensated through Lucid. Each participant was given a consent form, which was approved by the university's institutional review board. Data collection was completed in October 2021. A pretest was conducted using a Lucid panel ($N = 63$) to test measurement wording, survey flow, and response time. Participants from the pretest sample were not included in the final sample.

A total of 473 participants were recruited for this study. After eliminating participants who did not agree to the informed consent terms, the final sample included 439 participants. Among the 439 participants, 47.6% ($n = 209$) identified as male, 51.3% ($n = 225$) identified as female, 0.7% ($n = 3$) identified as other, and 0.2% ($n = 1$) preferred not to answer. The mean age was 45.85 ($SD = 17.27$). Regarding race, 75.4% ($n = 331$) were White, 12.8% ($n = 56$) were African American, 5.0% ($n = 22$) were Asian, 4.6% ($n = 20$) were Multi-Racial, 1.1% ($n = 5$) were American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.9% ($n = 1$) were Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. Among participants, 11.6% ($n = 51$) were of Hispanic or Latino origin while 88.2% ($n = 387$) were not. As for political views, on average, participants were somewhat conservative to moderate ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.67$).

After indicating implied consent, participants' pre-stimulus attitudes toward the companies included in the study (Eastman, Amazon, and Formula 1) were measured. Participants were asked to indicate their attitudes toward a list of six companies to avoid priming effects. Next, participants in each condition read the manipulated text that included information about a partnership and its efforts to contribute to a sustainability-focused issue. After reading the text, participants in all conditions completed the same questionnaire, including measures perceived organizational legitimacy, issue legitimacy, actional legitimacy, intrinsic and extrinsic motives.

Measures

Partnership type was the manipulated independent variable in this study. Individuals' perceptions of organizational legitimacy, issue legitimacy, and actional legitimacy were measured dependent variables. Intrinsic and extrinsic motives were measured as mediating variables. All items for mediating and dependent variables were measured using a seven-point Likert scale with "1 = Strongly Disagree" and "7 = Strongly Agree." Covariates included prior company attitudes and individuals' level of involvement with the sustainability-focused issue they read about in the prompt.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motives. Intrinsic and extrinsic motives were each measured using four items adapted from Ham and Kim (2019). The items for each measure were averaged to

form a reliable index (intrinsic motives: $M = 4.72$, $SD = 1.5$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$; extrinsic motives: $M = 4.74$, $SD = 1.38$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$).

Organizational Legitimacy. Five items adapted from Chung et al. (2016) were used. The company type was customized for each condition to reflect the real-life company included in a given condition. The items were averaged to form a reliable index ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.40$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$).

Issue Legitimacy. Six items adapted from Chung et al. (2016) were used to measure issue legitimacy. The issue type was customized for each condition to reflect the real-life issue included in a given condition. The items were averaged to form a reliable index ($M = 3.60$, $SD = .93$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$).

Actional Legitimacy. Based on Boyd's (2000) definition, we wrote new items to measure actional legitimacy focusing on its three theorized subdimensions: appropriateness, responsibility, and conscientiousness. Exploratory factor analysis of principal axis factoring (PAF) with oblimin rotation was run on the items to determine scale suitability. Results indicated that all items loaded strongly (>.74) on one factor ($\lambda = 8.48$), explaining 77.07% of the variance (Pett et al., 2003). Thus, the 11 items were combined into one scale for actional legitimacy ($M = 4.93$, $SD = 1.38$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .97$).

Prior Company Attitudes. Individuals' pre-existing attitudes toward each of the companies were measured before exposure to the stimulus. To control for priming effects, individuals were asked to indicate pre-existing attitudes toward three additional companies that were selected at random and not part of the analysis for this study. Four items measured by a seven-point semantic differential scale adapted from Rodgers (2003) were adapted. The four items were averaged to form a reliable index (Eastman: $M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.62$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$; Amazon: $M = 5.63$, $SD = 1.57$, $\alpha = .91$; Formula 1: $M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.70$, $\alpha = .91$).

Issue Involvement. Issue involvement was measured by using a seven-point semantic differential scale adopted from Becker-Olsen et al. (2006). The issues measured included plastic recycling efforts, climate change mitigation efforts, and renewable energy efforts. To control for priming effects, participants were asked to indicate pre-existing attitudes toward another sustainability-focused issue that was selected at random and not part of the analysis for this study. The four items were averaged to form a reliable index (Plastic Recycling: $M = 5.68$, $SD = 1.46$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$; Climate Change: $M = 5.37$, $SD = 1.79$, $\alpha = .96$; Renewable Energy: $M = 5.60$, $SD = 1.56$, $\alpha = .95$).

Results

H1 predicts that individuals' perceptions of a) organizational legitimacy, b) issue legitimacy, and c) actional legitimacy would vary among CSR partnership types. A series of analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) were performed to test H1. Participants' prior company attitudes and issue involvement served as covariates. The results of ANCOVA tests showed that participants reported higher levels of organizational legitimacy for the corporate-corporate partnership ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 1.17$) and the corporate-nonprofit partnership ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 1.41$, $p < .001$) than the sport partnership ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.39$, $p < .001$), $F(2, 429) = 8.32$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta2 = .04$. Regarding issue legitimacy, participants reported higher levels of perceived issue legitimacy for the corporate-corporate partnership ($M = 3.70$, $SD = .87$) than the corporate-nonprofit partnership ($M = 3.50$, $SD = .96$, $p = .001$) or the sport partnership ($M = 3.57$, $SD = .94$, $p = .40$), $F(2, 429)$

= 5.37, $p < .01$, partial η2 = .02. Participants reported higher levels of perceived actional legitimacy for the corporate-corporate partnership ($M = 5.06$, $SD = 1.25$) and the corporate-nonprofit partnership ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.42$, $p < .05$) than the sport partnership ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 1.45$, $p < .01$), $F(2, 429) = 7.18$, $p < .01$, partial η2 = .02. H1 was supported.

To test H2, we performed a series of parallel mediation test with 5,000 bootstrapping samples using Mplus (version 7.4). Based on the results of H1, the sport partnership condition served as a baseline condition. Intrinsic motives positively mediated the impact of corporate-corporate partnership on the legitimacy types (organizational legitimacy: $\beta = .06$, 95% CI = [.05, .33], $p < .05$; issue legitimacy, $\beta = .07$, 95% CI = [.03, .26], $p < .05$, actional legitimacy $\beta = .10$, 95% CI = [.08, .56]), $p < .05$, as well as the impact of corporate-nonprofit partnerships on legitimacy (organizational legitimacy: $\beta = .07$, 95% CI = [.05, .33], $p < .05$; issue legitimacy, $\beta = .07$, 95% CI = [.04, .28], $p < .05$, actional legitimacy $\beta = .10$, 95% CI = [.08, .56], $p < .05$). Extrinsic motives mediated the impact of corporate-corporate ($\beta = .05$, 95% CI = [.01, .11], $p < .05$) or corporate-nonprofit partnerships ($\beta = .06$, $SE_{boot} = $, 95% CI = [.02, .11], $p < .05$) on organizational legitimacy, but not other legitimacy types. The results indicated that corporate-corporate or corporate-nonprofit partnerships increased intrinsic motives, and in turn to increase their perceptions of organizational, issue, and actional legitimacy (see Figure 1). H2 was supported.

Figure 1
Mediation analysis
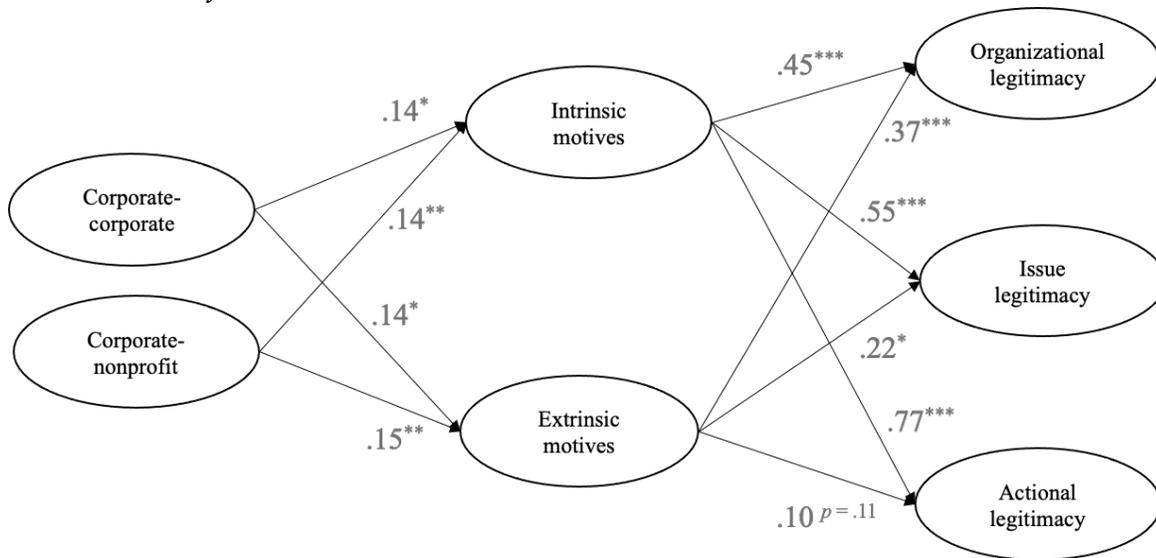
Discussion

This paper aimed to examine how different CSR partnership types create legitimacy among the general public and to investigate a path forward to measuring actional legitimacy. For organizational legitimacy, corporate-corporate and corporate-nonprofit partnerships were seen as significantly more legitimate than sport partnerships. That is, companies that are involved in both corporate-corporate and corporate-nonprofit partnerships and seem to be better positioned to create legitimacy with stakeholders than

sport entities are, contrary to Godfrey's (2009) argument for sport CSR. Prior research has suggested that perhaps the public views sports CSR communication differently than CSR communication from the corporate sector (Kim et al., 2018). Or, perhaps, sport partnerships are not seen as legitimate as corporate partnerships because they are neither as prevalent nor as established as corporate-corporate or corporate-nonprofit partnerships.

Regarding issue legitimacy, the issue tested in the corporate-corporate partnership (plastic recycling efforts) was significantly more legitimate than the issue tested in the corporate-nonprofit partnership (climate change mitigation) and the issue tested in the sport partnership (renewable energy). The issues included were selected based on real-life examples and individuals' prior issue involvement was controlled in the experimental design. However, while the issues examined were all sustainability-focused, perhaps other factors not controlled for this study could have contributed to differences in perceptions of issue legitimacy. For example, climate change mitigation is a naturally more controversial sustainability-focused topic than recycling, which could have impacted results.

Perceptions of actional legitimacy followed the same pattern as organizational legitimacy in that both corporate-corporate partnerships and corporate-nonprofit partnerships were perceived to be more legitimate than sport partnerships. That is, individuals felt these partnerships were more responsible, conscientious, and appropriate in corporate-corporate and corporate-nonprofit partnerships. This again may be a reflection of the novelty of sport partnerships and individuals' perceptions of and/or expectations of how CSR and CSR communication efforts should look in this sector vs. the corporate sector.

Interestingly, all three partnership types were seen as the most legitimate in the area of actional legitimacy. Perceptions of issue legitimacy were lowest among the three types of legitimacy. As issue legitimacy "deals with legitimating a specific issue or an organizational behavior" (Chung et al., 2016, p. 406), our study results suggest there is more to investigate about the types of issues with which partnerships are engaging and that their communication about their CSR activities in this area needs to be done carefully. The lack of significant differences in how the public perceives corporate-corporate and corporate-nonprofit partnerships in terms of organizational and actional legitimacy also calls into question whether the traditional corporate-nonprofit alliance offers more benefits than a corporate-corporate alliance. However, certainly, the benefit to the nonprofit is another factor to consider that was not examined in this study. However, this study offers a first step toward comparing partnership types and testing newly constructed scales for organizational legitimacy and issue legitimacy (Chung et al, 2016), as well as taking preliminary steps to develop a new measurement for actional legitimacy.

With regard to perceived motives, the results offer strong support for the long-discussed argument that it is not just what, but *why* companies do what they do that matters. Perceptions of partnerships being intrinsically motivated (doing something out of genuine concern for society) increases perceptions of legitimacy regardless of whether it is a corporate-corporate partnership or a corporate-nonprofit partnership. However, feeling like a partnership is engaging in action to increase profits, for example, won't enhance issue legitimacy or actional legitimacy.

Implications for Public Relations Practice

This study offers implications for public relations practice beyond generic considerations for how to develop a CSR message or to drive sales from consumers. By

examining three real CSR partnership types, this study offers guidance about what types of partnerships are deemed more legitimate than others. As companies are constantly faced with decisions about how and with whom they wish to partner to tackle a societal issue, they can lean on findings from this study that suggest that partnerships beyond the most commonly-known corporate-nonprofit partnership are just as (or even more) legitimate in the eyes of stakeholders. Since all partnership types were seen as the most legitimate in the area of actional legitimacy, stakeholders may be recognizing and appreciating the actions taken by CSR partnerships even if they don't see the issue itself as the most legitimate. It is important for companies to be seen as legitimate (e.g., organizational legitimacy), but the actional legitimacy measure suggests that actions that are altruistically-motivated are being noticed and should continue being measured. This underscores the long-accepted argument that companies have a responsibility to contribute to societal good and must do so to be seen as legitimate.

However, while extrinsically-motivated partnership actions may still lead to organizational legitimacy, it does not enhance issue or actional legitimacy. Companies must be sincere with their efforts and approach partnerships carefully to not be perceived as being extrinsically motivated. Finally, while this study seems to cast doubt on the viability of sport-governing body partnerships as legitimate entities, we would suggest that further research is necessary to more fully understand why. As scholars have argued that sport both has an obligation to practice CSR given its position of power and wealth in society, and it may also help make CSR more accepted as a business practice in other areas of society (Rumsey, 2009), it will be important to further investigate how sport-governing body partnerships can be seen as more legitimate contributors in this area. However, based on this study's findings, it is clear that corporate-corporate or corporate-nonprofit partnerships are recognized as more legitimate.

Limitations and Future Directions for Legitimacy Research

This study included real-life sustainability-focused issues for each partnership type. While a benefit of using a real-life example allowed us to learn about perceptions of each partnership type and its CSR efforts about a real issue, the lack of standardization across conditions may have impacted issue legitimacy measurements. Furthermore, future studies could test different CSR partnership types and/or types of CSR issues (e.g., health-focused issues, diversity-focused issues, etc.). With regard to the actional legitimacy scale, the authors used this study as a preliminary test with intentions to retest the scale through another independent round of data collection for another investigation. Extant literature has demonstrated how CSR communication can impact perceptions of legitimacy, but more robust measurement is necessary for our continued understanding of how and why companies can build legitimacy through CSR strategy.

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Gender Equality in Public Relations and Communication: A Comprehensive Study Bridging the Knowledge Between North and Latin Americas

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Abstract
This paper investigates the topic of gender equality in public relations and communication in North and Latin Americas. By comparing the responses from communication professionals in four regions (i.e., Northern North America, Southern North America, South America, and Central America and the Caribbean), we confirmed that unequal treatment, nontransparent promotion policies, the lack of networks and development programs, and the limited number of inspiring female role models in those regions are key factors hindering women's professional development.

Keywords: Gender Equality; Gender Inequality, North America; Latin America; Communication professionals; Public Relations practitioners, Glass ceiling, Job disparity, Leadership

Gender Equality in Public Relations and Communication: A Comprehensive Study Bridging the Knowledge Between North and Latin Americas

The study of women in public relations began to gain more force and attract the attention of academics since the publishing of the *Velvet Ghetto* study in 1986 (Topić et al., 2020). In general, research on gender equality in communication focuses on two main categories: 1) employment discrimination as reflected in wage gap, technical roles for women, and educational differences; and 2) gender bias against women as related to gender stereotyping, chauvinism and feminization of the industry when making decisions on promotion and leadership advancement.

The feminist theory has been one of the dominant theoretical frameworks in the past to explore the subject. Research in this stream has revealed subtle and obvious gender inequalities, as well as addressed the change to eradicate or reduce inequalities. Numerous studies have found gender discrepancies in public relations in aspects such as hiring, salary, promotions, and power positions (Aldoory & Toth, 2002). Since the beginning, an invisible structural barrier (or the glass ceiling) has blocked women from reaching senior management positions in the public relations industry (Wrigley, 2002). Although women in public relations occupy more than 70 percent of jobs, reliable studies continue to show that men tend to be favored in hiring, with higher salaries and promotions to managerial positions (Aldoory & Toth, 2002). The impact of masculinity and its relationship with power affects women in public relations significantly, which has created male networks and prejudices against women (Topić et al., 2020). However, most of the previous research on this topic has largely based in the United States.

When examining the public relations profession in Latin America, the professionalization itself has been affected by different aspects of the political system and structural issues in that particular region. When the public relations profession has been significantly connected to the profession of journalism in Latin America, it creates "a hybrid and ambiguous definition between the two professions" (Mellado & Barría, 2012, p. 447). Furthermore, Ferrari points out that the weaknesses of professional organizations and low participation in international associations have made it difficult to professionalize the public relations field (Ferrari, 2011). This phenomenon has also contributed to the fact that research on public relations in this region is scarce and lack of comprehensiveness. In addition, the topic of gender equality has not been researched in this region, but it is a much-needed task on the research agenda.

Therefore, our research endeavors to provide the current reality of gender equality in the profession of public relations in the geographic region of America (i.e., North America and Latin America). Specifically, we explore the perceptions of gender equality in four regions in America, including Northern North America, Northern South America, Central America and the Caribbean, and Southern South America. By doing so, we aim at exploring the following four issues, including: 1) whether gender equality in communication has improved in the four regions, 2) how communication professionals have perceived the impact of the glass ceiling; 3) what are the potential barriers causing the glass ceiling issue for women in public relations in those regions; and 4) who is most capable of leading the change in gender equality.

As the first comprehensive study evaluating data from most countries in the Americas concerning major aspects of gender equality in communication and public relations, we hope to offer more insights and effective solutions to address the issue of gender inequality in both North and Latin America. This will be the basis of future large-scale studies that will aid in the design of research on gender equality, not just in the communication and public relations industry, but hopefully in a much broader scope. More research and practical implications are discussed.

Literature Review

Gender inequality in public relations profession in North America

The public relations profession has been criticized for lacking racial diversity and inclusion. At the same time, the gender representation in the industry remains skewed at the top leadership level. The *PRovoke* published an article in 2015 addressed that while women make up 70% of the PR workforce in the U.S., they only hold about 30% of the top positions in the industry (Shah, 2015). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, women make up 71.4% of those employed in the public relations industry in 2019. The ethnic makeup of the public relations industry in the U.S. is 89.8% white, 8.0% African American, 0.4% Asian American, and 1.4% Hispanic or Latino (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019), which presents an urgent need for organizations to develop and implement effective diversity and inclusion initiatives. The skewed gender and racial representation in the industry also contributes to the existence of a pay gap between men and women (Chitkara, 2018). Such pay gap becomes even greater when comparing white PR professionals to nonwhites when all other variables are held constant such as tenure, education, location, job type, gender, etc. (Shah, 2017).

However, the more discouraging truth is this significant evaluation gap based on gender perceptions has not changed nor improved much in the public relations profession in the past five years. More sharp gender gaps are also found in job engagement, trust in the workplace, job satisfaction, organizational culture in supporting two-way communication, and stress factors in their jobs (Meng, Reber, Berger, Gower, & Zerfass, 2019). In general, women in public relations feel less engaged, less satisfied with their current job status, and less optimistic about their future career development. They also feel less confident in their work cultures in sharing decision making and less trusting of their organizations in taking their opinions into account.

Not surprisingly, the unbalanced gender scene has existed in the public relations industry for a few decades as witnessed by several benchmark studies done by pioneering feminist scholars in public relations research (e.g., Aldoory & Toth, 2002; Cline et al., 1986; Grunig, L., 2006; Hon, 1995; Toth & Cline, 1989, 1991; Toth & Grunig, L., 1993; Wrigley, 2002). The stream of feminist scholarship in public relations research has significantly contributed to our understanding of women's experience and perspectives in the public relations profession and the challenges faced by women working in public relations in North America. Several recurring themes are confirmed by these early studies on gender issues in public relations. Some major ones include: 1) The noticeable salary disparity between men and women is prevalent (e.g., Toth & Cline, 1991); 2) The socialization problems of women who want careers steer women to self-select technical roles, as opposed to managerial roles (e.g., Cline et al., 1986; Toth, 1989); 3) The existence of institutional factors and barriers (or the glass ceiling) prevents women from being promoted or limits their advancement opportunities (e.g., Wright et al., 1991); and 4) The double standards women are facing between work and family force unfair choices and result in unfair treatment (e.g. Hon, 1995; Wrigley, 2002).

The inequality faced by women in public relations in Latin America

When reviewing the literature of gender issues in public relations in Latin America, it becomes clear that women's under-representation in leadership positions is largely attributed to traditional gender expectations and practices. In Latin America, inequality has been constant historically and with normative establishment since the conquest of the Spanish empire (in Central, South America and the Caribbean) and the Portuguese empire (in Brazil). Gender inequality is framed in social customs that are legitimized through institutional and organizational procedures. Such a social context influences the analysis of gender equity in each

country and region, including in economically and socially productive areas (Ganga Contreras, et al., 2015).

Although the United Nations (2010) has warned that gender inequality is one of the main dimensions of inequality, women in Latin America still face the stereotypes and challenges reinforced through national and organization cultures. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in 2012 defined that the work for advancing gender equality in Latin America should be a top priority. The interactions of microeconomic and social factors, such as human capital (e.g., education, health, work experience and skills), social norms, preferences, and household structure and dynamics, are essential mediators shaping women's economic opportunities and decisions regarding their participation in the economy (Chioda, 2011).

Not surprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the labor inequality between men and women in Latin America. The IDB records show that the loss of employment by gender in each country in Latin America, from February 2020 to June 2021, maintained a significantly negative impact on women. There are only two South American countries, Bolivia, and Paraguay, observing a timid balance in employment recovery, with percentage differences between women and men of less than 5% (Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean - IDB, 2021). In general, in Latin America, the pandemic deepens inequality in women's access to and permanence in employment, which further weakens their autonomy. The most recent data showed the participation rate of men in the labor market was 69%, while the rate of women in the labor market was 40% in 2020 (CEPAL, 2021). More recently Persigo (2018) conducted a mapping of the communication market in Brazil and found that more women (42%) remain in the lower base of salaries ($6,400 Brazilian real in average), if compared to men (23%). On the other hand, men predominate with 31.4% in high-end salary (above $18,000 Brazilian real), if compared to women (7.1%) in the industry. The significant compensation gap further confirms the existence of gender biases in the public relations profession in Latin America, which calls for more research and actions to drive change. Therefore, we proposed the following research questions to direct our study:

RQ1: Do communication professionals in four regions in America (i.e., Northern North America, Southern North America, South America, and Central America and the Caribbean) feel gender inequality in communications has been improved?

RQ2: Do communication professionals in four regions of America perceive that the glass ceiling affects women in the profession? If so, at which level do they perceive this barrier (i.e., organization, departmental, professional, or personal level)?

RQ3: What are the reasons that communication professionals believe contribute to the issue of glass ceiling in the four regions of America? Do reasons remain the same across the regions? If not, what are the differences?

RQ4: Who is perceived by the communication professionals as the most capable leader in changing the current gender inequality situation faced by women in America?

RQ5: What is the situation regarding women in leading communication positions in the four regions of America?

Research Method

Sample and Procedure

In order to address our research questions, we used the method of secondary data analysis. By obtaining the permission from the international research teams of the North American Communication Monitor (NACM) and the Latin American Communication Monitor (LCM), we were granted the access to their 2020-2021 data sets. Thus, we performed an

international comparative analysis on the topic of women in communications based on the combined data sets of NACM and LCM. The following paragraphs report the data qualification and sample profiles.

Sample 1: NACM 2020-2021

Our first data set is NACM 2020-2021. According to Meng, Reber, Berger, Gower, and Zerfass (2021), the responses of NACM 2020-2021 were recruited by using the Qualtrics online survey platform. The final data set included 1,046 communication professionals in North America (268 in Canada and 778 in the U.S.) that provided valid answers for the 40 questions. On the topic of gender equality in the profession, two-thirds (65.6%) of respondents observed improvement in their country, though nearly half (49.5%) of surveyed women said they were personally affected by the glass ceiling barrier in leadership advancement. The section also explores reasons preventing women from reaching top leadership positions in the communication profession and the driving force in changing the gender inequality situation.

Sample 2: LCM 2020-2021

Our second data set is LCM 2020-2021. According to Alvarez-Nobell, Molleda, Moreno, Herrera, Athaydes, and Monsalve (2021), LCM 2020-2021 used a database of email addresses of more than 20,000 communication and public relations professionals throughout Latin America to compile the survey data. A total of 1,850 professionals who work in communication departments of companies, consultants, non-profit and government organizations participated in the online survey, which includes 1,683 valid cases that represent 16 countries of the subcontinent, encompassing for the first time Puerto Rico and Cuba. On the topic of gender inequality in communications, the LCM reported that women make up more than half of the communication departments and agencies while but only a few achieved top leadership positions. The geographic regions and countries included in this study are summarized in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Geographic regions and countries included in the study

	Geographic region	Countries	Sample
North America	Northern North America	Canada and the United States	1,046
	Southern North America	Mexico and Puerto Rico	189
Latin America	Central America and the Caribbean	Costa Rica, El Salvador, Panama, and Dominican Republic	297
	South America	Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela	1,152

Results

RQ1: Improvement in gender equality in communications

Our first research question focuses on investigating communication professionals' perceptions on gender inequality in the four regions and its improvement. Results indicated that overall, the surveyed communication professionals tended to agree that gender equality has improved over the last five years in their country ($M = 3.75$, *S.D.* $= 1.12$, 95% C.I. $= (3.71 - 3.80)$, $F [3, 2606] = .55$, $p = .65$) on a scale ranging from 1 (fully disagree) to 5 (fully agree). Details of the mean comparisons for this question are summarized in **Table 2**. Communication professionals in these four regions reported a very similar score acknowledging they have

experienced the improvement in gender equality in communications in their country. Although results showed a neutral perception reflecting on the number of efforts that have been done towards supporting women in communications in their country ($M = 2.96$, *S.D.* = 1.40, 95% C.I. = (2.91 - 3.02)), we found significant differences across the four regions (F [3, 2605] = 48.47, *p* < .001). Communication professionals in South America reported a significantly low score when assessing enough is done to support women in communications.

In general, communication professionals in the Northern North America, Southern North America, and Central America regions assessed the support significantly higher than their peers in South America. Details of the mean comparisons for this question are summarized in **Table 3**. Overall, the results showed although professionals perceived some improvement in gender equality in communications, they also acknowledged that there is still much work to do towards supporting women in the communication field.

Table 2. Perception of communication professionals towards the improvement of gender equality in the past five years

Gender equality in communications has improved within the last five years			
Geographic region	***Mean***	***S.D.***	**95% C. I.**
Northern North America	3.72	.924	3.67 - 3.78
Southern North America	3.79	1.293	3.61 - 3.98
Central America and the Caribbean	3.73	1.442	3.57 - 3.90
South America	3.78	1.271	3.71 - 3.86

Table 3. Perception of communication professionals with regards to the support of women in communications in the past five years

Enough is done to support women in communications			
Geographic region	***Mean***	***S.D.***	**95% C. I.**
Northern North America	3.28	1.18	3.21 - 3.35
Southern North America	3.17	1.38	2.97 - 3.38
Central America and the Caribbean	3.09	1.48	2.92 - 3.26
South America	2.59	1.48	2.51 - 2.68

RQ2: The glass ceiling in communications

Our second research question is interested in investigating the glass ceiling phenomenon perceived by communication professionals in their country and within their organization. Overall, communication profession tended to agree the glass ceiling is an issue in their country ($M = 3.74$, *S.D.* = 3.95, 95% C.I. = (3.59 - 3.89)), on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) or 6 (do not know). Statistically, significant differences were found across the four regions (F [3, 2617] = 16.14, *p* < .001). Professionals in Southern South America reported a significantly high score, indicating the glass-ceiling problem affects the communication profession in their country/region (i.e., Mexico and Puerto Rico). When asked specifically if this affected their own communication department/agency and the female practitioners working in similar positions, the average response tended to neutrality ($M = 2.91$, *S.D.* = 3.04, 95% C.I. = (2.80 - 3.03)), ($M = 3.24$, *S.D.* = 5.20, 95% C.I. = (3.04 - 3.44)), respectively.

More importantly, when looking at the data resulting from the comparison of responses between the four regions, we found statistically significant differences across the four regions: the Southern North America region scored significantly higher than the Northern North America

region ($Mean_{diff}$ = 2.06, 95% C.I. = (1.26 - 2.86), $S.E.$ = .31, p < .001), followed by the Central America region ($Mean_{diff}$ = 1.92, 95% C.I. = (.97 - 2.86), $S.E.$ = .37, p < .001) and the South America region ($Mean_{diff}$ = 2.08, 95% C.I. = (1.28 - 2.87), $S.E.$ = .31, p < .001).

Moreover, the next significant differences were found when asked if the glass ceiling issue affected their communication department/agency. Communication professionals in the Northern North America ($Mean_{diff}$ = .61, 95% C.I. = (.28 - .95), $S.E.$ = .13, p < .001) and the Southern North America ($Mean_{diff}$ = .92, 95% C.I. = (.31- 2.87), $S.E.$ = .24, p < .001) regions reported significantly higher scores than those in the South America region. Professionals in Southern North America also reported a significantly higher score than those in Central America ($Mean_{diff}$ = .77, 95% C.I. = (.04 – 1.50), $S.E.$ = .29, p < .001).

Lastly, specifically related to if female practitioners in similar positions were affected, more significant differences were found. Professionals in Southern North America reported a significantly higher score than those in Northern North America ($Mean_{diff}$ = 2.95, 95% C.I. = (1.91 – 3.99), $S.E.$ = .41, p < .001), followed by professionals in Central America ($Mean_{diff}$ = 3.23, 95% C.I. = (1.99 – 4.47), $S.E.$ = .48, p < .001) and South America ($Mean_{diff}$ = 3.47, 95%C.I. = (2.43 – 4.51), $S.E.$ = .40, p < .001).

As gender inequality affects women, we also evaluated if the female professionals themselves are affected directly by the glass ceiling effect. Our findings indicate that women agreed that the glass ceiling phenomenon affected them directly (M = 3.73, $S.D.$ = 1.77, 95% C.I. = (3.66 - 3.80). The Southern North America ($Mean_{diff}$ = .76, 95% C.I. = (.38 - 1.14), $S.E.$ = .15, p < .001), the Central America ($Mean_{diff}$ = .38, 95% C.I. = (.06 - 71), $S.E.$ = .13, p < .001), and the South America ($Mean_{diff}$ = .52, 95% C.I. = (.29 – .75), $S.E.$ = .09, p < .001) perceived this issue statistically significantly higher than the Northern North America region.

RQ3: Reasons hindering women from reaching the top leadership positions

There is a common belief that women do not reach top positions in strategic communication and public relations because there are factors hindering them, which is the purpose of our third research question. When examining the data, several factors were rated high by professionals on a Likert-scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) as displayed in **Table 4**. When looking into the statistical meanings of the data, we identified multiple significant differences across the regions as displayed in **Table 5**.

Table 4. Factors preventing women from reaching top positions

| Factors preventing women from reaching top positions	*Mean*	*S. D.*	95% C. I.
Lack of specific competences	2.46	4.27	2.26 – 2.66
Lack of ambition	2.41	4.27	2.21 – 2.61
Informal and non-transparent promotion policies	3.91	4.76	3.69 – 4.14
Lack of flexibility to meet family obligations	3.93	2.57	3.81 – 4.05
Lacks networks and specific development programs	3.80	4.19	3.60 – 4.00
Lacks inspiring female role models	3.33	4.83	3.10 – 3.56

Table 5. Statistical differences across the four regions indicating a higher score for factors preventing women from reaching top positions in the communications and public relations field

Factors	Geographical regions	*Mean diff.*	*p-value*
Lack of specific competences	NNA vs SA	1.48	< .001
	NNA vs CAC	.98	< .03
	SNA vs NNA	1.16	< .04
	SNA vs SA	2.64	< .001
	SNA vs CAC	2.14	< .001
Lack of ambition	NNA vs SA	1.35	< .001
	NNA vs CAC	1.09	< .02
	SNA vs NNA	1.24	< .001
	SNA vs SA	2.58	< .001
	SNA vs CAC	2.33	< .001
Informal and non-transparent promotion policies	SNA vs NNA	3.16	< .001
	SNA vs SA	3.18	< .001
	SNA vs CAC	3.40	< .001
Lack of flexibility to meet family obligations	SNA vs NNA	1.04	< .001
	SNA vs SA	.78	< .02
	SNA vs CAC	.95	< .02
Lacks networks and specific development programs	SNA vs NNA	2.08	< .001
	SNA vs SA	2.11	< .001
	SNA vs CAC	2.06	< .001
Lacks inspiring female role models	NNA vs SA	.69	< .04
	SNA vs NNA	2.41	< .001
	SNA vs SA	3.10	< .001
	SNA vs CAC	3.01	< .001

RQ4: Who is capable of changing the gender inequality situation

Diving deeper into who communication practitioners identify as a leader of changing the current situation of women in communications, the main actor chosen was organizations (i.e., by changing structures and cultures) with 54.7% across regions. Followed by female communication practitioners and professional communities/associations (i.e., by uniting and supporting female practitioners) with 22.8% and 22.5%, respectively. If we go into the data by region, we found that organizations were selected the most in South America (26.7%), followed by Northern North America (18.6%), Central America and the Caribbean (5.9%), and Southern North America (3.6%). Female practitioners themselves were selected in 15.1%, 5%, 1.6%, and 1%, in Northern North America, South America, Central America and the Caribbean, and Southern North America, respectively. Lastly, professional communities/associations were indicated the most in Northern North America (8.9%), subsequently by South America (8.1%), Central America and the Caribbean (3.4%), and Southern North America (2.1%) (as displayed in Figure 1). There were statistically significant differences for the three answer options between the different regions (n= 1758) (X^2 = 141.486, *d.f.* = 6, *p* <.001).

Figure 1. Survey results of who communication practitioners identify as a leader of changing the current situation of women in communications per region.
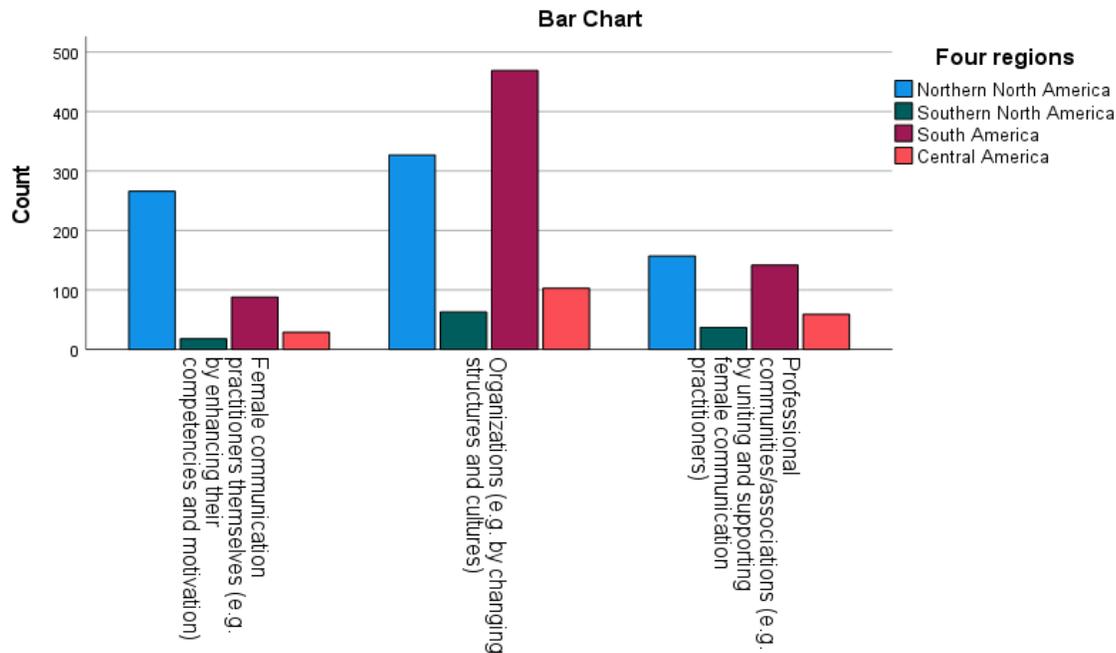
RQ5: The current landscape of women in leading communication positions

        Our last research question investigates the situation regarding women in leading communication positions, as we wanted to obtain a current picture if women were overcoming the glass ceiling phenomenon. Specifically related to a woman being the top leader of the communication department / CEO of an agency, where a positive answer across the regions was 52.3% and negative (45.1%), with a non-applicable answer of 2.6% (n = 2523). At the regional level, most women were in a managerial communications position in the South America region (22.9%, n= 1047), followed by Northern North America (18.9%, n= 1046), Central America and the Caribbean (5.9%, n= 257), and Southern North America (4.2%, n= 189) as displayed in Figure 2. There were statistically significant differences for the two answer options between the different regions (X^2 = 112.130, *d.f.* = 6, *p* <.001).

        When examining if there were more women than men in the communication department/agency, the analysis indicated that most responses were affirmative with a 61.6% compared to negative answers with 35%, and non-applicable answers of 3.3% (n= 2,516). Moreover, the region with more positive answers were South America (29.2%, n = 1043), then Northern North America (20.6%, n = 1046), Central America and the Caribbean (7%, n = 263), and Southern North America (4.8%, n = 164) as displayed in **Figure 3**. There were statistically significant differences for the two answer options between the different regions (X^2 = 189.822, *d.f.* = 6, *p* <.001).

Figure 2. Survey results of a woman being the top leader of the communication department / CEO of an agency per region.
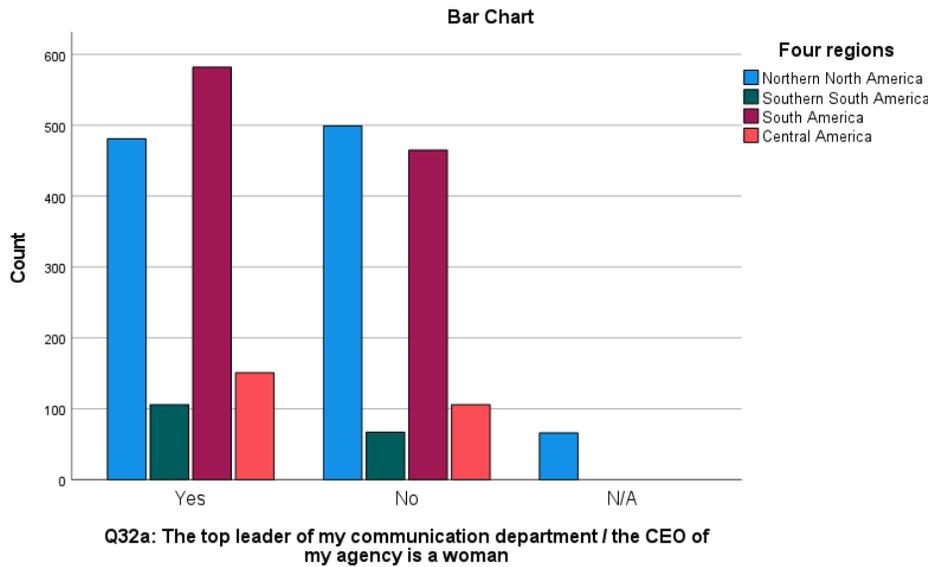
Figure 3. Survey results of more women than men in the communication department/agency per region.
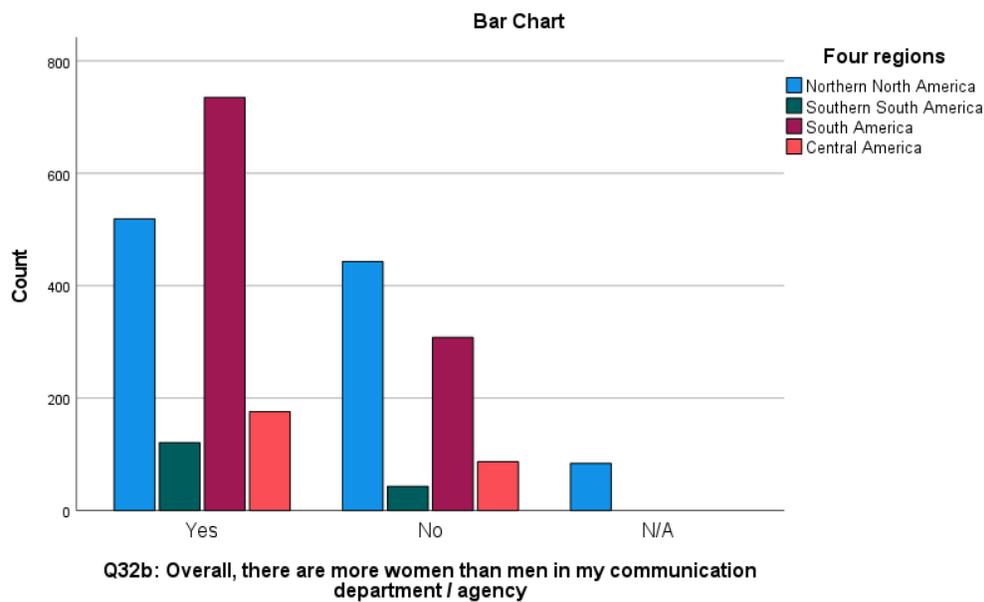
Discussion

In this paper, by using the method of secondary data analysis, we were able to combine and compare responses from communication professionals in four regions in America (i.e., Northern North America, Southern North America, South America, and Central America and the Caribbean) on the topic of gender equality in communications. A strong pattern was identified that communication professionals in all four regions confirmed the glass-ceiling issue affects the

communication profession in their country with a strong and significantly high response from professionals in Southern North America and South America. Communication professionals in South America and Southern North America also expressed the concern of the glass ceiling problem affecting their own communication department, agency, as well as female professionals in their organizations.

Although communication professionals have acknowledged certain degree of improvement in gender equality in communications was witnessed in the past five years, they also addressed more efforts are needed to advance gender equality, esp., in regions of Southern North America, South America, and Central America and the Caribbean where gender stereotypes are deeply rooted in history and societal cultures.

When looking at the factors that hinder women from reaching top positions in public relations and communications, multiple reasons were evaluated and significant difference across the regions were identified. Specifically, professionals in Southern North America (i.e., Mexico and Puerto Rico) addressed the factor that the glass ceiling is directly linked to organization's nontransparent and informal policies when it is about promotion. Professionals in this region also expressed they lack specific networks and development programs for women. The profession itself also lacks inspiring female role models. Professional in South America expressed similar concerns, but not as strong opinions as expressed by their peers in Southern North America. Such findings help us build a grand picture depicting the gender inequality in communication in a much broader geographic scope. It helps us spot the similarities, the gaps, the perceptions, and the concerns from communication professionals in the culturally rich and geographically diverse region of America.

Further, we looked into the responsible party who is capable of changing the current situation of gender inequality. The majority of surveyed professionals in four regions believe organizations carry the biggest responsibility to drive change by changing structures, policies and cultures and by building more development programs to support women in communication. The bright side of this study is we found a substantial percentage of women who are currently taking on junior or middle management roles along the leadership pipeline. At the same time, we also need to admit that the profession itself does not have a sufficient number of women as role models in top leadership positions. This is particularly problematic in Southern North America and Central America and the Caribbean regions. Such a fact does not only discourage aspired junior female professionals. More critically, it may also slow down the progress of qualified women advancing into senior leadership in organizations because there are not enough role models and/or influential mentors to advocate for them.

Conclusion and Future Research

Despite the persistent challenges in overcoming glass ceiling and achieving gender equality, the profession shall adopt joint efforts that go beyond the cultural and geographic boundaries to support women in public relations in the near future. As noted by earlier research in Latin America, we face the reality that research on the practice of public relations in Latin America is limited due to the authoritarian regime and dictatorships that were experienced in the region during the twentieth century (Mellado & Barría, 2012). However, the importance of public relations in the region began to emerge, only after the authoritarian government regimes began to decline in the 1970s and 1980s (Mellado & Barría, 2012). As the profession of public relations is highly connected to the profession of journalism, it blurs the boundaries between the two professions while deepens the gender expectations associated with women in Latin American cultures.

By focusing on the topic of gender equality in communication in four regions in America, our study takes a first step to explore this topic at an international level. Although our findings revealed the current situation as compared across four regions in America, future research is needed to place gender-related barriers in a developmental context. Organizations and professional associations should be at the forefront of driving forces to advance gender, diversity and leadership in public relations and communication. Organizations have an enormous stake in ensuring women and minorities having equal access to involvement and development opportunities. To make that possible, we need more knowledge about gender and communication in different regions. We hope our research offer a starting point to enrich knowledge in the region.

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Business Models for Communication Departments:
A Comprehensive Approach to Analyze, Explain and Innovate Communication Management in Organizations

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Abstract
This paper introduces a novel framework that can be used by public relations leaders to describe, empirically assess, and redesign business models for communication departments. Such models describe the basic principle of how such a unit operates, what services and products it provides, how it creates value for an organization, and what revenues and resources are allocated.

Keywords: Business models, communication departments, communication management, public relations leadership, measurement and evaluation, value creation

Business Models for Communication Departments:
A Comprehensive Approach to Analyze, Explain and Innovate Communication
Management in Organizations

In today's increasingly complex world with a dramatically changing media landscape, companies rely on public relations and corporate communications leaders and their teams to manage multiple aspects of making, giving, and negotiating sense internally and externally (Berger & Meng, 2014). This acknowledges communications as a central component of an organization's success (Cornelissen, 2020; Ragas & Culp, 2021). It is reflected in rising expectations and more diverse areas of responsibility for communication departments in corporate practice (Raywood & Butcher, 2021). However, within the internal competition for budgets, communication leaders rival with other functions such as marketing or human resources, and need to justify their contribution to organizational success. After all, spendings for communications only make sense if they create tangible or intangible value, either directly (e.g., by stimulating employee engagement or generating profit) or indirectly (e.g., by building trust or securing the license to operate).

The extensive debate on measurement and evaluation of communications (Buhmann & Likely, 2018; Ji et al., 2021) has explored these issues in detail. In practice, however, debates on communication value are often limited to the question of whether specific communication goals have been achieved. But meeting communication objectives is not an indicator of whether the financial and human resources add value to the organization as a whole or to another focal entity (e.g., business units, country organizations). Instead, communication departments and their leaders need to ensure that communication objectives are aligned with the overall corporate strategy (Volk & Zerfass, 2018) and demonstrate what value is created through communications and how this can be utilized for the organization (Buhmann & Likely, 2018). To close this gap, researchers have developed various models over the years to explain value creation through communication activities *in general* (e.g., Balmer & Greyser, 2006; Grunig et al., 2002; van Riel & Fombrun, 2007; Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017). What is lacking, however, is a *specific and practice-oriented approach focusing on concrete communication departments in organizations.* These units usually provide a variety of services to different internal clients, ranging from monitoring public opinion, content production, and relationship management to coaching and advising executives. Ultimately, top management will neither be interested in generic debates about the impact of communications, nor in detailed evaluations of social media activities, but in the overall value created by each communication unit that is staffed and funded within the organization.

This paper suggests to use the business model concept, an established approach from management theory and practice, to fill this gap. It is the first and major output of a large-scale academic-professional collaboration that includes the development of a business model framework for communications, the development of an applied instrument for assessing business models of communication departments in practice, and a pilot study in which the instrument was applied to 53 different communication units in one industry. This paper introduces the conceptual framework.

Communication Management, Functions, and Departments

Researchers and professionals use many different and somehow overlapping terms and concepts to describe the practice of using communication to reach organizational goals. Without going into too much detail, it is important to clarify the understanding used in this paper before linking the debate in our field to the management discourse on business models.

Conceptually, it is necessary to distinguish a) professional communication activities and processes between different actors in society from b) management processes used to steer those activities by different actors and c) organizational units or people that are in charge of managing and executing communication on behalf of those actors. Depending on the authors, terms like public relations, communication management, strategic communication, integrated communications, and corporate communications are used for all or only for some of these aspects (Nothhaft & Zerfass, 2023). They are sometimes used interchangeably and sometimes exclusively for highlighting specific practices like communication activities outside the scope of marketing communications (e.g., Grunig et al., 2002) or those with strategic rather than just operational significance (e.g., Nothhaft et al., 2019). In the following, all varieties are taken into account, using businesses and other organizations that are at least partially focused on generating profit as examples – although the rationale also applies to other types of organizations.

A leadership and practice-oriented perspective requires a holistic perspective on corporate communications (Argenti, 2016; Cornelissen, 2020; van Riel & Fombrun, 2007). Accordingly, *corporate communications* encompasses all communication processes that are relevant to the emergence, constitution, management, and future development of businesses – in short, communications by, in, and about companies. This includes processes initiated by the organization as well as communication processes by third parties in which companies or their products, brands, and representatives are the object, e.g., when journalists report on a company or stakeholders discuss about it (Zerfass & Link, 2023). These activities affect knowledge, attitudes, actions, relationships, etc. in social life and thus can create (or destroy) value for all actors involved.

Communication management can be conceptualized as steering and shaping communication activities and processes in organizational contexts by means of planning, organizing, leading, and control (Brønn, 2014; Gregory, 2018). Such management activities are necessary to use communication to achieve organizational goals, and they are specific for each actor involved. Each business will establish different routines to manage communications; and intermediaries (journalists, influencers, etc.) or stakeholders (employees and unions, consumers, activist groups, etc.) do the same.

The *communication function* comprises the totality of tasks focused on managing and executing communication activities within an organization (Zerfass & Link, 2023). This definition goes hand in hand with organizational theory and management practice (Lassl, 2020). It puts communications in line with other cross-sectional functions such as human resources management, financing, research and development, and information technology, as well as with primary functions such as procurement, production, and sales. The overall communication function and subfunctions like employee communications or public affairs are usually performed by a variety of people, teams, internal units and external entities on behalf on an organization. Board members and C-level executives communicate with key stakeholders as part of their roles; agencies plan and run campaigns; employees act as corporate ambassadors on social media; human resources (HR) and marketing departments are in charge of employee or product branding; and communications or public relations departments reach out to a broad range of other stakeholders. This practice – which is rarely reflected in theories that attribute the responsibility for all kind of communication tasks to either public relations or marketing – is theoretically underpinned in the concept of the 'communicative organization' (Heide et al., 2018).

A *communication department* is an organizational unit that is responsible for the governance, management, and execution of functional communication activities in a company within a defined area of responsibility (Zerfass & Link, 2023; Cornelissen, 2020, pp. 27–32). Large companies will have different communication units with varying mandates – for example, a global corporate communications department in the headquarter; communication departments in business units, regions, or countries; and several communication units or teams as part of other business functions like finance (investor relations), HR (employer branding) or sales (customer relationship and events). Communication departments are usually staffed with *communication practitioners* who have professional expertise in the field and therefore shape the direction of the respective function beyond their own department, support other members of the organization with communication-related tasks, offer advice on business decisions, and implement key activities.

Corporate communications requires considerable resources in terms of budgets and personnel. From a leadership perspective, it is necessary to assess whether and how this contributes to value creation. So far, little attention has been paid to communication departments as a unit of analysis to demonstrate their value contribution. Research in this area has focused on case studies or the attempt to find the ideal setup of communication departments including budgets, staffing, or processes. It is often overlooked that responsibilities and structures must always be based on the respective corporate strategy, and that there is no set standard for how communication units should be organized (Moss et al., 2017; Raywood & Butcher, 2021).

The Need to Position Departments, Secure Resources, and Explain Value Creation

Like all other departments, communication units compete internally for resources and recognition within a company. However, they often fall behind because their profile, activities, and contributions are not clearly identifiable. Research on the positioning of communication departments within organizations has only recently begun (Brockhaus & Zerfass, 2022). But it is becoming increasingly important as the range of services provided by communication units rapidly expands and changes. In times of digital transformation, restructuring, and cost savings, workflows need to be optimized and scarce resources need to be aligned with strategy. Communication departments need a clear vision and value proposition to signal their relevance to top management.

However, many communication professionals miss the big picture when they try to explain the value contribution of communications. Many trust that achieving communication goals is enough to legitimize their actions within the organization. This is evident when communication leaders report on their success in terms of key performance indicators (KPIs) for easily measurable media outputs or successful campaigns (Buhmann & Likely, 2018), rather than providing a holistic picture of what they do for whom in the organization. An ongoing challenge is to demonstrate business acumen and explain performance in the language of management (Ragas & Culp, 2021).

This gap can be closed by applying the *business model concept* to communication departments. Business models are a proven way to analyze, explain, and innovate the service portfolio and value contribution of organizations and subunits. So far, the business model approach has only been discussed for communication and media agencies, but not for in-house departments (Bennin & Kapoor, 2017; Jensen & Sund, 2017; Ragas & Culp, 2021, pp. 165–174). While agencies are forced to explain explicitly what they deliver to clients in order to legitimize their billing rates, it is usually unclear which products and services are delivered by in-house

communication departments, what value is created, and how and with what resources this is done.

The Business Model Concept

Business models have attracted the attention of scholars and practitioners in many disciplines over the past 25 years (Chesbrough, 2010; Coombes & Nicholson, 2013; Nielsen et al., 2020). Information technologies, globalization, the quest for sustainability, deregulation and protectionism, and faster innovation cycles have disrupted traditional ways of doing business (Nielsen et al., 2020; Wirtz, 2020). Companies are forced to rethink and innovate how they do business. Business model management helps companies to develop new business ideas, examine existing activities, and modify their strategies and structures to meet changing requirements (Wirtz, 2020, p. 3).

Definitions, frameworks and typologies of business models

Although there is a remarkable number of publications and scholars around the business model concept, there is still no generally accepted definition of the term (Jensen, 2014). A literature review reveals that scholars and consultants have developed multiple frameworks to outline key components of business models (Perić et al., 2017). Nevertheless, two aspects are combined in all definitions and frameworks: the *creation and delivery of value for stakeholders* – in most cases referred to as customers – and the *way of capturing value for the organization* – mostly, but not always focused on economic profits (e.g., Afuah, 2004; Baden-Fuller & Morgan, 2010).

A comprehensive *definition of business models* has been proposed by Johnson et al. (2008) in their seminal *Harvard Business Review* article: A business model "consists of four interlocking elements that, taken together, create and deliver value" (p. 60) – a customer value proposition, key resources, key processes, and a profit formula. Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010) state that a "business model describes the rationale of how an organization creates, delivers, and captures value" (p. 14). According to Wirtz (2020), a business model serves as "a simplified and aggregated representation of the relevant activities of a company" (p. 57) and it is based on partial models describing key components like revenues, resources, market offers, etc. (pp. 103–133).

Business model frameworks highlight key components of business models and explain them as well as their interaction in detail. The *Business Model Canvas* by Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010) uses nine blocks to cover four main areas of business: customers, offer, infrastructure, and financial viability reflect the logic of how a company intends to make money. Gassmann et al. (2020) employ a conceptualization that consists of four central dimensions: the Who, the What, the How, and the Value, unified in a "magic triangle". Defining a target group (Who?) clarifies who will be addressed with specific products or services. The value proposition defines which products and services (What?) are offered. The way of producing these offers (How?) is described with the value chain, based on resources and capabilities. The profit mechanism describes how a company generates value and revenues for shareholders and stakeholders (Value).

Moreover, scholars and practitioners have always been concerned with the analysis and identification of *business model typologies.* From an analytical point of view, Wirtz (2020) distinguishes technology-oriented, organization-oriented and strategy-oriented business models. Gassmann et al. (2020) have empirically analyzed successful business model innovations for over 50 years. They abstracted these to identify common patterns, resulting in a typology of 60 business models that can be used by practitioners to review and innovate existing approaches.

One example is the *solution provider.* This business model "offers customers an all-inclusive package that takes care of all tasks and problems in a certain area" (e.g., web services) and "helps them to concentrate fully on their core activities" (Gassmann et al., 2020, p. 292). This is typically done by consolidating a range of products and services through a single point of contact. Revenues are driven by the ability to build long-term relationships, reduced customer price sensitivity, and upselling opportunities.

Application of business models

Business models can be used to analyze and design value-creating activities on the corporate, business unit, or product level (Afuah, 2004; Wirtz, 2020, p. 57–61). Different companies can pursue the same business model (e.g., being a 'solution provider'), in various industries with completely different outputs. At the same time, different companies can offer similar products or services (e.g., on-demand, short-distance transport of people) based on quite different business models (e.g., taxi companies as a 'service provider' and Uber using a 'peer-to-peer' approach).

Within one and the same company, several business models can be applied simultaneously and in different combinations. For example, software companies can create more value by combining a 'freemium' model (offering free basic versions with upsell options) for private users with a 'licensing' model for business customers.

Business Models for Organizational Units and Departments

As a generic management tool, business models can also be applied to corporate functions and organizational units. This is rarely discussed in mainstream discourse. Nevertheless, an extensive literature review has revealed several applications in human resources, training and development, information technology, and intellectual property management – but not in public relations and corporate communications.

Oertig (2007) proposes an *integrated HR business model.* This includes, for example, a service center, which combines operational, highly standardized HR processes and transactions, as well as a center of expertise, which unifies specialized HR expertise and methodological know-how. Gärtner (2013) presents *four typical business models for HR* that represent different ways of value contribution: for example, the 'resource manager', where services are limited to administering personnel, and the 'resource generator', where innovative services are delivered to top management and other organizational units. Carliner (2004) used the business model concept to explain how *training and performance improvement departments* can transition from delivering training services to providing performance consulting by bringing in novel capabilities and processes that lead to new revenue streams and a growing internal influence. Bergmann (2019) proposes that *IT departments* have to position themselves as service brokers, who bundle external and internal services based on the requirements of the business, instead of focusing on governance and support approaches. Last but not least, Le Mauff (2021) transfers the *Business Model Canvas* by Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010) to *Intellectual Property (IP) departments,* who have to manage patent applications, but also keep trade secrets and deal with numerous legal restrictions in various markets. The author extends the nine blocks of the Canvas to make IP assets explicit and identifies specific targets for using the IP departments' resources in a valuable way for the organization.

Business Models for Communication Departments

Combining the previously explained understanding of corporate communications and communication management with the business model concept makes it possible to define business models for communication departments in a concise manner:

A business model for a communication department describes the basic principle of how such a unit operates, what services and products it provides, how it creates value for an organization, and what revenues and resources are allocated.

Two *specific aspects* need to be considered when applying the business model concept to communication departments. The first systematic difference to business models on the corporate or business unit level is that products and services are not provided for external customers but for the company itself or for other departments, divisions, etc. The work of communication departments and its results must be valuable to those internal clients or partners. Secondly, with a few exceptions (shared service centers; licensing income for brands, etc.), value is not created at the level of the communication department, but elsewhere in the organization. For example, employee communication activities can increase motivation and reduce fluctuation, which can lead to a higher productivity in production plants and lower recruitment costs in HR departments. This places specific demands on the allocation of expenses and revenues.

Using the business model approach to analyze and explain the activities of communication units has *several advantages.* Most importantly, a holistic and established scheme reduces complexity and helps communication leaders to explain top executives and internal clients what, how, why, what for, and with what they are working. Business models can be used to guide team members as well as external agencies and service providers. They can be analyzed with regard to their logical consistency and their fit with higher-level business models and strategies. Methods of business model innovation can be used to revise and continuously adapt value propositions, structures, processes, resources, and revenue streams to new challenges (Wirtz 2020, pp. 159–185). Last but not least, the business model concept provides a much-needed counterpoint to the 'one best way' delusion that dominates large parts of the discourse in corporate communications and public relations research and practice. Since most companies pursue different business models at the same time – e.g., in the holding, in different business units, in different countries – it would be naive to demand that all communication departments in an organization or in an industry create value in the same best way. Even within a single department, different business models can be pursued if various services and products are provided in different ways at the same time.

Overall architecture of business models for communications

The framework shown in Figure 1 outlines a generic architecture of business models for communication departments. It has been developed by underpinning the core definition with key elements identified in the corporate communications literature, and by matching them with the experience of a management consultancy specialized in benchmarking and restructuring communication departments in one of the world's five largest economies. It comprises four elements with which central characteristics of a business model can be described, discussed and further developed. Each of the four elements is further differentiated by a sub-model that describes concrete dimensions, which can be empirically tested, evaluated and further developed. This provides a link to established systematizations, concepts, and measurements in theory and practice. Individual practices can be benchmarked on this level, e.g., how content management is best organized, how best-of-class LinkedIn channels look like, or how reputation as an immaterial value created by communications can be measured and assessed.
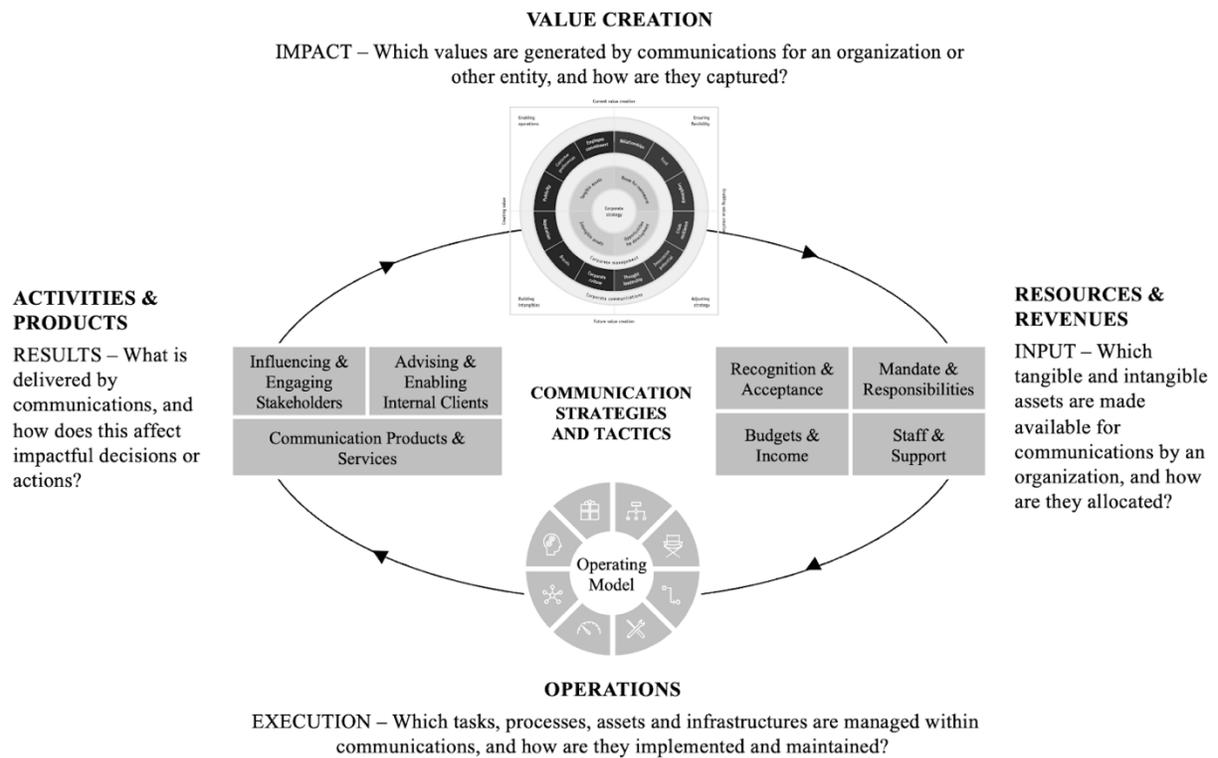
Figure 1. Structure of business models for communication departments.

Each business model based on this framework maps the entire value creation process within the respective communication unit: from the provision of necessary resources by the board or internal clients based on the organization's objectives (input), through tasks and processes of combining and transforming resources (execution) and the resulting activities and products (results), to the intangible and tangible values that are created for the organization as a result (impact). If this is successful, resources for the communication department and practitioners (in the form of salaries, bonuses, promotions) are provided or increased in future periods. This is where the gain component manifests itself as the core component of any business model (revenues).

Sub-models

The four sub-models describe the key elements of a business model for communication departments in more detail. These dimensions can be further operationalized in research or consulting projects.

1) The *resources and revenue model* defines which tangible resources (budgets, internal billing costs, staff positions, rooms and facilities, technology) and intangible resources (in general: internal recognition and acceptance; specifically: mandates and responsibilities) are made available to a communication department and how the success of its work is captured as revenue for the department and its members. This can be explained, analyzed, and innovated by identifying current and potential resources and revenue streams, considering additional options, and by evaluating volatility and expandability. It makes sense to focus on resources and revenues that can be influenced by activities within the unit's operating model. Established management

tools such as cost accounting, financial decomposition, process analysis, internal client surveys, and external or internal benchmarks can be used when working with this model.

2) The *operating model* (Figure 2) describes which tasks, processes, values and infrastructures are managed, implemented, and further developed in a communication department. This includes organizational structures and coordination routines, leadership culture and competence development, the management of partner networks and knowledge management (including analytics) as well as governance, work processes (e.g., content management, campaign management, internal coaching) and methods as well as digital services and the management of editorial content, visuals, contacts, brands, or stakeholder insights. This can be analyzed and optimized by reflecting on the setups, workflows, and decision-making processes as well as the constellation of people, culture, and technology in the department. In doing so, bottlenecks, pain points and drivers of success can be identified. The best way to optimize the operating model is to focus on the primary and secondary activities that have the highest impact on the key output defined in the activities and products model. Methods that can be used here are process, network, competency and budget analyses; measurement insights from stakeholder communications; data analyses; as well as benchmarks and advice from (internal) management consultants.


Mission & Alignment
– Self-conception of communications
– Positioning within the organization
– Alignment with organizational strategy

People & Culture
– Leadership culture and values
– Competency management
– Recruiting and talent management

Partnering & Network
– Functional and technical network
– Expert and content-related network
– Legitimacy and informational network

Insights & Knowledge
– Information retrieval and monitoring
– Information use and data analytics
– Knowledge management

Structure & Coordination
– Positions, roles and responsibilities
– Reporting lines
– Coordination and decision-making bodies

Governance & Steering
– Resource allocation (budgets, staff, data)
– Policies, guidelines and quality management
– Performance indicators and reporting standards

Processes & Methods
– Stakeholder communication processes
– Internal advising processes
– Work methods and management tools

Technology & Assets
– Digital infrastructure and tools
– Digital services and assets
– Databases and content

Figure 2. Dimensions of the operating model for a communication department.

3) The *activities and product model* defines which products (e.g., content in various formats, social media channels, magazines, trade shows, events, branding manuals) and services (e.g., issues monitoring, media training, consulting) are provided by a communication department. It also explains how communication products and services are intended to change the knowledge, attitude or behavior of stakeholders or internal clients so that their future decisions or actions have a positive impact on the organization. This is typically done by influencing external or internal stakeholders, by enabling internal clients (e.g., top executives, other departments, business units) to communicate themselves through coaching, or by helping them fulfill their respective tasks through internal advice. Analyzing and optimizing this sub-model requires a detailed understanding of what products and services are delivered to whom, how they are used, what they trigger, and which impactful activities are then performed by stakeholders (e.g., engaging, supporting, purchasing) or other members of the organization (e.g.,

informed business decisions, autonomous communication). Activities and products should be prioritized based on efficiency and effectiveness, which can be done by aligning with the value creation model. A variety of methods can be used here, such as measurement of media and outreach activities, and client surveys.

4) The *value creation model* clarifies which values the communication department creates through its activities for the overall organization or for internal clients. A comprehensive approach that can be used here to structure different contributions holistically is the *Communication Value Circle* (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017). It is based on interdisciplinary research and has already been successfully applied in corporate practice on three continents. The tool systematizes communication goals in four dimensions (employee commitment, customer preferences, publicity; reputation, brands, corporate culture; thought leadership, innovation potential, crisis resilience; legitimacy, trust, relationships) and links them to four generic dimensions of corporate, business, or functional goals (enabling operations, building intangibles, adjusting strategy, ensuring flexibility). This can be analyzed and further developed by identifying value links between the impact of communication activities or products and overarching objectives. Typically, communications can support in many different ways. This often leads to high demand and pressure on communication departments and professionals. One way out is to build value propositions based on the relative importance of internal clients and their willingness to provide resources.

Practical Application of the Framework and its Sub-Models

Business model frameworks can serve as a *management tool* (Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015), i.e., a method used by organizational leaders and consultants to discuss, analyze, evaluate, plan, and innovate the key logic and core elements of their business on different levels (Magretta, 2002; Wirtz 2020, pp. 14–17). Using a well-established and easily understandable scheme helps to achieve a higher level of abstraction which is necessary to make sound decisions (Wirtz, 2020, p. 59). Managing with business models reduces complexity (Bridgeland & Zahavi, 2009), highlights relevant information that is necessary to develop successful strategies (Wirtz, 2020, p. 59), makes it easier to identify potentials, opportunities, and risks of current business activities (Eriksson & Penker, 2000), and thus helps to adapt and modify them (Wirtz, 2020, pp. 235–246).

Communication leaders can build on the rich experience in management practice when applying the business model approach to communication departments. While it will be hard to find expertise in the public relations profession, it should not be too complicated to seek advice and support from in-house or strategic management consultants. Of course, those experts will have little or no knowledge of corporate communications; therefore, sound expertise in this field must be brought in by communication practitioners or consultants. The business model framework for communications expands the existing range of *management tools for corporate communications* (Volk & Zerfass, 2021); it helps to leverage the performance of communications.

Specifically, the approach can be used in the following ways:
- *Analyze and evaluate.* The business model framework can be used as an analytical tool to take stock of the current situation in a structured and comprehensive way. Top management and communication leaders can identify how various communication units in an organization operate, what they deliver, and how they create value, and how this value is captured. To this end, the overall model and the sub-models must be operationalized. All dimensions need to be assessed by appropriate means, such as reflecting practices in team meetings, reviewing

internal documents, interviewing internal clients, etc. A newly appointed Chief Communication Officer (CCO) could use the approach to get an overview of the situation, and long-term leaders could apply it to future-proof their department. Business models for communication departments are always unique – they cannot be benchmarked against each other or evaluated against generic standards. But it is possible to assess whether they are logically consistent or inconsistent; whether they are appropriate or not suitable for a particular corporate communications strategy; and whether they are aligned with overarching business models of the organization. Moreover, individual dimensions of the models can be compared within or across organizations, as outlined above (p. 12).

- *Explain and position.* The framework and the sub-models can also be used to describe in a consistent and understandable way how different communication units in organizations operate and how they create value. Focusing on key questions and elements, visualizing them, and explaining the logic behind everything reduces complexity and facilitates cooperation within the organization. In this case, detailed data is less relevant – it is the overall storyline and the 'big picture' in familiar business terms that counts. Communication leaders can explain their department's core business model or various concurrent business to guide team members and to position themselves and their unit within the organization (Brockhaus & Zerfass, 2022). A simple exercise that any CCO could start with is to ask oneself and the leadership team to explain what the department does in no more than 100 words, referring to the elements of the business model framework. This can lead to statements like the following from a pharmaceutical company with a communication department that is geared to the 'service provider' model:

  Our communication department leverages *deep industry knowledge* [1] and *personal networks* [1] to produce world-class *content on treating rheumatic diseases* [2] and inform audiences over *owned and earned media* [2]. This inspires *consumers to ask for our medicines* [3], *prescribers to trust us* [3], and *pharmacy graduates to rank us as an employer of choice* [3]. High-profile sales and excellent young researchers *drive corporate profits* [3] and *secure competitive advantages* [3] that are on top of the board's agenda. This makes us a *trusted service provider for all divisions* [4], *secures our internal resources* [4], and *generates bonus payments* [4].

  [1] Operations – [2] Activities & Products – [3] Value creation – [4] Resources & Revenues

Results from such an elevator pitch can be discussed within the team and serve as starting point for developing a common understanding. Repeatedly conveying this self-conception can help to channel the expectations by others in the organization and gain more appreciation.

- *Innovate and redesign.* The business model approach can also serve as a management tool for continuous improvement. Communication leaders can use it to ensure that the overall direction and key elements of managing and executing corporate communications in their department are transformed and enhanced whenever internal demand or external factors change. Such efforts will often focus on partial aspects like aligning communications with new corporate or business unit goals; revising the portfolio of communication services in the light of a rapidly changing media landscape and audience behavior; integrating digital technology to update internal workflows; or leveraging new revenue streams to expand resources. Apart from such incremental changes, it may sometimes make sense to completely redesign existing business models for communications. For example, the traditional 'service provider' model of the pharmaceutical company outlined above may no longer make sense if

high-quality health content can be generated and distributed by artificial intelligence in the near future. Changing to another business model, e.g., an 'advising and coaching' model focusing on monitoring public debates and identifying business opportunities and risks, or a 'facilitating relationships' model that creates value by initiating dialogue with key stakeholders to develop markets and secure legitimacy, could be an option here. Business model innovation requires thorough assessment, as in the first scenario, but also a good understanding of corporate goals and communication trends, a willingness to learn from alternative solutions and models, and strong leadership to drive internal change.

Conclusion and Outlook

This paper has demonstrated how the business model concept can be integrated in the body of knowledge in public relations and corporate communications research by applying it to communication departments.

While implications for the profession and communication leaders are evident in the use cases outlined above, more research is needed to generate detailed insights and support practical applications. There is a need to develop *empirical methods to study business models in practice.* One approach developed in another part of this research project is a qualitative self-assessment with gamification elements that can be used by communication leaders and their teams to identify existing sub-models and business models. Preliminary results from the ongoing research indicate that the method works, at least in organizations with an open and collaborative team culture. Future research should also aim to *identify and classify prototype business models for communication departments.* This could be done conceptually, by transferring existing typologies from the business model literature to the communications field, or – following the path taken by Gassmann et al. (2020) – inductively, by examining communication departments in an ongoing and large-scale study and compiling the results. Initial results from a pilot study conducted as part of this research project give hope that the inductive approach will be successful: The analysis of 53 communication departments in one industry led to the identification of 4 distinct business models.

Apart from the topic discussed here, linking public relations to management science and current challenges facing the profession has proven to be a fruitful way to generate novel thoughts that can stimulate the debate between theory and practice – which is a worthwhile goal in itself.

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Restoring Trust Through Transparency: Examining the Effects of Transparency Strategies on Police Crisis Communication in Mainland China

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Abstract
Employing a 2 (high vs low accountability) x 2 (high vs low information substantiality) x 2 (high vs low participation) online experiment (n = 293), this study examines how different transparency influence public anger and trust in a Chinese police crisis context, offering insights on government social media crisis communication. In general, transparency is crucial for Chinese local governments, especially police agencies, in managing crises on social media. Reporting organizational crisis accountability, delivering sufficient and evidence-based messages, and enabling public discussion on social media are three transparency strategies that can help minimize public outrage and rebuild public trust. Results suggest that first, at least one single transparency should be employed during crisis times. Second, when faced with unaccountable cases, delivering high-quality information with solid evidence can assist in reducing the publics' anger, which in turn can increase public trust. Furthermore, the study points out that law enforcement should consider the possibility of information overload and unexpected low overall expectations in government transparency.

Keywords: transparency, crisis communication, Chinese government, information substantiality, accountability, participation

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Given the worldwide decline in public trust (Edelman, 2021) and increased public demands for government transparency, crisis communication has become one of the most perplexing issues for government public relations practitioners. Knowledge and skills concerning effective crisis communication are desperately needed by the Chinese government, particularly in the local police system. To note, trust in police continues to be poor among Chinese citizens in general (Sun et al., 2019) as a result of an increasing number of police misconducts and crises in recent years (e.g., Shuying Wang's Case). Although local governments actively present themselves on social media, few studies have explored police transparency especially through the lens of crisis communication.

Drawing on Rawlins (2008)'s typology of transparency, crisis communication research (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2007), and government public relations literature, this study aims to (1) explicate the concept of transparency in government crisis communication, (2) examine the effects of different transparency strategies on publics' anger and trust in a social-media based police crisis context, and (3) explore the underlying psychological mechanism of anger through which transparency excerpts effects on public trust. An online experiment with 293 Chinese citizens was conducted to address the research inquiries.

This study makes several contributions to government public relations and crisis communication research and practice. This study expands crisis communication research to a Chinese government context where the escalating tensions between local law enforcement and publics create unique relational dynamics. By analyzing different transparency strategies on social media, we offer useful guidelines for police authorities to promote ethical and effective crisis communication. In addition, we identify emotional reactions as a key mechanism through which public trust is constructed in crisis communication, highlighting the importance of taking care of publics' anger and the need to include emotional care into government crisis management.

Police Public Relations in Mainland China: A Focus on Crisis Communication

Compared to the maturity of the corporate and nonprofit public relations scholarships, government public relations is still a relatively understudied topic. As Liu and Horsley (2007) suggested, existing theoretical frameworks do not adequately capture the unique circumstances and constraints of public relations in the public sector, requiring for more context-based examination of government public relations. The majority of research regarding government crises investigated governmental voices on large-scale media coverage (e.g., Chen, 2012), while the effective crisis communication strategies are still unclear with empirical support and from publics' perspective. In addition, while existing studies extensively examined government crisis responses to natural disasters (e.g., Chon, 2019), other forms of crisis and the approaches to address them have been less discussed.

Among various government entities, police departments represent a unique branch of governmental authority. Under the sociopolitical and cultural influences, the relationship between police and citizens is both cooperative and contentious in contemporary Chinese society. On the one hand, most services provided by police are close to people's daily lives (Cao & Hou, 2001) and the police image is usually portrayed as integrity, justice, and fairness. On the other hand, the relationships between Chinese police authorities and citizens are also fragile and contentious (Dai & Yang, 2021). The Chinese society's high-power distance, the police system's centralized power structure, and the support from central and local governments all create

legitimate concerns about whether the police's ultimate authority will overwhelm the populace and result in power abuse (Sun et al., 2021). Previous research also found that some police officers lack the necessary training and quality when operating cases (Lin et al., 2019). Given the contentious relationships between Chinese police authorities and citizens in recent years (Dai & Yang, 2021) and the increasing number of police misconducts (Lin et al., 2019), it is urgent for government communicators to develop appropriate strategies to navigate through such complex and challenging relational dynamics.

Publics' Responses to Crisis: Trust and Anger

This research examines two primary public responses to government crisis communications: anger and trust, which reflect the public's emotional and cognitive information processing of crisis communication. Inevitably, anger is one of the most prevalent unpleasant feelings and emotional reactions in crisis circumstances (Jin et al., 2018). Anger is a trigger of unsatisfied and negative experiences, which can influence individuals' behaviors directly (Jin et al., 2018). Trust is a multidimensional construct, consisting of competency, benevolence, and integrity dimensions (McKnight, et al., 2002). Specifically, competency refers to the capacity of government to meet trustees' needs; Benevolence is defined as the organizations' ethical concerns of caring, charity, and considerate wills resonating with trustees' interests; For integrity, it means the extent of organizations' honesty, credibility, and word keeping (McKnight, et al., 2002).

Linking Transparency to Crisis Communication

The current study contextualizes Rawlins' (2008) typology of transparency into government crisis communication with an emphasis on social media, including three key elements: accountability, participation, and information substantiality.

Accountability refers to the objective disclosure of an organization's missions, actions, or policies (Rawlins, 2008). In a crisis, accountability denotes the organization's actions pertaining to the crisis, indicating its acknowledgment of responsibility in causing the crisis (Lee & Li, 2021). Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) suggests that organizations involved in disasters or rumors are likely to be attributed minimal crisis accountability, while organizations involved in preventable crises will be attributed greater crisis accountability (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). Because the government has ultimate authority in China, when it admits its mistakes, anxiety and doubts about the government's capacity to govern may arise. Additionally, since law enforcement is inextricably linked to the lives of citizens, knowing that police have failed to hold themselves accountable may easily spark public anger. We thus propose that:

H1: The higher level of accountability (vs. the lower level of accountability) attributed to the police in causing the crisis will evoke a) more anger and b) less trust in police.

Participation entails the available opportunities that organizations provide to interact with stakeholders and allow them to identify the information they need (Rawlins, 2008). Despite that social media offers rich tools of interactivity, past research found that government organizations largely use social media for one-way communication and only adopts limited interactive tactics (Medaglia & Zhu, 2017). Allowing publics to be part of the post-crisis conversation is important to show that the government is willing to listen and cares about people's feeding. Numerous studies have proved the positive effects of symmetric communication and interactions are both ethical and effective in managing crises and fostering relationships (e.g., Kim, 2015). Thus, we propose:

H2: The higher level of participation (lower level of participation) allowed in the crisis response will evoke (a) less anger and (b) more trust in police.

Information substantiality refers to the message to be relevant, accurate, clear, complete, verified, and reliable (Rawlins, 2008). Specifically, the message forms (length and quantity of information), information quality (clearness and comprehensiveness), and argument strength (cogency) are critical indicators of information substantiality (e.g., Ju et al., 2021). Relevant studies in the Chinese context noted that insufficient and vague information could intensify citizens' anger and anxiety toward regulatory institutions (Wang & Laufer, 2020). Information substantiality generates trust in Chinese governmental bodies during the pandemic substantial information reduce citizens' uncertainty (Lee & Li, 2021). Hence, we hypothesize that:

> H3: The higher level of information sustainability (vs. lower level of information substantiality) in the crisis response will evoke (a) less anger and (b) more trust in police.

To further explore the effectiveness of using multiple transparency strategies in a government crisis response, this study also proposes the following research question:

> RQ1: Are there any interaction effects between accountability, information substantiality, and interactivity on (a) anger, and (b) trust?

The Mediating Role of Anger

Crisis communication scholars argue that anger is the mediator between individuals' cognitions and actions in response to crisis situations (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). However, studies focusing on the effects of emotion on cognition processing are relatively sparse in crisis management (Lu & Huang, 2018). To further reveal the mechanism under which transparency influences public trust in a crisis context, we propose the following research question:

> RQ2: How, if at all, does anger mediate the effects of (a) accountability, (b) information substantiality, (c) participation, and (d) interactions between three transparency strategies on trust?
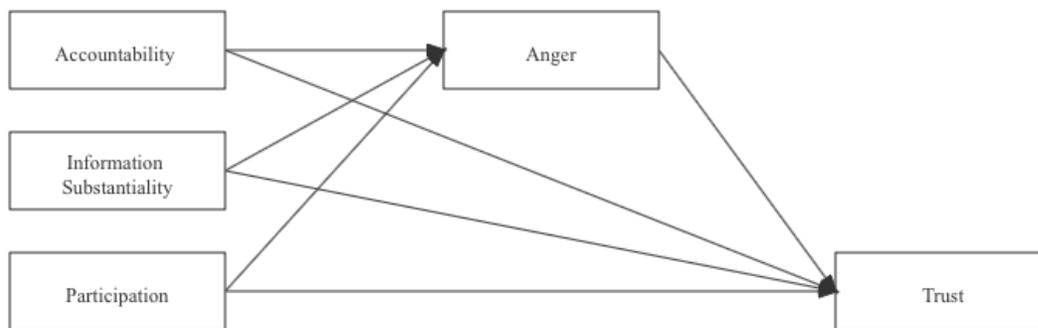
Figure 1. *Conceptual Model*

Method

This study employed a 2 (low vs. high accountability) x 2 (low vs. high information substantiality) x 2 (disabled vs. enabled public participation) online between-subjects experiment to examine the effects of the transparency strategies used in crisis responses on publics' anger and trust in a Chinese police crisis context.

Participants and Procedure

Credamo, a professional marketing research panel company based in Mainland China (c.f. Xiang et al., 2020), was used to recruit participants (N = 336) in November 2021 with an incentive of ￥3 (about $ 0.46) per person. After excluding the participants who failed attention

checks, a total of 293 answers were eligible for further analysis. The average age of the sample was 29.80 (SD = 6.23), and 40.2% were females and 59.7% were males.

After completing the consent form, participants proceeded through the experiment on *Credemo*. First, participants were asked to indicate their attitudes and perceptions of media use and government-related variables. Participants were also asked to read the crisis scenario about an accusation of police misconduct on social media, followed by an attention check on the key information presented in the crisis scenario. Afterward, participants who passed the attention check were randomly assigned to one of the eight conditions showing different combinations of the three transparency strategies (Table 1). Next, participants responded to manipulation checks and measures of dependent variables. Demographic information was collected at the end.

Stimuli and Manipulations

To enhance ecological validity, our stimuli were developed based on several local police crises that happened in Mainland China in recent years (e.g., Lijiang tourist attack in 2017). A crisis situation described a social media user accusing local law enforcement of misbehaving by ignoring citizens' requests for help during a violent attack. To reduce the potential bias from participants' prior associations with police or similar crises, fictitious city, police department, and victim names were used in the stimuli. Crisis responses from the local police department were created in a Weibo post format, including the combinations of three different transparency strategies. The length, color, and structure of experimental materials were designed comparable to ensure the consistency of stimuli.

To manipulate the accountability aspect of transparency, two types of crises showing different levels of accountability of the organization in causing the crises were created (Bakker et al., 2018; Coombs, 2007). In the high-accountability condition, the accusation of police misconduct was admitted by the police department. In the low-accountability condition, the accusation was refuted as a rumor. Information substantiality was manipulated by showing large-quantity, high-quality, and logical evidence to support crisis response. In the high-information substantiality condition, the police's announcement contained explanations of crises and procedures with ample testimonies or evidence, such as photos and hyperlinks. In a low-information substantiality condition, the crisis response only reported the final organizational decision without any logical information or evidence about how the crisis situation was handled. Participation was manipulated by enabling or disabling the public's comments following Liao and Mak's (2019) guidelines. The enabled participation condition displayed public comments showing different attitudes toward the police to mimic a real online public opinion environment. The disabled participation condition showed a pop-up notice informing that the commenting function was not allowed.

A few rounds of informal pretests were launched to seek feedback from Chinese participants regarding the believability of the stimuli materials. To pretest the manipulations of key variables, stimuli were randomly assigned to 79 Chinese participants recruited from Credemo with an incentive of ¥1.2 (about $0.18) per person. Results from independent T-Tests showed that the manipulations of all three transparency strategies worked as expected, $M_{high\ accountability} = 5.16$, $M_{low\ accountability} = 2.25$, $p < .001$; $M_{high\ information\ substantiality} = 5.16$, $M_{low\ information\ substantiality} = 3.58$, $p < .001$; $M_{low\ participation} = 5.43$, $M_{low\ participation} = 2.10$, $p < .001$.

Measurements

The measures of key variables were modified based on existing scales and translated into Chinese. All measures used seven-point Likert scales. To validly manipulate the three transparency strategies (i.e., substantial information, accountability, and participation),

manipulation check items were used to determine whether different levels of transparency in the crisis response were evaluated by participants in the same direction as the stimuli being manipulated. The manipulation of *Accountability* was checked by asking participants to rate three items from Brown and Ki (2013), such as "the police department was accountable for the crisis" ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 2.04$, $\alpha = .96$). *Information substantiality* was checked by asking participants to rate four items adapted from Youn and Kim (2019), such as "I think the police officers in City A provided high-quality evidence" ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 1.74$, $\alpha = .96$). *Participation* was checked using three items from Xu et al. (2018) ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 2.15$, $\alpha = .95$), such as "the chat box underneath the announcement of the police department shows no encouragement for citizens to talk back."

Anger was examined by the scale adopted from Dillard & Peck (2001) ranging from angry, irritated, annoyed, and aggravated ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 1.69$, $\alpha = .95$). *Trust* was measured by eight items using McKnight et al.'s (2002) trust scale ($M = 4.97$, $SD = 1.64$, $\alpha = .97$). In addition, cynicism can jeopardize police-citizen relationships, activate distrust and disbelief, and moderately strengthen the effects of scandals and negative evaluations toward government (Lee & Lee, 2017). Thus, cynicism toward police was treated as a control variable and measured using the scale from Regoli et al.'s (1990) ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.23$, $\alpha = .89$).

Results

Manipulation Checks

Independent T-Tests confirmed that all three transparency strategies were successfully manipulated. There were statistically significant differences in participants' ratings between the high ($M = 5.6$, $SD = 1.15$) and low accountability ($M = 2.3$, $SD = 1.26$) conditions, $t(291) = 23.16$, $p < .001$; between the high ($M = 5.6$, $SD = 1.1$) and low information substantiality ($M = 3.7$, $SD = 1.7$) conditions, $t(252.10) = 11.23$, $p < .001$; and between the enabled ($M = 5.8$, $SD = .9$) and disabled participation ($M = 2.3$, $SD = 1.4$) conditions, $t(244.50) = 25.54$, $p < .001$.

Effects of Three Transparency Strategies on Anger and Trust

A series of one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) analyses were conducted to test H1-3 using SPSS, controlling cynicism toward police. Results revealed that when the message shows police department owing low accountability in causing the crisis, anger was significantly reduced, $F(1, 290) = 27.49$, $p < .001$, $\eta 2 = 0.09$, and trust in police was increased, $F(1, 290) = 12.76$, $p < .001$, $\eta 2 = .04$. **Thus, H1 was supported.** High information substantiality condition was found to significantly minimize anger, $F(1, 290) = 9.303$, $p = .002$, $\eta 2 = .03$, and increase trust $F(1, 290) = 24.86$, $p < .001$, $\eta 2 = .08$, as compared to the low information substantiality condition. **Thus, H2 was supported.** There were statistically significant differences between the participation conditions and publics' anger, $F(1, 290) = 6.73$, $p = .01$, $\eta 2 = .01$, and trust $F(1, 290) = 5.78$, $p < .001$, $\eta 2 = .08$. Enabling public comments in the crisis response can mitigate publics' anger and restore their trust toward the police. Thus, **H3 was supported.**
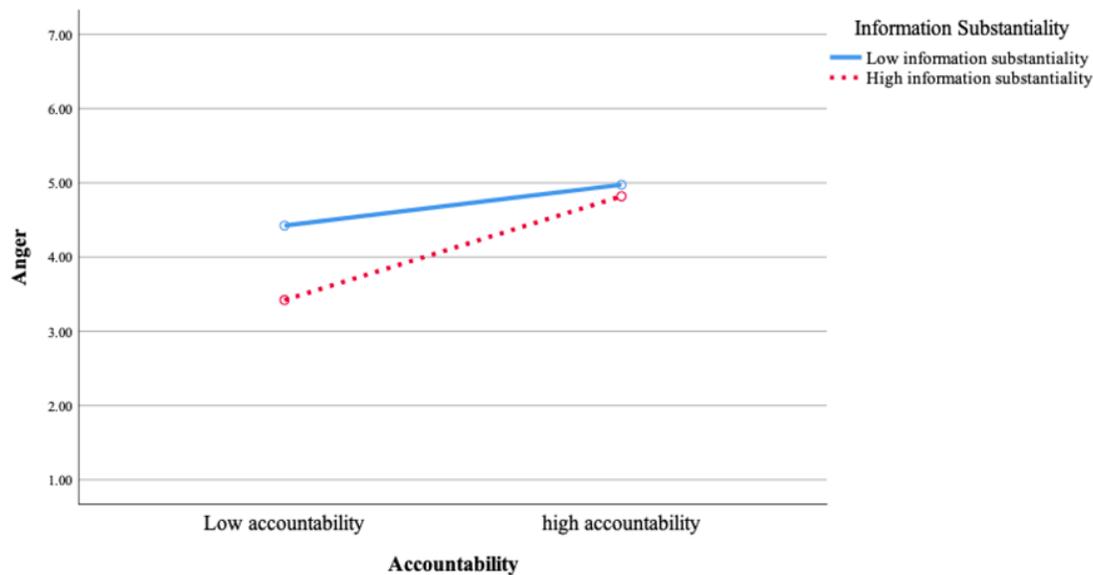
Figure 2. *Two-way Interaction effects of Accountability (High vs. Low) and Information Substantiality (High vs. Low) on Anger*

RQ1 examined whether there were any two-way or three-way interaction effects between accountability, information substantiality and participation that influence the dependent variables. A series of ANCOVA tests revealed that the only significant interaction effect was found between accountability and information substantiality on anger, $F (1, 288) = 5.54$, $p = .02$, $\eta2 = .02$. Specifically, pairwise comparisons showed that when citizens attributed lower levels of accountability to the police department which provided substantial information in its crisis response, publics expressed the lowest level of anger across all conditions (see Figure 2).

Mediation Effect of Anger

Hayes (2018) PROCESS Model 4 was separately employed to examine how anger mediated the influence of each transparency strategy on trust, using 5000 bootstrapped samples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals. Police cynicism was included as covariates. Results indicated that all separate paths (total indirect effects) from accountability, information substantiality, and participation through anger to trust were significant (accountability: $b = -.43$, $SE = .10$, CI [- .65, -.26]; information substantiality: $b = .25$, $SE = .09$, CI [- .09, -.42]; participation: $b = .22$, $SE = .09$, CI [- .06, - .42]). In addition, the direct effects of accountability and participation on trust were not significant ($p > .10$), while the direct effects of information substantiality on trust in the police were significant and positive: $b = .63$, $SE = .16$, CI [.32, .95]. Our results indicated that the influence of accountability and participation on trust were fully mediated by anger, and the influence of information substantiality on trust in police was partially mediated by anger (Table 1).

To examine whether anger mediates the two-way interactions of transparency strategies on police trust, we applied Model 8 and found that the interaction effect of information substantiality and accountability on trust was partially mediated by anger. Specifically, high information substantiality was moderated by low accountability to evoke police trust, and such effect was explained by reduced anger: $b = .41$, $SE = .13$, CI [.16, .69] (Table 2). No other moderated mediation effect was found. Finally, results from Model 12 did not reveal any

mediating role of anger in the three-way interaction effects of the three transparency strategies on police trust.

Discussion

The pervasiveness of social media and a growing consciousness of human rights among the younger generation in Mainland China have posed significant challenges to the crisis communication approach of police authorities. This study aimed to explore how transparency can be effectively applied by government entities in crisis communication. In addition, the current study investigated the role of emotion in explaining the psychological mechanism through which public trust is restored.

Main Effects of Three Transparency Strategies

First, our findings explored how different transparency strategies (i.e., accountability, information substantiality, and participation) influence publics' emotional and cognitive reactions in different ways. As for the disclosing accountability in the crisis response, although Rawlins (2008) suggested that admitting mistakes builds organizational trust and commitment, our research found that accepting internal crisis responsibility causes more publics' anger and damage their trust, consistent with previous crisis communication literature (Bakker et al., 2018).

The information substantiality strategy was found to be effective in reducing publics' anger and restoring their trust in the government body in the crisis. Previous research warned that lengthy posts may impede public engagement on social media due to information overload and substantial information may elicit publics' critical responses and dissatisfaction toward the government , we suggest that during times of crisis, government entities can benefit from substantial information in calming publics and building public trust because message quality, evidence strength, and argument clarity help to demonstrate government bodies' credibility (Metzger et al.,2003).

The participation strategy was also found effective in minimizing anger and generating more trust. Interactivity cues are the environmental supports for genuine dialogues, and the commenting interface is an important technological affordance enhancing organizational credibility (Liao & Mak, 2019). Protecting the free flow of information is one of the core principles of public relations ethics (PRSA, n.d.). However, censorship is commonly observed on Chinese social media. The Chinese Mainland government was found to strategically avoid arguing with skeptics or discussing controversial issues on social media in an attempt to reduce rumors and reinforce the policies of "harmonious society". Our findings cast doubt on this premise, implying that blocking commenting would incite public outrage and erode public trust, which runs counter to the purpose of information restriction.

Interaction Effect of Transparency Strategies

We found that only when the police department proved its low accountability in causing the crisis using the substantial information strategy, public trust was increased, which is through minimizing anger. This finding implies that government agencies must combat disinformation and demonstrate their righteousness using facts and proof if their crisis accountability is low. This study resonates with previous research that refutations should be employed when organizations with weak responsibility and denials' effects on trust in times of crisis. Since the virality of online misinformation is accelerating, Chinese Mainland governments have endeavored huge efforts into controlling misinformation through rumor-rebuttal strategies, content censorship, and other Chinese-style strategies (Cheng & Lee, 2019). Transparency strategies, hence, become possible approaches to cope with rumors.

It is reasonable to assume that the more transparent, the better. However, to our surprise, other combinations of transparency strategies in the crisis response did not reveal a significant impact on publics' anger or trust. There are several possible explanations. First, although progress is being made, criticisms on the lack of transparency in the local police are consistent (Zhao et al., 2018). Wang and Mark (2015) found that almost half of citizens support the Internet censorship. They further assert that censorship is gradually becoming "normalized" and legitimized (Wang & Mark, 2015). It is possible that long-existing asymmetrical government-citizen relationships in China might have inhibited or altered publics' overall expectations of government transparency. Integrated transparency strategies may lose their effectiveness if the combined impact of the three strategies exceeds the current Chinese citizens' expectations for government transparency. However, it is important to note that publics media literacy and expectations for information transparency constantly grow as the internet continues becoming an integral part of people's daily life.

Second, the principle of "less is more" may work in fostering transparency in crisis communication. Too much information in crisis responses may trigger disturbance, misunderstanding, confusion, and even bias. As noted by Heald (2006), there is a discrepancy between nominal (ineffective) and effective transparency, called "transparency illusion." Heald (2006) studied the UK Parliament's case and found that increasing transparency indexes did not contribute to openness in reality. Rather, transparency should concern the audiences' capability of "processing, digesting, and using the information" (p. 35). The combination of transparency strategies may cause an increase in cognitive load as a result of the complicated technological affordances and richness of information.

The Mediating Role of Anger

We found that anger significantly mediated the relationships between the transparency strategies and publics' trust in the organization in crisis. In terms of emotional appraisal, the finding supports anger as an attribution-dependent emotion. In line with prior studies, anger could be evoked by higher levels of crisis responsibility (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). This study also answers the calls of Emotion-Cognition Dual-Factor Model of Crisis Communication (Lu & Huang, 2018), stating anger as a vital mediator. Our findings imply that dealing with publics' emotions may serve as a means of re-establishing trust after crises, supporting Holland et al.'s (2021) suggestion that reconciling anger is the first stage in crisis management. In this sense, it is particularly crucial for the Chinese Mainland government to mitigate anger since the online sphere has become the vent for citizens to express their blames, anger, resignations as well as cynicisms. Governments should know that wrongly providing incomplete information could fuel citizens' outrage, imperil society's stability.

Strategic Implications

This study advances government public relations literature by highlighting transparency as an ethical and effective strategy in crisis responses. Extending Rawlins's (2008) theoretical framework of transparency into crisis communication, this study identified the different effects of transparency strategies on publics' emotional and cognitive responses to governmental crises. To answer the call of Cheng and Cameron (2017) for more scholarly attention on crisis communication research in non-Western contexts, this study offers empirical evidence to elucidate the psychological processes by which people react to authorities' crisis responses in a high-power distance and collectivistic society. Specifically, we offer six practical suggestions for managing government crisis, especially local police crisis, on social media:

1. We recommend using one of the transparency strategies in single crisis response on social media to reduce publics' anger and restore public trust.
2. Police should be prepared for publics' outrage and a loss of trust when admitting crisis accountability. When a government agency is not accountable for creating the crisis, making the claim clearly and utilizing rational, evidence-based information can maximize the positive effects on restoring public trust.
3. Do not only provide a lot of information but provide sufficient high-quality information in the crisis response. Government practitioners may use images, fact checks, and logical arguments to enhance the effectiveness of crisis response. In contrast, the vagueness of crisis response will exacerbate publics' anger, consequently damaging public trust.
4. Disabling comments in crisis communication should not be taken as a quick fix for crisis. If the path to post-crisis dialogue is blocked, publics may seek alternate, if less peaceful, means of expressing themselves.
5. Use the accountability and information substantiality strategies to deal with rumor and misinformation. When a government agency is unaccountable for the crisis, making the claim clearly and utilizing rational, evidence-based information (e.g., visualization and hyperlinks) can maximize the positive effects on restoring public trust.
6. Taking care of publics' emotions should be prioritized in crisis communication because anger can be immediately triggered by untransparent communications and publics' anger induces greater loss in trust.

Admittedly, local Chinese government entities are under dual pressure from the higher-level authority and the public (Wei et al., 2021), restricting their flexibility in social media management. Although this research found no significant effect of integrating three transparency strategies, we caution that diminishing transparency in crisis responses may exacerbate tensions between police and citizens in the long run. While Chinese citizens may not appreciate multiple transparency strategies simultaneously now, possibly due to the overall low expectation in government transparency, police should strive for higher ethical and transparency standards in order to earn public trust via effective social media crisis management.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this study. First, given the complexity of transparency's classifications, we did not test the publics' predisposition perceptions of transparency, such as the awareness of transparency policies, expectations toward transparency, and attitudes toward media regulations in Mainland China. These factors should be further examined in future research. Also, our experiment was conducted in a controlled lab environment to avoid confounding biases. To improve the generalizability of the study and further detect more nuances in transparent crisis communication, future research should examine the effects of transparency in other countries and crisis contexts and investigate publics' reactions to different transparency strategies under the influence of varying political, social, and cultural environments.

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Table 1. *Regression Results from Moderated Mediation Analysis of Interaction of Three Transparency strategies*

	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Total Effects (ACC)	-.65	.18	-1.01	-.29
Total Direct Effects (ACC → Trust)	-.22	.17	-.55	.12
Total Indirect Effects (ACC → Anger → Trust)	-.43	.10	-.65	-.26
Total Effects (IS)	.88	.18	.53	1.23
Total Direct Effects (IS → Trust)	.63	.16	.32	.95
Total Indirect Effects (IS → Anger → Trust)	.25	.09	.09	.42
Total Effects (PAR)	.44	.18	.08	.80
Total Direct Effects (PAR → Trust)	.22	.16	-.11	.54
Total Indirect Effects (PAR → Anger → Trust)	.22	.09	.06	.42

Note. The regressions were tested by model 4(Hayes, 2018). Bootstrap samples = 5000, B = unstandardized effect size. ACC = accountability, IS = information substantiality, PAR = participation.

Table 2. *Regression Results from Moderated Mediation Analysis of the Interaction of Information Substantiality and Accountability*

	Mediator			Outcome variable		
	Anger (M)			Trust (Y)		
	Coefficient	LLCI	ULCI	Coefficient	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	3.66	3.11	4.21	7.26	6.65	7.86
IS (X)	-1.00	-1.50	-.50	.63	.19	1.08
ACC (W)	.55	.05	1.05	-.27	-.72	.17
IS*ACC (X*W)	.85	.14	1.56	.03	-.59	.10
PC (Control)	.26	.11	.40	-.23	-.36	-3.52
Anger (M)				-.41	-.51	-.30
	$R^2 = .18$			$R^2 = .33$		
	$F (4, 288) = 15.58$			$F (5, 287) = 28.89$		

Conditional direct effects of X on Y				Effect	BootSE	LLCI	ULCI
Low ACC				.63	.23	.19	1.08
High ACC				.67	.22	.22	1.11

Indices of partial moderated mediation				Index	BootSE	LLCI	ULCI
Moderator: ACC				-.34	.41	.13	.16

Conditional direct effects of X on Y				Effect	BootSE	LLCI	ULCI
Low ACC				.41	.13	.16	.69
High ACC				.06	.09	-.12	.25

Note. The regressions were tested by model 8 (Hayes, 2018). Bootstrap samples = 5000, B = unstandardized effect size. ACC = accountability, IS = information substantiality, PAR = participation, PC = police cynicism.