24TH INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC RELATIONS RESEARCH CONFERENCE

Contributing at the Top and Throughout an Organization: Research and Strategies that Advance Our Understanding of Public Relations

Virtual Conference

March 4–6, 2021

Edited by:
Branden Birmingham, Ph.D.
SUNY Fredonia
Bora Yook, Ph.D.
Fairfield University
Zifei Fay Chen, Ph.D.
University of San Francisco
iprrc.org@gmail.com

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Normalizing the New Reality: Newsjacking, Brand Activism, and Something In-Between

Ekaterina Bogomoletc
North Carolina State University

Abstract

With the COVID-19 pandemic becoming part of our lives, brands are facing the challenge of figuring out appropriate ways to build relationships with their publics as well as to promote their products and services. Drawing upon research on brand activism and newsjacking, this paper examines public reactions to three campaigns, *You Can't Stop Us* by Nike, *Socialize Responsibly* by Heineken, and *Open Like Never Before* by Coca Cola. The research is done by analyzing YouTube comments using computational text analysis (N = 4979) and thematic analysis (N = 600). The analysis demonstrated that brands' publics were more concerned about the political side of the campaigns which might indicate publics' readiness to negotiate brands' place in the new reality without viewing their actions as opportunistic. At the same time, the campaigns were perceived as brand activism which brings additional concerns when it comes to authenticity of companies' COVID-19 responses. Overall, the paper explores the broader questions of brands negotiating their place in the new, post-pandemic, world.

With the COVID-19 pandemic lasting for more than a year, brands are facing the challenge of building relationships with their publics as well as promoting their products and services. As mentioned by experts, today, "some viewers expect to see cues about current events on the screen, such as actors practicing social distancing, while others want to escape from reality" (Vranica, 2020, para. 6). A number of companies approached this challenge by launching "life after the pandemic" kind of campaigns. In these campaigns, brands would usually discuss the new habits and life adjustments that people are getting used to in the post-pandemic world, such as contactless delivery or cooking at home (Vranica, 2020). However, companies' attempts to navigate the new environment did not always work well, and some of the campaigns received controversial feedback from their audience.

Drawing upon research on brand activism (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019) and newsjacking (Angell et al., 2019), this paper examines public reactions to three campaigns, *You Can't Stop Us* by Nike, *Socialize Responsibly* by Heineken, and *Open Like Never Before* by Coca Cola. These campaigns were launched several months after the beginning of the pandemic. They all communicated brands' vision of going back to a "normal" life. More interestingly, all of them got massive, conflicted responses from their publics online.

In the next sections, I first describe the case studies and the theoretical framework of the project. Then, using computational text analysis, I conduct sentiment analysis of the public reactions to the campaigns. Finally, I conduct qualitative thematic analysis of the reactions to uncover the meanings behind the sentiments.

Normalizing the New Reality

The campaigns by Nike, Heineken and Coca Cola were launched at the end of July and beginning of August 2020. Nike's commercial was created by Wieden+Kennedy agency and communicated the idea of coming "back stronger, together" after the pandemic and civil unrest in the U.S., underlining the power of sports in bringing people together and "pushing [them] ahead" (Dan, 2020; Nike Youtube, 2020, para.3). The ad is an impressive compilation of video recordings from sport events with videos of athletes training at home during the pandemic. Through the campaign, Nike addresses the issues of COVID-19, racial and social justice, and inclusivity. The commercial was posted on social media platforms and received almost 60 million views on YouTube (Nike YouTube, 2020), 40 million views on Twitter (Nike Twitter, 2020), and hundreds of thousands of reposts and thousands of likes across platforms. The commercial also received a lot of attention from popular media with some outlets praising the video and the team behind it (Dan, 2020).

Coca Cola's ad was created together with George the Poet. The implied message was to encourage people to "start over" and come back to a new, better reality after the lockdown (Coca Cola YouTube, 2020). The commercial addresses not only the issue of COVID-19 but also the pressing issue of social justice. The ad received more than 200,000 views on YouTube and hundreds of comments. The commercial also got covered by popular and professional media (see, e.g., Marketing Week, 2020).

Finally, the ad by Heineken depicts the post-pandemic life from the perspective of those going to bars (Heineken YouTube, 2020). In the video, people wear masks at a bar, keep six feet distance when going to a bathroom, blow birthday candles with a napkin, and find creative ways to keep their hands clean. The ad has received more than 200 thousand views and hundreds of comments on YouTube (Heineken YouTube, 2020). It also received media coverage by

professional and popular media with some outlets calling the ad "100% relatable" and suggesting that the video "captures the joy and awkwardness of the new normal" (Spary, 2020, para. 3).

Overall, the ads were part of a trend where brands tried imagining and normalizing the new reality, whether it was the "new normal" related to COVID-19 safety measures or the idea of a better world without the virus and racism. While companies have been responding to relevant news and societal issues in the past, the COVID-19 situation seems to be unusual. First, due to the scale of the crisis, companies seem to have no choice but to react to the pandemic in some way. At the same time, with hundreds of thousands of people dying from the virus, there is a risk of looking tone-deaf and being accused of opportunistic behavior. To account for these aspects of strategic communication during the pandemic, the current study draws upon research on newsjacking and brand activism. In the next sections, through the lenses offered by these approaches, I explore public reactions to brand's attempts to normalize a new reality and negotiate brands' place in the new, post-pandemic, world.

Responding to the Current Events: Newsjacking and Brand Activism

Newsjacking

Newsjacking is the strategy of "referencing of topical news stories in marketing communications" (Angell et al., 2019, p. 756). This is an increasingly popular practice among communication professionals, especially those working in digital PR and marketing, who see it as a way to get free publicity and/or better social media engagement (Scott, 2012; Sprout Social, 2020). The strategy is also called real time marketing (RTM) suggesting that marketing materials are being designed in real time, thus becoming "part of the ongoing conversation" (Willemsen et al., 2018, p. 830). Despite the growing popularity of this strategy among communication professionals in the industry, research on the topic of newsjacking is scarce. Existing studies show that newsjacking positively affects attitudes towards brands' content (Angell et al., 2019), increases content shareability on Twitter (Willemsen et al., 2018), and negatively affects public responses to brands' communication on Instagram (Mazerant et al., 2021). Research by Willemsen and colleagues (2018) also demonstrated that using unpredictable events (e.g., news) for newsjacking is more efficient than using predictable events (e.g., holidays) in terms of content shareability. Interestingly, scholars suggested that in situations when "newsjacking is perceived as opportunistic or trivializing grave matters, it could prove counterproductive" (Angell et al., 2019, p. 769). Similar concerns were voiced in the community of marketing practitioners discussing whether some newsjacking practices might be "in poor taste" (see, e.g., Volpe, 2012, para. 1).

Brand activism

A different way for companies to address pressing issues is through brand (or corporate) activism. Brand activism is defined as "the act of taking a stand on controversial social or political issues for which society has yet to reach consensus" (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, The Asymmetric Effect of Brand Activism section, para. 1). When conceptualizing brand activism, some scholars also highlight companies' responsibility to contribute to the good of the society. For example, Eilert and Cherup (2020) define corporate activism as "a company's willingness to take a stand on social, political, economic, and environmental issues to create societal change by influencing the attitudes and behaviors of actors in its institutional environment" (p. 461). In addition, some also discuss pragmatic benefits of such communication moves. Vredenburg et al. (2020) argue that brand activism allows companies to "stand out in a fragmented marketplace" (p. 444).

Unlike traditional corporate social responsibility initiatives, brand activism is oftentimes related to controversial issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020). In addition, brand activism "involves both intangible (messaging) and tangible (practice) commitments to a sociopolitical cause" (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 448). As a result, some scholars and marketing practitioners suggest that brand activism might bring risks for a company (Moorman, 2020). Some scholars also argue that the success of brand activism depends a lot on its authenticity, i.e. how well it aligns with a company's reputation and behavior (Moorman, 2020). The brands that do not demonstrate genuine commitment to the declared views and values might be accused of "woke washing" or the practice of capitalizing on societal issues (see, e.g., Mahdawi, 2018). Among the possible strategies to evoke positive response to brand activism, researchers list using specific language when articulating brands' position and communicating its actions, having third parties confirm their commitment to societal good, and engaging with local organizations that influence policies of social interest (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Based on the two approaches described above, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What public reactions did the brands' COVID-19 responses evoke?

RQ2: To what extent do public reactions to the brands' ads reflect the perception of the brands' COVID-19 efforts as newsjacking or brand activism?

Methods

In order to answer the research questions, YouTube comments under the brands' commercials were analyzed. The comments were collected on October 6, 2020, using Coberry tool (Coberry, 2020) which allows exporting YouTube comments. The dataset includes user responses to the videos by Nike (N = 4400), Coca Cola (N = 263), and Heineken (N = 316).

The YouTube comments were analyzed in two stages using computational text analysis and thematic analysis. First, the computational text analysis was performed using the *tidyverse* R package. At this stage of the analysis, the comments for each campaign were broken down into single words ("tokenized"). After that, "stop words" (popular yet meaningless in the context of the study words, i.e., articles) were removed. Then, the most frequent words among the responses to each ad were identified. At this stage, the analysis was conducted using stemming technique, i.e., words with the same roots were counted as one word (e.g., "meet" and "meeting"). Finally, the sentiment analysis using the *bing* lexicon was performed. The top ten words with the highest frequency contributing to the negative and positive sentiments were identified for each campaign.

At the second stage, thematic analysis of the comments was conducted. For each campaign, 200 random posts were selected for analysis (N = 600). The comments were selected using the random number generator in Excel spreadsheets. The comments that were not in English, blank comments, or comments consisting of emojis were replaced by the next comment in line. The thematic analysis was based on the approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach consists of six rounds of data examination that involve getting familiar with the data as well as identifying key themes. First, the themes were identified for each case study separately. Then, common trends across the case studies were identified.

Overall, combining computational text analysis with the thematic analysis allows for identifying underlying trends in the data and a deeper "immersion" into people's conversations at the same time (see, e.g., Light & Roscigno, 2020). By adding thematic analysis to the sentiment

analysis, I was able to uncover reasons behind the trends manifested through the negative and positive sentiments expressed by the brands' publics.

Results

Overall trends

Public reactions to Nike's and Heineken's campaigns demonstrated the predominance of negative polarity words over positive polarity words (4083 vs. 2183 words and 278 vs. 96 words respectively) while the ad by Coca Cola received almost equal number of negative and positive polarity words as a reaction to the campaign (99 vs. 103 words).

Nike's campaign

The top ten words in the public reactions to Nike's campaign include "Nike," "Muslim," "Islam," "people," "sport," "change," "religion," "buy," "video," "ad," and "woman" (See Figure 1). Based on the list of the most frequent words, the discussion revolved around religion and women.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The top ten words contributing to the negative sentiment in the discussion of Nike's campaign were the words *wrong, boycott, bad, shame, hate, disgusting, offensive, racist, slave, and disrespectful* (See Figure 2). The top words contributing to positive sentiment were *respect, love, support, freedom, peace, free, supporting, nice, wow, proud, and faith*. Interestingly, none of these words directly relate to COVID-19 or the idea of the new reality. It is also interesting how a number of words on both sides relate to respect and strong feelings regarding either supporting or boycotting the brand. Also, one can see that while the original intention behind the campaign was to bring people together, some of the popular sentiments relate to racism, slavery, and hatred.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

The thematic analysis helps examine what stands behind these public reactions. Based on the analysis of a random sample of comments (n = 200), several key themes emerge. First, the biggest theme seems to be *Anti-Islam Ad.* The comments under this theme accused the brand of promoting anti-Muslim ideas both through the visual part of the commercial and through the narration. It seems that this theme stands behind the trends manifested through some of the frequent words contributing to the negative sentiment including *wrong, shame, hate, disgusting, offensive, racist,* and *disrespectful.* The outrage related to this theme might be seen in such comments as, *"We don't fit ????? as a Muslim woman I don't want to fit on your version"* (User_18) and *"I am a Muslim and seeing this ad makes me really offended and uncomfortable. Good job Nike, good job…" (User_109).*

The second theme stems from the first one, and this is the theme of *Boycotting* Nike. This theme manifested through declarations of one's intentions to stop buying Nike's products, suggestions to join the boycott, and suggestions to report the video. This is the theme that might explain the frequency of the word *boycott* in the sentiment analysis. For example, the theme is manifested through such comments as, "*I'm a Muslim and I'm never buying ur products again*" (User_49).

The company was also reminded of its *Past Missteps*. The comments falling under this theme discuss Nike's hiring practices in China as well as refer to a negative reputation of the company in general. This is the theme that might explain the "slave" portion of the negative sentiments. For example, one comment stated, "*Nike has always been shady, but d*mn you guys*

are the worst. Boycott all major fashion corporations that benefit from illegal child and slave labour!!" (User_73).

Another interesting theme that emerged during the analysis was the theme of *Propaganda*. Users accused Nike of promoting "leftists" views through their commercial. This theme might be seen in such comments as "*New Wolrd Agenda Advertisment*" (User_38), and "*the liberals & feminists will you use any tactics for their agenda*." (User_197). Interestingly, some users also questioned the sincerity of Nike's position by calling it "woke".

Finally, some users tried *Supporting Nike*. They expressed admiration for the quality of the video production and editing skills of those behind the campaign. They also tried defending the implied message bringing the discussion back to the idea of the unifying power of sports. For example, this theme was manifested through such comments as, "*Wow why does such a nice message have to offend so many people.*" (User_43) and "*Seriously This is sooo satisfying for a sports person like me*" (User_79). This is the theme that might explain some of the words that contributed to the positive sentiment of the discussion. However, in most cases, the positive words were related not to the brand but to one's religion and views.

Coca Cola's campaign

The top ten words in the public reactions to Coca Cola's campaign include "coca", "cola," "song," "ad," "drink," "normal," "people," "background," "coke," and "music" (See Figure 3). These words are not very informative, and overall, look like a neutral conversation about the ad and the music that was used in the video.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

The top ten words contributing to the negative sentiment in the discussion of Coca Cola's campaign were the words *propaganda, worst, die, bad, stole, poison, disgusting, cringe, broke, and uncomfortable* (See Figure 4). The top words contributing to positive sentiment were *beautiful, lead, love, positive, masterpiece, awesome, wow, supports, pure, and pretty.* Some of these words overlap with the public reaction to Nike's campaign. For example, one might see similarities when it comes to the idea of propaganda and brainwashing on the negative side of the discussion.

[INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

The thematic analysis revealed several key themes in the discussion. One of the biggest themes was *Propaganda.* The comments under this theme accused Coca Cola of *propaganda* and *brainwashing*. For example, User_118 wrote, "*This Ad/ Spot/ Clip is disgusting. I've changed to organic coke by opponents. Better stuff, better taste, no brainwash. Thanks for makin goodbye this easy!* 👋". Users also argued that the ad was overly political for a soft drink. Several users commented using a popular expression "*Go Woke Go Broke.*" (e.g., User_63) referring to the idea that taking political stands might bring companies loss of revenue.

Another theme was related to *Health*. This is the theme that might explain the negative sentiments brought by the word "*poison*". People commented on the amount of sugar in Coke drinks and health risks associated with drinking soda including obesity and diabetes. The theme was manifested through such comments as "*and then we all get obese and diabetic. :)*" (User_60) and "*What if Coca-Cola stopped producing poison that it markets through flat, supposedly emotional engaging, content. Your intentions are transparent and you do not deserve the right to be a part of the new normal.*" (User_74).

Some users shared their intentions of *Boycotting* Coke. Interestingly, in this case, a boycott was suggested in the form of buying from the brand's competitors, Pepsi. As it is seen from the examples below, oftentimes, users would not even explain their motivations behind

such a move simply suggesting switching to another drink: "*Yeah, what if we are #OpenLikeNeverBefore and actually start drinking Pepsi! I hope we don't go back to Coca-Cola.*" (User_4); "*I will never buy coca cola again in my life. From now on i will only buy Pepsi or something else.*" (User_40).

Finally, a number of people discussed the *Quality of the Ad*. Just like in Nike's case, users discussed whether they liked the quality of the video, music, and text. However, in the case of Coke, users had polar opinions regarding everything but the music. An example of comments supporting the ad would be "*Great emotional Video! BRAVO COCA COLA!! Can someone tell me wich song plays in the backround?*" (User_191). Those who disliked the video, would comment "*worst and most annoying ad ever*" (User_15).

Heineken's campaign

The top ten words in the public reactions to Heineken's campaign include "people," "mask," "wear," "Heineken," "death," "covid," "flu," "virus," "life," and "Sinatra" (See Figure 5). This list suggests that the public responses to the ad are focused on issues of the pandemic and the new reality that includes mask wearing, death, and the virus.

[INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]

The top ten words contributing to the negative sentiment in the discussion of Heineken's campaign were the words *virus, sad, die, disgusting, stupid, fake, died, geezer, fear, and propaganda* (See Figure 6). The top words contributing to positive sentiment were *love, safe, protection, prefer, nice, healthy, wow, top, super,* and *rich*. As is evident from the frequency count, this is the first ad that provoked a discussion regarding the virus itself. One might also see overlaps with the previous case studies when it comes to the topics of propaganda on the negative side and love on the positive one.

[INSERT FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE]

One of the key themes that emerged during the thematic analysis was *Science*. People shared statistics about the virus, expressed their support towards doctors' recommendations, and argued about the risks of the pandemic. The theme also includes comments arguing for or against masks, sharing links to research, and discussing trustworthiness of scientists. For example, this theme was manifested through such comments as "*@HetFloortje: Do you really think everybody will die of covid? There' s a new study in Germany from the DIW (german institute of economy) that shows, most people overestimate by fare the chance of getting so ill by covid one may die.*" (User_21). This is the theme that explains the negative sentiments behind the words *virus, die,* and *death*.

Another theme that emerged at this stage of the analysis is *Propaganda*. The brand was accused of brainwashing its publics. Interestingly, Heineken's comments included claims regarding the brand getting money from the World Health Organization (User_182) and supporting the New World Order[1] (User_13). These comments explain the sentiments brought by the words *propaganda, disgusting, and stupid*. The theme got manifested through such comments as "*Absurd sad sick world. Pure brainwashing and propaganda.*" (User_171).

Some of the comments discussed the *New Reality* depicted by the ad. In most cases, the offered vision of the new normal was not received well. People even called the suggested way of going back to bars "*the new abnormal*" (User_81). Users pointed out that the suggested safety measures would ruin all the fun, and the attempt to normalize it is "totally absurd" (User_18). The theme got manifested through such comments as "*This is why I'm not going to the pub etc.,*

[1] A famous conspiracy theory suggesting the existence of one global government.

until the world regains its sanity. That is not a good night out. It's a dystopian purgatory." (User_17).

Finally, some people argued for *Boycotting* Heineken. The theme of boycott appeared in the comments related to the new reality, propaganda, and also without any explanation: "*Scr*w u heineken!!! U KNOW WHY!!*" (User_40), "*what a shame I love Heineken but I will never drink it ever again after this advert it is disgusting that's abnormal you should be very ashamed of yourselves.*" (User_126).

Discussion

This study explored reactions to brands' attempts to reconsider the new reality after the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis demonstrated that while some of the reactions to the companies' campaigns were unique to the brands, a number of comments conveyed similar public reactions across the case studies. First, the publics seemed to be more concerned with the political side of the brands' responses to the pandemic rather than with the newsjacking aspect of the campaigns. This might be seen both through the sentiment analysis and through thematic analysis. The comments focused more on the values promoted by the companies than on the brands capitalizing on public interest to COVID-19. This is an interesting take-away from this study as previous research raised questions about the benefits of newsjacking negative events (Angell et al., 2019). A different reaction in the case of COVID-19 might be due to the shared understanding that the pandemic is affecting everyone's lives, including brands. For companies, this might mean that publics are open to negotiating brands' place in the new reality without viewing their actions as opportunistic.

At the same time, all the three campaigns were accused of promoting a certain political agenda, and propaganda. This demonstrates that the campaigns were perceived as part of brand activism efforts. This is not as surprising in the cases of Nike and Coca Cola since they explicitly addressed the issues of social and racial justice. However, this is rather unexpected in the case of Heineken as the campaign focused specifically on COVID-19 safety. The perceptions of brands' COVID-19 responses as brand activism bring extra expectations in terms of authenticity of companies' efforts which might be seen through some of the comments accusing the brands of woke washing. It might also mean that brands' reactions to COVID-19 might be perceived as taking a political stand, whether companies want it or not. This finding raises questions about how companies might react to the increasing politicization of various topics, including public health issues and the new, post-pandemic, etiquette. When does a company decide that an issue gets political and requires the company not only to address it but also to take a stand? When do companies' actions stop being perceived as newsjacking and become brand activism?

Second, as a result of negative reactions to such "propagandistic" efforts, publics suggested boycotting the brands. This included reporting the ads, buying from competitors, or not buying from the brands themselves. Such a reaction reflects the trends highlighted in scholarship on brands' activism suggesting that by taking a stand, a company might lose some of its customers who might not share the declared views of the organization (see, e.g., Moorman, 2020). These reactions raise questions about possible ways to navigate these issues for brands. When an issue is happening at the scale of the global pandemic, is it possible (is it advisable) for a company to ignore it? Is it possible for a company to take a neutral stand when negotiating the company's place in the new reality? How can a company ensure that its actions are socially responsible and not contributing to the growing polarization of the society?

Finally, the case studies demonstrate that organizations' past missteps or the negative aspects of products might become an unintended part of the public discussion of brands' activism. In other words, when reacting to brands' activism, not only would publics criticize the companies for their stances but also for other actions or products that reflect negatively on their reputation in general. Similar phenomena are well-known in crisis communication scholarship which suggests that *crisis history* and *prior reputation* would affect public reactions to new crisis situations (Coombs, 2007). This is due to the fact that publics interpret new crises as part of the pattern demonstrating organizations' approach to building relationships with their publics (Coombs, 2007). I would suggest that in case of brand activism, negatively perceived activism also becomes a part of "the company's character". However, companies willfully engage in brand activism, and should have more control over this area of communication compared to crises. Hence, this public reaction raises questions about possible ways to address and manage negative responses in advance.

Limitations

While the paper provides valuable insights regarding public reactions to brands' COVID-19 responses, it has certain limitations. The biggest limitation of the study is that it only relies on YouTube data thus omitting other social media platforms. Also, the study treats threads and replies equally thus omitting the dynamics of the conversations between users.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Steve McDonald, Dr. Sergei Samoilenko, and Jessica Carter for their helpful feedback on this piece.

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Figures

Figure 1

Top frequent words in public reactions to Nike's campaign

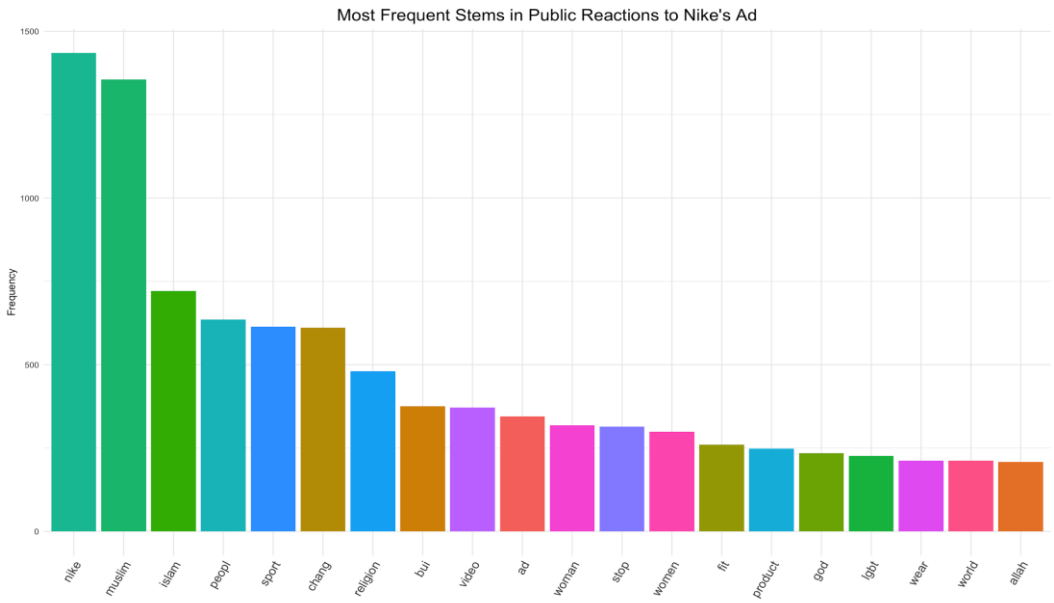


Figure 2

Sentiment analysis of Nike's campaign

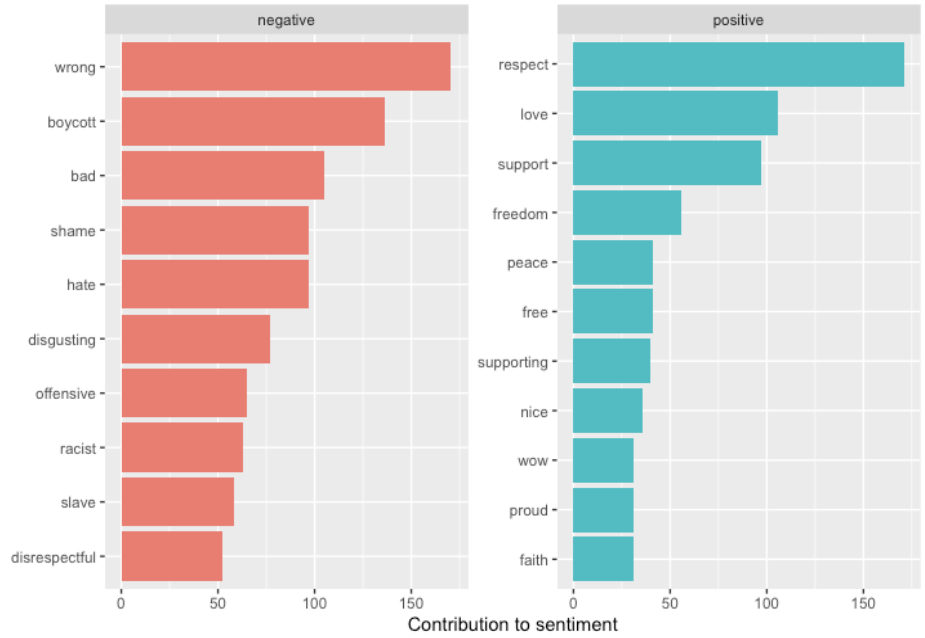


Figure 3

Top frequent words in public reactions to Coca Cola's campaign

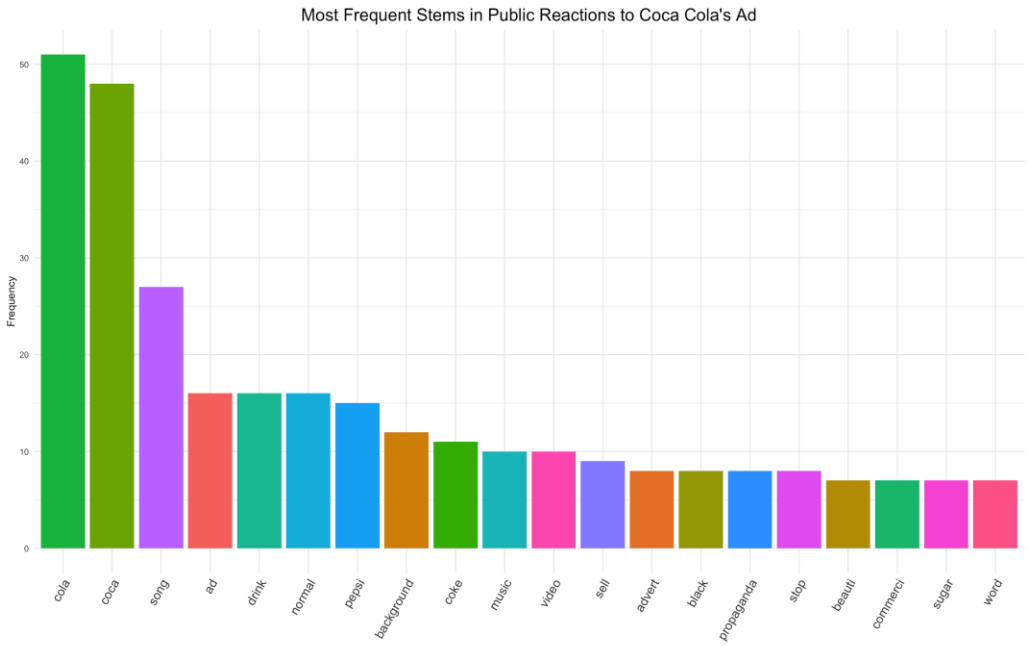


Figure 4

Sentiment analysis of Coca Cola's campaign

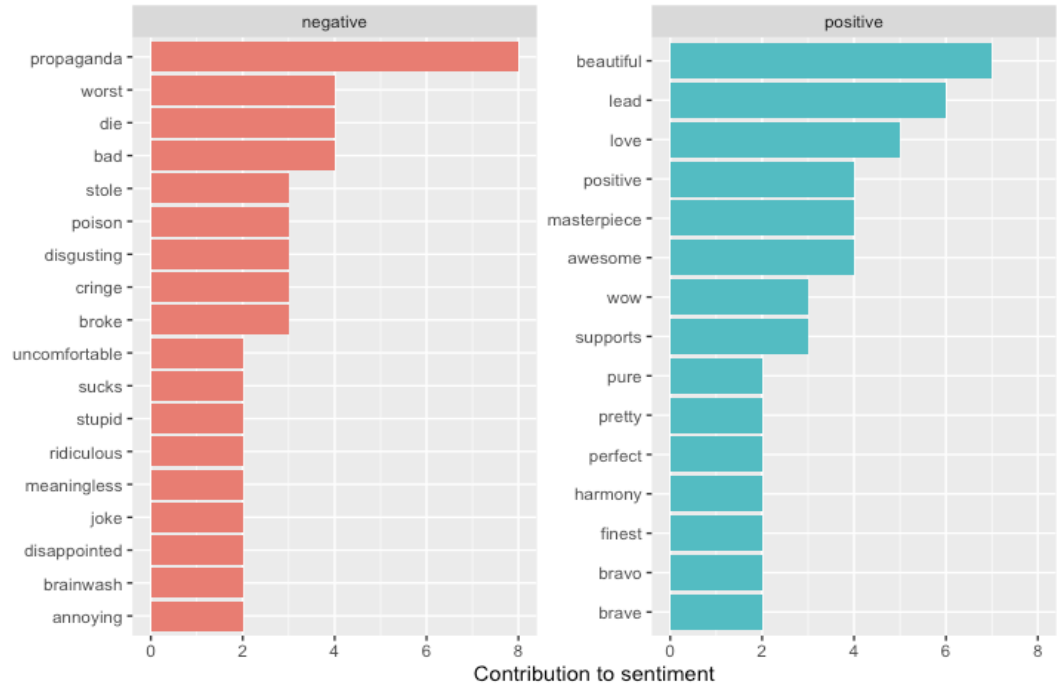


Figure 5

Top frequent words in public reactions to Heineken's campaign

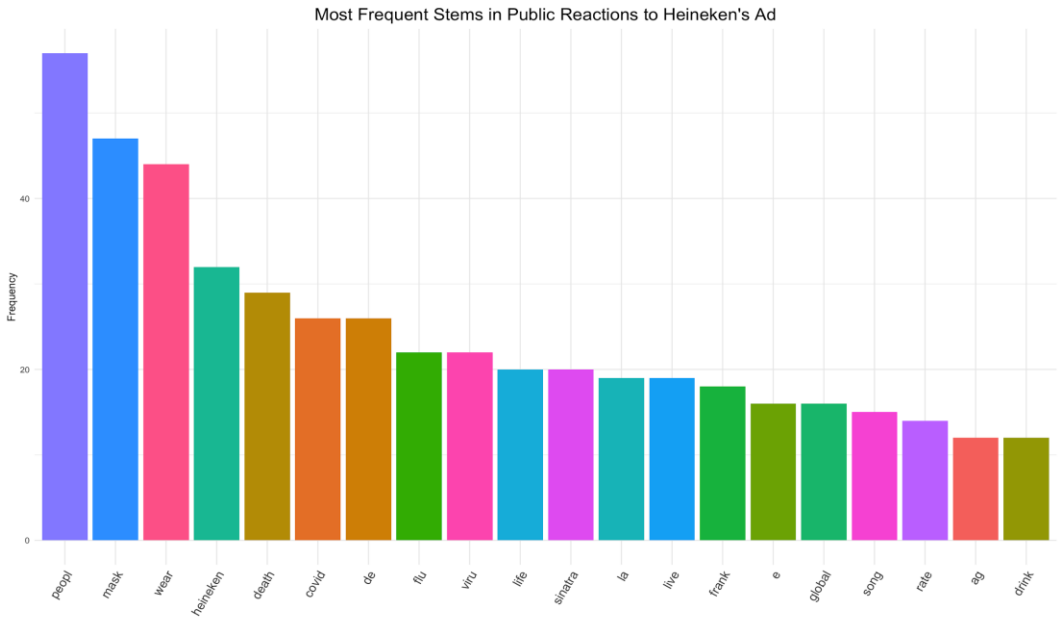
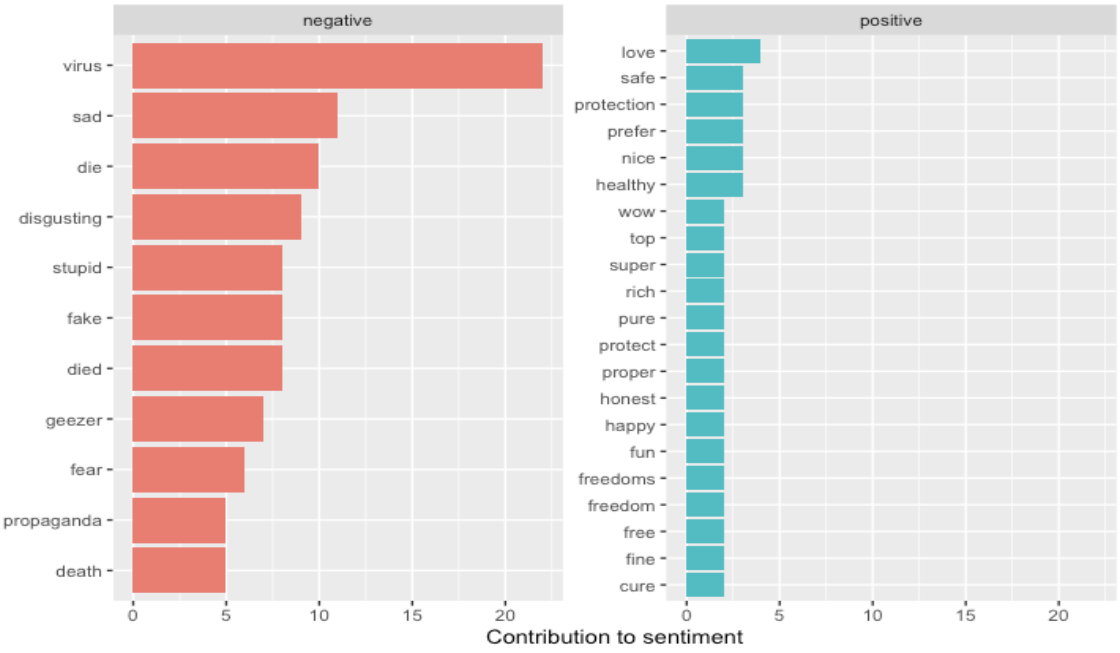


Figure 6

Sentiment analysis of Heineken's campaign



Unveiling disinformation: Influencing ethical concerns, moral outrage, and amplification

Courtney D. Boman
The University of Alabama

Abstract

Pre-bunking has been touted as a potential solution to disinformation. However, there has been little empirical research examining its effectiveness. Results from this study provide a conceptual framework for organizations to use pre-bunking and debunking messages to influence ethical concern, moral outrage, and amplification regarding disinformation astroturf attacks.

Keywords: disinformation; pre-bunking, crisis communication, ethical concern, moral outrage

While conversations of disinformation and its effects are prevalent within journalism and media studies in the post-truth era, public relations does not go unscathed from this problematic societal issue. The use of astroturf disinformation campaigns is not a novel concept. In fact, the practice has been around since at least the early 20th century when a social movement called for the use of individual paper cups instead of tin cups dipped into well buckets for health concerns. It was never disclosed that the campaign's founder was the Public Cup Vendor Company, now known as Dixie Cup (Leiser, 2016). The increasing use of social media to disseminate disinformation campaigns brings into question the negligent and unethical public relations practice of astroturfing and calls for it to be brought to the forefront of our industry's conversations. Professional organizations such as PRSA and scholars (e.g., Edwards, 2020) have spoken out against the practice and attempted to situate it within the broader issue of our society's disinformation crisis. However, there is limited empirical knowledge on how public relations can deal with the issue. While there will always be unacceptable PR practices, how can truth-tellers within our field work to prevent or undo the damage?

The current research endeavor explored how organizational use of both pre-bunking and debunking, when paired with positive psychology elements, can help decrease the adverse effects of disinformation by examining its influence on ethical concerns and moral outrage. It was also investigated if ethical concern and moral outrage can mediate the impact of (pre-/de)bunking strategies on individuals intentions to amplify the disinformation on social media. Specifically, an astroturf attack frequently used against the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) was used to explore how organizations can combat disinformation crisis attacks while aiding in the societal issue of decreasing the spread of disinformation.

Literature Review

Astroturf within the context of public relations

Disinformation can be described as the intentional spread of misleading information for a specific purpose. As such, astroturf, or the practice of using deception to disguise the true origins of the message being portrayed, is categorized under the umbrella of disinformation (Zerback et al., 2020). Astroturf attacks provide a unique issue as it presents itself as a grassroots campaign supported by an individual's peers or general public members. However, as the name suggests, it is not organically grown and is considered "fake grassroots" produced by shell organizations, usually for political or organizational gain. These campaigns work to intentionally spread harmful or inaccurate disinformation (Zerback et al., 2020).

Despite the growing popularity of astroturf campaigns, a limited number of studies have provided insights into the effects of astroturf on audience attitudes and perceptions within the communication paradigm. Pfau et al. (2007) investigated the effects of corporate front-group stealth campaigns, similar to astroturfing. After individuals were confronted with the disguised corporate messages, the opinions of those initially favoring restrictive policies on different issues significantly decreased. Most recently, Zerback et al. (2020) examined the psychological effects of online astroturfing in the context of foreign propaganda from Russia and if inoculation influenced outcomes. Results showed that individuals' political opinions and attitudes were influenced by the astroturf messaging even when inoculated.

Proactive disinformation conceptual framework

Combatting the broader (dis/mis)information issue from a public relations standpoint has begun to be studied (Einwiller & Johar, 2013; Jin et al., 2020). For instance, Jin et al. (2020) found that debunking, or reactive communication after an individual has received

misinformation, is a successful strategy. In addition, the proactive disinformation crisis communication framework provides initial empirical evidence that there are three primary strategies useful in combating astroturf attacks, including strategic silence, PR supportive, and pre-bunking (Boman & Schneider, 2021). Strategic silence is when organizations intentionally or unintentionally do not provide clear and adequate communication regarding a failure or concern being raised (Le et al., 2019). This strategy has been found useful when the organization in question needs time to investigate or identify an issue prior to making a primary response. PR supportive works to prevent slippage of an individual's positive attitude to more negative attitudes by providing reinforcement (Benoit, 1995). This strategy has been suggested to be used when exact details of a disinformation threat are unknown to bolster or protect positive organizational attributes. The last strategy is inoculation, which uses two-sided messages to create resistance to persuasion prior to the received threat (Einwiller & Johar, 2013). This strategy, termed *pre-bunking*, can be used when organizations want stakeholders to be armed with information to counterargue attacks to defend current opinions from threats. This leads to the first research question, which examined the difference between the message delivery's timing on research outcomes.

RQ1: What, if any, are the differing effects of pre-bunking and debunking strategies on research outcomes?

Enhancing pre-bunking strategies

The inoculation theory guides the foundation for the proactive communication strategy of pre-bunking disinformation. Similar to a medical vaccine inoculating patients, the theory states that individuals who are presented with a forewarning message about an attack will be less affected by the persuasive attempt (McGuire, 1961). It assumes that individuals are a) unpracticed in defending their beliefs and b) unmotivated to do so. Inoculation works to provide individuals with details and resources on defending their beliefs while also motivating the individual to defend said beliefs to overcome these two obstacles.

This study examined how including autonomy support, stemming from positive psychology's self-determination theory (SDT), and explicit warnings can influence pre-bunking success. SDT addresses when people will be internally motivated to engage in a behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). A primary concept from SDT is autonomy support. Autonomy supportive communication can be perceived as legitimate, less threatening, and less demotivating. Mouratidis et al. (2010) conducted a study looking at autonomy controlling versus supporting communication in terms of athletes' feedback. It was found that feedback that conveyed autonomy support was associated with autonomous motivation and led to favorable outcomes. The characteristics of autonomy supportive messaging include providing meaningful choices, acknowledging potential anxieties, and providing strategies that actively allow a person to explore options. When all three of these items are met within a message, evidence shows that individuals can be motivated to further think about or overcome a particular issue (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Sheldon & Filak, 2008).

Moral outrage towards crisis allegations

The current research endeavor defines moral outrage as anger triggered when there has been a violation of cultural or social norms (Darley & Pittman, 2003). This complex construct of emotions can be triggered by individuals, groups of people, and organizations or institutions. Previous research has shown that perceptions of irresponsible corporate behavior can be a root cause for moral outrage (Lindenmeier et al., 2012). This research endeavor studied how the practice of pre-bunking or debunking can reduce the levels of moral outrage an individual feels

after viewing false allegations of misuse of funds by HSUS being made through disinformation. Thus, the following research question is posed:

RQ2: What, if any, are the differing effects of pre-bunking, debunking, and strategic silence strategies on levels of moral outrage towards HSUS after reading the claims brought forth by the astroturf?

Ethical concern towards astroturf attacks

Within crisis communication literature, prior research has recognized that ethical components, such as ethical judgment, are an important part of stakeholders' decision-making and trust-building post-crisis (Cheng & Shen, 2020). For example, Coombs (2007) stated that stakeholders' ethical beliefs determine key post-crisis outcomes, such as attribution of responsibility. More so, it has been found that violating stakeholders' ethical expectations could lead organizations to lose the trust of their publics and even destroy the well-built reputation, long-term relationships, and brand loyalty (i.e., Bowen & Zheng, 2015; Cheng & Shen, 2020). Thus, the question is raised on how organizations being attacked can influence perceived ethical concern towards organizations spreading false claims through astroturf.

RQ3: What, if any, are the differing effects of pre-bunking, debunking, and strategic silence strategies on levels of ethical concern towards the disinformation astroturf campaign?

Spread of disinformation online

Social amplification is a concept that can measure the potential for a crisis to perpetuate through social media by asking questions such as the likelihood of reacting, sharing, or commenting on a post negatively or positively. This type of social media engagement is significant to the spread of information because engagement, such as sharing, is necessary for information to reach a more substantial number of people (Pidgeon et al., 2003). This engagement expands the reach of Facebook posts exponentially. When a social media user sees that another person or organization liked or shared a post, it represents the value of the information for that user (Sun et al., 2014). Thus, when it comes to the spread of disinformation, it is important to empirically examine how organizations can aid in thwarting the spread through amplification. As such, the following research question is posed:

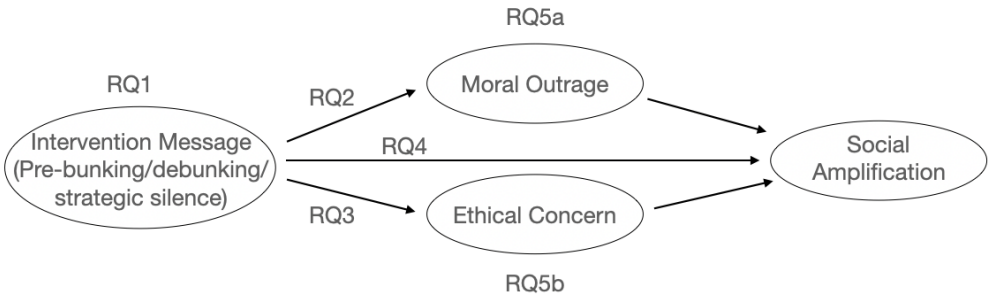
RQ4: What, if any, are the differing effects of pre-bunking, debunking, and strategic silence strategies on individuals' intentions to amplify the disinformation-based astroturf on Facebook?

Mediating communication strategies effects on amplification

It has been found that perceived unfairness is linked with causing specific behavioral outcomes, such as intentions to boycott and spread negative information (Antonetti & Maklan, 2016). The root of this behavior is instigated through the perception that an institution or organization is behaving unfairly, therefore triggering angry reactions (Lindenmeier et al., 2012). Specifically, Crockett (2017) proposed a framework suggesting that moral outrage can fuel amplification (the retransmission of a message) on social media. By expressing these opinions, individuals can benefit society by holding those deemed to be acting unfairly accountable and sharing their beliefs that the action is socially unacceptable (Crockett, 2017). While Crockett specifically examined if moral outrage can trigger the sharing of beliefs with peers, the current study set out to examine if both moral outrage towards Humane Watch's and ethical concerns pertaining to the claims made against HSUS influence individuals' intentions to amplify the disinformation astroturf video on social media. Therefore, the following question to investigate the potential mediation effects exerted by moral outrage towards Humane Watch and ethical concern raised by its claims against HSUS:

RQ5a-b: How, if at all, does (a) moral outrage and (b) ethical concerns mediate the effects of the intervention communication strategies on an individual's intention to amplify the disinformation on Facebook?

Figure 1.
Research model examining the mediating effects of moral outrage and ethical concern



Methods

Participants and procedures

Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) was used to collect data for this study (N = 965). Following the advice from Berinsky et al. (2012), attention checks were used throughout the study to ensure data quality. The average age of the sample was 38.60 (SD = 17.50), and there were slightly more males (n = 483, 50.1%) than females (n = 474, 49.1%), with .8% preferring not to say or intersex (n = 8).

After reading the informed consent script approved by an Institutional Review Board at a university in the U.S., participants proceeded through the 20-minute experiment. First, participants were asked to fill out a feeling thermometer that gauged attitudes towards seven organizations, including the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and Humane Watch. Afterwards, individuals were randomized into one of nine conditions (pre-bunking base (n = 106), pre-bunking with autonomy support (n = 107), pre-bunking with explicit warning (n = 102), pre-bunking combining the former two strategies (n = 98), debunking base (n = 109), debunking with autonomy support (n = 104), debunking with explicit warning (n = 115), and debunking combined strategies (n = 103), and strategic silence (n = 121). Those in the pre-bunking conditions saw the message from HSUS, which was then followed by a 30-second astroturf video produced by Humane Watch. Those in the debunking conditions only differed in receiving the astroturf first, followed by the HSUS message. The last group received the strategic silence (no response from HSUS), seeing only the astroturf video. Next, participants received attention checks and dependent measures displayed in the form of an online questionnaire. Demographics were collected, and a randomized code was generated for participants to receive payment.

Manipulations

To increase ecological validity levels, stimuli for this experiment mirrored what is published by both the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and Humane Watch. Only minimal edits occurred between conditions to ensure that content stayed consistent throughout all treatments when accounting for the manipulations, reading levels, and length. Previously conducted inoculation studies served as a template for the pre-bunking-based stimuli that provide participants with a forewarning message enacting a sense of threat (e.g., Banas & Miller, 2013). In addition, messages that contain autonomy support followed previous guidelines set-forth by

SDT literature that state that autonomy-supportive messages provide individuals with control, freedom, and support (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Sheldon & Filak, 2008). The stimuli that contained an explicit statement explained what astroturfing is and who funds Humane Watch. The only modification that occurred between the pre-bunking and debunking conditions was that participants randomized into one of the four debunking strategies viewed the HSUS messages after receiving the disinformation astroturf video.

Measurements

Attitudinal feeling thermometer. Individuals were asked to evaluate a series of organizations, including Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and Humane Watch, on a 100-point feeling thermometer. The higher the rating, the more favorable attitude was held towards the organization. If individuals were unfamiliar with the organization they were instructed to select "50 = neither dislike/like" (Pre-Crisis HSUS: M = 76.78, SD = 20.66; Pre-Crisis Humane Watch: M = 61.64, SD = 20.74).

Moral outrage. Moral outrage was measured by adapting a scale from Antonetti and Maklan (2016). Three items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale. Individuals were asked to indicate "the degree to which are you feeling angry/outrage/mad as a result of learning about the claims Humane Watch is making against HSUS" (1 = Not at all, 7 = Extremely) (M = 3.91, SD = 1.81, α = .95).

Ethical concern. Individuals were asked to rate their ethical concern towards Humane Watch's astroturf video using an eight-item bi-polar scale adapted from Reidenbach et al. (1991). The scale included items such as the video is: "Traditionally Acceptable/Traditionally Unacceptable; Just/Unjust; Does not violate an unspoken promise/Violates an unspoken promise, Just/Unjust" (M = 4.15, SD = 1.36, α = .92).

Intention to socially amplify. This study asked participants how likely they are to engage with the attack video via Facebook (i.e., share, positively react, comment). This measurement helped in determining if proactive messaging could help deter the spread of false information. This three-item scale was evaluated on a 7-point Likert scale with the higher the number meaning more likely to amplify (M = 2.87, SD = 1.98, α = .93).

Results

To answer research questions looking at direct effects (RQ 1-4), a series of t-tests and ANCOVAs (controlling for pre-attitudes towards both the attacked (HSUS) and attacking organization (Humane Watch)) were conducted (Table 1).

Differing effects of message timing

A series of t-tests were run to determine if there were statistically significant differences between pre-bunking and debunking strategies on moral outrage, concern of ethics, and attitudes towards the attacking organization. It was found that there were no statistically significant differences between the two conditions for moral outrage, $t(1, 842) = -.10$, $p = .92$, or concern of ethics, $t(1, 842) = 1.27$, $p = .20$. There were, however, significant differences found for perceived attitudes towards Humane Watch, $t(1, 842) = -2.39$, $p < .05$, $d = .16$. there were statistically significant for intention to amplify the astroturf video, $t(1, 841.56) = -2.56$, $p = .01$, $d = .17$)[2]. The result suggests individuals who received a pre-bunking message (M = 2.56, SD = 1.85) have

[2]Levene's test for equality of variances was found to be violated, $F(1, 842) = 8.29$, $p < .01$. As such, a t-test not assuming homogeneity of variance was computed.

less intention to amplify the message than those who received a debunking message (M = 2.89, SD = 1.98).

Direct effects on moral outrage towards crisis allegations

An ANCOVA found that there were statistically significant differences between the conditions and perceived moral outrage towards the attacked organization, $F(8, 954) = 3.54$, $p < .001$, Power = .98, $\eta^2 = .03$. Pairwise comparisons using Bonferroni found that on average, individuals who were randomized into the strategic silence condition (no response) had higher levels of moral outrage towards HSUS (M = 4.40, se = .16) than individuals who received pre-bunking with autonomy support (M = 3.50, se = .17, $p < .01$) and debunking with autonomy support (M = 3.51, se = .17, $p < .001$). Meaning that individuals who did not receive a message from HSUS experienced greater levels of moral outrage towards HSUS after viewing the astroturfing video than those who received pre-bunking or debunking containing autonomy support.

Direct effects on ethical concern towards astroturf attack

An ANCOVA revealed statistically significant differences between the conditions and ethical concerns towards the attacking organizations practice of astroturfing, $F(8, 954) = 9.30$, $p < .001$, Power = 1.00, $\eta^2 = .07$. Individuals who did not receive a message from HSUS had statistically significant lower levels of ethical concern (M = 3.50, se = .12) than individuals who received pre-bunking with autonomy support (M = 4.14, se = .13, $p < .01$), pre-bunking with explicit warning (M = 4.47, se = .13, $p < .001$), pre-bunking with combined strategy (M = 4.55, se = .13, $p < .001$), debunking with explicit warning (M = 4.58, se = .12, $p < .001$), and debunking with combined strategy (M = 4.39, se = .13, $p < .001$). Individuals who received the pre-bunking base (M = 4.02, se = .13) had significantly less concern than those who received debunking with explicit warning ($p = .05$). Individuals who received the pre-bunking explicit warning on average had higher levels of concern than those in the debunking base (M = 3.77, se = .13, $p < .01$). The pre-bunking combined strategy was significantly different than debunking base ($p = .001$). Debunking base was significantly different than debunking with explicit warning ($p < .001$) and debunking combined strategy ($p < .05$). Debunking with autonomy support (M = 4.01, se = .13), was significantly different than debunking with explicit warning ($p = .05$). In summary, this indicates that individuals who do not receive a forewarning message, whether it be pre-bunking or debunking, had less ethical concerns regarding the disinformation attack. While not statistically significant from all of the conditions, results indicate that pre-bunking combined strategy and debunking with explicit warning had the highest average ethical concern levels.

Direct effects on intentions to amplify astroturf attack

Statistically significant differences between the conditions were found when looking at amplification through an ANCOVA, $F(8, 954) = 6.62$, $p < .001$, Power = 1.00, $\eta^2 = .05$. It was found that individuals who did not receive a message had higher intentions to amplify the disinformation (M = 3.86, se = .16) than those who received pre-bunking base (M = 2.73, se = .18, $p < .001$), with autonomy support (M = 2.54, se = *.18* $p < .001$), with explicit warning (M = 2.56, se = .18, $p < .001$), with strategy combined (M = 2.50, se = .18, $p < .001$) and debunking with autonomy support (M = 2.61, se = .18, $p < .001$), with explicit warning (M = 2.81, se = .17, $p < .001$), with combined strategy (M = 2.81, se = .17, $p = .001$).

Table 1. ANCOVA Pairwise Comparisons Using Bonferroni

	Moral Outrage	***Ethical Concerns***	***Intention to Amplify***
Condition	***M (se)***	***M (se)***	***M(se)***
Strategic Silence	$4.40(.16)_{ab}$	$3.50(.12)_{cdefg}$	$3.86(.16)_{nopqrst}$
Pre-bunking Base	$3.74(.17)$	$4.02(.13)_{h}$	$2.73(.18)_{n}$
+Autonomy Support	$3.50(.17)_{a}$	$4.14(.13)_{c}$	$2.54(.18)_{o}$
+Explicit Warning	$4.15(.18)$	$4.47(.13)_{di}$	$2.56(.18)_{p}$
+Combined	$3.94(.18)$	$4.55(.13)_{ej}$	$2.50(.18)_{q}$
Debunking Base	$3.66(.17)$	$3.77(.13)_{ijkl}$	$3.21(.17)$
+Autonomy Support	$3.51(.17)_{b}$	$4.01(.13)_{m}$	$2.61(.18)_{r}$
+Explicit Warning	$4.05(.17)$	$4.58(.12)_{hfkm}$	$2.81(.17)_{s}$
+Combined	$4.16(.18)$	$4.39(.13)_{gl}$	$2.83(.18)_{t}$

Note. Shared subscripts represent statistically significant differences: $_{defknopqrst}$ = $p < .001$, $_{j}$ = p = .001, $_{abci}$ = p <.01, $_{l}$ = p < .05, $_{hm}$ = p = .05.

Mediation effect of moral outrage and ethical concern on intentions for social amplification

Lastly, the role of moral outrage and ethical concern in the effect of message strategy on the intention to amplify was examined. To do so, structural equation modeling (SEM) using latent variables was conducted using SEM with the lavaan package (Rosseel, 2012) for R. All models were estimated using robust Maximum Likelihood (MLR) unless bootstrapping was employed, in which case ML estimation was adopted. A two-step process examining both global and local fit was conducted prior to estimating the structural path model (Kline, 2015).

A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to verify the factor structure of the three multi-item variables (moral outrage, ethical concern, and social amplification). The researchers followed Hu and Bentler's (1999) joint criteria which are considered the most conservative evaluation criteria.[3] Initial fit was inadequate $\chi2(74) = 694.79$, $p < .001$, robust root mean square error of approximation (rMSEA) = .12, 90% CI = [.11, 12], robust comparative fit index (rCFI) = .92, robust, non-normed fit index/Tucker Lewis index (rNNFI/TLI) = .90, standardized root mean residual (SRMR) = .07. After removed two items form ethical concern due to low loadings on the latent variable (<.45), along with correlating two items from the same variable, adequate fit was found ($\chi2(40) = 100.27$, $p < .001$, robust root mean square error of approximation (rMSEA) = .05, 90% CI = [.04, .06], robust comparative fit index (rCFI) = .99, robust, non-normed fit index/Tucker Lewis index (rNNFI/TLI) = .99, standardized root mean residual (SRMR) = .04).[4]

With this in mind, a regression model was fit using dummy variables for eight of the treatments (0 = not received, 1 = received), with the ninth (strategic silence) being used as the

[3] According to the joint criteria, a good structural testing model approaches CFI ≥ 0.90 and SRMR ≤ 0.10, or RMSEA ≤ 0.06 and SRMR ≤ 0.10.

[4] Even though the chi-square value suggests that the measurement model does not adequately fit the data, the chi-square value is often problematic because it is sensitive to sample size (Bentler, 1990; Bollen, 1989).

reference ("control") condition. The model was found to have adequate fit, $\chi 2(129) = 345.10$, $p < .001$, robust root mean square error of approximation (rMSEA) = .04, 90% CI = [.04, .05], robust comparative fit index (rCFI) = .98, robust, non-normed fit index/Tucker Lewis index (rNNFI/TLI) = .97, standardized root mean residual (SRMR) = .06. Thus, after analyzing local and global fit, the researchers consider the measurement model could be retained.

First, regarding the mediating role of moral outrage on the effect of message strategy on social amplification, five strategies were significantly mediated, including pre-bunking (base and with autonomy support) and debunking (base and with autonomy support). According to these findings, when the attacked organization used these pre-bunking or debunking strategies, moral outrage towards the organization decreased, which in return reduced the individual's intention to amplify the astroturf video. However, similar to the direct effects analysis, no mediating role was found for pre-bunking using explicit warning and debunking using explicit warning or the combined strategy. Second, for the effect of ethical concern, it was found that all strategies except for pre-bunking using autonym support were mediated. Hence, when an individual received one of the seven strategies outside of this, ethical concern towards the practice of disinformation astroturfing was increased, which led to less intention to amplify the information across Facebook. The only exception (non-significant results) occurred when using pre-bunking with autonomy support). Table 2 reports the outcomes of the analyses.

Table 2. Mediation effects of message strategy on intention to amplify disinformation

	Mediated by Moral Outrage		***Mediated by Ethical Concern***	
	b	***CI***	***b***	***CI***
Pre-bunking Base	-.17(-.04)	[-.30, -.02]	-.27(-.07)	[-.46, -.10]
+ Autonomy Support	-.23(-.05)	[-.40, -.08]	-.30(-.07)	[-.45, .11]
+ Explicit Warning	-.07(-.02)	[-.18, .06]	-.45(-.12)	[-.64, -.29]
+ Combined	-.12(-.03)	[-.24, .04]	-.47(-.11)	[-.65, -.33]
Debunking Base	-.19(-.05)	[-.32, -.07]	-.18(-.04)	[-.33, -.05]
+ Autonomy Support	-.23(-.05)	[-.36, -.09]	-.25(-.06)	[-.45, -.09]
+ Explicit Warning	-.09(-.02)	[-.24, .04]	-.48(-.12)	[-.71, -.33]
+ Combined	-.06(-.02)	[-.21, .09]	-.43(-.10)	[-.61, -.27]

Note: Path coefficients are unstandardized with standard errors in parentheses. 5000 bootstrapping used.

Discussion

This research endeavor aimed to explore how pre-bunking and debunking strategies can serve the dual purpose of lowering the temperature when it comes to moral outrage based on false claims while also raising ethical concerns towards disinformation-based astroturf campaigns. In addition, the current study looked at how these two constructs mediate the effects message strategy has on the amplification of disinformation. Recently, Edwards (2020) called for greater public scrutiny of PR practices such as astroturfing, which is seen as unethical and not condoned by the PR industry as a whole. This study specifically examined how an organization being attacked can inform the public about astroturfing, while also protecting itself from the claims.

Initial findings show that the steps taken by organizations both before and after disinformation attacks are important. While the lack of significant differences between the pre-bunking and debunking conditions were substandard, it points to the overall idea that some communication is better than none when it comes to disinformation being spread. Literature surrounding paracrises, such as rumor-based situations, suggest that no response may be warranted in some situations. However, this study provides empirical evidence that this advice might not hold true with disinformation events, as suggested by the proactive disinformation crisis communication framework.

Findings suggest that infusing autonomy support and explicit warnings into pre-bunking and debunking messages can decrease individuals' concerns of moral outrage by the attacked organization, along with enhancing ethical concerns towards the disinformation, ultimately thwarting intentions to amplify disinformation. These observations support self-determination theory findings in that individuals prefer autonomy supportive language versus controlling language (e.g., Mouratidis et al., 2010). The results indicate that providing individuals with explicit details about the disinformation and providing autonomy support by letting individuals know they are supported and have the freedom to decide their own opinions is a strong message strategy that should be focused on. When looking at how to decrease disinformation's persuasive effect, using the combined strategy in both the pre- and debunking consistently performed the strongest when looking at the research outcomes as a whole.

Overall, individuals who received the solo autonomy support strategy had the lowest moral outrage levels towards HSUS. When examining ethical concerns, again, both pre-bunking and debunking performed better than ignoring the accusations. Similar to what Jin et al. (2020) found when examining debunking information and crisis outcomes, providing detailed information is beneficial when exploring how to increase ethical concern towards the practice of astroturfing when using pre-bunking or debunking. Similarly, looking at direct effects on the intervention message strategy and intention to amplify, individuals who received autonomy support or explicit warning consistently reported less intention to amplify than no message or messages without these message enhancements. In general, individuals who received the pre-bunking combined strategy had the lowest intentions to amplify.

Lastly, when looking at how moral outrage and ethical concern mediated message interventions, both variables influenced the message strategies effects on intention to amplify. This provides support for Crockett's (2017) framework suggesting the moral outrage can motivate behavioral responses. Individuals with higher levels of moral outrage based on the allegations against HSUS were more likely to amplify the disinformation. Experiencing heightened levels of ethical concern towards the astroturf message, while also experiencing lower levels of moral outrage towards HSUS practices, decreased intentions to amplify the message. This held true for both the pre-bunking and debunking base messages and messages using autonomy support. Meaning that when looking at how to limit the spread of disinformation, it could be of importance to provide individuals with information that heightens their ethical concern towards astroturfing. Within a similar vein, when looking at how to protect an organization post-attack, it is important to lower moral outrage an individual may have towards the organization based on ethical dilemmas mentioned in attack ads.

Practical Implications

In addition to the prescriptive research implications above, there are also several practical implications. While this research has self-serving implications for organizations to protect themselves from attacks, it also demonstrates how singular organizations can have an impact

with decreasing the spread of disinformation on social media. This study provides practitioners with a prescriptive strategy on what to include in messages and when messages should be deployed. In general, this study shows that organizations should not ignore the attack and should consider sending either a pre-bunking or debunking message to stakeholders. Ignoring the attack and not providing a message to individuals caused those individuals not to be as concerned with moral or ethical issues pertaining to the astroturf attack. To deploy these strategies, communication practitioners should infuse messages that state individuals can choose what to believe (autonomy support) and explain the disinformation attack's goal.

Limitations and Future Research

A few limitations must be mentioned prior to discussing future research. This study's primary limitation is that while experimental design has many benefits, it is still conducted in an experimental setting. Participants were purposely exposed to stimuli in a condensed timeframe that they otherwise might not encounter. Within this same vein, this crisis's lifecycle played out in a 20-minute capsule, which does not represent the actual timescale in which intervention messages would occur. This inhibits this study's ecological validity since, in reality, individuals would not receive a threat immediately following the warning. It is hypothesized that the lack of time-lapse between presentation of the stimuli could have led to the lack of significant differences between the pre-bunking and debunking conditions.

The latter limitation leads to the first opportunity for future research, which should consider measuring amplification intentions immediately after the disinformation is presented to participants instead of after all stimuli are received. Moreover, this research examined a single situation and organization within the U.S. The issue of disinformation and astroturf campaigns influences various industries. It is crucial to test further if the strategies that successfully thwarted adverse effects for HSUS translate into other fields and other cultures. Future research is needed to bolster the assumptions, and claims within this study for generalizability, by replicating similar experimental designs in different settings. And lastly, while this study supported Crockett's proposed model for moral outrage influencing amplification, future research should continue examining the difference between offline and online interaction with disinformation content.

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Knowledge Mapping of Crisis Communication Research: A Visual Analysis Using CiteSpace

Tingjun Deng
Shanghai Jiao Tong University

Abstract

This study used CiteSpace to analyze 4116 articles about crisis communication in Web of Science from 2010-2020. The paper identifies the most influential authors, institutions, theories, papers, as well as hot topics and future trends for crisis communication research. Overall, this application results in comprehensive knowledge maps of crisis communication, which makes for a quick and better understanding in the development of crisis communication for both researchers and practitioners.

Keywords: crisis communication, Citespace, cocitation, bibliometric analysis, science mapping

Introduction

Due to the frequent crisis events, the attention of researchers has put on crisis communication. Thus, the number of literatures on crisis communication research increases fast. Four thousand one hundred sixteen articles about crisis communication are found in the Web of Science database. There is a calling for comprehensive reviews of crisis communication to help researchers keep track of the current state of research for crisis communication. Therefore, this paper's primary goal is to create an integrated map of crisis communication research, which includes past, present, and future of crisis communication research. Based on this, researchers are easier to push forward the study of crisis communication.

Literature Review on Crisis Communication Research

Crisis communication refers to delivering messages between individuals and organizations, particularly during and after the crisis stage (Coombs, Holladay, 2012). The purpose of public relations is to build trust and nurture a good relationship between organizations and their publics (Grunig, Hunt, 1984). Hence, crisis communication is a critical component of public relations. In the past, there are many meta-analyses related to public relations. For example, Broom et al. (1989) used content analysis to compare the top two journals (i.e., Public Relations Journal and Public Relations Review) in 1975-1982. Cutler (2004) reviewed articles in *Public Relations Review* on case-study research in 1995-1999. Pasadeos et al. (2010) analyzed the most-cited works of public relations literature in the 1990s and identified current authors, the journals of their publication outlets, new research perspectives and topics. However, few studies sum up the researches in crisis communication. For instance, Lawson (2017) provided some evidence-based advice for the development of crisis communication research from an intercultural perspective in 1953-2015. Ha et al.(2014) examined seventy-five articles about crisis communication in major communication journals from an interdisciplinary perspective in 1991-2011.

Although above mentioned studies have roughly described the current crisis communication studies, limitations were as follows: Firstly, the recent review study of crisis communication ends by 2016(Schwarz et al). However, the number of articles about crisis communication is in rapid growth. Thus, their studies couldn’t keep pace with the times. Secondly, most review studies were conducted in content analysis, which was restricted to hundreds of articles. With the help of Citespace software, this paper could analyze thousands of articles. Thirdly, previous studies only count single terms in different papers, like single authors, or a certain paper in the references. Therefore, this paper not only updates review studies in the present crisis communication research by expanding the data, but also builds a relationship between terms and draws maps of collaboration/ cooccurrence/ cocitation. It carries out a visualized bibliometric analysis, and provides a longitudinal analysis to fill this research gap.

Methodology and Data

Data Collection

This paper used Citespace to analyze existing crisis communication literature and present a systematic review of evolutionary change. Citespace is a computer program, which was used to perform a bibliometric analysis. Professor Chaomei Chen invented CiteSpace in early 2004.

The article selection process was in four steps. Firstly, this study chose Web of Science Core Collection other than all Databases, so as to obtain influential papers and eliminate unimportant articles. Secondly, articles with “crisis communication” as theme words were

selected in the Web of Science Core Collection database. In addition, the time was set from 2010 to 2020. Fourthly, exclusion criterions were papers not written in English and the types of papers not articles. Finally, a total of 4116 published articles were retained.

The Advantages of Citespace Analysis

Citespace can be used to interpret three categories of things. Firstly, it shows the network map of authors, countries, and institutions, making it easy to trace the basic information of cooperation between papers. Secondly, the cooccurrence of keywords and disciplines help scholars to identify hot research topics and key research areas. Thirdly, cocitation analysis is used to reflect the potential collaboration and similarity of cocited references, cocited authors and cocited journals. Besides, there are three values generated by Citespace worth mentioning. Frequency means the number of occurrences of the two terms at the same time. Betweenness centrality means the number of times a node serves as a bridge along the shortest path between two other nodes, that is, this term has a relationship with different terms. The burst means a variable's values change dramatically over a short period. This change is regarded as a new emphasis in crisis communication research (Li, Ma & Qu, 2017).

Results and Discussion

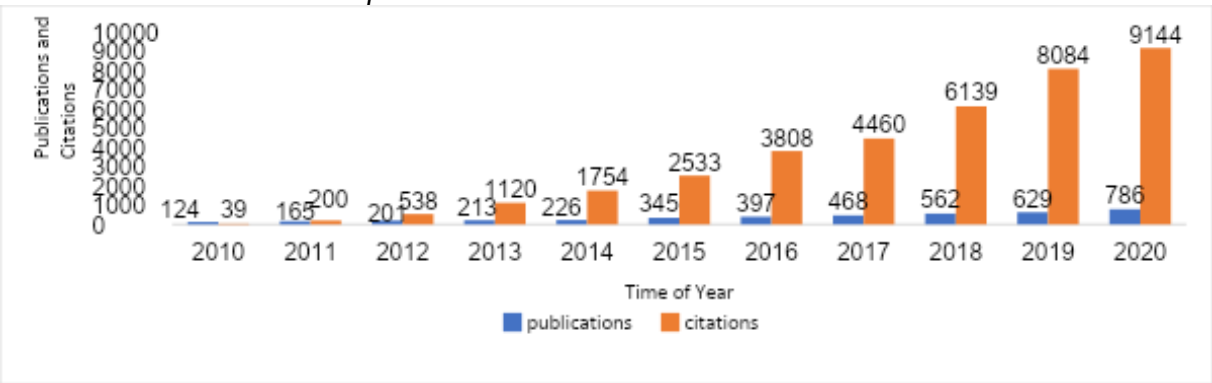
Macro Level: Landscape of Crisis Communication Research

At the macro-level, this paper used cooccurrence analysis of disciplines and cocitation analysis of journals to get a landscape view of crisis communication research.

A total of 4116 publications with 37819 citations were retrieved and downloaded in December 2020. Figure 1 displays the number of articles in every year. As a whole, the number of publications has increased at about 40 publications per year in the last decade. There were two sharp jumps in 2014 and 2019. The second growth may be caused by the outbreak of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) globally in 2020.

Figure 1

Publications and Citations of Crisis Communication Research in 2010–2020



***Mapping and analysis* on disciplines.** The variety of disciplines reveals disciplinary foundations for crisis communication research. The principles of subject cooccurrence analysis are as follows: Each journal in the Web of Science database is labeled as one or more subjects. As a result, all articles in a journal are distributed to one or more subjects in the same way. For example, the journal of *Management Communication Quarterly* is assigned to management and communication. As displayed in Table 1, the main research area is communication, which is the largest subject(861), business-related field(829) come next and then social sciences (245). Other vital disciplines with cooccurrence frequency less than 250 but more than 110 include environmental & occupational health, environmental sciences & ecology, computer science,

government & law, psychology, health care sciences & services, engineering and political science. Some disciplines have smaller frequency, but with higher betweenness centrality, such as hospitality, leisure, sport & tourism (0.49). It means that this discipline often cooccur with many different disciplines in crisis communication research. This can give rise to stable economic growth and political environment in the tourism industry. (Tang and Law, 2006). For example, Pennington-Gray is a productive scholar in the area of tourism crisis management. Various disciplines vastly improved the evolution of crisis communication theory and concepts by learning from other disciplines.

Table 1

Top 14 Disciplines of Crisis Communication Research

Ranking	***Disciplines***	***Frequency***	***Centrality***
1	Communication	861	0
2	Business & Economics	829	0.26
3	Business	421	0.11
4	Management	284	0.29
5	Social Sciences	245	0.46

Mapping and analysis on journals. Journal cocitation analysis also provides essential insights into the knowledge base of crisis communication research. It counts the cocitation of two journals in the references. The top six journals (i.e., Public Relations Review, Journal of Public Relations Research, Journal of Communication, Journal of Applied Communication Research, Communication Research, Management Communication Quarterly) in terms of cocitation frequency are all in the communication field. This explains why communication is the top 1 category in crisis communication research. From the category standpoint, journals in the business and management category received more citations, such as *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management, Academy of Management Review, Corporate Reputation Review*. Knowledge from business and management is therefore a main intellectual resource for crisis communication scholars. The cause for that is the most frequently studied type of crisis were "product tampering."(Wang, Dong, 2017) This result is in accordance with the subject analysis of crisis communication.

Meso Level: Basic Information of Crisis Communication Research

At the meso-level, basic information of crisis communication research is displayed, such as countries, institutions, grants, authors and cited authors.

Mapping and analysis on countries, institutions and grants. The network of countries was mapped. It shows that the USA contributed the most. One thousand three hundred seventy-six publications were from the USA, nearly half of the sample size. England ranked second, with 326 publications. China was fourth, with 201 publications. Since the US has the majority of the top research center, scholars and grants, such as the "National Science Foundation," it is the leader of crisis communication research for a long time. Also, the crisis communication research in England is funded by three grants, that is, "National Institute for Health Research," "Economic and Social Research Council," "Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council." The crisis communication research in China has the largest grants called "National Natural Science Foundation of China." More details can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2

Top 5 Grants of Crisis Communication Research

Ranking	***Grants***	***Frequency***	***Centrality***	***Countries***
1	National Natural Science Foundation of China	39	0.04	China
2	National Science Foundation	21	0	USA
3	European Union	17	0.03	Europe
4	National Institute for Health Research	14	0.01	UK
5	European Commission	12	0	Europe

From the perspective of region, it can be found that the studies about crisis communication mainly focus on North America (the United States and Canada), Western Europe (England, Germany, Netherlands, Spain, etc.) come after and Asia-Pacific region (Australia, China, South Korea, Singapore). Although some of European countries have a small number of publications, they have high centrality value, like Italy (0.26), France (0.55), Austria (1.14), Hungary (0.48). This shows that these countries have formed close academic networks with other countries, mostly because of formation of European Union.

Table 3

*Crisis Communication Research Distribution of Institution*s

Ranking	***Institutions***	***Publications***	***Centrality***	***Countries***
1	University of Kentucky	58	0.24	USA
2	University of Maryland	50	0.09	USA
3	University of Georgia	33	0.18	USA
4	University of Central Florida	32	0.08	USA
5	University of Toronto	28	0	Canada

The results of countries also can be explained by the analysis of institutions. The institutions of crisis communication research can be classified into two types: universities and research centers. In Table 3, the number of institutions in the USA accounts for four out of five. The University of Kentucky, the University of Maryland, and the University of Georgia are the top three American universities in crisis communication research, due to long tradition of research focus and famous scholars. As shown in Figure 2, Liu, the top 1 prolific author, is from the University of Maryland. Many of her recent studies are about tornado risk communication as well as crisis narratives and other message strategies. What's more, Grunig, an Emeritus Professor at the University of Maryland, is a noted public relations theorist. Jin is from the University of Georgia. There are two authors (Veil and Spence) who come from the University of Kentucky. Veil emphasizes organizational learning in high-risk environments and community preparedness. And Spence cares about the issues of race, gender, disaster management and natural disaster, like Hurricane Katrina.

In terms of centrality, the centrality value of the University of Kentucky and the University of Georgia, the University of Michigan, the University of Oklahoma are highest. For example, the University of Kentucky established the Risk and Disaster Communication Center.

They recruited students and had many alumni, like the associate dean of applied sciences & technology. Moreover, they set up a crisis communication pedagogy program called "The Crisis Communication Coalition," which taught students about crisis communication research and practice. Therefore, the University of Kentucky cooperated closely with researchers and practitioners.

Mapping and analysis on author and citied authors. The most significant difference between Figure 2 and Figure 3 is that Figure 2 shows the established cooperation among researchers. Centrality in Figure 2 means real connections with other researchers. However, Figure 3 exhibits the potential relationship between different scholars. Centrality in Figure 3 represents the scholars who have similar interests in crisis communication research with others.

Figure 2

The Network of Author for Crisis Communication Research

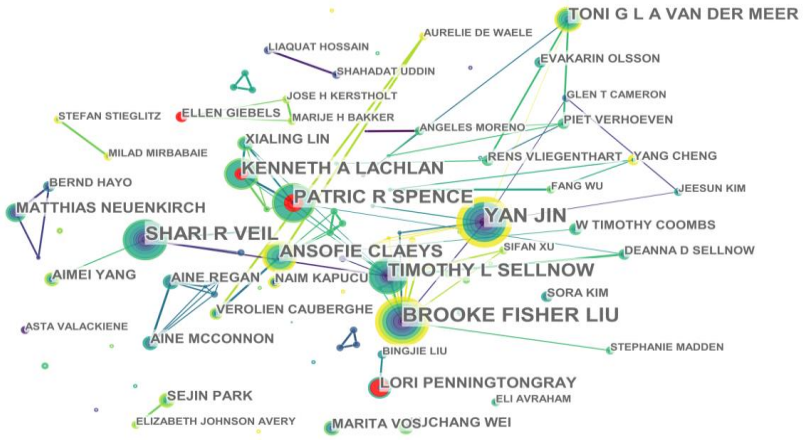
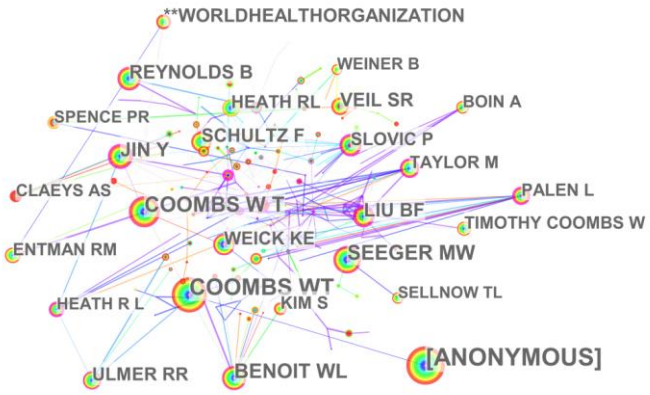


Figure 3

Author cocitation Network of Crisis Communication Research



The network of authors calculated the number of actual collaborations between two authors. Citespace generated a coauthor map with 403 nodes and 208 links (Figure 2). Different nodes in this map represent the author, and links between nodes represent collaboration relationships (Yu-Dan et al., 2017). The size of each node is corresponding to the cooperation frequency of the authors. The bigger the node is, the more frequent the author occurs with other authors in the meantime. Each line linking two nodes in Figure 2 stands for cooperation links connecting the two authors. The colors of links show the first year of the connection between the

two authors (Liu, Yin, Liu & Dunford, 2015). They are active and professional authors, also called" rising stars" in this field. The top five co-authors were Liu (frequency: 23), Jin (frequency: 23), Veil (frequency: 19), Spence (frequency:18), Sellnow (frequency:17). In contrast, the centrality for their collaborations was basically 0, suggesting that collaborations between different authors are few. They are inclined to cooperate with few familiar scholars.

Author cocitation analysis investigates inner relationships among individual authors in the research field. The more two authors are cocited, the closer they are mutually related. Citespace presents an "invisible network" among crisis communication scholars. Figure 3 is composed of the 265 most cocited authors and 305 cocitation links. The top five cocited authors were Coombs (frequency: 39), Seeger (frequency: 21), Benoit (frequency: 17), Jin (frequency: 14), and Reynolds (frequency: 12). Coombs and Benoit are the theory builders, and they came up with fundamental theories, like "situational crisis communication theory (SCCT)" and "image restoration theory (IRT)". These two theories played a critical role in advancing the development of crisis communication research. Further, the top five cocited authors in aspects of centrality were Sweetser(0.54), Jin(0.36), Liu(0.35), Palen(0.28), and Slovic(0.24). They made a great contribution to different domains within crisis communication research. Both cocitation counts and centrality revealed that Jin was a "core strength" researcher and her research had an important influence on this field in the last ten years. She concentrates on applying theories of crisis and risk communication to social media and individual's reaction, such as emotions.

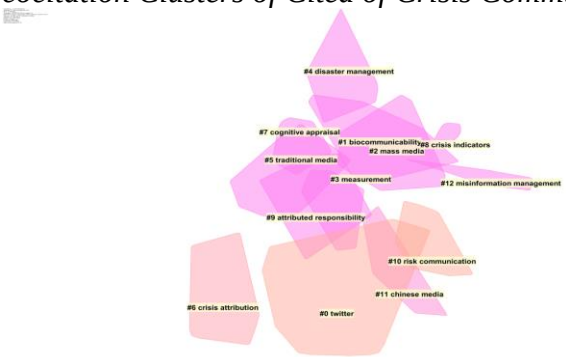
Micro Level: Knowledge Structure Map of Crisis Communication Research

At the micro-level, specific papers and keywords are used to depict current crisis communication research's knowledge base and hot topics.

Mapping and analysis on references. Through Citespace, the study identified cocitation clusters, which is the foundation knowledge of the crisis communication research. The smaller number of the cluster has, the bigger size the cluster has. Besides, the label of the cluster is the keywords with the largest value.

Figure 4

cocitation Clusters of Cited of Crisis Communication Research



From Figure 4, it can be seen that crisis communication research was divided into 12 clusters: twitter(size: 49), biocommunicability(size: 37), mass media(size: 33), measurement(size: 32), disaster management(size: 29), traditional media(size: 28), crisis attribution(size: 28), cognitive appraisal(size: 22), crisis indicators(size: 16), attributed responsibility(size: 16), risk communication(size: 13), Chinese media(size: 12), misinformation management(size: 10).

Most of cocited references are papers; some of them are books in the list of cocited references. For instance, *Ongoing Crisis Communication and Theorizing Crisis Communication* are books in the top ten cocited references. *Ongoing Crisis Communication*, written by Coombs

(2011), provides useful suggestions for how to react to crisis in the three phases (pre-crisis, during crisis, and post-crisis). *Theorizing Crisis Communication*, written by Sellnow and Seeger (2013), not only summarized theories from varied perspectives, but also supplied a tool for communication in the natural and human-made crises.

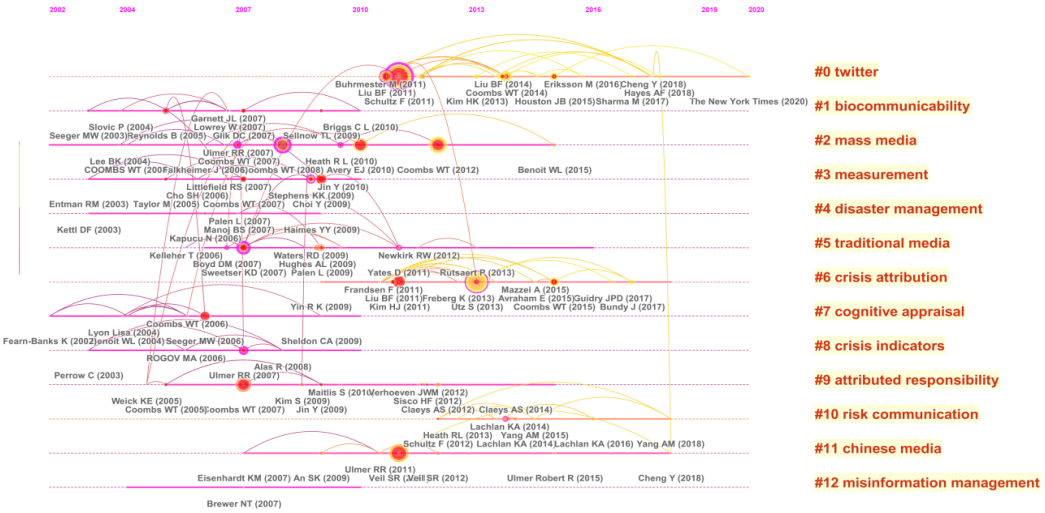
In summary, 7 out of 10 top cocited studies are about social media and post-crisis communication. This information confirms the importance of social media in crisis communication research and emphasis on the stage of crisis communication research (Schultz et al., 2011; Utz, Schultz & Glocka, 2013; Jin, Liu & Austin, 2014; Sweetser, Metzgar, 2007; Austin, Liu & Jin, 2012). Other studies of top 10 cited studies focus on theory testing and building (Ulmer, Seeger & Sellnow, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Veil, Reynolds, Sellnow & Seeger, 2008), and comprehensive review (Veil, Buehner & Palenchar, 2011).

To capture the history, current status and progress of crisis communication and discover critical papers in the clusters, Citespace is utilized to perform a visual timeline analysis on the cocitation clusters of cited references (Figure 5).

As shown in the timeline overview (Figure 5), the sustainability of a cluster varies. The largest cluster (Cluster #0) lasts ten years and it is still active. Cluster #2(mass media) stays 13 years and also remains to be active. On the contrary, Cluster #3(measurement), Cluster #7 (cognitive appraisal), Cluster #8(crisis indicators), Cluster #12 (misinformation management) are relatively short-lived, ended by 2010.

Figure 5

The Timeline of cocitation Clusters from 2010 to 2020



Mapping and analysis on keywords. The mechanism of keywords cooccurrence is calculating the frequency of two core keywords used in journal articles. Because keywords on behalf of articles' main content, a map of keyword cooccurrence can tell us the current research hot spots and future orientation(Chaomei, Zhigang, Shengbo & Hung, 2013). An analysis of cooccurrence keywords in light of frequency and centrality (Table 4) revealed the focus point. This paper removed some similar words with the same meaning to reduce noise, for instance, “communication”, "crisis”. There were five hot topics:

1. Social media: in the era of Web 2.0, social media becomes a place where crises or risks constantly happen (Coombs, 2014). Three types of social media(i.e., Blog, Twitter and Facebook) were most discussed; whereas few scholars related crisis communication to

Bookmark, YouTube, Wikipedia, photograph, virtual game worlds and virtual social worlds (Cheng, 2018).

2.Crisis management: crisis management and response strategies is a promising research area in public relations, which was hotly debated by Benoit (1997), Hearit (1994), Coombs (1998), and Allen and Caillouet (1994). Crisis communication is the core of crisis management research (e.g., Hearit 1994). In Table 4, the popular crisis type includes disaster and terrorism.

3. Individuals' responses: in the twentieth century, a significant change in crisis communication research is from sender orientation to audience orientation. An audience orientation research includes (1) the public's assessment towards crisis situation, (2) the public's response towards crisis response strategies, (3) the public's views towards organizations during the crisis, and (4) the public's intended behaviors towards the organization after crisis in the future. In formal research about crisis communication, experiment and surveys are used to grasp these four audience perceptions (Coombs and Holladay, 2012).

4. Health communication: as mentioned in the disciplinary section, crisis communication is a cross-field with a variety of perspectives, such as business, government and politics, health care, education, and so on. For example, Reynolds is a famous scholar with dozens of cocitations, and he is in Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine. In particular, the COVID-19 coronavirus in 2020 becomes the central topics in crisis communication among researchers.

5. Risk communication: health experts, including psychologists, preferred to use "risk communication" rather than "crisis communication" when faced with risks or threats to public health (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005). The processes of risk and crisis communication are closely combined, in that both of them aimed at the management of the public's performances and health influences. The key difference is that most risk communication happens in the pre-crisis stage, while crisis communication only occurs during the crisis (Glick & Deborah, 2007). Recently risk communication has frequently occurred in the preparedness phase.

To sum up, Table 4 would help scholars to broaden their awareness and extend their interests in the relevant fields.

Table 4

Top 20 Keywords of Crisis Communication Research

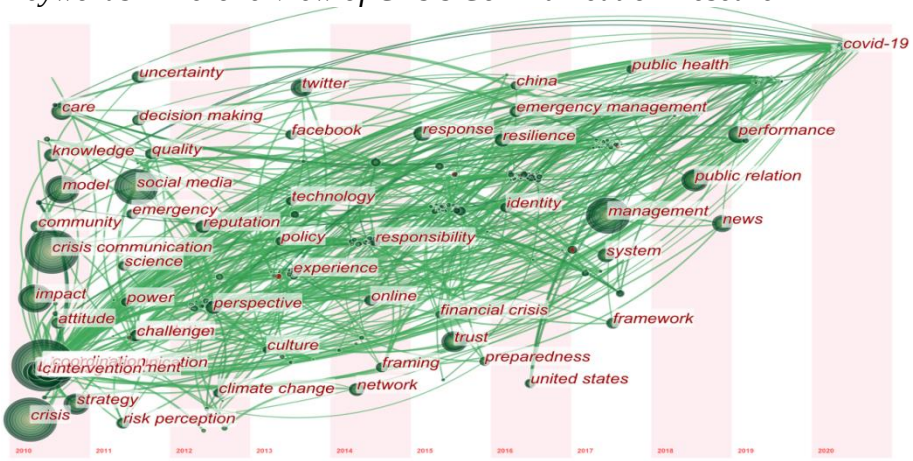
Ranking	***Frequency***	***Keyword***	***Centrality***	***Keyword***
1	450	Crisis Communication	0.36	Health
2	414	Social Media	0.31	Coordination
3	321	Management	0.3	Media
4	233	Information	0.29	News
5	219	Media	0.28	Credibility
6	207	Impact	0.25	Social Media
7	203	Risk	0.25	Impact
8	185	Model	0.23	Information
9	171	Perception	0.23	Community
10	159	Risk Communication	0.22	Terrorism
11	154	Crisis Management	0.21	Risk Communication
12	144	Disaster	0.2	Hurricane Katrina

13	137	Twitter	0.19	Internet
14	131	Strategy	0.19	Adaptation
15	126	Public Relation	0.18	Twitter
16	123	Trust	0.15	Response
17	106	Performance	0.14	Network
18	104	Emotion	0.13	Risk
19	104	Covid-19	0.13	Crisis Management
20	99	Health	0.13	Strategy

To reveal the evolution of research focus, this study applied keywords to a timezone view shown in Figure 6. The locations of nodes are where the first years they appear.

Figure 6

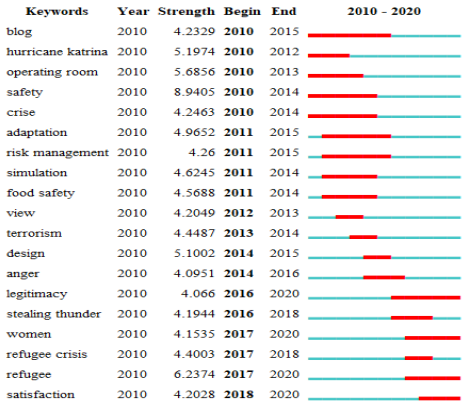
Map of Keywords Timezone View of Crisis Communication Research



Citespace allows researchers to showcase burst keywords and list the keywords according to their time of appearance and finishing (Figure 7).

Figure 7

Top 19 Keywords with the Strongest Citation Bursts



This function can help researchers to depict the knowledge structure of crisis communication and foresee future trends visually. Research focuses in 2017 and 2018 were on women, refugees and satisfaction. These topics got much attention in a short time. Essentially,

it's the shift of the types of sample used in crisis communication research and focus from the sender (crisis managers) to the audience.

Conclusions and Future Study

To sum up, through Citespace software, this study suggests that the intellectual base and theories of crisis communication research are principally from the communication, business and economics and management disciplines. In terms of contributing countries, institutions, authors, and journals, the leading force of crisis communication research is from the United States and Europe, with the University of Kentucky, University of Maryland, and the University of Georgia being major contributing institutions. Coombs, Seeger, and Benoit are top contributors; Sweetser, Jin, Liu are the center of crucial cooperative networks. Articles from the International Journal of *Public Relations Review* have the highest number of citations (821). The International Journal of *Journal of Public Relations Research* and *Journal of Communication* is also listed in the top five. In terms of the popularity of research topics, contemporary crisis communication research highlighted social media, crisis management, individuals' responses, health communication, risk communication. The front-line research has also switched to women, refugee, and satisfaction.

Based on these findings, this paper proposes some advice: the research of crisis communication needs more cooperation from different disciplines, countries, institutions, and authors. Although the research found that crisis communication research was already at the initial stage of the interdisciplinary research phase, there is much room for introducing more theories from other disciplines and using mixed methods. Developing understandings of crisis communication in a global context is a must (Ha & Boynton, 2014). Put it another, crisis communication research needs more different experiences and voices in other regions (Diers-Lawson, 2017). Moreover, more studies are supposed to focus on the mitigation phase, in other words, pre-crisis phases in the future (Fischer, Posegga & Fischbach, 2016).

Overall, rather than traditional isolated citation counts, this paper employs Citespace to identify and picture the knowledge structure, turning points, hot spot and dynamics of crisis communication research, so as to inspire scholars' academic imagination. Although Citespace performed an effective econometric analysis of crisis communication, the data obtained were not complete. For example, future research may consider adding the languages of literature and comparing different languages, such as English paper versus Chinese paper. Expanding the period of crisis communication research from 1975-2020 is also a good choice.

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Tweeting a Pandemic: Communicating #COVID19 across the Globe

Jeanine Guidry, Ph.D.[1]
Nicole O'Donnell, Ph.D.[1]
Shana Meganck, Ph.D.[2]
Alessandro Lovari, Ph.D.[3]
Marcus Messner, Ph.D.[1]
Aloni Hill, Ph.D.[1]
Vivian Medina-Messner, M.A.[1]

[1]Virginia Commonwealth University
[2]James Madison University
[3]University of Cagliari, Italy

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about an urgent need for public health departments to clearly communicate their prevention, testing, and treatment recommendations. Previous research supports that Twitter is an important platform that public health departments use to communicate crisis information to stakeholders in real time. This study aimed to shed light on how international health departments shared relevant information about COVID-19 on Twitter in 2020. We conducted a quantitative content analysis of N=1,200 tweets from twelve countries, across six continents. COVID-19 prevention behaviors were consistently referenced far more than testing or treatment recommendations across countries. Disease severity and susceptibility were referenced more than recommendation benefits, barriers, and efficacy. Furthermore, most tweets featured an accompanying visual, which may enhance message attention and reception. Results provide support for how public health departments can better communicate recommendations related to COVID-19 behaviors. Based on these results, implications for public health organizations and public relations practitioners worldwide are discussed, and hands-on action guidelines are provided.

Keywords: Twitter; COVID-19; Health Belief Model

Background

On January 4, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) used Twitter and other social media sites to report for the first time that there were clusters of outbreaks of pneumonia in Wuhan, China (World Health Organization, 2020). The disease was later identified as COVID-19 and the World Health Organization declared it a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on January 30, 2020, with 7,818 confirmed total cases worldwide (World Health Organization, 2020). As of January 2021, the number of cases worldwide has grown to over 99.7 million (Johns Hopkins University and Medicine, 2021) in 219 countries and territories (Cable News Network, 2021). Information about COVID-19 prevention, testing, and treatment has developed and evolved rapidly throughout the pandemic. Social media such as Twitter provide health departments with the opportunity for two-way communication of relevant and often urgent health information (Syed-Abdul et al., 2016). It is unknown how public health organizations use social media to communicate specifically about COVID-19. The current study aimed to address this research gap by analyzing and comparing how public health departments in twelve countries, across six continents, communicated COVID-19 related risks as they developed in 2020.

In the wake of the 24 hours news cycle, public health agencies act in a feedback loop with the media and the public through participatory websites and social media platforms, such as Twitter, in which the public have the ability to make substantial contributions to knowledge translation in the forms of "information generation, filtering, and amplification" (Chew & Eysenbach, 2010, p. 1). As a result, public health professionals have the opportunity to monitor and respond to user-generated content about public response and perceptions of health crises. Public health organizations across the globe use social media platforms to communicate urgent information, including COVID-19 as it spread across the globe (*cite withheld for blind review*).

As of October 2020, a reported 4.66 billion people worldwide had access to the Internet (Statista, 2020). While there are many ways that individuals can obtain health information online, social media provide unique spaces for real-time updates and direct dialogue between health departments and the public. The social media Twitter is especially useful to public health departments in times of crisis and for reaching people who may not visit a traditional public health agency website (Bartlett & Wurtz, 2015). Bartlett and Wurtz state, "Twitter can serve as a powerful communication modality to both "push" and "pull" public health data; each user is a potential public health sensor and actor" (2015, p. 375).

Social media provide unique spaces for the spread of health information with stakeholders and the general public. Public health departments are able to embed website links in their tweets to direct Twitter users to their website or to other important information. Monitoring analytics of such tweets and their responses can be advantageous for public health experts because they provide insight into users' understanding and perceptions of health-related content. According to Boon-Itt and Skunkan (2020), analysis of Twitter data is one of the most prominent forms of research in medical informatics studies. It is especially useful for analyzing public awareness about diseases and other health issues, which could be used to construct public response strategies and tactics. Social media platforms such as Twitter are especially useful during an outbreak of a disease to evaluate public panic through user tweets and comments (Bartlett & Wurtz, 2015). Likewise, public health agencies are able to use Twitter to respond to public concern and provide live updates on the locations of outbreaks and health measures to take in response to them (Boon-Itt & Skunkan (2020).

There are limited social media based studies on COVID-19 since the initial outbreak of this disease emerged recently (Boon-Itt & Skunkan, 2020; Chandrasekaran et al., 2020; Damiano & Allen Catellier, 2020; Gruzd & Mai, 2020; Rufai & Bunce, 2020). One content surveillance study collected and analyzed data from around 15 million posts on COVID-19 from the Chinese social media site called Weibo, a platform similar to Twitter, and found that monitoring overall social media searches, posts, and information sharing behaviors provides insight into disease signals related to case counts, outbreaks, and testing inquiries (Shen et al., 2020).

Another study used the model of stigma communication to analyze stigma communication, misinformation, and conspiracy theory content found in 155,353 COVID-19 related tweets posted during the early stages of the outbreak between December 31, 2019, to March 13, 2020, and found that public health agencies should pay attention to public health content that contains unintentionally stigmatized COVID-19 information because it can diminish efforts to prevent and fight the disease in stigmatized populations (Li et al., 2020). Moreover, the scholars encouraged public health agencies to urgently engage and educate the public about COVID-19.

One study analyzed how national health departments in different nations utilized Twitter to disseminate information about health to the public (*cite withheld for blind review*). The scholars conducted a quantitative content analysis of 1,200 tweets from national health departments in 12 different nations. The findings showed that there was a lack of content on cardiovascular disease, but there was significant information provided on infectious diseases. The public health departments in the study also did not utilize the tweets to initiate two-way communication with their followers. The present study seeks to expand on the aforementioned study by analyzing how public health organizations from different countries are utilizing Twitter to disseminate information about COVID-19 in general. As a result, the first two research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

RQ1: How is COVID-19 public health information shared on Twitter across nations?

RQ2: Are there differences in the Twitter engagement among COVID-19 public health tweets of different nations?

Health Belief Model and COVID-19 Related Tweets

The Health Belief Model (HBM) is a widely used framework in research that seeks to explain, predict, and influence health-related behavior (Rosenstock et al., 1988). The model emerged from a series of independent, applied research problems that a group of Public Health Service investigators faced between 1950 and 1960 (Rosenstock, 1974). There was a need to understand why individuals did or did not participate in various health related actions (Janz & Becker, 1984). The aforementioned early researchers leaned heavily on the idea that "it is the world of the perceiver that determines what he will do and not the physical environment, except as the physical environment comes to be represented in the mind of the behaving individual" (Rosenstock, 1974, p. 329). Since its inception, the HBM has evolved to include six constructs: perceived susceptibility, perceived severity, perceived benefits, perceived barriers, perceived self-efficacy, and cues to action. Perceived susceptibility refers to one's perception of their vulnerability or risk of contracting an infection or developing a disease. Perceived severity describes one's perception of the seriousness of a condition and its consequences. Perceived barriers refers to barriers to the uptake of the focused health behavior, or one's beliefs about the negative impact of obstacles or impediments that may interfere with performing recommended health actions and whether their psychological and financial costs are worth the sacrifice (Glanz et al., 2008). Perceived self-efficacy describes an individual's perception of their ability to

successfully perform recommended activities, and cues to action are the internal and external triggers that cause behavior changes (Tajeri Moghadam et al., 2020).

In regards to social media content about infectious diseases and related topics, scholars have used the HBM to analyze Instagram posts about Zika (*cite withheld for blind review*); to conduct a quantitative content analysis of 800 Pinterest posts to gain an understanding about public perceptions of infectious disease vaccinations (*cite withheld for blind review*); and to understand the public's perceptions of social distancing by classifying Facebook comments left in response to COVID-19 on the pages of public health authorities in Singapore, the United States, and England (Sesagiri Raamkumar et al., 2020). There is still a need to understand how HBM constructs are used in national health department tweets, which informs the following research questions in the present study:

RQ3: To what extent are Health Belief Model variables present in COVID-19 public health tweets originating in different nations?

RQ4: To what extent does the presence of Health Belief Model variables impact social media engagement in COVID-19 public health tweets originating in different nations?

Visual communication and the use of Twitter

Visual content is an essential component of health communication because images that accompany text or spoken words increase the attention, comprehension, and recall of health communication information (Houts et al., 2006). Moreover, visuals are especially beneficial for individuals with low literacy proficiencies. Although some social media platforms, like Instagram, are more visually driven than others, scholars have found that visual content also enhances text and spoken information on social media sites, like Twitter, that do not require visuals (*cite withheld for blind review*). It is important to understand how visuals are used by public health departments in tweets about COVID-19 related information; thus, the fifth and final research question for this study seeks to understand:

RQ5: To what extent are visuals used in COVID-19 public health tweets across different nations?

Method

Sample

We conducted a quantitative content analysis of 1,200 randomly selected tweets by the following 12 national health departments: Australia (@healthgovau), Brazil (@minsaude), Canada (@GovCanHealth), Chile (@ministeriosalud), Germany (@BMG_Bund), India (@MoHFW_INDIA), Italy (@ministerosalute), New Zealand (@minhealthNZ), Nigeria (@FmohNigeria), Singapore (@sporeMOH), South Africa (@healthZA), and the United States (@HHSgov). National health departments from two of the most economically productive countries on each of the six contents were chosen, with leading countries determined through a combination of Gross Domestic Product and per capita income. The program Meltwater was used to collect tweets from the aforementioned health departments' Twitter accounts. We obtained a random sample of 100 tweets from each country tagged #COVID19 in 2020.

Content Coding

The codebook was adapted from previous research (*cite withheld for blind review*). Before content coding, multilingual research team members translated tweets that were in languages other than English with language (German, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish). After coder training, code modifications, and intercoder reliability testing, three researchers independently coded the data. Dichotomous codes were used for analyzing how tweets portrayed information about prevention behaviors (masks, social distancing, handwashing,

respiratory hygiene, etc.), screening (locations, availability, recommendations, etc.), and potential treatment (Hydroxychloroquine, Remdesivir, convalescent plasma, etc.). Then, corresponding HBM questions were asked for prevention, screening, and treatment behaviors. These questions included perceived benefits, barriers, self-efficacy, and cues to action, and COVID-19 severity and susceptibility. We also analyzed a variety of questions related to tweet attributes including the presence of visuals, hyperlinks, hashtags, and audience engagement. Tweet engagement metrics included the number of likes, retweets, and replies.

Analytical Strategy

Descriptive statistics were used to answer research questions related to how COVID-19 was discussed (RQ1), the frequency of HBM variables (RQ3), and the nature of COVID-19 visuals present (RQ5). Mann Whitney-U and Kruskal Wallis H-tests non-parametric tests were used to analyze potential median engagement differences (RQ2, RQ4) between different countries. Twitter engagement metrics are not normally distributed; thus, the median is a better measure of central tendency than the mean for these data.

Results

The first research question asked how COVID-19 public health information is shared on Twitter across nations. For the entire sample, 30.6% (n=367) of the tweets consisted of either a retweet or a quote tweet (a tweet forwarded from another Twitter user). In addition, more than half (61.8%, n=741) of the tweets in the sample included a hyperlink, and the majority of those pointed either to the organization's own website (70.9%, n=525) or to another, related, government website (13.5%, n=100). All of the tweets mentioned COVID-19, since that was the hashtag/search term used in the study.

Table 1

COVID-19 focus by country

Country	Prevention	Testing	Treatment
Australia	33.0% (n=33)	11.0% (n=11)	0% (n=0)
Brazil	24.0% (n=24)	5.0% (n=5)	9.0% (n=9)
Canada	40.0% (n=40)	13.0% (n=13)	1.0% (n=1)
Chile	35.0% (n=35)	11.0% (n=11)	15.0% (n=15)
Germany	38.0% (n=38)	3.0% (n=3)	3.0% (n=3)
India	19.0% (n=19)	6.0% (n=6)	2.0% (n=2)
Italy	19.0% (n=19)	3.0% (n=3)	0% (n=0)
New Zealand	7.0% (n=7)	3.0% (n=3)	0% (n=0)
Nigeria	53.0% (n=53)	7.0% (n=7)	4.0% (n=4)
Singapore	2.0% (n=2)	1.0% (n=1)	0% (n=0)
South Africa	17.0% (n=17)	2.0% (n=2)	0% (n=0)
USA	67.0% (n=67)	9.0% (n=9)	13.0% (n=13)

The second research question asked about differences in Twitter engagement among COVID-19 public health tweets across nations. For the complete sample, the median number of retweets was 24.50 (Range: 12,400); the median number of likes was 42.00 (Range: 11,900); and the median number of replies was 0 (Range: 349). Table 2 shows median engagement by country.

Table 2

Engagement by country

Country	Variable	Retweet frequency	Like frequency	Reply frequency
Australia	Median	13.00	15.00	1.00
	Range	1190	2398	62
Brazil	Median	31.50	141.50	6.00
	Range	1019	3483	65
Canada	Median	35.50	51.00	0
	Range	1679	3100	30
Chile	Median	26.50	18.00	2.00
	Range	171	426	32
Germany	Median	28.00	58.50	0
	Range	674	3600	349
India	Median	56.50	136.50	0
	Range	4493	6273	95
Italy	Median	42.00	66.50	0
	Range	2300	2888	71
New Zealand	Median	11.00	22.50	1.00
	Range	226	471	66
Nigeria	Median	18.50	36.50	1.00
	Range	12400	11899	50
Singapore	Median	5.00	11.00	0
	Range	29	54	6
South Africa	Median	26.50	36.00	3.00
	Range	1088	1497	56
USA	Median	81.00	134.00	0
	Range	5305	5693	51

We also looked at engagement with the entire sample by three different COVID-19 pandemic phases – January-April, May-August, and September-December. Kruskal Wallis tests showed that tweets from Phase 1 (January-April) were significantly more frequently retweeted

and liked than those from either Phase 2 (May-August) or Phase 3 (September-December), all p<.001).

The third research question asked to what extent are HBM variables present in the tweets. Several countries, for example South Africa, Singapore, and India, barely used HBM constructs or did not use them at all; others only included certain constructs while leaving out others (see Table 3).

Table 3

Health Belief Model constructs by country

Country	Severity	Susceptibility	Benefits	Barriers	Cues to action	Self-efficacy
Australia	39.0% (n=39)	32.0% (n=32)	18.0% (n=18)	2.0% (n=2)	25.0% (n=25)	1.0% (n=1)
Brazil	12.0% (n=12)	11.0% (n=11)	8.0% (n=8)	0% (n=0)	5.0% (n=5)	0% (n=0)
Canada	17.0% (n=17)	22.0% (n=22)	24.0% (n=24)	1.0% (n=1)	25.0% (n=25)	6.0% (n=6)
Chile	28.0% (n=28)	36.0% (n=36)	25.0% (n=25)	0% (n=0)	17.0% (n=17)	0% (n=0)
Germany	12.0% (n=12)	10.0% (n=10)	32.0% (n=32)	0% (n=0)	28.0% (n=28)	2.0% (n=2)
India	1.0% (n=1)	0% (n=0)	7.0% (n=7)	0% (n=0)	8.0% (n=8)	6.0% (n=6)
Italy	47.0% (n=47)	49.0% (n=49)	12.0% (n=12)	0% (n=0)	33.0% (n=33)	10.0% (n=10)
New Zealand	65.0% (n=65)	61.0% (n=61)	3.0% (n=3)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	2.0% (n=2)
Nigeria	53.0% (n=53)	48.0% (n=48)	37.0% (n=37)	11.0% (n=11)	42.0% (n=42)	2.0% (n=2)
Singapore	1.0% (n=1)	1.0% (n=1)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)
South Africa	3.0% (n=3)	0% (n=0)	5.0% (n=5)	0% (n=0)	4.0% (n=4)	6.0% (n=6)
USA	23.0% (n=23)	18.0% (n=18)	49.0% (n=49)	3.0% (n=3)	46.0% (n=46)	18.0% (n=18)

The fourth research question asked how engagement differed based on the presence of HBM variables. Inclusion of HBM variables in tweets tended to elicit higher engagement (see Table 4).

Table 4

Health Belief Model variables and median engagement

Country	Engagement variable	HBM variable	Mdn present	Mdn absent	p-value
Australia	Retweets	Severity	15.00	9.00	.037
	Retweets	Susceptibility	15.50	12.00	.023
	Likes	Susceptibility	17.50	12.00	.018
Brazil	Retweets	Severity	252.00	29.50	.001

	Likes	Severity	612.50	131.50	.001
	Retweets	Susceptibility	236.00	30.00	.031
Canada	Retweets	Severity	68.00	32.00	.009
	Likes	Severity	124.00	46.00	.019
Chile	Retweets	Severity	39.50	16.50	.002
	Retweets	Susceptibility	37.00	16.00	.001
	Retweets	Cues to action	15.00	29.00	.035
Italy	Retweets	Severity	29.00	71.00	<.001
	Likes	Severity	40.00	112.00	<.001
	Retweets	Susceptibility	31.00	55.00	<.001
	Likes	Susceptibility	51.00	97.00	<.001
	Retweets	Benefits	265.00	37.00	<.001
	Likes	Benefits	520.00	62.50	<.001
	Replies	Benefits	26.50	0	<.001
	Retweets	Cues to action	405.00	34.50	<.001
	Likes	Cues to action	687.50	61.50	<.001
	Replies	Cues to action	27.50	0	<.001
New Zealand	Retweets	Benefits	30.00	11.00	.023
Nigeria	Retweets	Severity	28.00	12.00	<.001
	Likes	Severity	65.00	24.00	<.001
	Retweets	Susceptibility	40.50	10.00	<.001
	Likes	Susceptibility	67.00	23.00	<.001
USA	Retweets	Susceptibility	287.50	63.00	.013
	Likes	Susceptibility	356.00	86.00	.023
	Retweets	Benefits	159.00	41.00	.003
	Likes	Benefits	209.00	48.00	.001
	Retweets	Self-efficacy	282.50	63.00	.013
	Likes	Self-efficacy	447.50	91.00	.038
	Retweets	Cues to action	170.50	47.50	.001
	Likes	Cues to action	246.50	51.50	.001

Note: No significance for any HBM constructs for South Africa, Singapore, Germany, India
Note: Non-significant results not included in this table, but available upon request from the authors

The fifth and final research question asked about the extent of visuals present in tweets. For the entire sample, 71.7% (n=860) of the tweets contained a visual. Of those, 16.2% (n=139) consisted of primarily an image (a photo with little or no text), 22.3% (n=192) consisted of a mix of image and text, and 15.6% (n=134) consisted of an infographic. Considering each country individually, 99% of Australia's tweets included a visual, 87% for Brazil, 73% for Canada, 98% for Chile, 78% for Germany, 72% for India, 88% for Italy, 16% for New Zealand, 83% for Nigeria, 74% for South Africa, and 92% for the USA. None of Singapore's tweets included a visual.

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a sense of urgency not often seen in public health communication, with the outbreak affecting all of the countries in our sample. Our findings indicate that public health departments across nations utilized several methods to connect with stakeholders and share timely information about COVID-19. Recommendations for COVID-19 prevention were mentioned more frequently than information about testing and treatment. This finding makes practical sense as stopping the spread of COVID-19 and flattening the curve to reduce likelihood of hospital capacity are international priorities (WHO, 2020). However, our research also revealed that the promotion of these prevention behaviors were not often accompanied by HBM model variables. Thus, as health departments across nations were sharing recommendations, they were not necessarily supporting their calls to action with adequate messages communicating COVID-19 severity and susceptibility, as well providing information about barriers, efficacy, and benefits consistently.

More than 50% of posts from the United States and Nigeria referenced prevention recommendations, whereas tweets from New Zealand and Singapore referenced prevention the least. While the tweets from the United States and Nigeria may be good models for effective communication, differences between outbreak severity should also be considered when comparing results across nations. New Zealand and Singapore have reported low COVID-19 fatality rates and have contained the spread of the virus better than other countries in our sample such as the USA and Brazil. The fact that these countries discussed prevention less than others may suggest that these behaviors were normatively being followed, with a lower need for health departments to emphasize them. Tweets from Brazil, India, and the United States received the highest engagement. These countries all have reported higher fatalities than the other countries included in this sample (BBC News, 2021). Hence, the attention and engagement with COVID-19 content in these countries is warranted and encouraging.

Engagement with COVID-19 focused tweets was significantly higher in the early months of the pandemic compared to the latter part of 2020, when mortality had reached levels that were only feared earlier in the year. This is potentially concerning, since it can point to lower online engagement with public health departments at the time the first COVID-19 vaccines were being approved and promoted. A possible explanation is COVID-19 fatigue and a lack of urgency to engage because of the duration of the pandemic.

Frequency counts for replies were low across our sample, and public replies were not responded to by the health departments, who may consider revising strategies for encouraging two-way communication. While some accounts featured live streams for COVID-19 press conferences, it was rare for accounts to encourage interaction and information seeking. A great deal of uncertainty has accompanied the pandemic, which has been made worse by an increase in the spread of misinformation (Rutter, Wolpert, & Greenhalgh, 2020). Few accounts directly addressed misinformation and there is a missed opportunity for health departments to engage with stakeholders and correct misperceptions.

It may benefit public health departments to develop strategies for discussing testing and treatment options more frequently to enhance public knowledge. Across all countries, discussions related to availability and efficacy of testing and treatment were sparse. These findings may correspond with limited testing availability in many of the countries we sampled and the still evolving knowledge of best treatment options (Richie et al., 2020). Furthermore, this study only included tweets from 2020 and the first vaccine was not administered until December

(Smith-Spark, 2020). A follow-up study should be conducted to analyze how public health departments across nations communicate vaccine availability and efficacy in 2021.

Analysis of the presence of HBM constructs reveals inconsistencies within and between countries. First, there was an overall lack of tweets that featured efficacy appeals. The presence of COVID-19 severity and susceptibility messages in several accounts were more frequent than efficacy appeals, which means that individuals may develop an intention-action gap in which they fear COVID-19 but do not have the corresponding skills or confidence to take preventive action (Rui, Yang, & Chen, 2021). Similarly, benefits of recommendation adherence were mentioned far more than addressing possible barriers. Considering this finding, messages about the benefits of recommendation adherence may not be reaching those most vulnerable and those who experienced the greatest barriers. Individuals who are required to work outside of the home and who live in lower income and more crowded living areas may experience greater barriers to COVID-19 prevention (Baye, 2020) and these individuals may benefit from messages that specifically address how barriers can be overcome. Overall, public health departments may be relying more on tactics of communicating information as it develops overtime, while overlooking strategies informed by best practices and health behavior theory. Reflecting on data from this study may provide public health professionals a broader outlook on how countries have communicated COVID-19 risks, with the ability to identify and model messages off of exemplary health departments. For example, tweets from Nigeria frequently featured several HBM constructs and reviewing their content may be useful for practitioners. Engagement differences between HBM constructs varied by country. For example, the engagement with Italian tweets was often significantly higher when HBM constructs were present. In general, Italy reported higher presence of many of these constructs showing the use and effectiveness of theory-driven message strategies.

Health communication research shows that the presence of visuals can enhance message attention, recall, and retention (Houts et al., 2006). A majority of tweets in our sample included accompanying visuals. In a previous similar study, public health department Twitter accounts used far fewer visuals (*cite withheld for peer review*). Both the presence and nature of included visuals may enhance public understanding of COVID-19 across nations. Public health departments should continue using visuals such as infographics in tweets that discuss general health issues. Singapore reported the lowest engagement rate; they were also the only country to not include visuals with any of their tweets in this sample. While these findings are descriptive, they do support the importance of visuals in communicating health. Furthermore, there were few instances when tweets functioned only as publicity to promote a public health department without offering information about COVID-19 prevention, testing, or treatment. Health departments should continue to focus messages on actions for disease prevention and health promotion. The current study suggests that COVID-19 may have enhanced public health communication strategies across nations in several ways, but that many areas of concern persist.

Limitations and Strengths

This study focused exclusively on COVID-19 related public health departments posts on Twitter during 2020. There is an opportunity for future research to compare COVID-19 messages promoted across multiple social media platforms. For instance, analysis of more visual-focused platforms may reveal more nuances in how public health departments communicate. Another limitation for this study is the focus on engagement as the primary outcome variable of interest. Additional analysis of comments as well as qualitative follow-up studies may be helpful in the future to see how individuals personally interact with, or fail to

interact with, COVID-19 related information posted on social media. Despite these limitations, the present study provides a global perspective on public health communication. Most studies of health information on social media focus solely on the United States or other western countries (Dutta, 2016). Given the unique international context of this research, the following section provides practical recommendations for health departments based on our theory-driven findings.

Practical Recommendations and Conclusions

The findings of this study have several implications for public health organizations and public relations practitioners worldwide. Health departments should continue to promote COVID-19 prevention recommendations and they should develop evidence-based strategies for discussing the efficacy and availability of testing and treatment. Trending discussions related to COVID-19 should be closely monitored online and health departments should utilize the real time benefits of Twitter to address misconceptions and correct misinformation about prevention, testing, and treatments. Furthermore, discussions of these topics should include strategies that draw on HBM constructs. While it is important to communicate disease severity and susceptibility, it is equally important (and supported by the Health Belief Model) to enhance public efficacy, communicate benefits of the proposed recommendations, and refute barriers to such recommended actions. Visual content may especially be helpful in clearly communicating these issues. Overall, the findings suggest that while the urgency and novel nature of COVID-19 may have in fact have moved health departments to improve their Twitter communication, many improvements are still urgently called for. COVID-19 may be the most widely spread pandemic of our lifetimes, but it almost certainly will not be the last one, and a more strategic use of social media by national health departments is something that cannot wait to be developed.

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Relationship Cultivation via Social Media During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Cross-cultural Comparison between China and the U.S.

Qiongyao Serena Huang
Hong Kong Baptist University

Benjamin J. Lynn
University of Florida

Chuqing Dong
Michigan State University

Shijun Ni
Hong Kong Baptist University

Abstract

The study explored the relationship cultivation and social media strategies companies used to maintain relationships with their publics in two culturally distinct markets of China and the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic. A quantitative content analysis of Weibo and Twitter posts from Fortune 500 companies in China and the U.S. respectively was conducted to examine the effects of these relational efforts on public engagement. Results showed that relationship cultivation strategies and use of social media functions effectively increased public engagement in both China and the U.S., although on different levels. Both Chinese and U.S. companies most frequently adopted the strategy of openness. However, it worked not as well as access in China, but was very effective in the U.S. Chinese publics also showed higher levels of engagement and more positive emotions to companies' social media messages than their U.S. counterparts. The findings advance our understanding of organization-public relationships in a worldwide disaster setting, with insights informing the global public relations theory and practices.

*Keywords***:** *relationship, engagement, COVID-19, social media, cross-cultural, China, U.S.*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic quickly became a global disaster that impacted every Chinese and U.S. company and presented new relationship management challenges with their publics. During the pandemic, companies were confronted with uncertain stakeholder relationships due to the heightened public emotions (Xie, 2019), possibly changing their relationship cultivation strategies. Thus, the global pandemic provided a meaningful context from which public relations scholars could examine the relationship cultivation strategies used on social media, a medium that has received increased scholarly attention in recent years (Men & Tsai, 2012; O'Neil, 2014).

Social media is an ideal channel for communication during a disaster (Houston et al., 2015). Given its low-cost, easy-to-use, accessible, and adaptable features, social media has the capacity to folster organization-public relationship cultivation (Chen et al., 2020; Mills et al., 2009). Despite the increase in studies on public relations on social media generally, few studies have examined relationship cultivation strategies in cross-cultural contexts, and even fewer have focused on the turbulent times, such as during COVID-19, even though cultural differences can lead to unique usage of social media among publics and organizations (Men & Tsai, 2012).

To fill these gaps and respond to the call for more cross-cultural public relations research (Ki & Ye, 2017), the current study examined relationship management models in two distinct cultures during the global disaster. This study is grounded in two theoretical frameworks: relationship cultivation strategies (Huang et al., 2020; Ki & Hon, 2008) and disaster use of social media (Houston et al., 2015). The frameworks provided a systematic approach for analyzing how companies strategically communicated with their publics during the disaster. Public responses to the companies' posts were assessed using a multi-dimensional construct of engagement that included cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions (Ji et al., 2017). This study illuminates how socio-environmental and cultural factors influence organization-public relationship strategies on social media and provides useful guidelines for corporations to better engage with their global publics in times of uncertainty.

Literature Review

Relationship Cultivation Strategies

After more than three decades of development (Ferguson, 1984), relationship management has become a foundational theoretical framework in public relations research. The outcomes of organization-public relationships (OPR) management are largely dependent on an organization's communication efforts (Hung, 2002). Previous research has identified six specific relationship cultivation strategies that can guide communication efforts to produce quality OPR with strategic publics, including access, assurances, openness, positivity, networking, and sharing of tasks (Ki & Hon, 2009). To elaborate, access is a strategy making an organization available to its publics, so that they can connect directly and share opinions and thoughts. Assurance suggests that the involved parties assure the legitimacy of each other's concerns and their commitment to the relationship (Ki & Hon, 2009). Openness concerns the open and honest disclosure of thoughts and feelings of parties involved in the relationship (Grunig & Hon, 1999). Positivity refers to the communication efforts that "make the relationship more enjoyable" for publics involved (Ki & Hon, 2009, p.7), which usually shows cheerfulness, courtesy, and politeness in the messages. Networking is a strategy for an organization to build coalitions with the same stakeholders that its key publics network with (Ki & Hon, 2009). Sharing of tasks refers to an organization's efforts to work together with its publics to solve problems of mutual interest

(Ki & Hon, 2009). Although relationship cultivation research has flourished, most of the previous studies were conducted in a normal organizational context, with limited guidance on relationship management in extreme situations, such as global pandemics. Thus, we ask:

RQ1: What relational strategies did companies in China and the U.S. adopt on social media to maintain quality relationships with their publics during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Functional Use of Social Media in Disasters

In disaster situations companies turn to social media to meet their communication needs because it facilitates one-to-many, easy to use, two-way communication with their publics at a time when information is in high demand, but not always available (Houston et al., 2015). With so many affordances, social media has positioned itself alongside traditional mass media as a primary mode of communication during disasters (Zhang et al., 2019).

The present study employed Houston et al.'s (2015) functional framework for social media use in disasters. Their framework was based on a uses and gratifications approach to media and grounded on the idea that individuals, or in this instance companies, use media for specific needs they have (Katz et al., 1974). The framework provides a method for categorizing which companies used social media, the needs those companies attempted to address, and their publics' responses. Originally, Houston et al. (2015) found 15 emergent categories based on a review of the literature. For example, during disasters social media can be used to send information, call for help or action, provide support, share personal experiences and express emotions to keep the publics either functionally or emotionally gratified. They further categorized those 15 functions based on which phase of a disaster they were used: pre-event, event, and/or post-event. Content functions specific to the pre- and post- event phases were excluded from the current analysis because the data collection period took place only during the event phase of the disaster. Thus, this current study proposes the following question:

RQ2: What functions of social media did companies in China and the U.S. use for disaster communication with publics during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Public Engagement

In addition to examining the relationship strategies and functions of social media use by the companies, this study also examined the public's engagement level with those strategies and functions using a social-psychological perspective (Hollebeek et al., 2014). As such, this study defined public engagement on social media as a multidimensional construct (Chen, 2018) that included dimensions of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement, which were all considered potential outcomes of relationship management efforts. Cognitively, engagement indicates information processing and a psychological motivational state that influences individuals' interactive tendency (Hollebeek et al., 2014). In our study, cognitive engagement was reflected in the diverse message content that emerged in the public comments to organizational posts. Emotionally, engagement suggests affective expression, dedication, and attachment to the message (Kang, 2014). Emotional engagement can be particularly salient during times of crisis and may resonate with publics, and diffuse across social media (Mak & Ao, 2019). Behavioral engagement is found in the responses to organizational communication endeavors (Guo & Saxton, 2018), in this case the "likes" and shares given to each post. Behavioral engagement is a fit for social media research given that it is an inherent technological affordance of social media that is observable and measurable to researchers (Saxton & Waters, 2014). During the pandemic, companies faced emotionally vulnerable consumers, online misinformation, and economic and environmental turbulence that imposed new challenges to public engagement, raising important questions regarding how they addressed the situation.

RQ3. How did Chinese and U.S. publics cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally engage with the companies' COVID-19-related posts?

RQ4. How, if at all, did companies' relational strategies and functional use of social media influence public engagement during the pandemic in China and the U.S.?

Cross-cultural Comparison

Culture informs public relations because it shapes public expectations for organizational behaviors, problem solving, and how relationships are created (Huang et al., 2018). The most influential research paradigm in cross-cultural studies has been Hofstede's individualist and collectivist (IC) framework (Huang et al., 2018). According to Hofstede (2005), individualism pertains to societies where the ties between individuals are loose, while collectivism pertains to societies where people are integrated into strong and cohesive in-groups. For individualist cultures (e.g. the U.S.), people are encouraged to share their feelings and personal opinions honestly. In contrast, collectivist cultures (e.g. China) often demonstrate more harmony-seeking appeals, conflict avoidance, and authority-directed orientation (Hofstede, 2005) . China has become a unique case, even within collectivist cultures, because it has shown a stronger relational orientation than other collectivist cultures, all of which emphasize positive, long-term relationships with other people (Leung et al., 2014). Guided by both structural and rational relation-centered orientations, Chinese people often rely on relationships to solve problems and view them as a resource for development. That aspect of the Chinese culture is in sharp contrast with U.S. cultural precepts that individuals are independent of one another and tasks are more important than interpersonal relationships (Hofstede, 2005).

The politico-social and economic dimensions of a country also impact how organizations communicate with their publics, including their degree of information transparency (Rim et al., 2019). Historically, U.S.-based companies have shown greater transparency compared with Chinese-based companies and those differences may become more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially when one considers the different pandemic responses each nation used (Zhao, 2020). It is therefore reasonable to question if different cultural backgrounds and COVID-19 narratives may have created different public expectations for organizational behaviors, and if those differences influence the publics' engagement with the strategies.

RQ5: a) How did the companies' relationship cultivation and functional use of social media differ in China and US during the pandemic? b) How did Chinese and U.S. publics' engagement with companies differ during the pandemic?

Method

A content analysis was conducted on social media posts made by 30 Chinese Fortune 500 companies and 30 U.S. Fortune 500 companies with active social media accounts. Weibo and Twitter were selected as the data collection platforms because (a) they were among the most popular social media sites in China and the U.S., respectively (Statista, 2020), and (b) they shared similar affordances, like interfaces, functions, word limits and account verification.

Sampling and Data Collection

Chinese companies were randomly sampled from a list of the largest "Fortune China 500" corporations (Fortune China, 2019). Using an iterative process, companies were removed and replaced if they did not maintain an active Weibo account until 30 active Weibo accounts had been collected. U. S. companies were sampled from the "Fortune 500" list (Fortune, 2020) and underwent the same iterative process until 30 randomly sampled Fortune 500 companies, with active Twitter accounts were selected.

A Weibo Crawler (Dataabc, 2020) was used for data collection of the Chinese companies' messages. Weibo posts from Chinese companies were collected from January 20th, 2020, when WHO confirmed human-to-human transmission of SARS-CoV-2 (Feuer, 2020), until April 10th, 2020, three days after Wuhan reopened (Gan, 2020). The top user comment under each post (if any), as rated by the Weibo algorithm, was also collected (n=553). In total, 9,671 initial posts were collected and then screened by a list of COVID-19 related keywords (e.g. "新冠", "疫情", etc.), generating 5,041 posts. The data collection period for U.S. companies' Twitter posts was set from March 19th, 2020, when U.S. COVID-19 cases surpassed 10,000 (Feuer, 2020), to November 7th, 2020, when the data was collected. A Twitter crawling tool (Ajctrl, 2020) was utilized to retrieve 33, 687 Tweets from the U.S. companies. Among them, 645 Tweets contained COVID-19 related keywords (e.g. COVID-19, coronavirus, etc.), with 279 top user comments included based on the Twitter algorithm. Because there were fewer COVID-19 related Tweets than Weibo posts, 15% of the Weibo posts were randomly sampled (n = 756) to obtain comparable datasets. The Weibo portion of the dataset was analyzed in isolation for a separate study (Huang et al. , 2020).

Coding Procedures

To ensure measurement reliability during the coding process (Riffe et al., 2019), a codebook was developed in both Chinese and English. Two coders conducted the coding for the Weibo posts and two other coders for the Tweets, all of whom were fluent in both Chinese and English and trained by the researchers. Intercoder reliability was tested using a subset of the samples (15%). Cohen's Kappa reliabilities ranged from .74 to 1.0 for Weibo posts, and from .79 to 1.0 for Tweets across most variables, indicating acceptable agreement between the coders (Perreault & Leigh, 1989). The coders then worked independently to code the remaining posts.

Measures

Measures of the six relationship cultivation strategies were adopted from previous research (Huang et al., 2020; Ki & Hon, 2008). Each strategy was coded as absence (0) or presence (1), then aggregated and reported on the post level. For instance, access was identified by a company's contact information in their message, its response to publics' comments, and sequentially organized replies to the publics' questions, requests, and concerns. Positivity included the presence of useful information, communication interventions, recreational elements, and conversation starters, etc. These indicators were not mutually exclusive categories and a single post may have contained several strategies.

Adapting from Houston et al's (2015) functional framework for disaster social media use, nine social media functions were identified that organizations might use during COVID 19: sending information about help or assistance, raising public awareness, and responding to criticisms and questions, etc. functional uses of social media were coded as mutually exclusive categories, with each individual post being assigned to the most relevant category.

Finally, in operationalizing public engagement, cognitive engagement was measured via seven types of message content found in publics' comments on companies' posts (e.g., "Requesting help or information", Huang et al., 2020; Men & Tsai, 2012). Each post was also assessed for specific emotions as a sign of emotional engagement, categorized as positive, negative, surprise/confusion, sarcasm/schadenfreude, and others. Behavioral engagement was measured by counting the numbers of likes, shares and comments for each tweet (Chen, 2017).

Results

RQ1 and RQ 5 asked how Chinese and U.S. companies employ relationship cultivation strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic and their differences. It is worth noting that Chinese companies posted significantly more COVID-19 related messages than U.S. companies ($\chi2$ = 16581.22, $p < .001$). The descriptive analysis showed that openness was the most frequently used strategy for both Chinese and U.S. companies (*nChina* = 588, 77.8%; *nU.S.* = 644, 99.8%), and sharing of tasks was the least frequently used strategy for both (*nChina* = 13, 1.7%; *nU.S.* = 32, 5.0%) companies. However, U.S. companies used more of access (t = -11.88, $p < .001$), positivity (t = -14.16, $p < .001$), and sharing of tasks (t = -3.44, $p < .01$), while Chinese companies used more assurances (t = 16.84, $p < .001$).

RQ2 along with RQ5 explored Chinese and U.S. companies' use of social media in disasters during the COVID-19 pandemic and their differences. The results found that compared to U.S. companies, Chinese companies were significantly more inclined to send information about help or assistance ($\chi2$ = 150.18, $p < .001$) and express emotions ($\chi2$ = 32.69, $p < .01$). U.S. companies, in comparison, more often tried to raise public awareness ($\chi2$ = 38.27, $p < .01$), tell stories, discuss socio-political and scientific implications ($\chi2$ = 4.07, $p < .05$), respond to criticisms and questions ($\chi2$ = 68.37, $p < .001$), and educate the public ($\chi2$ = 16.54, $p < .001$). Both Chinese and U.S. companies rarely signaled and detected disease threats (*nChina* = 6, 0.8%, *nU.S.* = 3, 0.5 %).

RQ3 and RQ5 asked how Chinese and U.S. publics engaged with companies behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively and their differences. Behaviorally, the average Chinese company post received about 41 likes (M = 41.30, SD = 213.93), 48 shares (M = 47.62, SD = 111.77), and 18 comments (M = 17.73, SD = 45.88). In comparison, each U.S. company Tweet received around 50 likes (M = 49.72, SD = 374.06), 15 shares (M = 15.23, SD = 108.04), and 4 comments (M = 3.85, SD = 24.72). The average comment counts for Chinese company posts were significantly higher than U.S. company tweets (t = 6.88, $p < .001$).

When looking at publics' emotional engagement, Chinese publics tended to show more positive (n = 176, 31.8%) than negative (n = 33, 6.0%) emotions in their comments. Happiness/satisfaction was the most frequently displayed emotion in Chinese publics' comments (n = 93, 16.8%), which was significantly higher than in the U.S. publics' comments ($\chi2$ = 33.48, $p < .001$). Chinese publics' comments displayed more hope than U.S. publics' comments ($\chi2$ = 31.24, $p < .001$). U.S. publics also posted more positive comments (n = 63, 22.6%) than negative ones (n = 46, 16.5%), despite that they most frequently showed disappointment/dissatisfaction (n = 38, 12.8%), which was also significantly higher than Chinese publics ($\chi2$ = 21.96, $p < .001$). Cognitively, over one-third of the top-rated public comments contained an emotional expression in China (n = 238, 43.0%), much higher than in the U.S. ($\chi2$ = 107.36, $p < .001$). Chinese publics were also more likely to provide an informative reply to the companies' posts ($\chi2$ = 4.48, $p < .05$). Conflicts, complaints or criticisms were rare public responses in both China (n = 21, 3.8%) and the U.S. (n = 29, 10.4%). The details can be found in table 1.

RQ4 along with RQ 5 explored how Chinese and U.S. companies' relationship cultivation strategies and disaster social media use influenced the engagement of publics during the COVID-19 pandemic and differences in these two countries. A Tobit model, which was designed to estimate linear relationships between variables when there is a limited dependent variable (Tobin, 1958), was utilized using StataMP 13.1. The overall results revealed that in China, access was the most effective strategy because it was positively associated with all of the behavioral engagement indicators, including the total number of likes (Coef. = 35.83, $p < .001$),

shares (Coef. = 51.65, $p < .001$), and comments (Coef. = 20.12, $p < .001$). However, the effect of access was not significant in the U.S. Instead, openness significantly predicted all behavioral engagement indicators, i.e., likes (Coef. = 204.98, $p < .001$), shares (Coef. = 64.72, $p < .001$), and comments (Coef. = 17.35, $p < .01$, see table 2).

Results from a set of logistic regressions suggested that Chinese and U.S. publics' emotions were predicted by very different factors. In China, the relationship cultivation strategy of access had a significant impact on positive emotions ($B = .68$, $p < .01$), while a variety of disaster social media uses had a significant influence, including sending information about help or assistance ($B = 2.51$, $p < .05$), raising public awareness ($B = 3.06$, $p < .05$), expressing emotions ($B = 2.74$, $p < .05$), telling stories and personal experiences ($B = 2.87$, $p < .05$), and discussing socio-political and scientific implications ($B = 2.57$, $p < .05$). In the US, only the relationship cultivation strategy of assurance significantly predicts positive emotions ($B = .98$, $p < .05$). No variables significantly predicted negative emotions in China or the U.S (Table 3).

For cognitive engagement, results from a multinomial logistic regression analysis showed that that relationship cultivation strategies and disaster social media use both had a significant influence on Chinese public's responses, but the U.S. publics' responses were only influenced by a companies' disaster social media use (Table 4).

Discussion

Constrained organizational resources, heightened public emotions, and a turbulent social environment all imposed challenges for companies who tried to engage with their publics during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Drawing on relationship management theory, this study examined and compared the relational efforts employed by large Chinese and U.S. corporations. Our first observation was that Chinese companies and publics were much more engaged in the COVID-19 related discussion on social media than their U.S. counterparts, in that they posted significantly more messages than U.S. companies did, receiving more responses. This could be explained by the two countries' different pandemic responses. China carried out a rigorous anti-pandemic campaign that mobilized their entire society (He et al., 2020) and the COVID-19 pandemic became a major spotlight in China. In contrast, the U.S. took a decentralized national approach and placed responsibility for containing the virus on the individual states (Altman, 2020). Additionally, national social issues drew public attention away from the pandemic.

Our study also revealed interesting observations about the similarities and differences in relationship cultivation decisions, identified by which strategies were effectively triggering public engagement. Although Chinese and U.S. companies both made use of relationship cultivation strategies, U.S. companies were more active in their use of the strategies across most dimensions. This finding may be related to a relatively long history of public relations in the United States with better established norms and more developed strategies.

In terms of specific relationship cultivation strategies, openness was most frequently used among companies in both China and the U.S. This finding underscores a consensus that maintaining proactive, honest, and candid communication is important in high-uncertainty situations (Seeger, 2006). Interestingly, Chinese and U.S. companies presented drastically different preferences in relationship cultivation strategies. U.S. companies showed a stronger tendency using access, positivity, and sharing of tasks to build relationships with publics on social media than their Chinese counterparts. In contrast, Chinese companies had a stronger preference for assuring their publics than the U.S. companies. While relationship management theory is regarded as a normative guideline for maintaining and fostering positive, stable

relationships, our findings add empirical evidence to articulate the variance of relationship cultivation strategies across countries.

The relationship cultivation strategies also influenced public engagement in different ways for companies in China and the U.S. Access was a strong predictor of the Chinese publics' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement, while it was not the case in the U.S. sample. Chinese companies have been criticized for poor performance in demonstrating corporate transparency (Transparency International, 2016). Implementing the access strategy, Chinese companies make themselves reachable to publics (Ki & Hon, 2009), which is particularly important during crises and appreciated by publics (Padgett et al., 2013). As for U.S. companies, tweets showing openness were more liked, shared, and commented on by publics. Recent years have seen declining corporate trust and rising consumer skepticism in the U.S. (Edelman, 2020). Thus, publics in the U.S. showed a strong appreciation for open and candid corporate communication that reveals an organizations' humanistic nature.

Moreover, our findings suggest that companies in both China and the U.S. were utilizing social media's affordances to micro-target messages for disaster communication. However, Chinese companies' messages focused more on providing help or assistance and expressing emotions, which significantly raised publics' emotional engagement in a positive way. Worth noting, Chinese publics also showed a stronger tendency to express their emotions in their responses, especially in reaction to emotional messages. As China has a strong relational orientation, expressing emotions, respects, wishes and memory are possibly effective means to build social bonds. In comparison, U.S. companies seem to use social media for information dissemination and opinion expressing, as they are more keen on discussing measures, causes or implications, reminding and educating the public, telling stories and sharing experiences.

Finally, positive emotions, especially happiness, satisfaction or hope, were significantly more frequent in Chinese publics' responses, while the U.S. publics' showing disappointment or dissatisfaction as their most frequent emotion. This tendency was consistent with the cultural differences between the two countries. China showed a higher appeal for harmony and a stronger conflict avoidance orientation, while the U.S. tended to believe that conflicts could be beneficial (Hofstede et al., 2005). On the other hand, Chinese publics, influenced by higher authority-directed orientation, tended to align with the official narratives appealing to citizens for positive emotions to boost morale (He et al., 2020).

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

The results paint a picture of how relationship management strategies play an important role in public relations during a widespread disaster, like the COVID-19 pandemic, in both China and the U.S. Comparative research like this is the first step to understanding global public relations (Ki & Ye, 2017). While previous research focused mostly on relationship maintenance during normal economic conditions (Men & Tsai, 2012), this research examined relationship cultivation strategies during a global disaster when organizations' relationships were in a fluid state. This study addressed the need in public relations research for results that could aid in international public relations theory development, as well as guide practitioners during future disasters.

For practitioners, it appears there may be a public relations knowledge gap between the two countries used in this comparison. For example, nearly all of the U.S. posts utilized the openness strategy, indicating that U.S. companies were keenly aware of which strategies were most effective with their publics. In contrast, Chinese companies received the highest engagement levels when they made themselves accessible, yet only one third of their posts used

that strategy. Both Chinese and U.S. companies used the openness strategy most often, despite it returning much lower engagement levels than accessibility. The takeaway is that applying what may be Western-based public relations strategies might not be an effective approach for Chinese practitioners, who likely need to develop their own relationship maintenance strategies; strategies that rely on accessibility because it showed higher engagement levels than openness.

Limitations and Future Research

There were several notable limitations in the current study. The data collection period for each country was different because of the time it took for the virus to reach the U.S. As a result, U.S. responses may have been shaped by any prior knowledge they had of the virus as attempts were made to contain it in China. Next, although internal consistency was carefully controlled, two different sets of coders were used to code the two data sets for pragmatic reasons. Our findings on the different publics' responses to the relationship management strategies between China and the U.S. indicate that there is also more work needed on non-Western public relations theory development.

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Table 1. Descriptive information of companies' posts during COVID-19.

Variable/measure	China	US	*t*	χ^2
Relationship cultivation strategies [a]	***N = 756***	***N = 645***		
Access	263(34.8%)	436(67.6%)	-11.88***	149.86***
Positivity	374(49.5%)	540(83.7%)	-14.16***	180.04***
Openness	588(77.8%)	644(99.8%)	5.89***	159.78***
Sharing of tasks	13(1.7%)	32(5.0%)	-3.44**	11.77**
Networking	284(37.6%)	237(36.7%)	-.81	.10
Assurances	398(52.6%)	83(12.9%)	16.84***	244.26***
Disaster social media use	***N = 756***	***N = 645***		
Signal and detect disease threat	6(0.8%)	3(0.5%)		.59
Send information on help or assistance	447(59.1%)	171(26.5%)		150.18***
Discuss medical/scientific information/plans	3(0.4%)	79(12.2%)		88.71***
Raise public awareness	13(1.7%)	58(9.0%)		38.27**
Express emotions, respects, wishes and memorial	144(19.0%)	54(8.4%)		32.69**
Tell stories and personal experiences	53(7.0%)	94(14.6)		21.20***
Discuss socio-political and scientific causes and implications	20(2.6%)	30(4.7%)		4.07*
Respond to criticism and questionings	0(0.0%)	55(8.5%)		68.37***
Public education about knowledge, tips and measures	41(5.4%)	100(15.5%)		39.08***
Other	29(3.7%)	1(0.0%)		16.54***
Purpose of public responses	***N = 553***	***N=279***		
Help/information seeking	51(9.2%)	34(12.2%)		1.33
Informative reply	20(3.6%)	7(2.5%)		4.48*
Unsolicited information	32(5.8%)	21(7.5%)		.91
Emotional expression	238(43.0%)	57(20.4%)		107.36***
Advocacy or request	17(3.1%)	21(7.5%)		1.34
Conflict/complaint/criticism	21(3.8%)	29(10.4%)		2.99
Not related to the COVID-19 outbreak	112(20.3%)	16(5.7%)		63.78***
Other or posted by the company itself	62(11.2%)	94(33.7%)		1.18
Emotions in the public responses	***N = 553***	***N=279***		
Anger	13(2.4%)	5(1.8%)		2.45
Fear/Anxiety	8(1.4%)	2(0.1%)		2.75
Sadness	1(0.2%)	0(0.0%)		.85
Guilt	1(0.2%)	1(0.0%)		.01
Disappointment/dissatisfaction	10(1.8%)	38(13.6%)		21.96***
Happiness/Satisfaction	93(16.8%)	24(8.6%)		33.48***
Hope	66(11.9%)	12(4.3%)		31.24***
Pride	1(0.2%)	5(1.8%)		3.37
Love	7(1.3%)	6(2.2%)		.00
Gratefulness	9(1.6%)	16(5.7%)		3.31
Surprise/Confusion	0(0.0%)	13(4.7%)		15.38***
Sarcasm	2(0.4%)	0(0%)		1.71
Other emotions	0(0.0%)	0(0%)		
Cannot be identified or posted by the company itself	342(61.8%)	157(56.27%)		128.05***

Note: Relationship cultivation strategies can be overlapping and thus aggregated to more than 100%; they were continuous variables when conducting t tests, and were recoded into dummy variables when conducting the Chi-square test with 0 meaning no present and 1 meaning at least one tactic present; *$p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 2. Random effects Tobit regression results.

	Dependent variables					
	Likes		Shares		Comments	
Predictors	China	US	China	US	China	US
Relationship cultivation strategies						
Access	35.83***	7.53	51.65***	-1.95	20.12***	-.28
Positivity	-10.15	-4.54	-5.64	-2.11	.09	-1.32
Openness	4.74	204.98***	15.30*	64.72***	4.55	17.35**
Sharing of tasks	22.86	-30.31	58.22*	-24.56	11.76	-2.45
Networking	-12.12	-27.21	9.96	-4.96	.45	-3.14
Assurances	-12.09	-17.75	-11.86	--6.48	-5.73*	-2.99
Disaster social media use [a]						
Signal and detect disease threat	-2.02	-159.42	-427.22	-27.52	-181.75	-23.39
Send information on help or assistance	2.91	-34.38	11.65	-6.93	-13.48	-38.33
Discuss medical/scientific information/plans	4.24	84.56	58.65	33.46	10.54	-29.87
Raise public awareness	11.20	-21.05	30.93	-20.14	-17.57	-36.16
Express emotions, concerns, wishes and memorial	3.34	14.34	19.87	3.84	-5.97	-35.40
Tell stories and personal experiences	6.27	-24.05	22.14	-4.65	-6.14	-42.58
Discuss socio-political/scientific implications	29.07	-32.66	27.00	3.08	-3.59	-51.01
Respond to criticism and questionings	[b]	-30.15	[b]	-8.35	[b]	-39.85
Public education about knowledge, tips, and measures	-4.64	-30.51	24.30	-2.99	-8.60	-42.06
Model fit	χ^2=1120.11 $p < .001$ Pseudo R^2 = .12	χ^2 =95.23 $p < .001$ Pseudo R^2 = .01	χ^2 =727.74 $p < .001$ Pseudo R^2 = .10	χ^2 =116.27 $p < .001$ Pseudo R^2 = .02	χ^2 =725.39 $p < .001$ Pseudo R^2 = .11	χ^2 =222.91 $p < .001$ Pseudo R^2 = .07

[a] Base category: Other function; [b] Zero case was observed in this variable; *$p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Logistic regression results.

Emotions		Predictors	B	SE(b)	Wald χ^2	ORs
China	Positive emotions	Relationship cultivation strategies				
		Access	.68**	.23	8.57	1.98
		Disaster social media use [a]				
		Send information on help or assistance	2.51*	1.12	5.07	12.32
		Raise public awareness	3.06*	1.30	5.60	21.41
		Express emotions, respects, wishes and memorial	2.74*	1.11	6.14	15.49
		Tell stories and personal experiences	2.87*	1.14	6.38	17.68
		Discuss socio-political and scientific implications	2.57*	1.25	4.24	13.12
	Negative emotions		NS			
US	Positive emotions	Relationship cultivation strategies				
		Assurances	.98*	.49	4.02	2.66
	Negative emotions		NS			

[a] Base category: Other function.

Note: The table displays only significant variables; *$p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 4. Multinomial logistic regression results.

Purpose of responses		Predictors	B	SE(b)	Wald χ^2	ORs
China	Help /information seeking	Relationship cultivation strategies				
		Access	1.46*	.52	7.88	4.30
	Informative reply	Relationship cultivation strategies				
		Positivity	2.10***	.51	17.10	8.20
		Disaster social media use [a]				
		Public education about knowledge, tips and measures	-5.65*	2.25	6.33	.00
	Emotional expression	Relationship cultivation strategies				
		Access	1.00*	.42	5.85	2.73
		Express emotions, respects, wishes and memorial	2.87***	1.23	5.46	17.65
	Advocacy or request	Relationship cultivation strategies				
		Access	1.72*	.66	6.77	5.56
	Conflict /complaint /criticism	Relationship cultivation strategies				
		Access	1.22*	.60	4.14	3.38
		Positivity	1.19*	.54	4.87	3.28
		Disaster social media use [a]				
		Discuss socio-political and scientific causes and implications	7.29*	3.35	4.73	1459.78
US	Help /information seeking	Disaster social media use [a]				
		Send information on help or assistance	7.28**	2.43	8.96	1450.99
		Discuss medical/scientific information/plans	6.77**	2.34	8.35	871.31
		Express emotions, concerns, wishes and memorial	9.54**	3.49	7.46	13904.95
	Advocacy	Disaster social media use [a]				
		Send information on help or assistance	4.54*	2.23	4.15	93.69
	Conflict	Disaster social media use [a]				
		Send information on help or assistance	4.69*	2.11	4.95	108.85

[a] Base category: Other function.

Note: The table displays only significant variables.

*$p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

How Avoidant Leadership Styles Turns Employees into Adversaries: The Impact of *Laissez-faire* Leadership on Employee-Organization Relationships

Jie Jin
University of Florida

Abstract

Laissez-faire leadership is an important but relatively unexamined leadership style in public relations literature. Specifically, the current study examines how the passive, avoidant and ineffective forms of leadership influence internal public relations by building linkage among *laissez-faire* leadership, organizational justice, employee-organization relationships, and employees' external communication behavior (i.e., megaphoning).

Keywords: Laissez-faire leadership, employee-organization relationships, megaphoning, organizational justice

The contemporary area of leadership in public relations literature is replete with positive leadership styles, such as transformational leadership and ethical leadership (Lee & Cheng, 2011; Men & Stacks, 2014). The dark side of leadership is an important yet unexamined topic in public relations. Beyond the mainstream description of destructive leadership as toxic (Lipman-Blumen, 2005) or abusive (Whitlock, 2014; Zellars et al., 2002), passive and indirect behaviors like *laissez-faire* leadership can also be destructive for both employees and organizations (Buch et al., 2015; Skogstad et al., 2007). *Laissez-faire* leaders dismiss subordinates' needs and evade leadership responsibilities (Bass, 1999). Studies have shown that *laissez-faire* leaders who are absent when needed can lead to both positive (e.g., innovation and high self-determination) and negative employee outcomes (e.g., lower job satisfaction and employee distress) (Bass & Bass, 2008; Skogstad et al., 2007; Yang, 2015). The negative effects of ineffective, passive, and avoidant leadership styles are particularly more pronounced during turbulent times like during the current pandemic or during organizational change when employees expect more clarity, guidance, and support from their leaders (Brown, 2016; Stefan & Nazarov, 2020).

This proposed study examines the impact of *laissez-faire* leadership on the quality of EORs and employees' megaphoning behaviors. In addition to EORs, the study examines employee communicative behaviors (ECB) as a critical aspect of employee outcomes. Kim and Rhee (2011) proposed the concept of ECB as an extended behavioral outcome of public relations. ECB refers to "employees' voluntary efforts to collect and circulate information related to the organization externally and internally" (Kim & Rhee, 2011). The limited existing research on employee communication behavior shows poor relationship management can turn employees into adversaries, who deliver negative messages to other employees but also to the external public, leading to a negative public perception of the organization (Lee, 2019).

Overall, the purpose of this study is to fill the research gap and expand knowledge on leadership and employee relationship management by improving our understanding of the role of *laissez-faire* leadership in the workplace and its effect on employee outcomes (i.e., employee relational outcomes and employee communication behavior). In particular, this study examines the linkages among *laissez-faire* leadership, organizational justice, EORs, and employee communication behavior.

Literature Review

Employee-Organization Relationships (EORs)

Previous research has identified various predictors of quality employee-organization relationships, which include strategic internal communication (Kim, 2007; Men & Jiang, 2016; Shen & Kim, 2012), communication channels (Men, 2014), leadership style (Men & Jiang, 2016; Men & Stacks, 2014), perceived justice (i.e., procedural justice and interactional justice; Kim, 2007), and so on. Among all these factors, Berger (2014) argued that leaders and supervisors are the foundation stones for strategic employee communication. The study of leadership communication and relationship management has taken a huge leap forward in recent years (Men & Jiang, 2016). Public relations research to date has explored a number of leadership styles including authentic leadership, transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and ethical leadership (e.g., Jin, 2010; Lee & Cheng, 2012; Men, 2014; Men & Stacks, 2014). However, the ineffective and avoidant leadership style has not been adequately explored. Thus, to fill the research gap, this study explores how *laissez-faire* leadership, an emerging leadership type, influences the effectiveness of internal communication. Organizational justice, which has been

widely examined in organizational psychology and management disciplines for more than 30 years (Kim, 2007) is another factor of interest in this study.

In particular, this study examined relational outcomes such as employee trust, control mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction (Grunig & Huang, 2000; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998), which have been largely replicated in relationship management literature. By definition, trust refers to employees' degree of confidence and their sense that they feel they can rely on and be open with their organizations (Huang, 1997; Hung, 2006). Control mutuality refers to the degree to which employees agree with the amount of control they have over the relationship (Huang, 1997). Commitment indicates the extent to which employees feel that the relationship with the organization is worth promoting and maintaining (Grunig & Huang, 2000). Satisfaction refers to the degree to which employees are satisfied with their relationship with the organization (Grunig & Huang, 2000).

The Destructiveness of Laissez-faire Leadership

Despite the fact that more attention is paid to the dark side of leadership, there is no consensus on the destructive nature of *laissez-faire* leadership (Norris et al., 2021; Yang, 2015). *Laissez-faire* leadership behavior involves "the absence of leadership, the avoidance of intervention, or both" (Bass & Avolio, 1990). These leaders avoid decision-making and more or less abdicate from the responsibilities of their position (Bass, 1990). As such, *laissez-faire* leadership may increase perceived effort-reward imbalance at work, thus eliciting negative work-related emotions (i.e., frustration and stress) in exposed employees (Ågotnes et al., 2020). Previous research has shown that *laissez-faire* leadership behavior relates negatively to employees' psychological well-being (Nielsen et al., 2019), motivation level with the organization (Chaudhry & Javed, 2012), perceived leader effectiveness (Limsila & Ogunlana, 2007), and job satisfaction (Skogstad et al., 2015).

The current study agrees with Einarsen et al. (2007) and Skogstad et al. (2007) that *laissez-faire* leadership is not only about a lack of leadership competence or the avoidance of intervention, but also involves not meeting employees' legitimate expectations for feedback, recognition, and support. Empirical research has shown the effects of laissez leadership on multiple outcomes, including job satisfaction (Skogstad et al., 2015), organizational commitment (Robert & Vandenberghe, 2021), trust (Breevaart & Zacher, 2019), workplace bullying (Glambek et al., 2018), and stress (Skogstad et al., 2014). Specifically, while authentic, ethical, and transformational leadership can lead to better relationships between employees and the organization (Men & Jiang, 2016; Men & Stacks, 2014), leader-member exchange (LMX) scholars have found *laissez-faire* leadership is likely to reduce employees' affective commitment toward the organization (Buch, Martinsen, & Kuvaas, 2015). Also, studies find there is lower employee satisfaction for those whose supervisors have little interaction with subordinates compared to those whose supervisors spend more time with each employee (Hunt & Liebscher, 1973). Further, when leaders show no interest in employees' needs, employees tend to perceive their leaders as incompetent and ineffective, thus eroding their trust in the organization (Tosunoglu & Ekmekci, 2016). Finally, leaders' lack of presence and involvement in a demanding workplace can increase the workload to a level beyond employees' control. Thus, this article predicts that *laissez-faire* leadership behavior will negatively influence employee satisfaction, employee trust, organizational commitment, and feelings of shared control, which constitute a quality EORs. Therefore,

H1: The perception of *laissez-faire* leadership behavior (H1) negatively influences the quality of EORs.

Perceived Organizational Justice

Organizational justice is defined as the extent to which individuals within an organization perceive organizational events and treatment as fair (Cropanzano, 1993; Kim, 2007). Currently, organizational justice is classified into four types: distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational (Colquitt, 2001; Greenberg, 1993). Distributive justice and procedural justice look at the structural aspect (e.g. resources allocations, policies, and procedures) of organizational justice, while interpersonal and informational justice focuses on the social aspects (e.g. trust, respect, and shared information) of organizational justice (Colquitt, 2001; Eberlin & Tatum, 2007). Specifically, distributive justice refers to the perceived fairness of the rewards or punishments employee receive (Alexander & Ruderman, 1987); procedural justice refers to the perceived fairness of the rules and procedures used to distribute rewards and punishments (Folger & Konovsky, 1989); interpersonal justice is about the quality of interpersonal treatment (e.g. justifications, respect, sensitivity) people receive during the enactment of procedures (Kernan & Hanges, 2002); informational justice relates to the accurate and adequate explanations individuals receive about procedures (Cheung, 2013; Greenburg, 1993). Scholars found that people tend to form close relationships at work with people and organizations that treat them fairly (Karriker & Williams, 2009). Regardless of justice types, organizational fairness is substantially related to emotional and attitudinal reactions toward the organization such as organizational commitment, satisfaction with the organization, and trust in the organization (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001). Similarly, the present study acknowledges that employees who feel they are being treated fairly develop a better relationship with the organization (Jiang, 2012; Kim, 2007). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Perceived organizational justice positively influences the quality of EORs.

Scholars have proved that leadership is linked to organizational justice. For example, transformational leadership is an important predictor of organizational justice as these leaders think highly of group welfare, share decision-making control with employees, and promote group solidarity through the articulation and modeling of their vision (Cho & Dansereau, 2010; Niehoff & Moorman, 1996). Conversely, *laissez-faire* leadership has the great potential to increase organizational injustice as it can cause role ambiguity and role conflict which contribute to unfair treatment and disrespect at workplace (Ågotnes et al., 2020). In this sense, *laissez-faire* leadership can harm organizational justice by ignoring employees' needs, leaving employees with too much responsibility, and rarely rewarding employees for their continuous efforts (Shaw, Erickson, & Nassirzadeh, 2014; Skogstad et al., 2007). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: The perception of *laissez-faire* leadership behavior (H3) negatively influences perceived organizational justice.

Employee Communication Behavior: Megaphoning

Employees' communicative behavioral outcomes, such as employee voice behavior (Ruck, Welch, & Menara, 2017), word-of-mouth (Harris & Ogbonna, 2013), and scouting (Park, Kim, & Krishna, 2014) have received much attention from scholars as they concerning the employee performance, corporate reputation, and organizational effectiveness. In particular, this study focuses on employee megaphoning, which is first identified by Kim and Rhee (2011) as one key aspect of employee communication behavior (ECB) in public relations research. Megaphoning represents "employees' positive or negative external communication behaviors about their organizations" (p. 246). Megaphoning tries to reveal "the likelihood of employees' voluntarily forwarding or sharing information about organizational strengths (accomplishments)

or weaknesses (problems)" (Kim & Rhee, 2011, p. 246). The idea of information forwarding is defined as "a planned, self-propelled information giving to others" (Kim & Grunig, 2011); and information sharing refers to ''sharing of information reactively only when someone requests one's opinion, idea, or expertise about the problem'' (Kim & Grunig, 2011).

Scholars found that employees can act as either advocates or as adversaries of their company according to the perceived quality of employee-organization relationships (Kim & Rhee, 2011; Mazzei, Kim, & Dell' Oro, 2012; Shen & Kim, 2012). They also found that perceived employee–organization relationship quality can result in positive or negative employee communication behavior in different situations (Rhee & Kim, 2009;). In crisis situations, Mazzei, Kim, and Dell' Oro (2012) found that employees who perceive good quality relationships with an organization will act as advocates for the company, avoid opportunistic action, refute false criticisms, report to management about dangers or threats, look for occasions to maintain or enhance the company's reputation, and generate other trust-related behavior. Similarly, employees who experience organizational secrecy in a merger, acquisition, and other changes related to the company tend to increase negative communication action such as forwarding and sharing organizational problems to the external public (Kim, Ruvarac, Nick, & Lee, 2009). Assuming the perceived relationship quality by employees will influence their transmission of organizational information, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Employees who evaluate their relationships with the organization positively are more likely to engage in positive megaphoning (H4a) and are less likely to engage in negative megaphoning (H4b).

Previous research has evidenced that destructive leadership negatively affects positive employee outcomes (e.g., Erickson et al., 2015). When employees feel their leaders are untrustworthy, lazy, or inactive in the decision-making process, they are discouraged to make innovative suggestions or reveal problems toward the organization (Vakola & Bouradas, 2005; Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). Scholars also found that employees, regardless of their position, will give voice to an organization's faults and mistakes to others intentionally depending on the attributes or kind of issue (Lee, 2017). Employees today also use social media to post negative messages to express anger and frustration at specific managers, and these posts are open to all users on these platforms (Krishna & Kim, 2015). Thus, the following hypothesis assuming employees who suffer from *laissez-faire* leadership are more likely to enhance their communication behavior is proposed:

H5: The perception of *laissez-faire* leadership behavior (H5) decreases positive megaphoning.

H6: The perception of *laissez-faire* leadership behavior (H6) increases negative megaphoning.

When perceiving great degrees of unfairness, employees tend to engage in absenteeism, burnout, and turnover (Conlon, Meyer, & Nowakowski, 2005; DeConinck & Johnson, 2009; Liljegren & Ekberg, 2009). Kassing and McDowell (2008) posited that the perception of justice affects the way employees choose to express their dissent. They found that when employees perceive unfairness in the organization, they express comparatively more dissent with coworkers, friends, and family outside of work (Kassing & McDowell, 2008). By being just, leaders become the key to facilitating employee voice or silencing employees (Zill et al., 2018). However, leaders who are passive, uncaring, and inactive in their leadership role may undermine employees' fairness perception (Lee & Jensen, 2014), which, in turn, will lead to negative

employee reciprocation (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). In relation to the above, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H7: Organizational justice mediates the effects of *laissez-faire* leadership on employee-organization relationship, positive megaphoning, and negative megaphoning.

Method

An online survey was conducted in February 2019 to test the hypothesized models. The population of the study is comprised of adult employees with different positions in medium and large corporations in the United States. To enhance the generalizability of the proposed model, the sample selection of the study covered a wide range of business communities. Participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk, https://www.mturk.com). After data cleaning, a final sample size of 397 was obtained. The final sample was composed of 54.7 percent males and 44.6 percent females, and 53.1 percent non-management and 46.9 percent management employees. The average age was 40 and the average corporate tenure was four and a half years. Approximately 69.6 percent of the respondents held at least a bachelor's degree.

Measures

The measures of these key concepts were adapted from previous research (Bass & Avolio, 1990; Colquitt, 2001; Ekval & Arvonen, 1991; Einarsen et al., 2007; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Kim & Rhee, 2011). The destructive leadership was measured with a 16-item scale from Aasland, et al. (2010), which evaluates *laissez-faire* leadership behavior (e.g., My immediate superior has avoided making decisions;" $\alpha = .87$). The perceived organizational justice was measured with twenty items adopted from Colquitt (2001) that assess procedural justice (e.g., "The procedures for determining outcomes are applied consistently;" $\alpha = .92$), distributive justice (e.g., "My outcomes reflect the effort I put into my work;" $\alpha = .95$), interpersonal justice (e.g., "My supervisor treats me in a polite manner;" $\alpha = .94$), and informational justice (e.g., "My supervisor's explanations regarding the procedures are reasonable;" $\alpha = .92$). To assess the quality of EORs, the study employed a widely adapted instrument developed by Hon and J. Grunig (1999). Twenty items were used to evaluate the quality of EORs, consisting of four dimensions: trust ("This company can be relied on to keep its promises;" $\alpha = .83$), control mutuality (e.g., "This company and I are attentive to what each other says;" $\alpha = .86$), commitment (e.g., "I can see that this company wants to maintain a relationship with me;" $\alpha = .89$), and satisfaction ("I enjoy dealing with this company;" $\alpha = .95$). Finally, to assess employees' megaphoning as one possible employee behavioral outcome, this study used the instrument developed by Kim and Rhee (2011) and modified by Men & Bowen (2017). This 9-item instrument comprises two sub-constructs: positive megaphoning (e.g., "I refute prejudiced or stereotyped opinions about my organization;" $\alpha = .91$) and negative megaphoning (e.g., "I state to friends and family that my organization is run more poorly than its competitors;" $\alpha = .85$).

Results

Analysis of SEM

Two-step structural equation model (SEM) was used to test the hypothesized models using AMOS 26. The model was modified by adding error covariance between trust and control mutuality to each CFA model. By this modification, the data-model fit for each CFA model was improved substantially and the modified model demonstrated a satisfactory fit to the data: χ^2 (30) = 194.58, $p < .001$, $\chi^2/df = 6.49$, TLI = .94, CFI = .96, SRMR = .04, RMSEA = .12 (90% CI =

.10, .13) for the positive megaphoning scenario, and χ^2 (30) = 194.44, $p < .001$, $\chi^2/df = 6.48$, TLI = .93, CFI = .96, SRMR = .04, RMSEA = .12 (90% CI = .10, .13) for the negative megaphoning scenario. Therefore, it was retained as the final CFA model. A second step evaluation of the structural model with employees' position levels controlled also yielded a satisfactory fit to the data: χ^2 (36) =271.64, $p < .001$, $\chi^2/df = 6.05$, TLI = .93, CFI = .95, SRMR = .04, RMSEA = .14 (90% CI = .13, .16) for the positive megaphoning scenario, and χ^2 (36) =217.84, $p < .001$, $\chi^2/df = 6.05$, TLI = .92, CFI = .95, SRMR = .04, RMSEA = .11 (90% CI = .10, .13), and was thus retained as the final model to interpret the paths. Figure 3 and 4 summarize the results.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypotheses 1 and 3 predict the negative effects of *laissez-faire* leadership behavior on the quality of EORs (Hypothesis 1) and perceived organizational justice (Hypothesis 3). Results in this study fully supported hypothesis 3 but failed to support hypotheses 1. In particular, employees' perception of *laissez-faire* leadership behavior (β=-.67, $p<.001$) has significant medium negative influence on perceived organizational justice. However, the direct effects of *laissez-faire* leadership behavior on the quality of EORs were not significant because of the mediation effect of perceived organizational justice. Therefore, hypothesis 1 was rejected.

Hypothesis 2 posits a direct positive effect of perceived organizational justice on the quality of EORs. This hypothesis was supported that employees' perception of organizational justice demonstrated a significant positive effect on the quality of EORs (β = .86, $p<.001$).

Hypothesis 4 proposes the positive effects of EORs on employees' engagement in positive megaphoning and their negative effects on employees' engagement in negative megaphoning. The results supported hypothesis 4. In particular, quality of EORs demonstrated a positive significant effect on positive megaphoning (β= .80, $p<.001$) and a negative significant effect on negative megaphoning (β= -.39, $p<.001$).

Hypothesis 5 predicts the negative effects of *laissez-faire* leadership behavior on employees' engagement in positive megaphoning. The results failed to support H5 as it revealed that the direct effects of *laissez-faire* leadership behavior on positive megaphoning was positively significant (β=.13, $p<.01$).

Hypothesis 6 posits the positive effects of *laissez-faire* leadership behavior on employees' engagement in negative megaphoning. The results supported this hypothesis. Specifically, *laissez-faire* leadership behavior demonstrates a positive direct effect on negative megaphoning (β=.19, $p<.01$).

Indirect (mediation) effects. A formal test of indirect effects using a bootstrap procedure (n=5,000 samples) was conducted to test H7. Results suggested that the indirect effects in paths from *laissez-faire* leadership to employees' megaphoning behaviors through organizational justice and EORs were significant. Specifically, organizational justice and EORs significantly mediates the negative relationship between *laissez-faire* leadership and positive megaphoning (β = -.49, $p < .001$ [95% CI: -.67; -.36]) as well as the positive relationship between *laissez-faire* leadership and negative megaphoning (β = .25, $p < .001$ [95% CI: .13; .41]). Therefore, H7 was supported.

Discussion and Conclusions

The Link between EORs and Employees' Communicative Behaviors

In internal communication research, EORs are believed to be an essential facilitator of positive employee attitudes and behaviors (Brown & White, 2011; Kim et al., 2019; Kim & Rhee, 2011; Men & Yue, 2019). For instance, Kim and Rhee's (2011) study proposed a strong

association between the concepts of EORs and employees' communicative behavior (i.e., megaphoning). Previous scholars also found that in a crisis, employees who have positive EORs not only choose to trust their organization but also engage voluntarily in efforts to dispel negative opinions and rumors about the organization, regardless of how and when their organization informs them about the situation (Kim et al., 2019). Also, Shen and Kim (2012) and Kang and Sung (2017) found that employees who evaluate their relationship with the organization positively are more likely to engage in supportive communication behaviors. Consistent with the above research, the results of the current study supported the prediction that the quality of EORs and employees' megaphoning are strongly associated with each other. Specifically, when employees have a good relationship with the organization, meaning they trust, agree with the distribution of power, commit to the organization, and are satisfied with the organization, they are more likely to say good things about their organization to their friends or neighbors and refute wrong arguments about the organization, and are less likely to talk about the weaknesses and problems of the organization with others.

Effects of Laissez-faire Leadership on Perceived Organizational Justice and EORs

Scholars have demonstrated the negative impact of various destructive leadership behaviors on employees' perceptual outcomes (e.g., perceived organizational justice, trust, commitment, and satisfaction) (Hoobler & Hu, 2013; Duffy & Ferrier, 2003; Burris et al., 2008; Skogstad et al., 2014). Expanding previous literature (Schyns & Schilling, 2013), the results of the current study supported the prediction that *laissez-faire* leadership behavior have negative effects on perceptions of organizational justice. *Laissez-faire* leaders who are absent when needed, avoid responsibility, and resist expressing opinions are found to have a strong negative impact on employees' perception of role clarity and leader effectiveness (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008). Known as passive leadership or "non-leadership", *laissez-faire* leaders diminish collaboration, which ultimately reduces the perception of organizational justice (Adeel et al., 2018).

Regarding the association between *laissez-faire* leadership behaviors and the quality of EORs, contrary to expectation, these destructive leadership behaviors did not directly influence EORs. Instead, their effects on the quality of EORs were fully mediated by perceived organizational justice. This finding indicates employees develop attitudes and actions toward the organization based on whether they are treated in the way they expect (Chao et al., 2011). In other words, *laissez-faire* leadership behavior influences the exchange of institutional, political, psychological, and other resources with employees, which in turn, affects employees' perception of fair treatment by supervisors (Burns, 1978). Accordingly, such perception of organizational justice positively and directly promotes favorable employee attitudes and behaviors toward the organization.

Effects of Laissez-faire Leadership on Employees' Communicative Behaviors

This study predicted that *laissez-faire* leadership behaviors will negatively affect employees' engagement in positive megaphoning while positively affect employees' engagement in negative megaphoning both directly and indirectly by influencing the quality of EORs and perceived organizational justice. Partially in line with expectation, *laissez-faire* leadership behavior was found to have a positive and direct impact on employees' engagement in negative megaphoning. Previous scholars have noted that anti-subordinate behaviors like abusive supervision and bullying are a potential source of employee stress (Tepper, 2000). Employees who suffer from abusive supervision are likely to discuss the situation or vent their emotions with their colleagues, friends, and family members to buffer their stress (Schreurs et al., 2012;

Webster et al., 2016). Therefore, employees tend to talk to people about the problems of their organization, products, or management when they perceive their supervisor as a derailed leader performing both anti-subordinate and anti-organizational behaviors.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The study findings provide important implications for public relations scholars and practitioners. Theoretically, first, this study contributes to the knowledge of leadership research in public relations. Men and Bowen (2017) note leadership communication plays an indispensable role in an organization's internal communication system. However, few studies have examined how the dark side of leadership as a contextual factor influences internal communication practices. As such, the current study contributes to leadership research in public relations literature by showing how *laissez-faire* leadership is related to internal public relations outcomes. Secondly, this study expands relationship management research. The findings of the current study extend the literature of internal relationship management by introducing *laissez-faire* leadership behaviors and perceived organizational justice as antecedents of the quality of EORs and employees' communicative behavior (i.e., megaphoning) as a consequence of the quality of EORs.

Practically, first, this study provides empirical evidence showing how *laissez-faire* leadership might influence the quality of EORs. Given the negative impact of *laissez-faire* leadership behavior on the quality of EORs and perceived organizational justice, it is necessary for the organization to train leaders to be aware of and to avoid certain destructive leadership behaviors. Also, since perceived organizational justice can buffer against the negative effects of *laissez-faire* leadership behaviors on the quality of EORs, the organization should enhance its fair treatment of employees. Second, the findings of this study also provide implications for communication practitioners on how to promote positive megaphoning and reduce negative megaphoning. The current study found that the better relationship between employees and the organization, the more employees will engage in positive communication behaviors over negative communication behaviors. Since employees' perception of organizational justice significantly contributes to the quality of EORs, the organization can create a fair working environment by listening to employees' opinions and provide adequate and credible explanations to assuage employees' doubts.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Several limitations have surfaced which can be addressed in future studies. First, a cross-sectional survey design together with the SEM analysis was used to test a priori theoretical model. However, without true experimental or longitudinal design, we cannot draw causal inferences from the study findings. Second, the study was conducted in the U.S. workplace context. National culture and socioeconomic contexts can influence how people interact, communicate, or interpret things (Men & Bowen, 2017; Sriramesh, Grunig, & Dozier, 1996). Therefore, future research could cross-verify the model and examine how these proposed relationships work in other cultural and societal contexts.

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Appendix

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations.

	M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. *Laissez-faire* leadership	2.41	1.34	—					
2. Organizational justice	5.37	1.17	-.64**	—				
3. Employee-organization relationships	4.63	1.31	-.52**	.78**	—			
4. Positive megaphoning	4.11	1.45	-.33**	.60**	.75**	—		
5. Negative megaphoning	3.39	1.54	.37**	-.39**	-.43**	-.19**	—	
6. Position level[a]	1.70	0.84	-.11**	.15**	.23**	.23**	-.09	—

Note. [a]Position level was measured using a four-level category system with 1 = non-management, 2 = lower-level management, 3 = middle-level management, 4 = top management. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$

Figures

Figure 1. The hypothesized model of *laissez-faire* leadership, organizational justice and EORs, and positive megaphoning.

Figure 2. The hypothesized model of *laissez-faire* leadership, organizational justice and EORs, and negative megaphoning.

Figure 3. Results of the hypothesized model for positive megaphoning.
Note. ** p<.01, ***P<.001

Figure 4. Results of the hypothesized model for negative megaphoning.
Note. ** p<.01, ***P<.001

A Conversation Model for Computer-Mediated Public Relations in the Age of AI

Tom Kelleher
University of Florida

Cen April Yue
University of Connecticut

Abstract

This essay proposes a framework for categorizing types of mediated communication in public relations to frame new questions of scalability of human interactions at the top and throughout organizations. The theoretical framework is defined by two dimensions: automated-human and mass-personalized. *Individualization* is characterized by personalized but not necessarily human-human interaction. *Personification* conveys humanness but is symbolic and parasocial. *Conversation* entails interactivity, engagement, and perceived humanness in communication. Scalability and consumer attributions and perceptions of mediated communication are discussed as key considerations for future research, practice, and theory building, setting the stage for studies of computer-mediated public relations in the era or AI that predict and compare the relative benefits of actual human conversations in public relations.

Keywords: Relationship Management, Conversation, Interactivity, Engagement, Communication Strategy, Artificial Intelligence, Human-Machine Communication, Computer-Mediated-Communication

Scope

The dawn of the internet age raised high hopes for public relations online. At the same time that public relations scholars began taking interest in the World Wide Web, many also began emphasizing dialogic communication theory as a framework for achieving next-level "potentiality" of mutual understanding (i.e., dialogue) via online public relations. From the get-go, however, there was a mismatch between conceptual and operational definitions of dialogue in this body of literature and research. Kent and Taylor (1998) cited philosophers and ethicists such as Martin Buber, Jürgen Habermas, Immanuel Kant, Ronald Arnett, and Richard Johannesen to articulate a conceptual definition of dialogue as an intersubjective process of open discussion in which participants share a willingness to reach mutual agreement. They then suggested guidelines for "the successful integration of dialogic public relations and the World Wide Web" (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 326). What followed were studies—mostly content analyses of web pages and social media (Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018)—with operational definitions such as tallies of the presence of site maps, information on how to donate money, timestamps indicating when sites were last updated, surveys, email subscription options, etc. (e.g., Taylor et al., 2001).

By 2002, Kent and Taylor cited the "increasing ubiquity of dialogue as a concept in public relations" and outlined a clarification of the term's meaning and its deep roots in philosophy (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 21). Nearly two decades later, Kent and Theunissen (2016) questioned whether dialogue in social media even exists and critiqued the appropriation of dialogue as a construct in social media research: "In fact, what many scholars call dialogue should more accurately be called 'customer service'" (p. 4046). Lane (2020) proposed a "dialogic ladder" to elucidate the differences in "dialogue-in-name-only and high-level true Dialogue" (p. 7).

While true dialogue with a capital "D" is indeed a noble aspiration for public relations, strategic management of social media and other forms of digital communication between organizations and publics, brands and consumers, companies and customers, etc. is the domain for this proposed framework. To what degree are computer-mediated communication strategies automated? To what degree are they personalized? And to what effects and relational outcomes? A CEO communicating from the top of an organization may mass-communicate in a way that builds a brand and perhaps even builds parasocial relationships with publics, but that same CEO with the help of technology, public relations managers, and thousands of employees or members throughout an organization may build and maintain more robust organization-public relationships by sharing the individual responsibilities of interacting, engaging, and conversing with individuals in the organization's publics. In an era of artificial intelligence (AI) and 'mass customization,' scalability and automation pose major questions for both public relations practice and theory. And of course, the most important factor in human communication, the human factor, must be accounted for.

Twentieth century communication scholars and theorists built basic concepts and models of mass communication on the basis of features like *scale, simultaneity,* and *one-directionality* when the society transitioned to a highly organized and centralized industrial stage (McQuail, 2010). Then the internet happened. Communication theorists of the early twenty-first century built models for computer-mediated communication on the basis of constructs like *relationships, personalization, personification, interactivity, conversation,* and *engagement* (e.g., Kelleher, 2009; Walther, 2011; Sundar et al., 2016).

This essay first reviews these six major constructs, then presents a framework for understanding and analyzing their application and effects in public relations and related fields.

Forms of Interaction

Relationships

As long as the construct of "relationship" has been a coin of the realm in public relations theory, public relations scholars and theorists have struggled mightily to explicate it. Republished in 2018, Ferguson's 1984 conference paper, "Building theory in public relations: Interorganizational relationships as a public relations paradigm," is often cited as the impetus for a large body of scholarship on organization-public relationships (OPRs) (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Grunig, 1993; Ki & Shin 2015; Ledingham, 2003). While the concept of an 'interorganizational' relationship or a relationship between an organization and its publics clearly implies interaction between large groups, the theoretical vocabulary for studying these relationships and their outcomes mostly has been adapted from interpersonal communication. For example, measures of individuals' senses of trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality in personal relationships are aggregated to assess organization-public relational outcomes in public relations (cf. Hon & Grunig, 1999).

Grunig wrote that "although it may be difficult for large organizations to communicate personally with all members of their publics, they have means other than [mass] media to communicate with publics" (1993, p. 123). Mass media, Grunig argued, offer means for symbolic communication allowing audiences to form cognitive images of organizations. He cited schema theories to build a case that an organization's image can be loosely defined as a composite of perceptions, cognitions and attitudes. Mass symbolic communication from the top of organizations and interpersonal behavioral communication with representatives throughout the organization complement each other in the formation of these schema, with behavioral relationships being indicated by outcomes such as reciprocity, trust, mutual satisfaction, mutual legitimacy, and mutual understanding.

Social media have afforded many more opportunities for individuals throughout organizations to interact with individuals in publics. Computer-mediated communication in general has opened a range of ways for brands, organizations, and leaders from all walks of life to communicate and build relationships with their publics (Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Kelleher, 2009; Men et al., 2018; Yue et al., 2019, 2020).

Interactivity

Sundar et al. (2015) forwarded a theory of interactive media effects (TIME) that suggests that interactivity leads to media effects either by the "symbolic potential of interface *cues* and their influence on the meanings we derive from our online interactions" (p. 78, emphasis original) or by actual user *action*. In the cue-based path to media effects, the noticeable presence of interactive features such as comment forms, counts of likes or shares, or options for users to customize content serve as heuristics that influence user perceptions of the source, the interface, and the content. In contrast, the psychological effects of interactive media are the result of actual user behavior. In these action-based paths to interactive media effects, user behaviors lead to changes in knowledge, attitudes, and future behaviors via numerous mediating variables, including engagement.

Janlert and Stolterman (2017) offered definitions of a number of terms that frame interactivity primarily as an activity that occurs when someone does something (an action) with respect to an artifact or a system. For example, they define *user* as "the human who interacts

with an artifact or system," and *receptivity* as "the ability of an artifact or system to discern and take into account (to some extent) actions of the human operator" (p. 138). While noting that the various types of interactivity are not mutually exclusive, an important distinction for discussing any computer-mediated communication is whether the focus is human-to-human interaction or human interaction with media, content, computers, artifacts, systems, etc. In public relations, this means discerning when individual members of publics sense they are interacting with real people who work for an organization and when they sense they are interacting with preprogrammed technology or content.

Engagement

Scholarly definitions of engagement range from meaningful human and societal experiences to mechanical interactions with other users, systems or interfaces. For example, engagement is necessary for philosophical aspirations of dialogue in public relations (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Taylor and Kent cited Heath (2006) in writing:

> "Engagement represents a two-way, relational, give-and-take between organizations and stakeholders/publics with the intended goal of (a) improving understanding among interactants; (b) making decisions that benefit all parties involved, not simply the organization; and (c) fostering a fully functioning society." (2014, p. 391)

Kang (2014), on the other hand, tested a "micro model" of public engagement at the individual level and posited that individual engagement in public relations is an affective behavioral motivator that serves as a mediator between individuals' trust and satisfaction with an organization and their supportive behavioral intentions (p. 399). That is, people who trust an organization and who are satisfied with their relationship with an organization are more likely to report feeling engaged, and that sense of engagement leads to greater loyalty and intentions to spread positive word of mouth. Sundar et al. (2015) also position engagement as a mediating variable. In their TIME model, engagement follows communication actions (i.e., using features of interfaces to perform communication tasks) that give users a sense of agency, self-determination, intuitiveness, reciprocity, responsiveness, etc. The resulting psychological state of engagement includes absorption and elaboration and leads to cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes.

Smith and Gallicano (2015) reviewed a range of scholarship to understand "the underlying factors that drive the progression of social media interactivity to the cognitive and emotional immersion of social media engagement" before conducting interviews and focus groups to better understand what engagement with organizations means to actual participants, in this case, young adults on college campuses (p. 82). They found that participants see engagement as a "personally-initiated and often spontaneous activity" that includes behavior (consuming information), feelings (a sense of presence), thoughts (immersion and involvement), and social interaction (conversation) (p. 84).

Conversation

Based on the literature above, a strong case can be made that interactivity (behavioral, symbolic, or both) is necessary for engagement. Conversation, this essay argues, is different than both interactivity and engagement, and equally important in understanding online public relations. Whereas interactivity and even engagement are commonly applied in human-computer and human-content contexts (e.g., a highly interactive app or a very engaging story), in everyday language, conversation mainly implies two or more people communicating as humans.

Kelleher and Miller (2006) introduced the construct of "conversational human voice" as part of an experiment to study how early organizational blogs differed from traditional corporate

communication material online as tactics for maintaining organization-public relationships. Conversational human voice was operationally defined by perceived characteristics "that otherwise might not be associated with traditional corporate communication" such as "communicating with a sense of humor, admitting mistakes, treating others as human, and providing links to competitors" (Kelleher & Miller, 2006, p. 399). Not surprisingly, blogs were perceived with a greater conversational human voice than corporate material. Conversational voice also correlated with relational outcomes, including trust, satisfaction, control mutuality, and commitment. However, Kelleher and Miller (2006) mainly manipulated content, and the participants only read printouts, so any effects on perceptions were evidence of what Grunig (1993) might call symbolic communication and Sundar et al. (2015) might call the "symbolic potential of interface cues" rather than behavioral interaction. That is, the perception of a *conversational* human voice is different than actual *conversation* – the act of conversing with another human.

In a larger scale survey of a sample of blog readers who had actually commented on MSDN blogs and thus were known to have behaviorally interacted with MSDN bloggers, Kelleher (2009) found that those who reported the greatest exposure to blogs were most likely to perceive the organization as communicating with a conversational human voice. That study and a number of others since by different authors with different organizations and samples have supported the correlation between perceived conversational human voice and relational outcomes in organization-public relationships (Sweetser & Kelleher, 2016).

Personalization

The internet has revolutionized personalization and customization (Kalyanaraman & Sundar, 2006). Two streams of thought inform definitions of the term *personalization*. One stream of literature defines personalization as a firm- or system-initiated action that relies heavily on gathering customer data and making statistical prediction (Kwon & Kim, 2012). The other considers personalization as an umbrella term, including both *system-initiated* personalization, and *user-initiated* personalization, also known as *customization* (Blom, 2000; Fan & Poole, 2006; Kwon & Kim, 2012; Sunikka & Bragge, 2012*)*. Personalization as a firm- or system-initiated action relies heavily on gathering user data to make statistical prediction based on users' wants and desires (Kalyanaraman & Wojdynski, 2015; Kwon & Kim, 2012). Broadly speaking, this data- and prediction-driven concept of personalization aims to increase the personal relevance of a product or a message to an individual (Fan & Poole, 2006).

Communication researchers have investigated how message personalization by political and business leaders on social media may engender individuals' favorable reactions toward the message senders (e.g., Lee & Oh, 2012). Mediated communication that is personalized can mimic face-to-face conversation, boost the social presence of message senders, and leads to individuals' perceived intimacy with the message senders (Lee & Oh, 2012; Tsai & Men, 2017). Public relations scholars have in recent years offered novel insights into how senior leaders can leverage personalized and interactive communication to build relationships with internal and external stakeholders (e.g., Men et al., 2018; Yue et al., 2020).

Personification

Cohen (2014) defined personification as "the use by a brand of a character with human-like characteristics in packaging, promotion, public relations, or other marketing related purposes" (p. 3). In other words, personification describes how people interacting with organizations, brands, or systems ascribe human characteristics to them. Differences between personalization and personification in what each strategy emphasizes are clear: while

personalization focuses on tailoring messages to individuals, personification underscores humanizing messages/brands/organizations.

The concepts of brand personality, anthropomorphism, and parasocial interaction in mediated environments are all related to the concepts of personification, which applies well in communication strategies implemented from the top of organizations. As a particular type of brand association, *brand personality* is "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (Aaker, 1997, p. 347). Since it can be difficult for consumers to differentiate brands based solely on their physical features, imbuing certain personalities of a brand in the hearts and minds of the consumers is a critical topic for marketers and advertisers (Sung & Kim, 2010).

Personification and anthropomorphism are inherently interconnected, and in many cases, they are treated as interchangeable constructs. To personify or anthropomorphize is to assign humanlike characteristics, intentions, motivations, emotional state, and behaviors to inanimate, nonhuman objects like brands or organizations (Epley et al., 2007; Guthrie, 1995). People anthropomorphize to meet emotional demands. A perceived companionship and quasi-interpersonal relationship may be attained through personification to satisfy people's motives for social relationships (Guthrie, 1995; Fournier, 1998; Wang et al., 2007). Prior studies have shown that consumers who perceive humanized brands as friendly or familiar may develop consumer-brand relationships (Fournier, 1998), which could induce brand attachment, trust, love, and loyalty (Batra et al., 2012; Rauschnabel & Ahuvia, 2014).

The concept of *parasocial interaction* has been well established in communication literature since Horton and Wohl published their seminal paper in 1956. Parasocial interaction refers to media users' illusionary experience, a felt interaction and reciprocity, with media personas (e.g., television characters, celebrities, influencers, corporate representatives) when in reality viewers are in a nonreciprocal, one-sided situation. Individuals who perceive strong parasocial interaction feel personally connected to the media characters and think the relationships are immediate, personal, and reciprocal (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Horton & Strauss, 1957). A related concept, *parasocial relationship*, refers to a more enduring relationship media users form with meditated performers beyond a single viewing activity (Dibble et al., 2016). While early research was conducted in the realm of traditional media (e.g., television viewers establish parasocial interaction with a soap character), scholars have extended parasocial interaction to include users' interactions with media characters in online environments (e.g., Labrecque, 2014; Lee et al., 2018; Tsai & Men, 2017). In computer-mediated contexts, a media 'character' could be an organization, a brand, a celebrity, or a company's CEO.

Digital channels flatten the traditional hierarchical structure of organizational communication and narrow the psychological distance between organizations and stakeholders (Men et al., 2018; Yue et al., 2020). Organizations, brands, and leaders from all walks of life are found to use human voice symbolically to create parasocial interaction, generate user engagement, and maintain relationships (e.g., Huang & Yeo, 2018; Ji et al., 2018; Kelleher, 2009; Tsai & Men, 2017). For instance, recent research pointed out that CEOs who sound responsive, authentic, empathetic, and friendly in responding to followers' social media posts and who exhibit active listening incurred higher PSI, which in turn, enhanced organization-public relationship quality (Tsai & Men, 2017). Other related interpersonal communication strategies such as the use of conservational tone and emotional language have been examined in the online environment and identified as effective engagement tools for organizations (e.g., Ji et al., 2018; Kelleher, 2009; Men et al., 2018; Yue et al., 2019).

A New Model

Given the ubiquity of computer-mediated strategic communication via both human and virtual agents and the affordances of technology and AI that have evolved in recent decades, we propose an organizing framework for online public relations that is built on two key dimensions: automated-human and mass-personalized (Figure 1). Real *conversations* between people throughout organizations and people in their publics are both human and personalized (e.g., human-to-human communication). *Individualization* in this framework is highly personalized but also highly automated (e.g., human-to-computer communication). *Personification* requires human characteristics and can be accomplished via one-to-many mass communication from the top of organizations (e.g., one-*N*, PSI or brand personality). *Corporate messaging* lacks personalization and humanness.

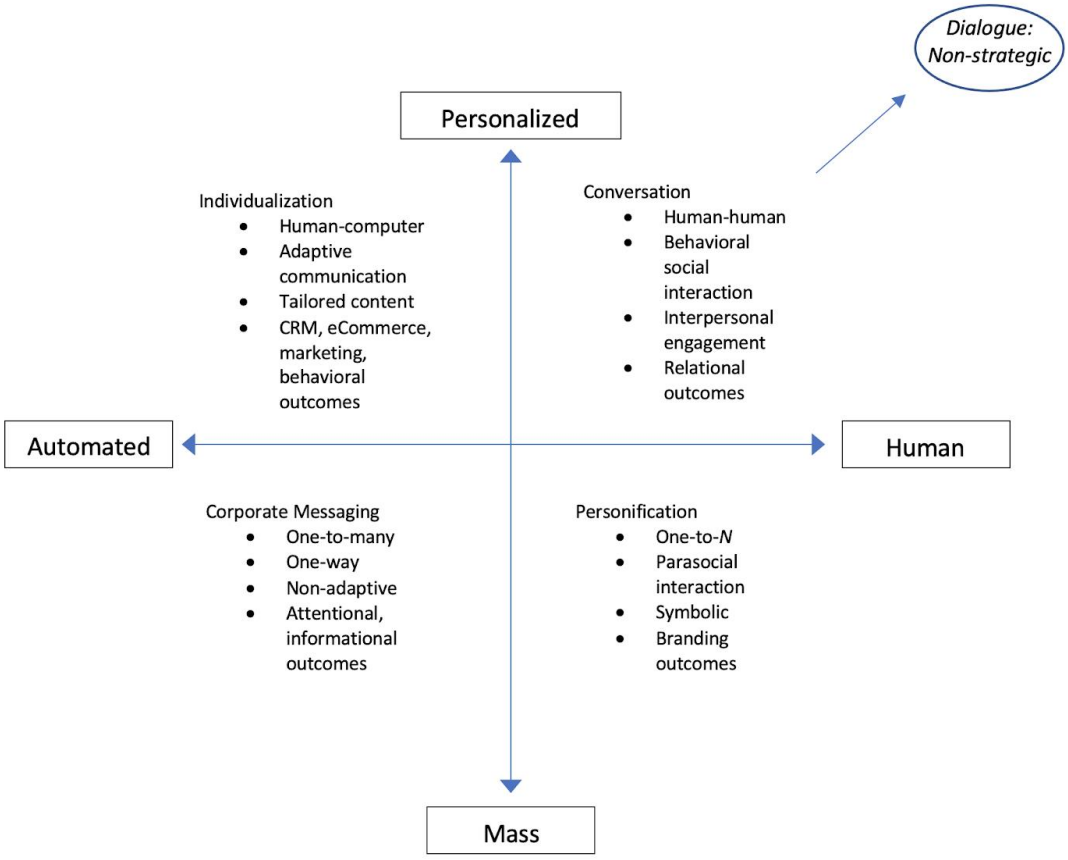

Figure 1. A model for theorizing conversation in computer-mediated public relations.

While this model is derived from prior literature and research, advances in communication technology raise the importance of two key considerations that will have important implications for its application in public relations: *scalability* and *consumer/public attribution and perception*.

Scalability

Human-computer communication scaling. Advances in technology have allowed strategic communicators to scale personalized communication to meet the needs and expectations of

customers and publics like never before. Customer relationship management (CRM), AI, and algorithm-driven recommender systems make it possible for every single user, customer or employee of even the largest companies and systems to have uniquely tailored communication experiences. The outcomes of automated personalization (i.e., individualization) are largely transactional. Millions of users find the right pair of shoes every day without needing an army of sales people or cobblers. They get hyper-specific book and movie recommendations without talking to a single bookseller or store clerk. Complex insurance rate quotes are generated in minutes. These systems also benefit social marketing and nonprofit organizations in influencing healthy and prosocial behavioral outcomes as personalized physical activity interventions are delivered automatically via apps based on individual fitness data (Ghanvatkar et al., 2019) and charity groups use personalized advertising to promote empathy and intentions to help stigmatized social groups (Bartsch & Kloß, 2018).

Human-human communication scaling. Though not to the same degree as human-computer or human-content interaction, social network systems afford organizations many more points of human-human contact between people throughout organizations and people throughout publics. In the context of organizational communication, Huang et al. discussed the concept of "multivocality" that social media afford: "the use of social media within organizations has the potential to increase the number of rhetors and feedback mechanisms… any organizational actor has access to the same set of rhetorical resources and has the ability to act as a rhetor" (2013, p. 120). In the context of business-to-business marketing, Kleinaltenkamp et al. (2019) have called this scaling of interpersonal interactions "collective engagement." In public relations, Kelleher (2015, 2018) has termed it "distributed public relations." But what are the relative benefits of scaling by communication technology and scaling by employing more real people in the strategic communication function of businesses and organizations? Prior research in the bodies of literature cited above suggests that personalization positively affects outcomes in e-commerce, marketing, and sales, and that behavioral outcomes also can be achieved in social marketing and health communication. Of course, actual interpersonal communication (i.e., conversation) can be used to achieve these outcomes as well, but conversational communication also has been shown to influence relational outcomes such as trust, commitment, satisfaction and control mutuality (Sweetser & Kelleher, 2016). To what extent do real humans have an advantage over computers in building and maintaining these relationship outcomes or other desirable effects of strategic communication? This is an important theoretical question as well as a practical question of the costs and benefits of scaling communication with AI and algorithms versus scaling communication by employing more people or allotting more time for people throughout organizations to participate in online public relations.

Symbolic scaling. While this strategy predates the internet, research on interactivity and engagement tells us that when real people representing an organization from the top interact directly with even a few members of publics or markets, some benefits of interpersonal communication will ensue for the whole organization or brand because of the symbolic value. The TIME model, for example, predicts that interactive media affordances not only affect user psychology for those who interact directly, but also for those users who only observe the interactions that serve as "symbolic representational cues" (Sundar et al., 2015, p. 51). Seeing that real people in an organization have responded to Facebook comments, or that a politician has directly retweeted or commented on constituents' tweets can have important perceptual effects for the thousands or millions more who are able to observe but who do not necessarily interact. CEOs who are assertive and responsive on social media have been found to influence

relational outcomes such as trust and satisfaction with their companies by way of parasocial relationships (Tsai & Men, 2017).

Attribution and Perception

While the two dimensions of the framework presented in Figure 1 (mass-personalized and automated-human) are offered to organize future study of computer-mediated public relations with more ontological clarity, humanness is in the eye of the beholder. Perhaps the most fascinating questions of modern media are the ones that focus on the blurred lines between machines and humans, and between social and parasocial interactions.

Humans or bots? The landscape for digital communication is changing rapidly, diminishing user recognition of automated versus human communication partners. Perceived humanness—whether people perceive that they are engaged in real conversation with real humans or personalized interactions with robots and AI—will be a key moderator in public relations involving online agents. One contributing factor is the advancement of AI. As Guzman and Lewis have noted, "the gulf between AI and communication research is narrowing, bridged by AI technologies designed to function as communicators" (2019, p. 2).

AI technology also has introduced a new set of ethical and social challenges: Do people have the right to know they are talking to a machine? Will the technology reduce the frequency and quality of human-to-human social interactions and thus erode relational trust and satisfaction?

Humans or brands? When individuals throughout organizations have conversations with individuals throughout publics or markets, interpersonal relationships become components of broader organization-public relationships. The composite of those interpersonal communications, experiences and relationships contributes to people's perceptions of their overall relationships with the organization or brand. A conversational tone engenders symbolic value, but also can backfire when a brand's tone of voice on social media is too informal or incongruent with the relationship consumers expect (Barcelos et al., 2018; Gretry et al., 2017). *Conversational tone* is akin to parasocial engagement in that its presence in computer-mediated communication can be observed by the masses as symbolic and as a form of personification. Actual *conversation*, however, entails both personalization and humanness, and the adaptive nature of interactive communication offers public relations practitioners the opportunity to avoid/prevent negative outcomes as they interact. This is a ripe area for future research.

Ideal public relations strategies in the AI era will entail organizations communicating with both humanness and customization. Relationship outcomes can be maximized when real conversation occurs between organizations and individuals on a large scale. Although personification, personalization, and parasocial interaction have been empirically linked to relational and attitudinal outcomes (e.g., Dibble et al., 2016, Kelleher, 2006, 2009; Lee & Oh, 2012; Sung & Kim, 2018; Tsai & Men, 2017), future studies comparing the differential uses and outcomes of personification, individualization, and conversation are encouraged.

Conclusion

While future research certainly should include ethical analysis of each strategy, including issues of manipulation, deception, exploitation, human agency, and privacy, each also has advantages and disadvantages that can be compared as effects in descriptive and predictive research going forward. Individualization, individualization, and conversation already have been shown to directly or indirectly affect marketing, branding, and public relations outcomes, respectively. Individualization is useful in generating transactional outcomes in e-commerce,

CRM, and precision marketing, as well as prosocial and health-related outcomes. Personification and anthropomorphization are useful strategies in affecting attitudinal and behavioral outcomes of interest to advertisers and brand strategists. And conversations via digital media are beneficial to the relational outcomes of great interest to public relations practitioners and scholars.

The conversation model forwarded in this essay sets the stage for future studies that predict and compare the relative benefit of actual conversations to automated personalized interactions or personified symbolic representations of organizations. While communication technologies (e.g., AI, bots and algorithms) have in many ways reduced the need for humans in mass communication (e.g., corporate messaging, public information), individualization (e.g., digital marketing, e-commerce), and personification (e.g., branding) from the top of organizations, we must not underrate the importance of human communicators throughout organizations, especially in building and maintaining relationships in public relations.

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Communicating About Mental Health During a Pandemic: An Examination of Social Support on Twitter

Jesse King
University of California, Santa Barbara

Audrey Halversen
Brigham Young University

Olivia Morrow
Brigham Young University

Whitney Westhoff
Harvard University

Pamela Brubaker
Brigham Young University

Abstract

With the arrival of COVID-19, several U.S. states enacted stay-at-home orders to mitigate spread, but the isolation and uncertainty of quarantine can have a detrimental influence on mental health. This study investigates how people discuss COVID-19 in relation to mental health on Twitter. Using Crimson Hexagon, this research examines tweets for three months following the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in the U.S. and includes an analysis of the public's concern about the disease and a thematic analysis of conversations on the topic. Results indicate that those who discuss mental health online behave as an active public that recognizes how mental health can be affected during a health crisis. This public makes a concerted effort to provide social support and solidarity for others. Data show that when cases of the disease increased, mentions of depression, PTSD, and psychologists increased as well. Additionally, as deaths related to the disease increased, so did mentions of psychologists. Implications for communication practitioners and organizations are discussed through the lens of the situational theory of publics.

Keywords: mental health, situational theory of publics, health communication, Twitter, active publics

The spread of the COVID-19 (i.e., coronavirus) precipitated the introduction of stay-at-home orders and social distancing across the U.S. Past research indicates that the practice of social distancing, while effective at impeding the spread of a communicable disease like COVID-19, can also have a detrimental impact on people's mental health (Brooks et al., 2020; Collinson et al., 2015; Czeisler et al., 2020; Panchal et al., 2020; Salathé et al., 2013).

Similar to reactions surrounding other communicable diseases, such as Ebola and Zika (Guidry et al., 2017; Liang et al., 2019; Vijaykumar et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2019), people have utilized social media to voice their concerns on the spread of COVID-19. Twitter has been identified as a useful platform of study because it provides real-time information that can help organizations understand how people are handling a crisis (Chavarria et al., 2017; Salathé et al., 2013). This information is crucial for mental health organizations and their public relations practitioners as it informs their strategic planning and implementation of health communication tactics.

Because of the impact a pandemic may have on people's mental health, it is important to understand how organizations can reach those who are experiencing worsened mental health during a health crisis. As a result, this study will investigate how the mental health conversation is discussed online in conjunction with the spread of COVID-19 and examine the users through the situational theory of publics in order to inform how communication practitioners and mental health organizations may respond in their social media strategies. This is especially important as publics communicate differently in various situations (Aldoory & Austin, 2011). To date, no other research has tracked the mental health conversation on Twitter in this way. Much of relevant research is devoted to creating algorithms that can detect the existence of mental health issues in social media texts (Coppersmith et al., 2014; Lachmar et al., 2017; O'Dea et al., 2015). Yet, Ji et al. (2015) argues that research needs to "differentiate between the spread of concern about a disease and the spread of the disease itself" (p. 12), which this study attempts to do. This study provides insight into how people are discussing mental health online in an effort to inform health communicators about how to better leverage online discussion platforms for communicating mental health information.

Situational Theory of Publics

This study will employ a situational theory of publics framework to interpret the communication behaviors of people who use online discussion platforms to communicate about mental health during a global health crisis (i.e., the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic). Developed by Grunig (1982), the situational theory of publics proposes that publics can be classified according to their awareness of and participation in three communication behaviors: problem recognition, constraint recognition, and involvement (Grunig, 1988). Problem recognition refers to the extent to which a public recognizes an issue as a serious problem while constraint recognition explains the extent to which members of a public feel that they are able to control a problem. And finally, involvement is a measure of how personally involved members of a public are in an issue.

Previous situational theory research has shown that members of a public are more likely to actively communicate about an issue when they recognize a problem, believe they have a measure of control over the problem, and feel personally involved in the problem (Aldoory & Austin, 2011). There are four types of publics that vary in the way they approach a situation: active, aware, latent, and nonpublic (Aylesworth-Spink, 2019). An active public is characterized by high problem recognition and high involvement, but low constraint recognition (Aldoory & Austin, 2011; Grunig, 1988); as such, they are active in communicating about the issue (Grunig, 1982). Further, an aware public recognizes the problem but is less active in addressing it, a latent

public faces a problem without recognizing it, and a nonpublic does not face the issue as the issue is not relevant to them at the time (Grunig, 1982).

Due to the participatory nature of social media (Jenkins, 2008), it is likely that an active public will manifest in a conversation about mental health. Active publics are not just active in seeking information, but they are active in sharing information online, providing others with the resources necessary to address a problem (Kim & Grunig, 2011). This group is formed based on emotional arousal—especially negative emotion—regarding a problem, and consequently holds stronger opinions on the issue (Shin & Han, 2016). They often also have a strong personal connection to an issue and actively disseminate information and solutions to the problems they recognize (Shen et al., 2019).

The situational theory of publics more recently has been applied to health public relations (Aldoory & Austin, 2011; Aylesworth-Spink, 2019; Guidry et al., 2017). Health public relations is used to strategically plan and implement communication tactics to influence health attitudes and relationships between health-related organizations and the public as well as to manage reputation (Aldoory & Austin, 2011; Aylesworth-Spink, 2019). More recently, the theory has also been used by a number of studies in the context of social media and how social media publics share information during risk or crisis situations (e.g., Malasig & Quinto, 2016; Zhao et al., 2017). The situational theory of publics is especially relevant when investigating how a public forms in the face of a crisis (Aldoory et al., 2010), and previous research has found that members of a public are more likely to actively seek information during times of risk or crisis (Grunig & Grunig, 2007). In order to implement their communication strategies, practitioners are apt to identify community members with high involvement who will spread the message (Aylesworth-Spink, 2019; Wirtz et al., 2011). By understanding the involvement of an active public, practitioners will be able to more effectively create targeted messaging (Aldoory & Austin, 2011).

Health Information on Twitter

Social media provides people with yet another place to find health information online, including a place to learn about health concerns (Aylesworth-Spink, 2019; Chavarria et al., 2017). Due to its affordance of synchronicity, it can provide individuals with immediate access to information when they are dealing with difficult issues, including information about self-monitoring and self-care (Aylesworth-Spink, 2019).

In recent years, researchers have used various methods to examine how viruses such as Zika and Ebola are discussed on social media. Research has found that news media on Twitter strongly influenced the conversation about Zika (Vijaykumar et al., 2018), and that people used Twitter to not only voice their fears about the spread of Ebola, but they also used it to criticize how the virus was being dealt with (Mondragon et al., 2017). Relatedly, Guidry et al. (2017) found that along with acknowledgement of the public's fear, the most effective social media messaging about Ebola also included solution-based messages that acknowledge people's fears and worries.

Research indicates that fear-based messages are also prominent on Twitter and that viral tweets are more likely to be emotionally charged (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013; Tsugawa & Ohsaki, 2015). Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan (2013) conjecture that tweets, when emotionally arousing—provoking anger or anxiety—may spread more quickly. Those who post about an issue may do so because they feel a physical or emotional proximity to the event, and thus their tweets are influenced by that connection (Huang et al., 2015).

Mental Health Content on Twitter

Pandemics can incite uncertainty and fear, thereby influencing people's mental health (Brooks et al., 2020). In the past, researchers have programed algorithms that detect and track mental health symptoms on Twitter and have thematically evaluated how these issues—including for depression, suicidality, and seasonal mood changes—are discussed (Coppersmith et al., 2014; Dzogang et al., 2016; Lachmar et al., 2017; O'Dea et al., 2015). Some of the key studies evaluating mental health and social media have focused on fluctuations in mood and mental health (Dzogang et al., 2016), the impact of emotionally charged mental health hashtags (Lachmar et al., 2017), uses of social media in healthcare (Giustini et al., 2018), and the detection of suicidal language in tweets (O'Dea et al., 2015).

COVID-19 and Mental Health

In order to investigate the public's health concerns surrounding the spread of COVID-19, this research examines how people explicitly express their mental health issues by discussing these issues publicly on social media. This study will employ a mixed methods approach, using qualitative data to help explain the quantitative data.

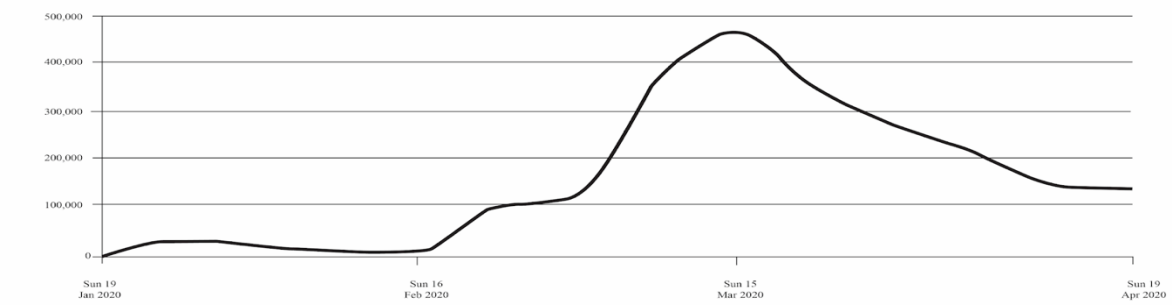
Study 1

Method

Using the program Crimson Hexagon, we scraped posts about the conversation on Twitter surrounding COVID-19 and mental health topics. Crimson Hexagon is an AI social media analysis platform that has been used in other communications research (Lee et al., 2020; Su et al., 2017) to provide insights into Twitter conversations—including post volume, key terms, post emotions, and key influencers. The program uses Boolean search terms to determine which posts to scrape. Search terms relating to the virus, mental health, and specific mental health symptoms were used to identify online conversations: ("coronavirus" OR "corona virus" OR "COVID-19" OR "COVID 19" OR "COVID") AND ("mental health" OR "psychological health" OR "burnout" OR "burn out" OR "burnt out" OR "anxiety" OR "depression" OR "stress" OR "anxious" OR "depressed" OR "stressed" OR "psychologist" OR "worried" OR "worry" OR "OCD" OR "obsessive" OR "compulsive" OR "obsessive compulsive disorder" OR "suicide" OR "suicidal" OR "PTSD" OR "post traumatic stress" OR "post-traumatic stress" OR "distress" OR "distressed"). The Boolean search terms will hereafter be referred to as the *conversation.* Data was collected on April 28, 2020, yet the analysis included tweets posted between January 22, 2020 (when the first case of COVID-19 in the U.S. was confirmed) and April 25, 2020. As of April 25, 2020, there were 934,065 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 50,698 COVID-19–related deaths in the U.S. (USA Facts, 2020). Only posts in the English language from the United States were included.

Using the Crimson Hexagon data, the total volume of the conversation was 2,199,625 tweets, and the total potential impressions surrounding this topic was 33,551,714,988 (i.e., the number of times that the tweets on this topic could have been read by all the followers of each Twitter author for the specified period of time). The conversation peaked on March 15, 2020 and then tapered off (see Figure 1). The conversation was dominated by those 35 years old and older (77%), followed by those 25 to 34 (8%) and 18 to 24 (8%), and then those younger than 17 (6%). Both males (49%) and females (51%) were involved in the conversation. A qualitative analysis of the online discussions is provided in Study 2.

Figure 1
Total volume of the conversation on COVID-19 and mental health over time



Note. The total volume of the conversation was 2,199,625 tweets.

We will present the main descriptive insights of the data. "Anxiety" was present in the highest number of posts (*N* = 81,281), followed by stress (*N* = 76,499), depression (*N* = 56,536), suicide (*N* = 44,055), psychologist (*N* = 4,933), PTSD (*N* = 4,397), and OCD (*N* = 1,985). The top 10 influencers in the conversation were (in order from most influential) @baeonda, @realDonaldTrump, @workerism, @elliottdunstan, @pearltearizzy, @senwarren, @barackobama, @cutmylip_mp3, @britrican, and @jimmykimmel. Crimson Hexagon calculates an influencer score based on the number of times a user is mentioned or retweeted. Only four of the 10 individuals had verified accounts—meaning an authentic account of an individual or entity of public interest—which included three politicians and one celebrity. The remaining accounts were maintained by non–public figures. Further, the top 10 mentions included (in order from most to least) were @realDonaldTrump, @SenWarren, @gabrielsherman, @SpeakerPelosi, @CDCgov, @POTUS, @nytimes, @politicususa, @ewarren, @WHO. Overall, the conversation was dominated by the sentiment of fear in all posts regarding mental health and COVID-19 and in each subcategory of posts as well.

Following Twitter data extraction, we investigated the relationship between the mention of specific mental health key terms on Twitter and COVID-19 cases and deaths in the U.S. We hypothesized that the conversations about mental health will be positively correlated with the U.S. COVID-19 cases and deaths. This is based on the premise that virus-related quarantine is associated with worsening mental health (Brooks et al., 2020; Collinson et al., 2015; Czeisler et al., 2020; Panchal et al., 2020; Salathé et al., 2013).

Using IBM SPSS software version 26, we ran Pearson correlations between the weekly COVID-19 cases in the U.S. and the number of weekly Twitter posts using the seven mental health keywords. The number of cases and deaths were obtained from datasets provided by the nonprofit civic initiative USA Facts (2020). Correlations between these mental health key terms and the number of COVID-19–related deaths in the U.S. were also recorded.

Results

The Pearson correlations revealed several statistically significant correlations (see Table 1). Total weekly COVID-19 cases in the U.S. was positively correlated with weekly Twitter posts using the terms "depression" (r = .55, p = .04), "psychologist" (r = .68, p =.01), and "PTSD" (r = .58, p =.03). Total weekly COVID-19 deaths in the U.S. was positively correlated with the posts using the term "psychologist" (r = .65, p =.01). All other bivariate correlations yielded non-significant results. Thus, the hypothesis was only partially upheld.

Table 1
Bivariate Correlations of weekly mental health key terms use and COVID-19 cases and deaths in the U.S.

	COVID-19 Cases	COVID-19 Deaths	*M*(*SD*)
anxiety	.10	-.03	13032.64(18276.71)
stress	.14	.03	12022.79(18841.09)
depression	.55*	.42	7927.57(9604.88)
suicide	.28	.04	4968.71(7391.16)
psychologist	.69**	.65**	553.86(547.81)
PTSD	.58*	.48	348.07(455.32)
OCD	.08	-.06	283.86(327.18)

Note. $*p < .05$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$.

Discussion

Though the conversation volume was relatively high for this niche topic, the conversation tapered off after about a month of exponential attention. It is possible that this decreased conversation is due to mass media fatigue (Collinson et al., 2015), meaning people became overwhelmed by the amount of information and consequently decreased their media usage.

Based on the engagement (i.e., top influencers and mentions) with the conversation, the data also provide interesting insights, which indicate that unverified, layperson accounts have the ability to influence niche topics on Twitter. Only four of the top influencers in this conversation were public figures; in other words, the lay Twitter public is active in recognition of the problem and their involvement (Grunig, 1988). It is possible that because this topic is more niche—and perhaps fewer people are posting about it—that non-influencers can have more of a voice in the issue.

These results indicate that during the COVID-19 surge, people became more aware of their need for psychological help as well as their own personal difficulties with social isolation. When there was an increase in COVID-19 cases, people regularly referenced depression, psychologist, and PTSD in their tweets. Additionally, an increase in COVID-19 deaths was associated with posts using the term psychologist. An increase in posts referencing psychologists may indicate the public's increased need to seek expert help or the sharing of expert opinions as they looked for mental health relief or solutions to cope with their emotional difficulties. It is possible that discussion surrounding depression also increased over time due to the research that indicates that social isolation and loneliness are related to depressive symptoms (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014); as such, it appears that quarantine and social distancing regulations may also impact individuals' feelings of sadness and hopelessness. Moreover, anxiety, stress, suicide, and OCD were not positively correlated with increasing cases of the disease or deaths. This is may be due to the fact that the stressors associated with trauma and depression are worsened when by social isolation, whereas anxiety, stress and OCD may be lessened if individuals feel that quarantine allows them safety from their stressors—be that the virus, social situations, or other environmental stressors. It is unclear why suicide was not found to be positively associated to COVID-19 cases or deaths; future research should investigate this.

Study 2

Method

In order to provide context to the findings from the quantitative data, we performed a thematic analysis of a sample of the tweets pulled from each of the subcategories and from the

full sample of tweets. We investigated the following question: What themes related to COVID-19 and mental health are being shared, and how do they explain the type of public that is involved in this conversation?

Using the export function of Crimson Hexagon, the researchers exported a post list of 800 tweets in the conversation. Four researchers then analyzed the post content using a qualitative thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). First, they familiarized themselves with the content by reading through the posts. Using the inductive approach, they coded the data, assigning qualitative codes for each post. They then used both a semantic approach (analyzing the explicit content) and a latent approach (examining the subtext and assumptions). Following coding, codes were examined to determine similarity and themes. These themes were refined by comparing them against the data, combining like-themes, and discarding themes that were not as prevalent in the data. This process was performed until the researchers agreed upon the established themes and subthemes. Each theme was named and defined. Throughout the coding process the researchers engaged in reflexivity to reduce personal bias.

Findings

There were three prominent themes in the Twitter conversation regarding COVID-19 and mental health key terms: (a) mental health support, (b) shifting priorities, and (c) politicized issues.

The first prominent theme found in the dataset was mental health support, which included subthemes of mental health awareness, expert opinions, self-help resources, fear of spread, concern for essential workers, and social support. A number of the posts used the conversation about COVID-19 discussed mental health awareness. This included the mentioning of various mental health issues and their symptoms. In general, the purpose of these posts was to call attention to those whose mental health might be worsening during the COVID-19 pandemic. Another prominent theme among these posts was the use of expert opinions related to mental health. These experts included medical practitioners, scientists, and psychologists. Though sometimes overlapping with expert opinions, there was a clear theme of self-help and resource suggestions. This included self-help articles, the promotion of mental health organizations, and other anecdotal coping mechanisms. Tweets also included the idea that mental illness could spread due to the circumstances of COVID-19. The suppositions included social distancing, the spread of germs, and preexisting illness. There was also a preoccupation with the toll that COVID-19 would take on veterans who already suffer from PTSD. Also among the themes was the concern over essential workers, including healthcare workers and first responders. There was some overlap with the essential worker theme and the theme of social support, which included statements of solidarity and encouraging stories as well as expressions of worry over the mental health of people's families and social circles. These tweets were meant to encourage users to reach out to those who might be struggling and to show support for those already experiencing mental health difficulties.

Though many posts focused on mental health issues, there was also a significant theme of posts that pointed out the need for a shifting in priorities. There were two types of posts in this thematic category: (a) those that described COVID-19 as less of a threat compared to other health issues or safety risks and (b) those that expressed the need to worry more about people in isolation who might experience exacerbated mental health symptoms. A number of the posts weighed the options of reducing the spread of COVID-19 and indicated that the ramifications of stay-at-home orders and social distancing—though keeping people physically healthy—may be negatively impacting people's emotional health.

Finally, not all the posts in this conversation were specifically about mental health, even though they used these mental health key terms; these were politicized issues, including subthemes of politics, economic concerns, and perceived misinformation. These themes are likely present due to dual meanings of words, including "economic stress" or "economic depression"; however, these subthemes also included posts that referred to mental health specifically. The subtheme of politics included posts wherein users politicized COVID-19, or the posts were an expression of politicians' commentary on COVID-19 through their personal political position. Other posts focused on political critiques and criticizing President Trump's actions that users saw as negatively impacting the economy and people's mental health. There was also a subtheme of economic concerns and the stress that stay-at-home orders would have on the economy. Moreover, the last subtheme was perceived misinformation, wherein tweets discussed the perceived misinformation about the virus while others referenced the distrust of the media surrounding the issue.

The qualitative findings of this study supplement the quantitative findings and provide insight into how U.S. Twitter users' communication behaviors can be conceptualized through the situational theory of publics framework. These results suggest that mental health–related posts on Twitter were varied; yet the posts focused solely on mental health were in some way related to support, be it informationally or emotionally. This indicates that these Twitter users act as an active public that believes their posts can address the problem of mental health issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic; these themes include mental health awareness, expert opinions, self-help resources, and social support. It is possible that an aware public (i.e., high problem recognition, constraint recognition, and involvement) is also present in this sample, due to the presence of the fear of the spread of the virus and expressions of concern for essential workers.

The other themes indicate that some of the posts using the keywords depression and stress may not be directly related to mental health, and as such, the aforementioned findings related to depression and stress should be approached cautiously. For instance, qualitative analysis indicated that "depression" was used in terms of mental health as well as in terms of an "economic depression," and as such, it is unclear which term is truly correlated with the number of COVID-19 cases. Future research should examine the use of these terms using other methods.

Discussion and Conclusions

This research examines how mental health issues are discussed online in conjunction with the physical spread of a communicable disease like COVID-19. Understanding the public's health concerns are important—and as mental health issues are a likely side effect of a pandemic (Brooks et al., 2020)—this study provides health communicators with insights about how publics are leveraging online discussion platforms to express social support for those in distress.

Findings from all three studies indicate that, overall, people involved in the discussion about mental health and COVID-19 online act as an active public. As the situational theory of publics suggests, an active public has high problem recognition and high involvement, but low constraint recognition (Aldoory & Austin, 2011; Grunig, 1988). In the context of this research, the active public understands that people are experiencing a difficulty with their mental health and as such are posting online about how they and other people can deal with it (i.e., social support). Further, this public likely believes that posting online has the ability to help others during a crisis because they perceive fewer constraints, or barriers to their ability to control the problem.

Problem recognition was demonstrated through the high percentage of posts that were dominated by fear and the term "anxiety." The analysis indicates that although the online conversation was dominated by fear, posts also prominently included themes of mental health support, indicating that the public was willing to share hope and helpful resources. As part of that, they were also providing advice from professionals (i.e., psychologists). It appeared that people were coping with the pandemic by posting more about meeting with psychologists or resources written by them. Thematic findings (i.e., mental health awareness, expert opinions, self-help resources, and social support) indicated that the public acknowledged the psychological difficulties surrounding the existence of the virus, but also recognized the need for tools to combat the problem.

Online conversations also suggest that the active publics who engaged in conversations about mental health experienced low constraint and felt they were able to control problems related to mental health to some degree. By sharing resources, this public showed a belief that mental health issues during the COVID-19 pandemic could be addressed (Giustini et al., 2018; Lachmar et al., 2017). The situational theory of publics indicates that an active public is especially proactive in sharing information about emotionally charged topics (Aldoory & Austin, 2011); the results found support for this concept, indicating that the active public in this instance was preoccupied with providing others with information about the mental health. These research findings also mirror the presumption that an active public uses social media to become informed and also to inform and influence others (Aldoory & Austin, 2011).

Personal involvement, or how personally involved the public was in the conversation about mental health, was demonstrated through the sharing of personal experiences and the theme of social support. This involvement may come as a result of their personal experiences with the topic, as those who are more invested in an issue have been found to be more active in discussing it online (Grunig & Grunig, 2007). As active publics encouraged and stood in solidarity with others who may have been experiencing declining mental health, they demonstrated a personal stake in the issue. Overall, the prevalence of mental health support indicates that U.S. Twitter users who participated in this conversation addressed mental health issues in the context of COVID-19 in a relatively uplifting way. In spite of the high level of fear associated with this the virus, the results of this study suggest that the conversation regarding COVID-19 and mental health online may be more supportive than presumed.

This study supplements previous scholarship on the situational theory of publics by suggesting that Twitter may be a space where a public can become active during times of a global health crisis. Because large numbers of the U.S. population engaged in limited in-person interactions during the time frame studied, it is possible that without access to social networking sites it would have been more difficult for a public to coalesce around a niche topic such as mental health. This study demonstrates that Twitter users in the U.S. were able to connect during the COVID-19 pandemic and provide mental health support.

Implications for Practitioners

Communication practitioners can act as a bridge between healthcare organizations and patients during crises, and as such should engage in strategic planning to effectively disseminate social media messages during these times. Practitioners can take an active role in using Twitter and other social media and online discussion platforms to help spread messages that will reduce stigma about mental health (Giustini et al., 2018), thereby improving their image with the public. For mental health clinics, hospitals, and other such organizations to have a strong voice on mental health during a health crisis, like a pandemic, they should consider including personalized

experiences and targeting laypeople and influencers who can spread their messages, uplifting and supporting those in need. Specifically, focusing on the active public may be beneficial, as this public has the ability to change health-related attitudes and behaviors (Wirtz et al., 2011).

Because the conversation about COVID-19 and mental health appeared to taper off mid-March 2020, it is important that public relations practitioners and other communication professionals have a media campaign strategy in place to respond to health crises like pandemics that involve isolation and social distancing.

Further, health communicators should construct messages in such a way that they balance out the fear online and involve messages of social support and solidarity. Continued messaging over time should also emphasize professional opinions from psychologists. Such posts can improve organizational reputation and build trust with the public. Messages should not rely solely on supportive messages, however, as research indicates that more positive and solution-based messages are most engaging (Guidry et al., 2017).

Moreover, these findings indicate that the most active public on Twitter regarding mental health and COVID-19 skews older (i.e., 35 years and older), and consequently, practitioners should employ language that speaks to this age group and the time in life they are experiencing.

As has been suggested in previous research, practitioners may have the most success when targeting laypeople, or hidden influencers, and influencers who can spread their content (Liang et al., 2019). Because the active public in this study included many laypeople, it shows that micro-influencers (i.e., between 1,000 and one million followers) may be effective targets for strategic messaging.

The results of this study demonstrate the uses of Twitter in times of crisis—as a space for mental health resources and social support—and illustrate that people are sensitive to how health crises like pandemics influence mental health. This study can inform the fields of health communications by providing a context for how mental health information is discussed online by active publics.

This study is limited in generalizability, however, as it provides insights into how an active public discusses concerns about a communicable disease on Twitter. Future research should further investigate the existence of different types of publics on other social media platforms as demographics and uses of platforms vary and may influence the way different publics communicate while using them.

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Engaging Startup Employees via Charismatic Leadership Communication: The Importance of Communicating "Vision, Passion, and Care"

Linjuan Rita Men
Yufan Sunny Qin
Renee Mitson
University of Florida

Abstract

This study examines how startup charismatic leadership communication, characterized by envisioning, energizing, and enabling, influences employee relationships and engagement. A survey of 1,027 Chinese startup employees showed that startup leader charismatic communication meets employee psychological need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, ultimately contributing to quality employee-startup relationships and employee engagement.

Keywords: leadership communication, internal communication, employee-organization relationships, employee engagement

Startups and new ventures are vital to economic growth in society as they are constant drivers for innovation and create new employment opportunity (Wiesenberg et al., 2020). Startups are agile, flexible, and adaptable to new opportunities; yet they also face unique challenges with limited resources, limited pre-existing knowledge, and yet-to-be established identities and reputations (Men et al., 2019). Startup leaders, e.g., founders or CEOs, are often charged with important communication roles. As the most influential person in the organization, startup leaders must create and communicate vision, goals and strategy, define the startup DNA, culture and identity, as well as inspire and motivate employees (Kuratko, 2007).

In public relations literature, despite the long-recognized communication function of top leaders, previous studies predominantly focused on executive leader communication in large and established organizations. Scarce empirical research exists regarding how startup leadership communication functions in a unique entrepreneurial context. To fill this important research gap and to expand the body of knowledge on leadership communication and startup public relations, this study aims to investigate how startup leadership communication affects startup employee relational and engagement outcomes.

Drawing upon interdisciplinary insight from public relations, leadership, and managerial psychology, this study proposes that startup CEO charismatic leadership communication, which is characterized by envisioning, energizing, and enabling (Men et al., 2020) behaviors help nurture quality relationships with the startup and engage startup employees. This study sets its context in mainland China where startups are rapidly developing alongside increased governmental policy and financial support encouraging innovation (Hu, 2018). In addition, the intersection of the hierarchical working culture in China and the flat management in startups needs further examination to uncover how leadership communication influences employee relationships and engagement in this unique context.

Literature Review

Startups as a Unique Study Context

A startup is defined as a small-medium-sized enterprise existing for less than a decade that is privately held and values market innovation and the implementation of unique and scalable business models (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010; Men et al., 2017). Startups occupy a unique space within their market sector, providing innovation, competition, employment opportunities and economic growth potential (Koster & van Stel, 2014). Distinct from traditional large corporations with brand heritage, startups are often tasked with forging a corporate image and reputation that they lack due to the newness of their establishment (Petkova et al., 2008). Also, startups often have more abstract internal processes and hierarchies due to their lack of market experience and quickly moving hiring process (Rode & Vallaster, 2005). This is salient in China where hierarchy has historically played a significant role in corporate structure, and marks startups as a departure from business culture norms (Atherton & Newman, 2017). Startup leaders have highlighted startup employees as the most critical strategic stakeholders with regards to overall success (Men et al., 2017).

Startup founders and CEOs (who are often one in the same) are entrepreneurs and have a unique relationship to their internal and external stakeholders that are distinct from those of established corporations (Deakins & Freel, 2009). Startup leadership also exhibit entrepreneurial traits that seek to overcome the obstacles of the hostile business environment in which startups begin their journey (e.g., lack of brand recognition, new products, legacy competitors), such as

extreme commitment to their organization, a strong attachment to work ethic, innovation-seeking behaviors, risk-taking and a problem-solving mentality (Freeman & Varey, 1997).

In leading by example, startup leaderships, particularly the CEO, steps into place as the face of the brand, and representative of a living embodiment of what the startup aims to project to their key stakeholders (Rode & Vallaster, 2005). According to Baumgart (2018), startup employees buy into the CEO just as much as they buy into the job opportunity itself, highlighting how much power CEOs have to shape internal and external perception of the startup. A CEO's management style and vision for the organization can be used as a recruitment tool and perceived as an indicator of potential success of the organization long-term for a job candidate (Cardon & Stevens, 2004). Leadership's perceived passion and ability to inspire employees not only helps employees and potential employees forge strong positive beliefs towards the organization, but also plays a role with external stakeholders such as investors, potential corporate collaborations, and formalized collaborations with government programs (Moser et al., 2017).

Entrepreneurial Leadership Communication

Embodying a communicative leadership perspective, leadership communication can be perceived as leadership's articulation through words or actions to send messages and connect with stakeholders (Harrison & Mühlberg, 2014). In the public relations literature, scholars have extensively examined how leadership communication plays a crucial role in shaping excellent internal public relations practice (e.g., Men & Stacks, 2014). At the executive leadership level, an increasing number of studies in public relations have explored CEOs' communication roles as organizational spokespersons (Park & Berger, 2004), communication agents, and "chief engagement officers" especially in today's digital era. However, in the startup context, how executive leadership and communication may influence organizational and employee outcomes remains under explored. To fill this important research blank, this study sets to examine how startup CEO communication, in particular, charismatic leadership communication, influence two key employee outcomes in internal communication, employee-organization relationships and employee engagement.

Charismatic Leadership Communication in Startups

This study particularly focuses on the charismatic leadership communication of startup CEOs as charisma has been recognized as a prototypical trait of leadership (Den Hartog & Verburg, 1997) and the structure of startups is more likely to induce close and frequent interaction between leaders and employees (Slevin & Covin, 1990). Also, by employing charismatic leadership communication, startup leaders can better convey organizational values and align direct reports' beliefs to those of the organization (Jamal & Abu Bakar, 2017).

Unlike other leadership styles that suggest rational process, the core components of charismatic leadership are emotional, and value driven (Yukl, 1999). A charismatic leader can be identified as one who articulates a compelling vision, shows high expectations, demonstrates excitement, and expresses confidence in the employee population (Antonakis et al., 2016; Nadler & Tushman, 1990). Nadler and Tushman (1990) proposed three behavioral factors that co-construct charismatic leadership: envisioning, energizing, and enabling. Based on this framework and communicative features of charismatic leadership, along with executive leadership's role in startups, Men et al. (2020) redefines the three components of charismatic leadership communication as envisioning (i.e., communication about vision), energizing (i.e., communication about passion), and enabling (i.e., communication about care) which are adopted in this study.

Envisioning refers to articulating a vision and motivating followers to pursue higher goals (Surie & Ashley, 2008). This is particularly important to startups as a new venture's identity is often yet to be established (Petkova et al., 2008). Entrepreneurial leadership plays a central role in establishing and conveying the corporate vision, as visionary communication may provide employees a deeper understanding of why the organization is established and their higher purpose (Men et al., 2020). Entrepreneurial charismatic leadership communication in the form of envisioning can provide startup employees a better understanding of the organizational identity and sets a common goal to engage employees.

Charismatic leaders also engage in *energizing* behavior by demonstrating their personal excitement, dispersing that energy through direct contact with employees, expressing confidence in the organization's ability to succeed, and demonstrating the passion to achieve the organizational vision (Antonakis et al., 2016). Charismatic leadership communication in an energetic, emotional, exciting, and confident manner can arouse positive employee emotions and favorable perception of the organization (Yorges et al., 1999). Such mood contagion can be more evident in the context of startups as the intimate environment provides startup leaders increased opportunity to energize employees through close daily interaction (Men et al., 2019).

The *enabling* dimension of charismatic leadership communication involves demonstrating empathy through listening and understanding employee feelings, expressing confidence in employee capability to perform well, and individualized support (Men et al., 2020; Nadler & Tushman, 1990), all of which are critical in the challenging entrepreneurial context. Enabling communication by leadership allows employees to feel they are valuable partners in the startup and cared for by leadership, which can motivate employees to align personal objectives with organizational goals and proactively seek resources in pursuit of their shared interest (Seltzer & Bass, 1990; Vincent-Höper et al., 2012).

Employee-Organization Relationships

Bruning & Ledingham (1999) asserted that in order for this relationship between organizations and their publics to exist, both parties must be aware of the relationship and that the actions of either party may impact one another, and proposed that OPR is the, "state which exists between an organization and its key publics in which the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, political, and/or cultural well-being of the other entity" (p.160).

Employee-organization-relationships (EORs) represent a subset of OPR focusing on relationships with a specific public, those that work internally within the organization (Jiang, 2012). As indicated in the definition of OPRs, the relationship between employer and employees is also mutually dependent, with the actions of one affecting the other and vice versa (Grunig & Huang, 2000). Men and Stacks (2014) defined EORs as, "the degree to which an organization and its employees trust one another, agree on who has the rightful power to influence, experience satisfaction with each other, and commit oneself to the other" which is adopted in this study.

Because leaders can exemplify charisma though their vision, expectations, excitement, and confidence (Antonakis et al., 2016; Nadler & Tushman, 1990), as well as their communication styles (supportiveness, confidence, expressiveness, accuracy, and mildness (De Vries et al., 2010), it stands to reason that charismatic leadership communication is salient within startups, wherein leadership has high visibility and plays a key role in building the internal culture of the organization (Moser et al., 2017). A large body of previous literature has tied charismatic leadership behavior and leadership communication with employee trust (Bommer et al., 2005), pro-organizational outcomes such as openness to change (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002; Men et al., 2020) and increased employee confidence in the organization. Charismatic

leadership communication in startups can unite employees by defining the organizational vision and motivate employees by aligning their personal objectives with organization goals, cultivating a stable relationship (Men et al., 2018). Energizing behaviors can create excitement, which may enhance employee confidence in dealing with uncertainty in the startup context. Furthermore, the empathy, supportiveness, and compassion aspects of charismatic leadership communication can create a workplace where leadership and employees work as a cohesive family (Men et al., 2019).

H1: *Startup CEOs' charismatic leadership communication positively influences the quality of employee relationships with the startup.*

Employee Engagement in the Startup Context

Employee engagement is a top priority for employers and those working in internal communication and public relations (Jiang & Men, 2017). Employee engagement received scholarly attention with Kahn's (1990) widely cited definition as when "people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively and emotionally during role performance" (p. 694). Saks (2006) called for further research in this area, and furthermore posited that an employee's engagement "reflects the extent to which an individual is psychologically present in a particular organizational role. The two most dominant roles for most organizational members are their work role and their role as a member of an organization" (p. 604). Recently in public relations, Ewing et al. (2019) defined employee engagement as "employees who are connected to the values and mission of the company, feel empowered, bring energy, passion, and discretionary effort to their jobs, and serve as advocates." (p. 4). Employee engagement plays a paramount role in startups because startup organizations rely more on employees to remain engaged with organizational goals and tasks to succeed given the organization's self-organizing and instable nature (Lisanti et al., 2017). Leadership may utilize charismatic leadership communication in order to achieve increased engagement though the aforementioned envisioning, energizing, and enabling behaviors (Men et al., 2020). Organization leaders using energizing language have the potential to help startup employees to feel increased energy in their role, which further aligns and engages them with the mission of the organization (Yorges et al., 1999) Enabling language allows startup leadership to engage with employees through connecting with them on an emotional level.

H2: *Startup CEOs' charismatic leadership communication positively influences employee engagement with the startup.*

EORs examines how mutually beneficial relationships can be fostered with employees and their organization. EOR cultivation efforts are linked to engagement in that employees who feel a strong relationship with their employer are more likely to be interested in playing a key role through commitment to their organization (Walden et al., 2017). Furthermore, having a positive and value-aligned relationship is thought to increase motivation and satisfaction (Taylor & Kent, 2014), resulting in employee engagement with the organization (Men & Stacks, 2014). This study proposes the following within the startup context:

H3: *Employees' relationship with the startup positively influences their engagement with the startup.*

Employees' Psychological Need Satisfaction

According to self-determination theory (SDT), there are three basic psychological needs that motivate human beings: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The need for autonomy refers to one's desire to feel self-directed to make decisions and act in ways without being pushed by external forces (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Competence refers to an intrinsic

desire to feel capable of achieving goals and developing new skills (Deci & Ryan, 2000; White, 1959). Relatedness refers to feeling connected and cared for by others and the surroundings (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Based on the SDT, satisfying these three psychological needs in the workplace is important for maintaining positive psychological well-being among employees, energizing their work performance (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

This study proposes that charismatic leadership communication by startup CEOs serves an important function in satisfying startup employees' psychological need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Specifically, first, startup CEOs' charismatic leadership communication in the form of envisioning sets up clear organizational goals and aligns it with employee objectives, thus potentially fulfilling employee needs for competence and relatedness (Barrick et al., 2013). Second, energizing communication by startup CEOs reinforces vision by communicating expectations and expressing confidence in meeting such expectation, which can increase employee self-efficacy and satisfy their need for competence (Surie & Ashley, 2008). Third, enabling communication by startup CEOs that demonstrates empathy, care, and understanding can help employees deal with the challenges of the entrepreneurial process (Nadler & Tushman, 1990). Such emotional support inspires employees to develop an intimate relationship and a sense of connectedness with the organization, which fulfills their need for relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

H4: *Startup CEOs' charismatic leadership communication positively influences employees' psychological need satisfaction*.

The SDT suggests that satisfying employee psychological needs can lead to positive attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (Van den Broeck et al., 2016). Namely, employees develop higher job satisfaction and commitment to the organization when their psychological needs can be satisfied in the workplace (Van den Broeck et al., 2016). Therefore, employees tend to develop favorable relationships (i.e., trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality) with the organization when their psychological needs can be met. When the need for autonomy is met, employees may feel greater freedom to do their work, which can enhance feelings of engagement and enthusiasm for the startup. When competence is fulfilled, employees experience self-efficacy and mastery of work, which motivates them to invest extra efforts in the new venture (Shir et al., 2019). Similarly, satisfying employee need for relatedness contributes to an intimate work environment, which in turn increases employee involvement with organizational activities and strengthens the exhilarating feeling of being a member of the startup (Mäkikangas et al., 2017).

H5: *Startup employees' psychological need satisfaction positively influences employee relationship (a) and employee engagement (b) with the startup.*

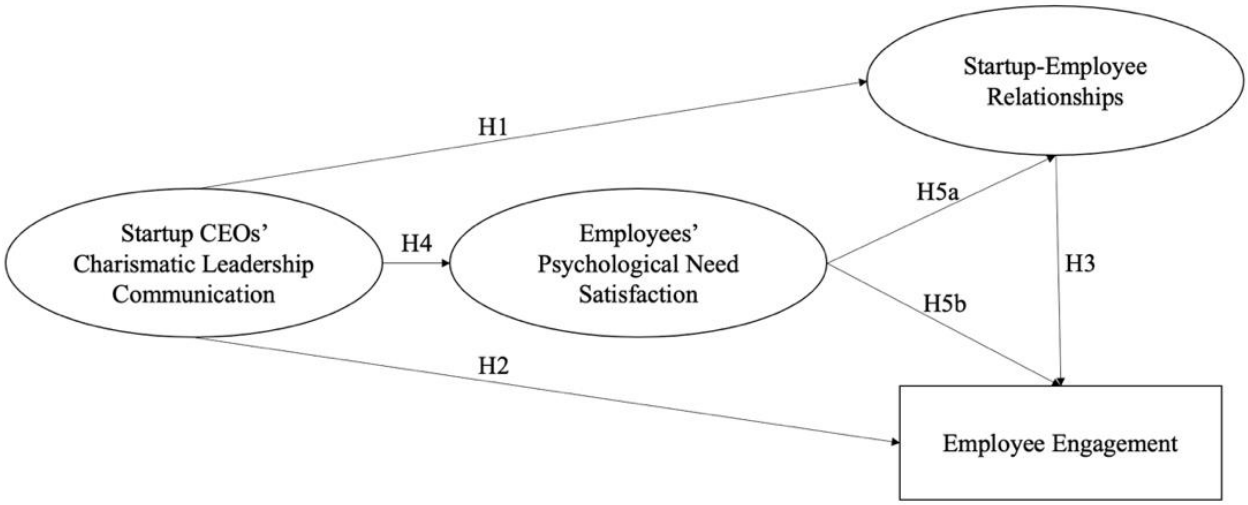
This study also considers employee psychological needs satisfaction as the underlying mechanism through which charismatic leadership communication by startup CEOs influences employee relationships and engagement with the startup. Entrepreneurs' charismatic leadership communication in the form of envisioning, energizing, and enabling can depict a clear future map, arouse employee positive affect to perform effectively, and provide emotional support, which can satisfy psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (De Vries et al., 2010; Nadler & Tushman, 1990). When employees feel that their psychological needs are met at workplace, they are more willing to cultivate quality relationships and engage with the organization (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

H6: *Startup employees' psychological need satisfaction partially mediate the effects of startup CEOs' charismatic leadership communication on employee relationship (a) and employee*

engagement (b) with the startup.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model of the Impact of Startup CEOs' Charismatic Leadership Communication on Startup-Employee Relationships and Employee Engagement



Method

An online survey was conducted to test the hypothesized model on a random sample of employees of startups in Mainland China. A total of 1,027 qualified and complete responses were collected with the assistance of Wenjuanxing, a leading research company in China. The average age of participants was 30.46 years (*SD* = 5.24). Fifty-five percent (55%) of participants were women and 45% were men. In terms of participant position level, 27.6% of participants were founding members other than CEOs, 34.8% were middle-level managers, 26% were lower-level managers, and 11.5% were entry-level employees. Eighty-nine percent (89%) of participants received some college education or above. About half (52.6%) of the startups that the participants were affiliated with had been established for five to 10 years. Information transmission, software and IT services (61.25%), manufacturing (13.44%), and scientific research and technology services (6.23%) were the top three industries identified in the survey.

Measures

This study used a seven-point Likert scale anchored by 1 being "strongly disagree" and 7 being "strongly agree" to measure the focal constructs. All measurement items were adopted from previous literature in English and then modified and translated to Chinese to accommodate the context of this study. A translation and back-translation process was conducted with the assistance of a professional translation service to ensure accuracy of translation. Specifically, 10 items adapted from Nadler and Tushman (1990) were used to measure CEO charismatic leadership communication composed of the three dimensions: envisioning (e.g., "The startup CEO articulates a compelling vision," $\alpha = .68$), energizing (e.g., "The startup CEO expresses confidence to succeed," $\alpha = .63$), and enabling (e.g., "The startup CEO expresses personal support for employees," $\alpha = .71$). Employees' psychological need satisfaction were measured by Van den Broeck and colleagues' (2016) scale. The 16-item instrument is composed of the three basic psychological needs: need for autonomy (e.g., "I feel like I can be myself at this startup company," $\alpha = .73$), need for competence (e.g., "I really master my tasks at this startup," $\alpha = .70$), and need for relatedness (e.g., "I feel connected with other people at this startup," $\alpha = .73$). The measure of employee-organization relationships was measured by 18 items adapted from

Hon and Grunig (1999), which comprised the following four dimensions: trust (e.g., "This startup company can be relied on to keep its promises," α = .82), control mutuality (e.g., "This startup company and I are attentive to what each other say," α = .82), commitment (e.g., "I feel that this startup company is trying to maintain a long-term commitment to me," α = .80), and satisfaction (e.g., "I am happy with this startup company," α = .82). Employee engagement was measured by 10 items adopted from Men et al (2020) (e.g., "I am attentive to this startup company's activities," α = .87).

Results

A two-step structural equation modeling analysis was conducted to test the hypothesized model using AMOS 26.0. The test of the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) model revealed satisfactory fit to the data: $\chi^2(39) = 274.04$, $p < .001$, $\chi^2/df = 7.03$, RMSEA = .07 (90% confidence interval: .06–.08), RMR = .03, TLI = .95, and CFI = .97, and the standardized factor loadings ranged from .62 to .89, suggesting a good construct validity of the measurement model. A second step evaluation of the structural model with position level and age controlled also yielded satisfactory fit to the data: $\chi^2(53) = 333.15$, $p < .001$, $\chi^2/df = 6.29$, RMSEA = .07 (90% confidence interval: .06–.08), SRMR = .06, TLI = .94, and CFI = .96, and was thus retained as the final model. All the hypothesized structural paths demonstrated significant results at the $p < .001$ level (see Figure 2).

Hypotheses Testing

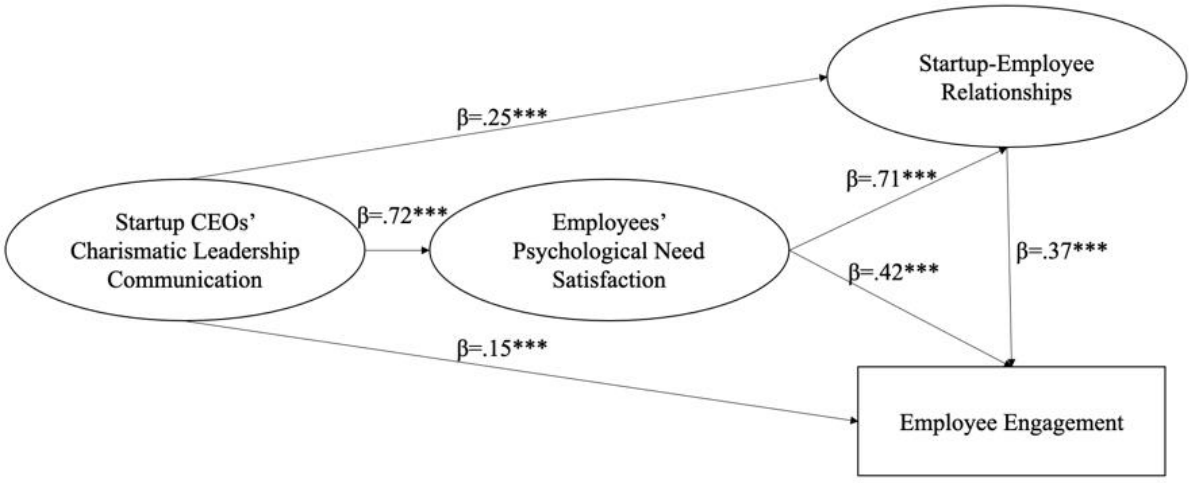
H1 and H2 predicted positive effects of startup CEOs' charismatic leadership communication on employee-relationships with the startups and employee engagement, respectively, both of which were supported by the data. Startup CEOs' charismatic leadership communication showed a significant moderate positive effect on employee-startup relationships (β=.25, p<.001) and a small positive effect on employee engagement (β=.15, p<.001). H3 proposed the positive association between employee relationships with the startup and employee engagement, which was also confirmed, β=.37, p<.001.

Results also provided strong support for H4, which predicted the positive effect of startup CEO charismatic communication on startup employees' psychological need satisfaction (e.g., envisioning, energizing and enabling behaviors) communication behaviors significantly enhanced startup employees reported psychological need satisfaction for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, β=.72, p<.001. Startup employees' psychological need satisfaction was found to strongly and positively impact employee-relationships with the startup (β=.71, p<.001) and employee engagement (β=.42, p<.001), supporting H5a and H5b.

To test H6, a formal test of indirect effects using a bootstrap procedure (N = 5,000 samples) was conducted to examine the mediation role of startup employees' psychological need satisfaction in the relationship between startup CEOs' charismatic leadership communication and startup employees' relational and engagement outcomes. Results showed significant indirect effects in paths from startup CEOs' charismatic leadership communication to employee-startup relationships (β = .51, p < .001 [95% CI: .40 to .63]) and to employee engagement (β = .59, p < .001 [95% CI: .50 to .67]) via startup employees' psychological need satisfaction. As thus, H6 was supported.

Figure 2

Results of the Hypothesized Model with Standardized Path Coefficients



*Note. *** p < .001*

Discussion and Conclusions

This study examined how CEOs' charismatic communication influenced employee relationships and engagement with the startups and the mediating role of employees' psychological need satisfaction. The major findings of the study are further discussed below.

The Role of CEOs' Charismatic Leadership Communication on Employee Outcomes in Startups

This study showed that charismatic leadership communication by Chinese startup CEOs, featured by CEO envisioning, energizing, and enabling communication behaviors, positively contributed to employee outcomes, including favorable EORs and employee engagement. Specifically, CEO articulation of a compelling vision can enable employees to understand the startup identity, enhance employee identification with the startup, and motivate employees to contribute their talents to the success of the startup (Men et al., 2018). In addition, since startup employees normally put less emphasis on short-term monetary compensation but greater emphasis on the achievement of self-worth (Freeman & Varey, 1997), CEO envisioning communication, which portrays a desired future of the startup, can greatly increase employee confidence and nurture positive beliefs towards the startup, all of which led to a trusting and committed relationship between employees and the startup.

Also, charismatic startup CEOs' energizing communication, such as showing excitement, passion, and confidence benefited EORs and engagement. There has been a growing notion that CEOs also serve as the "chief engagement officers" within the organization (Men, 2015), particularly in startups where CEOs communication becomes more important due to the flat management structure which shortens the distance between CEOs and employees. Also, the lack of resources during early stages of development requires startup CEOs to function as communication agents and to energize and connect employees (Weiblen & Chesbrough, 2015). When communicating passion, CEOs convey positive emotions, motivating messages, and instill confidence; mobilizing employees to become enthusiastic and actively engage (Oreg & Berson, 2019).

The impact of startup CEO charismatic communication on EORs and engagement with work can be further explained by Social Exchange Theory (SET) and the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model. According to SET and JD-R model, leadership's charismatic communication can be considered socioemotional resources which help employees manage job

demands and in turn leads to positive attitudes and dedication to work (Saks, 2006). For example, when startup employees perceive they are benefiting from CEOs through receiving care, support, encouragement, and confidence, they would be willing to repay their CEO by further engaging themselves (Menguc et al., 2013). The reciprocity effects may be more salient in China as Chinese culture stresses harmonious relationships (Zhang et al., 2015), interdependence, and consideration of others (Fu, 2014), so employees would be more willing to reciprocate with higher engagement when they feel they are envisioned, energized, and enabled by leadership (Jiang & Men, 2017). Therefore, startup CEO charismatic communication featured by depicting a clear vision, creating an energizing environment, and caring for employees serves as critical job resources that help startup employees deal with job demands and foster quality relationships and engagement (Jiang & Shen, 2020).

The Underlying Mechanism: Employees' Psychological Need Satisfaction

This study uncovered how startup CEO charismatic leadership communication influenced employee relationships and engagement with the startup through the mediating role of employee psychological need satisfaction. Results showed that startup CEOs' charismatic leadership communication satisfied startup employee psychological needs, namely, need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. First, by providing a clear vision and expectation, and expressing confidence, passion and excitement about the startup, startup CEO envisioning and energizing communication can increase employee self-efficacy (Choi, 2006), which meets their need for competence. Envisioning language can enhance employee identification with the startup and help them align their personal objectives with corporate vision (Bono & Judge, 2003); such value internalization can further satisfy their psychological need for relatedness at work. Also, startup CEO enabling communication in the form of empathetic language can also meet employee need for relatedness especially when they feel they are cared, supported, listened, and understood (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The sense of belonging is particularly needed in startups as the new venture often operates in an unstable environment dealing with fierce competition and uncertainty (Rode & Vallaster, 2005). Moreover, Chinese traditionally high-power distance culture emphasizes the hierarchical relationships in organizations, and employees generally lack the opportunity to directly interact with top leaders, much less to receive emotional care from CEOs (Atherton & Newman, 2017). By contrast, the flat and open structure in startups allow employees to have intimate daily interactions with leaders. In this case, startup CEO enabling communication which mitigates feelings of unapproachable leadership authority and shows genuine care would be greatly appreciated by employees.

This study also found that satisfying employee psychological need at startups helped develop favorable relational and engagement outcomes. Fulfilling employees' basic psychological needs serves an important role to attract and retain talented resources and to maintain a stable relationship with startups. Startup employees who are more willing to participate in decision-making, dedicate themselves to the business, and contribute to the success of the new venture would benefit more from the fulfillment of the psychological needs than those in the established companies (Benz & Frey, 2008). In this case, satisfying startup employee psychological needs can have a salient impact on developing EORs and motivating engagement.

Implications of the Findings

This study provides theoretical implications for public relations, internal communication and management communication scholars. Adding to knowledge in strategic leadership communication, this study showcased the role of CEOs as communication agents in the unique startup context as well as its impact on employee relational and engagement outcomes. Prior

literature highlights the importance of EORs as well as the evolving concept of employee engagement. This study contributes through adding charismatic leadership communication as a contextual antecedent for these important employee outcomes. By incorporating employee psychological needs, this study further explores the cognitive factors salient within a startup environment. By connecting the way in which leadership communicates and the means in which employees' psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are addressed through that charismatic communication, we can glean a deeper understanding of how charismatic leadership communication works. Lastly, situating this study in startup organizations, this study provides theoretical insights into strategic communication in the entrepreneurial context. With a focus in the culturally distinct market of China, this study brings attention to locations outside the Western world that are developing their own startup cultures impacting the global economy and provides implications for cross-cultural/international strategic communication research. Practically, the study suggests that CEOs at startups must recognize the impact of leadership communication on employee outcomes. Startup leaders should consciously develop their charismatic leadership and to communicate vision, passion, and care within the organization in order to motivate, strike a deeper bond, and engage startup employees.

This study comes with several limitations. First, the study used a cross-sectional survey design, which cannot establish true causal relationships. Future research can utilize experimental design or longitudinal study to explore the causal inferences. Also, qualitative research, such as interviews with entrepreneurs, focus group, and field observation can help provide more in-dept and rich insights into how charismatic leadership communication works in startups in future. Future research may also explore other leadership communication styles, such as transparent and authentic leadership communication, as well as different employee behavioral outcomes in the startup context. It is also worthwhile to explore other potential mediators of leadership communication, such as communication satisfaction, empowerment and perceived meaningfulness of work. Lastly, given that there are notable differences between Western and Eastern cultures, it is important to examine the model in contexts with different cultural characteristics.

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Employee Perceptions of Ethical Listening in U.S. Organizations

Marlene S. Neill
Baylor University

Shannon A. Bowen
University of South Carolina

Abstract

We found that women, nonmanagers and low-level managers all rated their organizations low on factors associated with listening in the areas of transparency, EOR and communication climate. They also expressed dissatisfaction with their organization's commitment to listening to employees like themselves. These perceptions can lead to less commitment and engagement. Since employees tended to perceive channels such as meetings with their direct supervisors and departmental meetings as most effective, we recommend that managers use those channels to seek regular feedback. If organizations do conduct annual and pulse surveys, they need to do a better job of implementing the feedback and communicating to employees that they have listened.

Listening could not be more critical as the workforce has faced dramatical organizational change due to the global pandemic including more employees working remotely, significant layoffs and new health and safety protocols. A variety of terms have been used to describe internal listening efforts including organizational listening (Macnamara, 2019), strategic listening (Lewis, 2020), corporate listening (Macnamara, 2020) and ethical listening (2016). Listening as a competency involves "knowledge about listening (cognitive), engaging in appropriate listening (behaviors), and a willingness to engage as a communicating listener (affective)" (Burnside-Lawry, 2012, p. 104; Wolvin & Coakley, 1994). A related concept in the study of organizational listening is employee voice, which involves providing employees with channels to communicate with management (Freeman & Medoff, 1984), and "the ability to have meaningful input into decisions" (Budd, 2004, p. 23).

Listening has received limited attention in communication and management literature and practice (Lewis, 2020; Macnamara, 2016a, 2016b, 2018, 2019). Despite the dearth of research focused on listening as a strategic management practice, scholars have identified a "crisis of listening" (Macnamara, 2016). More specifically, scholars have found that "organizations listen sporadically, often poorly, and sometimes not at all" (Macnamara, 2018, p. 1). This lack of listening can be costly for companies and organization, particularly in the areas of employee motivation, productivity and turnover (Macnamara, 2018).

The purpose of this study is to examine the state of listening in U.S. companies and organizations, including identifying the primary means that they are using to listen to internal stakeholders, the effectiveness of those listening efforts, and barriers to effective listening. To answer these research questions, we conducted a national online survey with 300 U.S. employees.

Literature Review

As a theoretical foundation for this study, a review of literature regarding organizational listening was conducted followed by relationship management theory, specifically employee-organization relationships (EOR). Finally, an overview of recent research related to forms of organizational listening and employee evaluations of listening were explored.

Defining Organizational Listening

Listening has been conceptualized as being comprised of at least three dimensions: cognitive, behavioral and affective (Lipetz, Kluger & Bodie, 2020). The cognitive dimension refers to practices such as understanding, receiving and interpreting the message; the behavioral dimension captures verbal and non-verbal responses such as asking questions to clarify information and engaging with eye contact; and the affective dimension encompasses emotions such as empathy and respect (Lipetz, Kluger & Bodie, 2020). Consistent with this conceptualization, listening quality then would capture an "individual's perception of being attended to, accepted, and appreciated" (Lloyd, Boer & Voelpel, 2017, p. 433; Rogers, 1975).

As we began this study, we examined the conceptual definitions developed by Macnamara (2016a, 2016b, 2018, 2019) and Lewis (2020). Macnamara used organizational listening and ethical listening to describe this area of research, while Lewis chose strategic organizational listening. Lewis (2020) defined strategic organizational listening as "a set of methodologies and structures designed and utilized to ensure that an organization's attention is directed toward vital information and input to enable learning, questioning of key assumptions, interrogating decisions, and ensuring self-critical analysis" (p. xvi). This definition requires senior leadership to be sincere in their desire to learn and gain insights from listening. Lewis

(2020) pointed out that this type of organizational listening can result in improvements in trust, commitment and performance. Some key characteristics of organizational listening include that it tends to be assigned to functions such as human resources, public relations, marketing and social media; it is mediated, asynchronous, and must be scaled to hear thousands or hundreds of thousands of voices from various stakeholders (Macnamara, 2018).

Macnamara (2020) recommended eight essential elements that are necessary to engage and benefit from the voice of employees (VOE):

1. A culture that is open to listening; 2) Addressing the politics of listening; 3) Policies that specify and require listening in an organization; 4) Systems that are open and interactive; 5) Technologies that can aid large-scale listening; 6) Resources, including staff to operate listening systems and do the "work of listening" (Macnamara, 2016, pp. 51–52), such as monitoring, analyzing, and responding to comments, questions, complaints and suggestions; (7) Skills for large-scale organizational listening; (8) Articulation of what is said to an organization to senior management (p. 380).

On the other extreme is what some have called *pseudolistening* (Adler & Rodman, 2011) or *faux voice* (Lewis, 2020) when stakeholders are able to vent and share concerns, but it has no impact on decision-making. Organizational listening also can be *instrumental* or focused on helping an organization achieve its own objectives (Macnamara, 2018) rather than focused on stakeholders' concerns. Another barrier to effective listening is information overload due to inadequate filtering and skills to analyze large quantities of data (Lewis, 2020). Lewis (2020) also found that leaders often used what she termed a "restricted" model of listening from a cherry-picked group of stakeholders that would confirm leadership decisions or fidelity to original plans over challenges, which results in the use of defensive strategies, and removes unique input that had not gained wide approval. When such barriers exist, stakeholders including employees may be less willing to share their feedback if they believe it will not make a difference, resulting in employee silence (Van Dyne, Ang & Botero, 2003). Employee silence involves "withholding relevant ideas, information, or opinions" based on perceptions that speaking up is unlikely to make a difference (i.e., Acquiescent Silence), or due to fear of personal consequences (i.e. Defensive Silence) (Van Dyne et al., 2003, p. 1366). Macnamara (2016a) wrote that silence based on these perceptions results in disengagement and a decline in trust in a variety of institutions including government and corporations.

Employee Organization Relationship Theory (EOR)

Relationships such as those between management and their employees require certain antecedents such as following social and cultural norms, cultivation strategies, and communication, which result in desired relationship outcomes (Broom et al. 1997; Walden, et al., 2017). Relationship theory in public relations is consistent with exchange and communal relationships (Hon & Grunig, 1999) and four essential outcomes include trust, commitment, satisfaction, and control mutuality. Ethical behavior appears as a pre-antecedent to these relational constructs because moral awareness, which results from strategic listening, is necessary to the formation of trust (Bowe, Hung-Baesecke, & Chen, 2016). According to Hon and Grunig (1999), who compared types of relationships, "in an exchange relationship, one party gives benefits to the other only because the other has provided benefits in the past or is expected to do so in the future," and "in a communal relationship, both parties provide benefits to the other because they are concerned for the welfare of the other - even when they get nothing in return" (p. 3). Among the potential outcomes, control mutuality, "the degree to which parties agree on who has the rightful power to influence one another," is examined using specific

measures tied to listening (e.g., in the current research operationalized as, 'this organization and people like me are attentive to what each other say;' 'this organization really listens to what people like me have to say') (Hon and Grunig, 1999, p. 4). Based upon the core principles associated with EOR, when organizations implement employee-centered communication strategies and cultivate a communication climate with a foundation of cooperation with their employees, the result is open, trusting relationships (Grunig, 1992; Grunig et al., 2002; Walden et al., 2017). This aspect is the eighth generic principle of public relations excellence in symmetrical systems of internal communication that "make organizations more effective by building open, trusting, credible relationships with strategic employee constituencies" (Grunig, 1992, p. 559) In their pilot study involving a manufacturing organization, Reed and colleagues (2016) found that organizational listening is associated with employee organizational identification and commitment.

Communication climate includes employee perceptions regarding "the receptivity of management to employee communication or the trustworthiness of information being disseminated in the organization" (Guzley, 1992; Smidt et al., 2001, p. 1053). An organizational communication climate reflects employee's shared perceptions regarding trust, openness and participation (Smidts et al., 2001). Consistent with organizational listening, Smidts et al. (2001) recommended that managers provide employees with "opportunities to speak out, get involved, be listened to, and actively participate" (p. 1059).

Another key factor impacting EOR is transparency. Rawlins (2009) defined transparent communication as having three key elements: "information that is truthful, substantial, and useful; participation of stakeholders in identifying the information they need; and objective, balanced reporting of an organization's activities and policies that holds the organization accountable" (p. 74). In his study, Rawlins (2009) identified organizational characteristics that he classified as respect for others, which included sensitivity, willingness to listen, personable, flexible, caring, and humility. Bowen's (2015) study argued that transparency is not enough for ethical internal communication but must be augmented by leaders who model the behavior they wish to encourage throughout the organization, including ethical listening and acting on values.

Forms of Organizational Listening

Companies, government agencies and nonprofit organizations have a range of options to listen to internal stakeholders. When employers are seeking feedback from their employees, examples of traditional approaches include skip-level meetings, face-to-face meetings, email, and committees (Neill, 2018). A compendium of the numerous internal communication scales and audit items is offered in Men and Bowen (2017), showing the numerous ways in which organizations can collect data from internal stakeholders. One of the obstacles associated with analyzing and interpreting much of the data is it is unstructured or "raw and unorganized" such as emails and social media posts (Weiner & Kochhar, 2016, p. 11). Fortunately, new technology tools are becoming available to assist with data collection and analysis (Lewis, 2020, Macnamara, 2018). This review of the literature leads to the following research questions:

RQ1: What methods are organizations using to listen to internal stakeholders?

RQ2: How do managers and nonmanagers perceive the effectiveness of their organization's listening efforts?

RQ3: What do employees perceive as the most common barriers to listening in their organizations?

Prior Findings on Perceptions of Organizational Listening

Prior research has found that women rated themselves high on people listening style (PLS), which involves seeking out similar interests with others and being responsive to emotions; and lower on content style listening (CSL), which is related to evaluating complex information in order to make decisions (Sargent & Weaver, III, 2003). In the same study, women also ranked their female peers higher than their male peers in both PLS and CLS, while men ranked themselves high on both forms of listening but ranked their male colleagues lower than themselves (Sargent & Weaver, III, 2003). PLS is consistent with moral sensitivity, which involves an awareness of the impact of decisions on the interests of others and can result in emotions such as sympathy or empathy (Tompkins, 2009). When moral sensitivity is activated, managers would be more likely to use ethical or *moral reasoning* to reach their conclusions (Rest, 1986) resulting in ethical decisions.

In another study, researchers evaluating the listening skills of managers and nonmanagers in the U.S., India and Malaysia and found that U.S. managers are "more prone to become distracted when they are listening" compared to managers in the other two countries (Roebuck et al., 2016, p. 498). In an earlier study conducted with U.S. managers and their employees, employees rated their supervisors as poor listeners while the supervisor rated themselves favorably regarding listening behaviors (Lobdell et al., 1993). The study also found that the employees' overall commitment to the organization also was low, leading the authors to conclude that improved listening skills may increase employee commitment (Lobdell et al., 1993). Finally, Brownell (1990) identified three variables that may influence how employees evaluate their supervisors' listening quality: the employee's level of familiarity with the manager, the frequency of communication with his or her manager, and the employee's satisfaction with his or her job and relationship with the manager. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a)Women will be significantly less satisfied with overall listening in their organization when compared to men, b) Nonmanagers will be significantly less satisfied with overall listening in their organization when compared to managers.

H2a) Women will be significantly less likely to say they personally feel listened to by their organization when compared to men, b) Nonmanagers will be less likely to say they personally feel listened to by their organization when compared to managers.

Method

A national online survey using the audience database of Qualtrics and its online survey platform was employed to recruit participants for our study. The survey was conducted in July of 2020. We designed our sample recruitment to only include U.S. employees with fulltime employment. The final survey sample consists of 300 valid respondents. We pre-specified two key demographic parameters (i.e., leadership position and gender) as part of our sampling strategies. More specifically, 40% of our sample were managers and 60% non-managers; and 49.7% of our sample were men and 50% were women and one participant selected 'other.' Among the participants who identified themselves as managers, 14.3% (*n*=43) were top/executive level, 18.3% (*n*=55) were mid-level management, and 7.3% (*n*=22) were lower-level management. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 73 with an average age of 40. Most of the employees had worked for their current employer for less than 5 years (43.7%, *n*=131), 39.7% (*n*=119) for between six to 15 years, and 16.7% (*n*=50) for 16 years or longer.

Measures

To assess organizational listening methods, a checklist was developed based on prior research on listening. Employees were then asked to assess the effectiveness of listening using a Likert scale. To assess barriers to listening, a checklist was adopted from Lewis (2020). To measure listening in the context of transparent communication, three items were taken from Rawlins (2009) such as "My organization asks the opinions of people like me before making decisions," a = .893. To assess listening in the context of EOR, we adopted three items from Hon and Grunig (1999) such as "My organization and people like me are attentive to what each other say", a = 891. To assess listening in the context of organizational climate, we adopted three items from Smidts et al. (2001), such as "At my organization, I have ample opportunity to have my say", a = .827. Finally, for hypothesis testing, we used nine items to assess employee satisfaction from Lewis (2020), such as "I personally feel listened to by this organization" and "I am satisfied with the overall listening that occurs in this organization", a = .931.

Results

To answer the first research question, survey participants were provided with a checklist of various types of internal listening methods. The top five means for listening to internal stakeholders were departmental meetings (n=160), meetings with direct supervisors (n=139), annual employee surveys (n=128), employee intranet (n=102), and anonymous reporting systems (n=76).

The second research question addresses the effectiveness of their organization's listening efforts. Nonmanagers rated meetings with the direct supervisors the highest (M=8.28), followed by departmental meetings (M=8.15), anonymous reporting systems (M=7.78), the employee intranet (M=7.74), and town hall meetings (M=7.64). In comparison, managers rated meetings with direct supervisors the highest (M=8.94), followed by annual employee surveys (M=8.80), department meetings (M=8.78), the employee intranet (M=8.73) and anonymous reporting systems (M=8.68). Interestingly, while employee annual surveys were the third most reported listening method for internal stakeholders, nonmanagers rated it sixth in effectiveness (M=7.63) while managers ranked it second in effectiveness (See Table 1). When asked to assess meetings at various levels, nonmanagers were least satisfied with the quality of listening that occurs in meetings with high-level leaders (M=3.23) and most satisfied with the listening that occurs in meetings with their peers (M=3.80) and work group (M=3.70).

Table 1: Ranking of Internal Listening Efforts by Effectiveness

Form of Listening	Manager Ranking	Employee Ranking
Meetings w/ Direct Supervisor	1	1
Annual Employee Survey	2	6
Departmental Meetings	3	2
Employee Intranet	4	4
Anonymous Reporting System	5	3
Pulse Surveys	6/7	8
Skip-Level Meetings	6/7	7
Employee Apps	8	9
Town Hall Meetings	9	5

To answer the third research question, survey participants were provided with a checklist of potential barriers to organizational listening. There was a tie for first among two items both

related to limited capacity: to channel what is heard up the chain of command, and to share information with departments and individuals who need it (*n*=130). Other significant barriers were associated with training such as poor or absent training for employees to collect needed information or input (*n*=104), and poor or absent training for employees to summarize and analyze information and input that is collected (*n*=100). The fifth ranking barrier was poor technology for collecting what needs to be listened to (*n*=63). Another barrier to listening was identified based on the following question: How often (1 never to 5 frequently) do you keep quiet about a flaw, problem, concern or brewing issue in this organization because you do not want to be the person to deliver bad news? The responses are reason for concern as 25% (*n*=76) answered sometimes, 21.7% (*n*=65) chose about half the time, 25.7% (*n*=77) chose most of the time, and 13% selected always (*n*=39). This response especially makes sense considering that both nonmanagers and managers agree that complainers are not listened to in their organizations and perceive that leadership is not genuine regarding their interest in listening (Table 4).

Table 4: Priority of Listening (Comparing Means)

	Nonmanager	**Manager**
Listening is an essential part of everything we do	3.81	4.20
Listening in this organization is a nice-to-have practice when we have time	3.46	3.98
Listening in this organization is intentional and focused	3.45	4.03
The importance of careful listening is frequently underscored by leaders	3.48	3.84
Leaders in this organization frequently emphasize that we need to listen to each other	3.58	4.06
This organization listens only to what it wants to hear	3.40	3.58
Leaders in this organization say that they want to listen, but they are not genuine	3.35	3.49
The only time listening is emphasized in this organization is when leadership is talking	3.34	3.55
Complainers do not get listened to in this organization	3.31	3.43

H1a posited that women will be significantly less satisfied with overall listening in their organization compared to men, and H1b) nonmanagers will be significantly less satisfied with overall listening in their organization as compared to managers. In order to test this hypothesis, an independent samples t-test was conducted. The test revealed that women rated their organization's overall listening lower (M=3.22, SD=1.274) compared to men (M=3.68, SD=1.135), t(297)=3.281, p=.001, and nonmanagers rated their organization's overall listening lower (M=3.04, SD=1.234) compared to managers (M=4.08, SD=.918), t(298)=-7.858, p=.000, H1a and H1b were both confirmed. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to test the relationship between employee satisfaction with listening and gender, position level, manager/nonmanagerial role, and longevity with their current employer (See Table 2). Gender, position level and manager/nonmanagerial role were all statistically significant.

Table 2: Pearson correlation coefficients and employee satisfaction

Measure	1	2	3	4
1.Gender	-.171**			
2.Position Level	-.246**	.418**		
3.Managerial Role	-.185**	.921**	.414**	
4.Longevity	-.90	.164**	.107	.062

H2a posited that women will be significantly less likely to say they personally feel listened to by their organization compared to men, and H2b) nonmanagers will be less likely to say they personally feel listened to by their organization when compared to managers. In order to test this hypothesis, an independent samples t-test was conducted. The test revealed that women were less likely to agree that they personally felt listened to (M=3.35, SD=1.285) compared to men (M=3.80, SD=1.208), t(297)=3.133, p=.002, and nonmanagers were less likely to agree that they personally felt listened to (M=3.15, SD=1.31) compared to managers (M=4.21, SD=.869), t(298)=-7.783, p=.000,. H2a and H2b were both confirmed. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to test the relationship between perceptions of being listened to and gender, position level, manager/nonmanagerial role, and longevity with their current employer (See Table 3). Gender, position level and manager/nonmanagerial role were all statistically significant.

Table 3: Pearson correlation coefficients and perceptions of being listened to

Measure	1	2	3	4
1.Gender	-.173**			
2.Position Level	-.246**	.412**		
3.Managerial Role	-.185**	.921**	.411**	
4.Longevity	-.90	.164**	.107	.027

As an item reduction technique, we employed exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with principal component analysis (PCA) on the set of nine items related to listening from previous research on transparency, EOR and communication climate. This resulted in a single factor, which explained 72% of the variance with a strong reliability ($\alpha = .951$). When assessing employees' perceptions regarding transparency, EOR and communication climate, women and nonmanagers were less satisfied with the listening happening in their organizations compared to men and managers, and low level managers were less satisfied when compared to mid-level and top-level managers (See Figures 1-3). Some of the lowest scores were related to the items "my organization asks the opinions of people like me before making decisions" (M=2.72 nonmanagers, M=3.02 women) and "my organizational really listens to what people like me have to say" (M=3.09 nonmanagers, M=3.25 women).

Figure 1: Perceptions of Managers & Nonmanagers

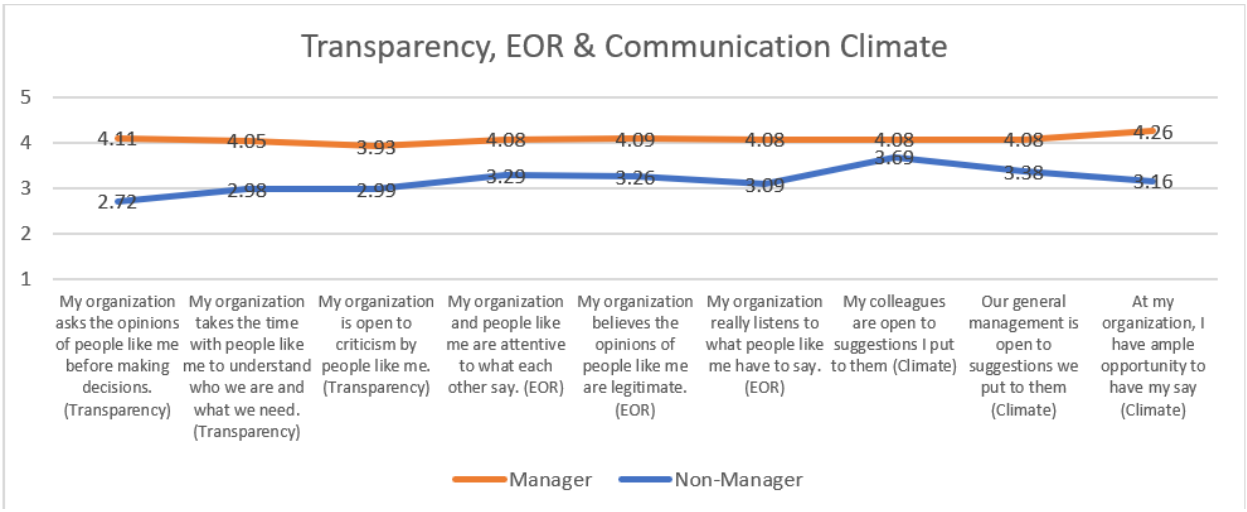


Figure 2: Perceptions by Gender

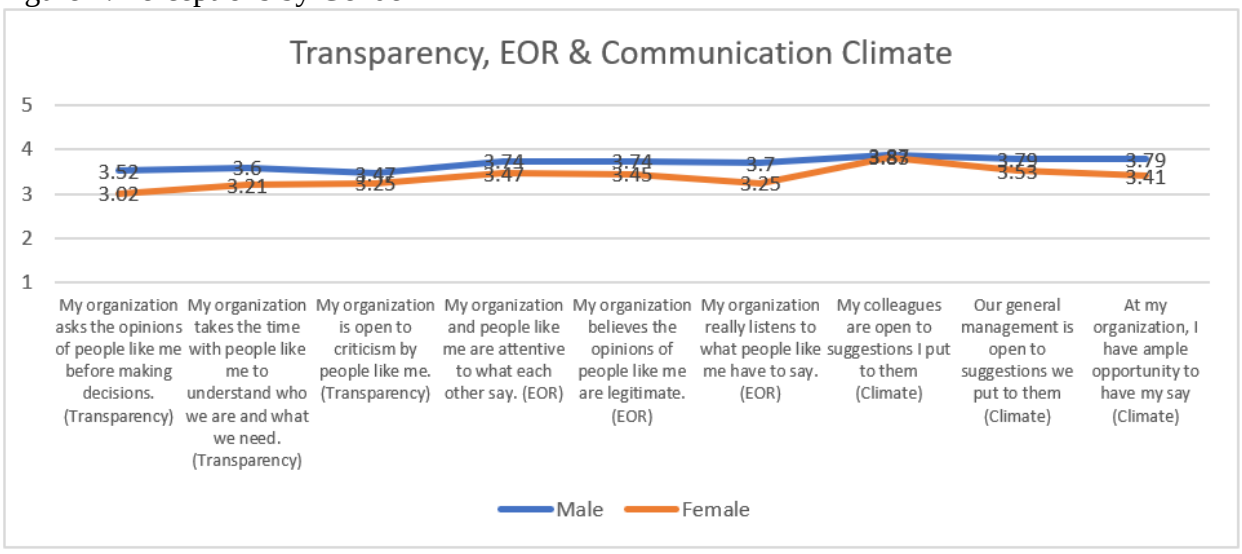
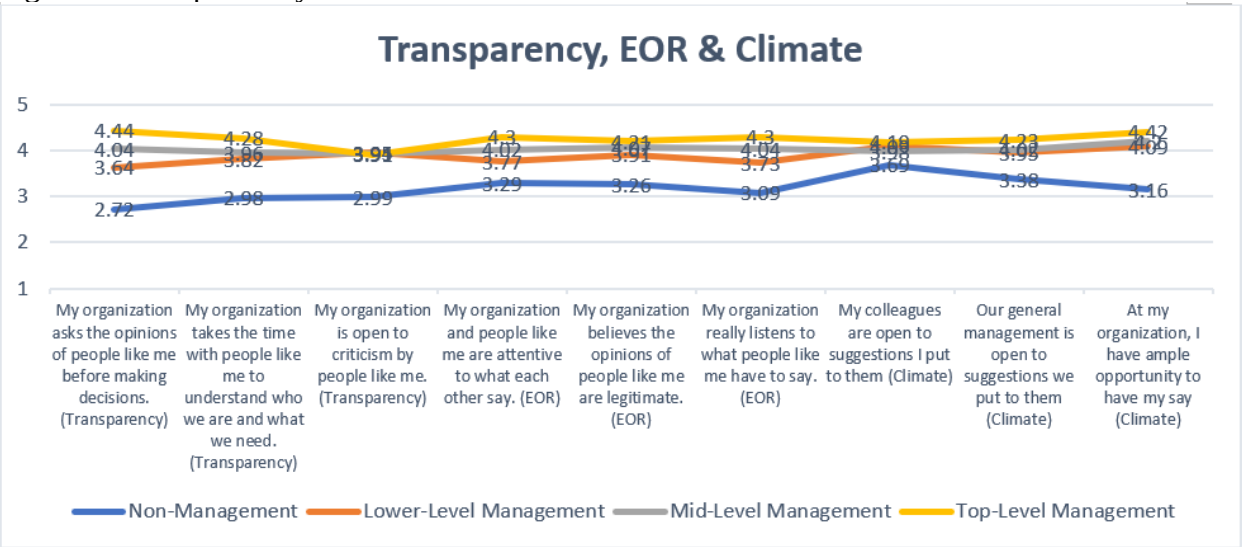


Figure 3: Perceptions by Rank



Discussion

This study revealed several areas for improvement associated with organizational listening. More specifically, women, nonmanagers and low-level managers were the least satisfied with listening in their companies and organizations. The employees attributed the barriers to effective listening to limited capacity and training. Not surprisingly employees considered meetings with their direct supervisor and departmental meetings to be the most effective means for listening, which are typically held face-to-face. On the other hand, they did not perceive surveys to be an effective means for listening to internal stakeholders. Perhaps employees perceive that their companies and organizations are not implementing any changes based on the feedback from these surveys or closing the feedback loop. This would be an example of *pseudolistening* (Adler & Rodman, 2011) or *faux voice* (Lewis, 2020) when employees vent and share their concerns, but it has no impact on decision making.

One area of listening that managers should focus on improving their skills in is people listening style (PLS), which involves a concern for other people's feelings and emotions (Sargent & Weaver, III, 2003). PLS is consistent with ethical listening, which involves acknowledging others' views and perspectives, and trying to understand their views, perspectives, and feelings (Macnamara, 2016b). This type of listening is also consistent with moral sensitivity, which describes an awareness of the impact of decisions on the interests of others and can result in emotions such as sympathy or empathy (Tompkins, 2009). When moral sensitivity is present, managers would then use ethical or *moral reasoning* to reach their decisions (Rest, 1986) resulting in better decision making.

These findings also have implications related to EOR (Hon & Grunig, 1999). We found that women, nonmanagers and low-level managers all rated their organizations low on factors associated with listening in the areas of transparency, EOR and communication climate. In addition, they also expressed dissatisfaction with their organization's commitment to listening to employees like themselves. These perceptions can lead to less commitment and engagement with their employers (Lobdell et al., 1993). Since employees tended to perceive channels such as meetings with their direct supervisors and departmental meetings as most effective, we recommend that managers use those channels to seek regular feedback from employees. If organizations do conduct annual and pulse surveys with employees, they need to do a better job

of implementing the feedback from employees and communicating to employees that they have listened. In addition, other factors to consider are familiarity with their supervisors, the frequency of communication with employees and job satisfaction (Brownell, 1990), which can impact employees' perceptions regarding relationship quality and organizational listening.

Due to the barriers identified with organizational listening, we recommend that managers review Macnamara's (2016a) eight essential elements and attempt to address any gaps. Employees in our study identified the greatest deficiencies as being associated with time, staffing and training, particularly training regarding collecting and analyzing data collected through listening efforts. More specifically, it appears from our findings that there are issues with processing and implementing intelligence gathered employee surveys. While these were listed as primary means for listening, employees rated these as channels as not every effective for listening. The issues could be related to information overload associated with inadequate filtering and employee skills to analyze large quantities of data (Lewis, 2020). Particularly troubling was our finding that employees were reluctant to share concerns about a flaw, problem, concern or brewing issue. This reluctance was likely due to perceptions that management doesn't listen to complainers and that leaders are not genuinely interested in listening. This lack of employee motivation has been referred to as acquiescent silence (Van Dyne et al., 2003) due to perceptions regarding management receptivity. These issues need to be addressed, because they can lead to disengagement and a decline in trust among internal stakeholders (Macnamara, 2016a). In contrast, Ruck, Welch and Menara (2017) found that that both opportunities for upward communication and management receptiveness were positively associated with employee emotional organizational engagement.

Gender differences offer a profound look at what may still be perceived as a glass ceiling in modern organizations, that women believe they are less listened to than their male counterparts at all levels, but specifically in management. Further, the manager versus nonmanager divide shows us the employees at lower levels may feel alienated from management and from the overall strategic direction of their employer. These perceptions can lead to lower job satisfaction, productivity, and longevity, as well as increased expenses from a growing turnover rate. Managers who want to generate listening data seem to know how to do that, relying on focus group data most heavily. Thus, internal communicators need to offer training and resources on how employees at lower levels can offer feedback, share insight, and share assessments. If such an educational effort is undertaken, one would also expect an eventual rise in assessments among nonmanagers in the EOR and climate measures discussed above.

Limitations and Direction for Future Research

While this study provided new insights regarding organizational listening, the sample was limited to U.S. employees. Additional research should be conducted in other countries to determine the state of organizational listening in other contexts. In addition, due to budgetary limitations, our sample parameters did not include race and ethnicity. Future research should include examine the perspectives of employees representing racial and ethnic diversity.

Conclusion

The state of ethical listening in U.S. companies and organizations needs immediate attention. Specific deficiencies include a lack of employee training in data collection and analysis and a lack of time and resources to ensure the information is properly shared internally with those who need the information for decision making.

As more focus is placed on strategic and ethical listening throughout organizations, means of offering feedback opportunities should be examined and expanded when possible. If

employees believe that their feedback is sought and welcomed, they are more likely to engage in dialogue with management, also a valuable means of listening. When organizations offer concerted and formal methods for feedback, as well as listen informally among stakeholders, many new avenues for strategic problem solving can be identified. Ethical listening requires the moral sensitivity to consider the views of others and in so doing the organization can be more effective, can lower employee turnover and can increase control mutuality, commitment, satisfaction, and trust among stakeholders of all types.

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Contributing via Internal Social Media towards a better CSR Communication at the Top and Throughout an Organization

Theoretical Foundations and New Results from a Qualitative Case Study and an additional Quantitative Interview Survey in Germany

Prof. Dr. Holger Sievert
Prof. Dr. Riccardo Wagner
Tobias Weiler M. A. [51]
Macromedia University

Abstract

This paper gives an overview of how internal social media might be reshaping communication regarding Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) at the top as well as throughout an organization. Its approach is based on the theoretical differentiation between sensegiving or sensemaking according to Weick. The results of this study are based on a two-pronged methodological approach: on one hand, a comprehensive qualitative research approach is used, which consists of a combination of interviews, observations and document analysis of a case study of the internal CSR communication in a medium-sized German insurance company. On the other hand, an additional quantitative online interview survey was conducted on the same issues, with a sample size of approximately 200 German companies.

The results show very clearly that so far the conditions which influence the CSR process are predominantly top-down oriented and even if participation is required, it is rarely realized. As the theoretical analysis will postulate and the quantitative results will show, it is only if these structures and the hierarchies behind them are culturally opened (e.g. via the effective use of internal social media) that the internal CSR communication can become sensemaking-oriented. If companies really want to act in more responsible way, a more communicative approach is needed concerning CSR communication and management. In this context, CSR communication via internal social media can be a role model for more interactive internal communication in general.

Keywords: Internal Communication, Internal Media, Enterprise Social Network, CSR, Public Relations

[51] 1 = A further special thanks to Lucie Schepputat for her contributive effort concerning the empirical part of the study.

Introduction

In today's world, businesses and organizations are no longer only profit-driven. While companies are aware of the importance of the external communication of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities, the importance of internal communication aspects is still mostly neglected, although a truly successful CSR campaign or activity is "lived" inside an organization. This paper therefore aims to develop an integrated approach for internal CSR communication with a focus on the applied communicative approach (sensegiving or sensemaking according to Weick (1995)) as well as on the underlying technology used (classical communication within hierarchies or internal social media platforms). Is this really advance our understanding of internal Public Relations or is it just old wine in new skins?

Firstly, the current state of research regarding internal CSR communication and the respective approaches applied in companies is analyzed in order to form a sound basis for the development of both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. The findings of this examination have been developed initially on a broad qualitative research, which consists of a combination of interviews, observations and document analysis of a case study of the internal CSR communication in a medium-sized German insurance company. This is followed by quantitative research, which includes an online interview survey with a sample size of approximately 200 German companies. The focus of the quantitative online survey was a determination of how intensely and successfully internal social media can be used in future internal CSR communication. The research was conducted in May 2017. An overview of the practical and social implications of the results of this article is provided in the conclusion.

Literature Review & Selected Current State of Empirical Research

CSR, Sensemaking & Narrativity

The image of Corporate Social Responsibility in classic management and academic literature largely consists of business case aspects and respective concrete competitive advantages of CSR activities. The perspective of external stakeholders dominates the literature. CSR communication as a special, but fundamental aspect of CSR can basically be understood as "a process of anticipating stakeholders' expectations, articulation of CSR policy and managing of different organization communication tools" which are "designed to provide true and transparent information about a company's or a brand's integration of its business operations, social and environmental concerns, and interactions with stakeholders" (Podnar, 2008, p. 75). Schoeneborn and Trittin (2013, p. 195) highlight CSR communication's role as an instrument to influence the perception of the organization by the stakeholders, but their instrumental perspective limits CSR communication to a transmission function only. Therefore, the objective of research in the area is to find techniques to more effectively communicate CSR messages to stakeholders (Huck-Sandhu, 2011; Bhattacharya, Sen & Korschun, 2011).

However, the instrumental perspective neglects the "messy problem CSR" (Golob, Johansen, Nielsen & Podnar, 2014), as it narrows CSR communication to simple rules and mechanisms which are not able to explain the processes, motivations and causes that are related to the institutionalization of CSR. The characteristics of CSR continue to change and evolve (Christensen & Cheney, 2011), which further increases its complexity.

A more flexible understanding of CSR Communication is therefore needed. Other research has pointed out the need to develop a deeper understanding of the reciprocal relationship between communication and CSR (Crane, Morsing and Schoeneborn, 2015). As early as 2011, Christians and Cheney called for research to focus on developing understanding of

CSR as “a continuous activity through which individuals and organizations explore, construct, negotiate and modify what it means to be a socially responsible organization.” (p. 491).

As stated above social responsibility is no longer an option, but a prerequisite in order to be successful in today’s business world. The impact of corporate social responsibility on employee satisfaction and motivation is a key element in this development. Internal communication aspects of CSR therefore have to be thoroughly analyzed in order to identify and implement improvements.

Schneider and Retzbach (2012) note that "internal communication is a poorly understood interface between psychological research in organizations and the study of communication and psychology in communication processes" (p. 5). Schneider, Retzbach, Barkela and Maier (2014) build on this by calling for research projects that consider organizations from a structural perspective, as well as looking at people's behavior and social interactions on an individual level within this structure., given the context of complex interrelations in internal communication

The gaps in academic research on internal CSR communication means that there is limited availability of knowledge concerning the actual processes of institutionalization, negotiation and translation of CSR. Wehmeier and Schultz describe CSR as a “social narrative that is constructed, situationally translated, and hereby narratively reconstructed by different actors from different societal fields […] in order to cope with societal problems and paradoxes.” (2011, p. 481). This leads to the methodological finding that “CSR communication should be analyzed from within a process-oriented framework” Wehmeier & Schultz, 2011, p. 482).

CSR communication can be regarded as symmetrical communication with circular relations of sensegiving & sensemaking (Bator & Stohl, 2011) in a sense of co-construction of CSR (Schultz & Wehmeier, 2011). Focusing on the organizational and individual sensemaking and its adaptation to CSR offers new insights into influencing factors which could play a key role in instigating or forming CSR activities (Basu & Palazzo, 2008).

It is therefore important to analyze specific individual sensemaking processes and to answer the question of what uncertainties and ambiguities exist, and when and how CSR becomes a topic. Since sensegiving is specifically trying to influence the sensemaking of employees, it is essential to assess:

- How does sensegiving work, and what collective sensemaking mechanisms can be identified;
- how do narration and storytelling support collective sensemaking mechanisms;
- how are collective sensemaking mechanisms divided into formal and informal paths (Van Vuuren & Elving, 2008).

The assessment of existing research results in the finding that „approaching CSR from the sensemaking perspective means focusing on the dynamic and social process underlying the development.“ (Nijhof & Jeurrissen, 2006) After a first step of comprehensive research on the microlevel of institutionalization from a sensemaking perspective, qualitative research methods are applied in the of form interviews and observations (Wehmeier & Röttger, 2011).

Understanding Sensemaking & Sensegiving

The following examination provide an overview of sensemaking and sensegiving in the context of this article.

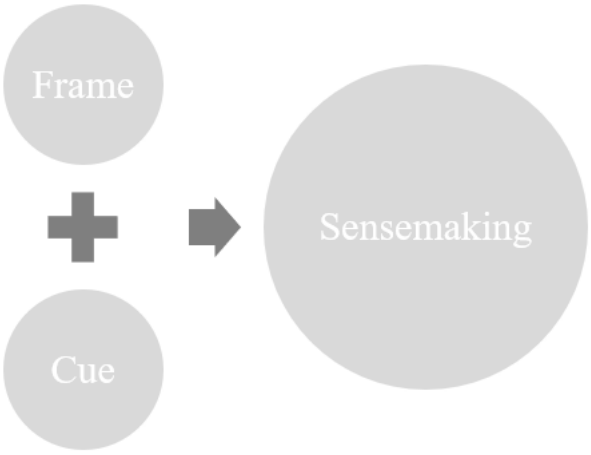
The concept of sensemaking involves the continuous retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize people's activities (Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). An important element of sensemaking is the understanding of how people react to change and interruptions. Sensemaking should therefore be a core element in all strategic change

processes, such as the institutionalization of CSR (Hanke & Stark 2009). In such phases, meanings materialize which inform and constrain identity and action. Communication is fundamental to the process of institutionalization (Schultz & Wehmeier, 2010). Indeed, it is communication that determines the importance of sensemaking, as one of its core principles is the use of communication as a method of organization.

Sensemaking is the process of social construction that occurs when discrepant stimuli interrupt individuals' ongoing activity. Existing research describes it as a process of reducing the gap between beliefs and actions (Weick, 1995) and as the creation of a storyline by connecting cues and frames to create an account of what is going on“ (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010, p. 551).

Sensemaking is determined by two elements and their relationship. The element reflecting the *present* is the indicator of a situation; the element reflecting the *past* is the frame of reference. The relationship between indicator and frame of reference represents the smallest possible sense structure. The objective of sensemaking is to assign appropriate reference frames to respective indicators (Wetzel, 2005).

Figure 1: **The model of sensemaking.**



Source: Own consideration and illustration.

Sensegiving „is the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality. (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007) The process can be divided into four phases: Envisioning, Signaling, Re-visioning and Energizing. Sensemaking and sensegiving form a reciprocal process (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).

For the implementation of CSR strategies, sensemaking and sensegiving stimulate the development of new management approaches by involving different organizational actors and stakeholders. “On the one hand, sensemaking is a catalyzer for the essential business processes of a company – in particular, for the new implementations. On the other hand, sensemaking can make sure that the old and stable structures and values still fit new requirements, if procurable. These values are particularly important engagement drivers for CSR processes.” (Hanke & Stark, 2009, p. 510).

Social media and their internal use

Although there are many perspectives from which social media can be viewed, most definitions emphasize User Generated Content (UGC) as the fundamental element of social media – especially in comparison to traditional media or even Web 1.0, in which content is

generated centrally. Social media are digital technologies that foster knowledge management and the exchange of information by connecting people with each other (Heymann-Reder, 2011, p. 17).

Alongside the improvements in knowledge management and information sharing offered by social media, other general benefits include better coordination of worldwide human and production resources, as well as the improvement on certain disadvantages of other electronic communication tools, such as email, intranets or databases. Furthermore, social media is a tool used widely for recommendations. Indeed, in 2014, there was a ten-percent increase in the number of customers buying based on recommendations in social networks compared with the previous year (Günther, 2015).

Social media influences companies and creates what is known as enterprise 2.0, in which business structures and technical infrastructure are changed (Jäger & Petry, 2012, p. 23). As well as social media, internal communication in general is also becoming more relevant, particularly for companies, as employees expect more transparent and comprehensible information (Huck-Sandhu, 2016; Arthur W. Page Society, 2007,). When it is used to share information, internal communication can increase employees' knowledge concerning their company as well as their own function. The savings in costs and time, in turn, facilitate employee satisfaction and help to ensure a pleasant corporate culture (Pfannenberg & Zerfaß, 2004).

Methodology

The methodology of the article introduces a multi-perspective study design, in order to pursue an integrated approach towards excellent internal CSR communication. The focus of the study is on sensegiving and sensemaking as well as on the (social) technology implied. Consisting of both qualitative and quantitative elements, the methodology aims to answer three research questions, derived from the assessment of existing research in the theoretical framework:

RQ_1	How is CSR reciprocally mediated and processed in internal communication?
RQ_2	Which conditions influence the translation and negotiation process?
RQ_3	To what extend and in what manner can internal social media help to better run internal CSR communication?

The first question intends to find answers for the initial implementation methods of CSR in internal communication as well as providing insights into further processing of internal corporate communication. The second and third research questions aim to distill the factors that most significantly influence the CSR translation and negotiation process and point out the role of internal social media and its influence on the improvement of CSR.

These overarching research questions are broken down into six subordinate questions in order to enable more precise scientific measurement and to consolidate the conclusion of the study. These subordinate questions are divided into two different areas of interest, which investigate both sensegiving and sensemaking within internal CSR communication. With regard to content, questions aim to provide insight into the main narratives of formal and informal internal communication. Regardless of whether these narratives are primarily sensegiving or sensemaking, the subordinate questions concerning content deal with what employees perceive as a break in communication and how they compensate for this gap.

In addition, the study goes beyond a mere focus on content, in order to focus on the conditions of internal CSR communication. In this context, the study design is structured to identify which media formats and channels are offered or used, including internal social media. The central objects of investigation in this area of the research are how employees access internal communication, how they participate and how the company enables them to narrate.

All of the above questions are addressed in both the qualitative and the quantitative section of the study. This two-pronged, multi-level study design is explained in the following sub-sections.

Qualitative Section

Due to the explorative character of the field of investigation, the study follows a qualitative multi-methodological study design (Courgeau, 2003). This approach is well-suited for research of an investigative nature, due to the combination of qualitative research methods, such as interviews, observations and document analysis.

The qualitative section of the study focuses on a medium-sized German health insurance company as the central object of investigation for internal CSR communication. Research was conducted over the period of one year, from December 1st, 2015 until November 30th, 2016, in order to scientifically substantiate the status quo with regard to the questions concerning sensegiving and sensemaking presented above. In order to obtain a comprehensive picture of all aspects of internal communication twenty-seven interviews were conducted within the research period (ten semi-structured expert interviews, ten semi-structured employee interviews and seven semi-structured executive interviews).

These interviews were complemented by twelve unstructured and spontaneous employee interviews during the company's official CSR Day. In addition, eight observations of the sustainability board, an employee workshop on CSR and the CSR Day were carried out to obtain further insights into the content of the internal CSR communication of the insurance company. Three executive speeches, three informal conversations with CSR managers and the analysis of 120 documents and texts complemented the multi-methodological study and provided the heuristic basis for the quantitative survey.

The study is limited to research and observations of a single company. Therefore, limitations on the validity and data quality have to be taken into consideration. Only parts of the qualitative study are published within this article; a complete publication in the form of a book is planned for 2018. Nevertheless, further research is recommended to assess whether the results for this company are mirrored in other companies.

Quantitative Section

A quantitative survey was also conducted based on the overarching research questions and underlying study design described above, in order to complement the qualitative multi-methodological study (Fielding, Lee & Blank, 2008). The quantitative study took the form of an online survey, partly based on previous studies of internal social media conducted by one of the authors of this paper (Sievert & Scholz, 2017). Questionnaires were distributed via e-mail and on social media, in order to reach the identified target group. The online survey was conducted from June 7th until June 22nd, 2017.

The target group for the quantitative survey consists of employees of commercial companies and consultancies. Employees of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are excluded from the target group. In total, 201 participants responded to the questionnaire. The sample structure can be described as follows: regarding company background, 71.1 percent of the samples can be viewed as employees of commercial companies, whereas 27.9 percent are

employees of consultancies. The gender division can be described as relatively balanced: 55.2 percent male and 44.8 percent female. With regard to the age of the participants, most of them were middle-aged (in detail: 20-29 yrs.: 14.0 percent; 30-39 yrs.: 23.1 percent; 40-49 yrs.: 28.0 percent; 50-59 yrs.: 25.9 percent; >60 yrs.: 9.1 percent).

42.4 percent of all respondents operate in external and internal communication departments. Management positions are also strongly represented in the study, as 28.7 percent of participants work in these positions. Almost a third of all respondents (31.5 percent) hold high-quality specialist positions. The middle management represents 24.5 percent of respondents, while about one in five works in the top management (21 percent).

The analysis of the company size shows that most respondents are employed in large companies with at least 1,000 employees (41 percent). This is followed by companies with 50 to 249 employees (21.6 percent) and companies with up to nine employees (16 percent).

The validity of the quantitative section is limited, due to the over-representation of large companies and employees who hold communication functions. Moreover, interviewees were self-selected. Furthermore, the study does not only focus on internal social media, as it is a single communication channel from a mixture of available channels for internal communication. Therefore, future studies should consider choosing a more well-balanced sample and placing particular focus on internal social technology.

Results

The following summary presents the results of the quantitative as well as the qualitative study concerning internal CSR communication in German companies. As qualitative research is still ongoing, only preliminary results can be presented in this article. However, an overview of the results of the quantitative study is provided.

Qualitative Section

The qualitative section illustrates clearly that it is difficult to inspire employees to participate actively in CSR, even in highly committed companies with a distinct, value-oriented corporate management and homogeneous corporate culture. On the contrary, there is a climate of positive passivity, with which employees issue an internal license-to-operate, but if possible, still remain passive themselves. The further development and increase of the effectiveness of CSR measures might be limited without the active cooperation of the colleagues.

It should be noted that the insurance market in Germany has been affected by strong market volatility in recent years, due to an increasing level of market saturation, a rising number of catastrophic events (floods, hurricanes) due to climate change and the emergence of massive market disruption caused by digital transformation. In this challenging market environment, the company was able to maintain its market positioning. The company enjoys a stable corporate culture (“corporate family”) and particularly homogeneous awareness as a responsible employer.

The implementation and pursuit of sustainability was the objective of the former CEO, who was in favour of an autocratic leadership style. However, the new management is following a transformative leadership approach.

The company is amongst top CSR performers compared to industry benchmarks (Schubert & Pieper, 2017), by virtue of more than ten years’ experience in CSR management. The company is viewed as a CSR-pioneer, as is illustrated by numerous awards, certifications and prizes. Furthermore, CSR is a cornerstone of the corporate culture, represented by clearly communicated corporate values (“The corporate family”). However, the company is subject to internal communication challenges, due to a recent change in management towards an improved

dialogue and transparent leadership style, coupled with the overall strategic reorientation imposed by digital transformation. Moreover, sustainability remains a key communication challenge for the company.

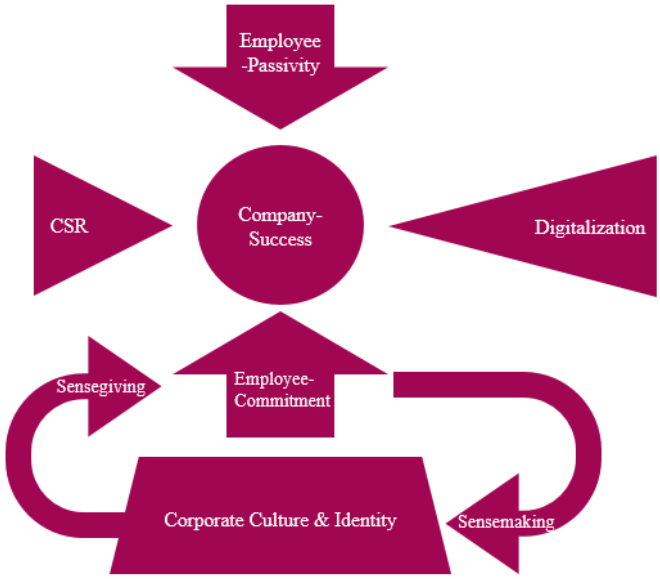
Although the company's external and internal communication is particularly professional and engaging, the interviews and observations showed that employees possess limited knowledge about sustainability in general and the sustainability strategy of their company in particular. No interviewee was able to establish a link between the company's claim and sustainability, despite the fact that sustainability was the overarching theme of the creative development process. Furthermore, not one interviewee could describe the "great narrative" of sustainability motivation and strategy or provide reasons why the company is committed to sustainability.

Why do employees illustrate such limited awareness of sustainability? The emergence of digital transformation and the strategic impact of the issue on the overall insurance industry might provide an explanation. Furthermore, the company was not able to provide conclusive evidence that sustainability contributes to the sale of insurance-contracts. Although sustainability efforts generate cost savings in energy and other operational areas, these cost savings might be insignificant and non-transparent to most employees.

In the company, all the CSR activities are the sole responsibility of the CSR manager. This clear role and responsibility might result in passivity on the part of other employees. Passivity might be caused by the feeling that active involvement is not needed. Nevertheless, passivity can be described as positive, if employees are proud of their companies' achievements and want it to continue, even though they see no tangible relevance, meaning or responsibility for themselves.

CSR and sustainability matters are not included in the regular internal communication of the company but are available on the companies' website and on official internal documentations. The intrinsic motivation of employees is therefore required if they are to educate themselves about CSR activities of the company. Internal communication is limited to sporadic messages concerning individual measures, areas of activity and individual targets of the company, such as the target of CO_2 neutrality. The content of these communications focuses on the reporting of measures, rather than actively engaging employees, which might provide an explanation for the lack of involvement.

Figure 2: **Competitive situation of CSR among other big issues within companies.**



Source: Own consideration and illustration.

When analysing the internal communication measures in general, a focus on sensegiving aspects can be observed. However, important aspects of the approach are neglected. Storytelling is of particularly great importance for individual and collective sensemaking and is currently applied insufficiently. Sensegiving has both to enable employees to reiterate stories and to provide indicators which link to the existing frames of reference. Ultimately this connection helps to develop new reference frameworks - for example a more active motivation towards sustainability.

The observation of CSR communication stands in strong contrast to the internal communication regarding digitization. Although the study of internal communication on digitization was not explicitly part of the study, it became obvious that employees are more committed to this topic. This commitment might be due to a more stringent storytelling approach and a variety of meso- and macro-references to the overall corporate strategy and societal changes. These communication elements create a convincing narrative for digitization, which in turn makes the topic more immediately relevant for the employees.

A further important aspect for the relatively low involvement of the employees in CSR is a lack of incentive for middle management to incorporate CSR sensegiving in their communication tow departments and teams. While top level management illustrate commitment to CSR and communicate relevant CSR information to colleagues and employees, this communication does not occur on departmental or team level.

It was consistently reported that sustainability either plays an insignificant role in internal communication at the department or team level or is strongly dependent on the personal motivation of the managers. This corresponds to the hypothesis above that the lack of correlation between sustainability and economic success in the insurance industry is not proven or made transparent to employees. The lack of CSR communication within departments and teams results

in the lack of opportunity for social encounters around this topic and the absence of discourses that are so important for sensemaking. Such social encounters are important and could be a starting point for the use of internal social media.

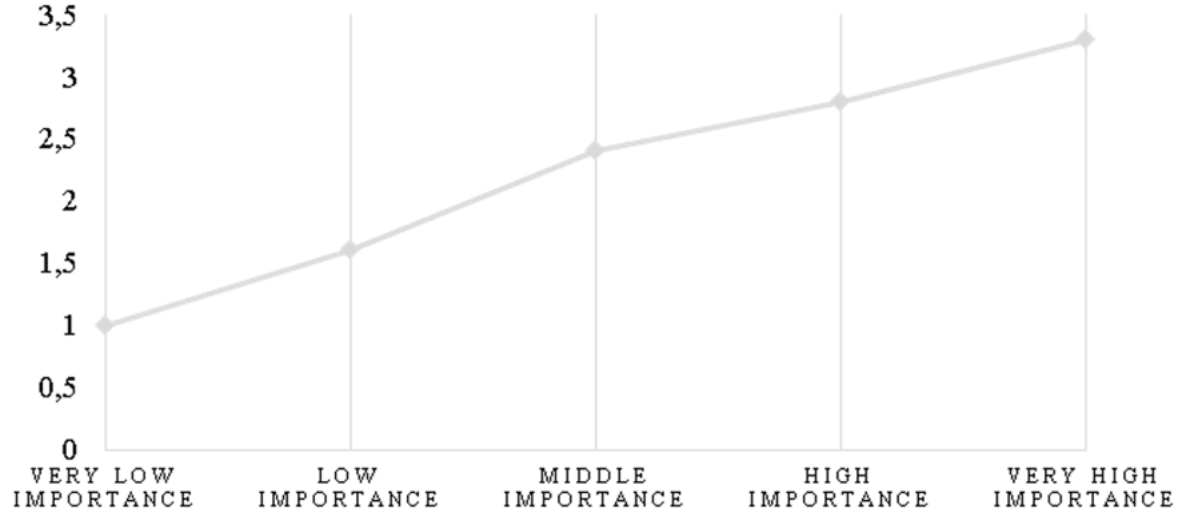
In conclusion, it is generally surprising that the involvement of only a few employees can significantly contribute to the overall CSR success of a company. Nevertheless, the involvement of a small group of employees results in natural limits. It can be assumed that these limits are similar to glass ceilings, which are difficult to see, yet have a noticeable impact. Further development and integration of CSR into corporate strategy and a connection to high impact topics such as digital transformation are difficult under the circumstances of limited employee involvement.

The involvement of the entire company is needed in order to develop CSR 3.0. CSR 3.0 represents genuine social innovation and a strategic approach to the topic, with the aim of increasing added value for companies and society. CSR 3.0 follows the objective of building a company which is actively contributing to pressing societal challenges ("being good" instead of "less bad") and to a shared value and cycle economy. An improved and more comprehensive understanding of sensegiving and sensemaking and the role of narration and discourse within a company will make an important contribution to this.

Quantitative Section

This section of the study provides an overview of relevant quantitative results and explains these results in the context of the overall research objective.

Figure 3: **General importance of CSR by intensity of internal social media use for CSR themes.** Original questions: "How important is CSR for your organization in general?" and "How intensively do you use internal social media for CSR-themes?" (n=139).



Source: Own research and illustration.

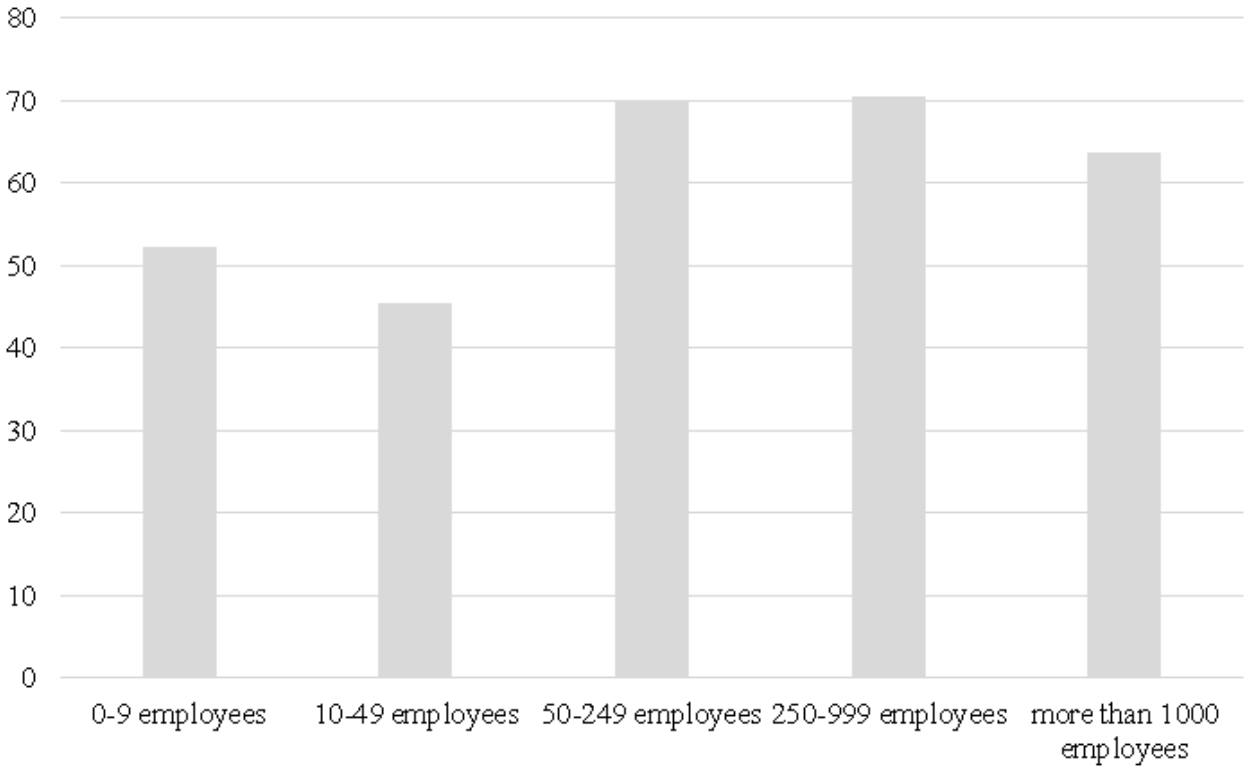
For the majority of organizations (46.8 percent), CSR issues play an important or even a very important role in their businesses. 32.8 percent state that CSR has limited importance in their companies, while 20.5 percent of the respondents state that CSR has a low importance in their organizations. Despite the high interest in CSR, internal social media usage for this topic is

still limited (56.7 percent). Only 24 percent of respondents state that CSR issues are at least regularly addressed in internal social media, while 19.3 percent of respondents state that internal social media is often used to broadcast CSR messages.

As part of the survey, the influence of different factors on internal social media usage for CSR have been assessed. The results illustrate that the usage increases as the importance of CSR in an organization rises. If CSR does not play an important role in an organization in general, the use of internal social media for CSR issues is correspondingly low. Furthermore, the usage is high if CSR is generally an important theme in an organization.

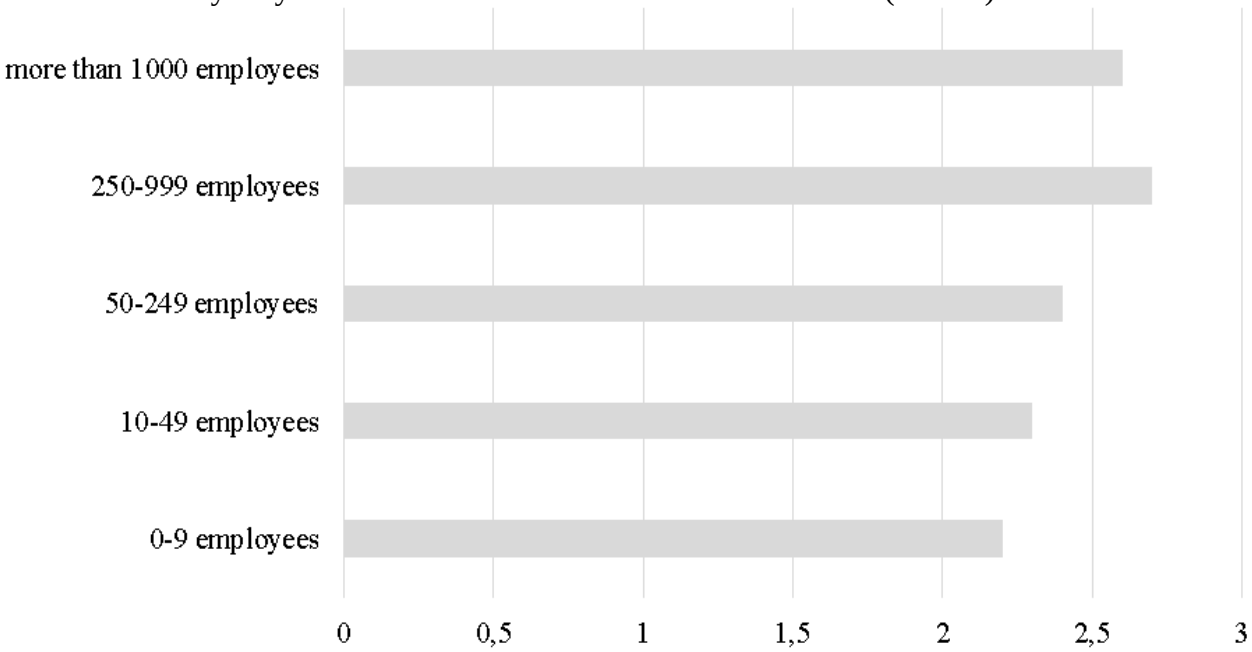
Moreover, the correlation between various other factors and the general interest in CSR has been analyzed. An interesting finding is the correlation between company size and interest in CSR. This interest is particularly high in medium-sized companies. More than 60 percent of the respondents of medium-sized companies state that it is important to be involved in CSR activities. Similarly, respondents from medium-sized companies claim the highest usage rate of internal social media for CSR issues.

Figure 4: **Importance of CSR themes by company size.** Original question: "Being involved into CSR-Themes is important to me" (n=136).



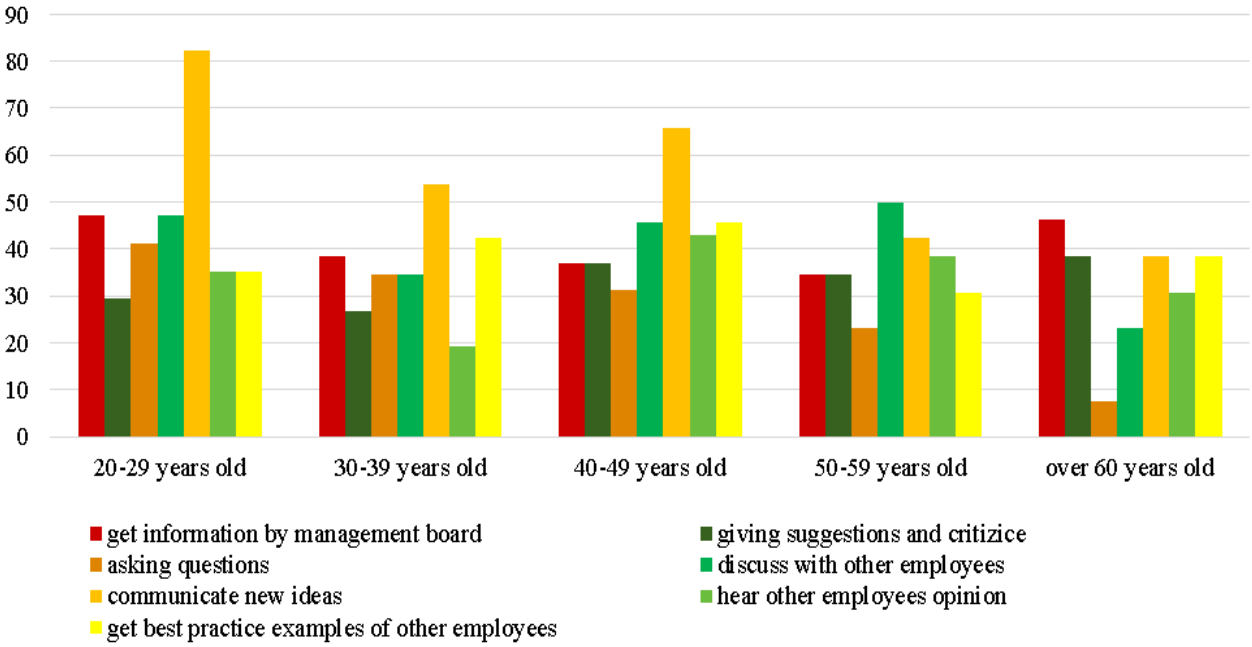
Source: Own research and illustration.

Figure 5: **Internal social media usage for CSR themes by company size.** Original question: "How intensively do you use internal social media for CSR-themes" (n= 139).



Source: Own research and illustration.

Figure 6: **Functions for the usage of internal social media.** Original question: „For which of the following functions in terms of CSR do you use internal social media?“ (n=117). Red columns indicate a pure sensegiving approach, green columns a mainly sensemaking approach, the different degrees of yellow and orange represent a mixture of both approaches.



Source: Own research and illustration.

A further focus of the quantitative survey was to find out whether internal social media tends to be used for functions that are related to sensemaking-processes or for those that can be defined as part of a sensegiving-process. The results illustrate that older employees use internal social media more frequently for sensemaking-related items such as „giving suggestions and criticizing“ or „discussing with other employees“.

Overall, the quantitative results illustrate that internal social media shows a high potential for communication regarding CSR issues and activities to employees. However, this hypothesis is subject to the assumption that CSR is an important aspect within an organization. This holds particularly true for medium-sized companies. The interest in CSR issues in these companies can be described as relatively high. Similarly, the intensity of usage of internal social media for CSR themes in medium-sized companies is the highest, when compared to other company sizes.

Conclusion

The long-term success of business enterprises is certainly influenced by the sustainability and social responsibility evident in its corporate action. It is indisputable that social responsibility is becoming more important when it comes to shaping the perception of a company in the public and generating positive effects regarding the brand value. Therefore, an appropriate adjustment of a company's communication is required to generate these positive effects, not only externally, but also for and by internal stakeholders.

The theoretical and two-pronged empirical findings of this paper illustrate that a new, more flexible understanding of internal CSR communication is needed. The qualitative section shows particularly clearly that CSR is still mediated and processed mainly within a sensegiving approach, with very few sensemaking aspects. The conditions which influence the CSR process are predominantly top-down oriented and even if participation is required, it is rarely realized. As the quantitative section shows, it is only if these structures and the underlying hierarchies are culturally opened (e.g. via the effective use of internal social media) that the internal CSR communication can be become oriented toward sensemaking. Internal social media can help to better run internal CSR communication, but only if the surrounding cultural parameters allow it to do so. Also, the overall results show a certain causality between the importance of CSR in companies and the usage of internal social media as a “sensemaking tool” for CSR.

In summary, a more communicative mediation of meaning and more storytelling is needed. It is important to emotionalise and personalise within the internal communication. Theses aspects should be used to promote sensemaking-related processes and achieve a higher visibility of the collective and individual CSR narrative. The results of this article show that internal social media can meet these requirements and can help to rethink responsibility from a sensemaking perspective. This can be really excellent communication, both in a CSR context and beyond. But it is important that this happens at the top as well as throughout an organization.

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Exploring the Attributes of Professionalism among Military and Civil Communicators

Chase Spears
Kansas State University

Abstract

This paper evaluates the U.S. Army's public affairs, and corporate public relations communities, in an attempt to determine where organizational communicators place in terms of formal recognition and trust among society. Findings suggest that though there is a desire for both to be viewed as professions, organizational communicators are not there yet. According to traditional attributes of professionalism, military communicators appear closer to achieving professional legitimacy than those who work in public relations, while those who work in public relations are acknowledged as performing more effectively than their military counterparts.

Keywords: professionalism, military, public relations, public affairs

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and are not representative of the official views or policies of the U.S. Army, U.S. Defense Department, nor any other agency or entity public or private.

Introduction

On November 6, 2020 the U.S. Army released the *Report of the Fort Hood Independent Committee,* an investigation commissioned by Secretary of the Army Ryan McCarthy to investigate the command climate at a major military installation experiencing a crisis in trust following high profile incidents of sexual assault and deaths associated with the base. The report noted eight separate findings, among them that Fort Hood's public affairs capabilities were inadequate to the task of managing public engagement through a crisis of national proportions due to an inadequate number of available organizational communication staff and lack of relationship with nearby communities (Fort Hood Independent Review Committee, 2020).

The Fort Hood report is a visible acknowledgement that the Army lacks effective public engagement capabilities that are critical for navigating institutional crisis. This is a documented issue and not an infrequent topic of conversation among those who observe how the military manages public affairs (Carr, 1996; Esper, 2019; Gercken, 2007). Crisis management is a skill that those who work in organizational communication must master, both with respect to helping to walk an organization through a crisis, and even more importantly how to prevent a crisis to begin with by exerting ethical influence over organizational decision-making (Scanlon, 2017). With the confluence of traditional mediums of mass communication, and the democratization of reach wrought by social media, how a person or organization communicates can be associated with levels of risk on par with issues handled in years past mainly by attorneys and medical experts, workers who are widely acknowledged to be members of professions.

The Meaning of Professionalism

At the 2019 U.S. Army Public Affairs Forum, Secretary of the Army, Dr. Mark Esper referred to public affairs officers, those charged with the military institution's public engagement, as "communication professionals" (Esper, 2019). Attributes traditionally associated with fields of professional work include vocations that: provide a public service, rely on unique knowledge, control access to the work community, and hold members to ethical standards (Nuciari 1994). Fields of work that are afforded professional status "are set apart from other career paths by their status and public respect which allow them a proportionate degree of autonomy" (Meyer & Leonard, 2013, p. 376). Yet there is a no single commonly-accepted definition of what might constitute the attributes of a communication professional. Because one claims to be a professional does not make it so. This paper offers a framework for organizational communicators to consider when trying to evaluate their place in vocational hierarchy.

Professionalism throughout History

Evidence suggests that the initial concept of profession is based on communities of work that relied on distinct education, starting during the Greek and Roman empires (Ahern, 1971). The actual word *profession* first appeared during the medieval period to describe unique fields of study for those whose work required deep thinking. This includes the practices of law, medicine, accounting, and members of the clergy, all who were expected to complete a rigorous liberal arts education, in addition to specific vocation training (Burns, 2014; Dzur, 2019). "From the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries onward, the emerging professional disciplines increasingly took charge of the complex processes by which individuals are made into objects of study" (Fischer, 2000, p. 25). The class of professionals was the domain of the societal elite, set apart from those who worked in vocations that were entered through some form of apprenticeship, such as blacksmithing or candle making.

The early 19th century afforded a greater level of prominence for professions, their members earning affiliation mostly through social class status and governmental recognition (Burns, 2014). The push to professionalize certain vocations in the United States started in the late 19th century as the American Medical Association and the American Bar Association came into being (Hacket, 1962). The mid-20th century brought about the initiation of a taxonomic discourse, with the intent of formally defining the parameters of professionalism (Saks, 2012).

Across the history of professions, their members have wielded tremendous influence, and have been held to a form of accountability for that influence. The public is familiar with terms like "doctor knows best," or "seek legal advice" because in the most critical moments of life people need services from someone who can be trusted, whose credibility is backed by an institutional body. In the modern informational environment, how one communicates likewise carries the potential of great risk to self, affiliated persons and organizations. "Yet when we have a communication problem, we are typically do-it-yourselfers" (Fisher, 1978, p. 6). Organizational communicators wield tremendous influence across society. Their counsel can lower or amplify the tone of crisis events with strategic consequences, and become points of persuasion echoed by large swaths of the public.

The public relations community faces reputational challenges because of practices that use social sciences to manipulate public behavior on behalf of clients (Stauber and Rampton 1995). The military public affairs community is not immune from similar incidents that do not live up to governmental transparency requirements (Carlson, Cuiller & Turkoff, 2012; House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, 2008; Inspector General of the U.S. Department of Defense, 2007; Johnson, 2019; Machamer, 1991; McMaster, 1997; Mogelson, 2020; Nye, 2002; Paladino, 2019; Payne, 2005; Ricks, 2009; Seligman, 2019). No work community is perfect, even among the recognized professions. The medical, legal and ministerial communities have examples of individuals who do not uphold standards of conduct. Consider attorneys for example. Though workers in law are among the earliest recognized members of a profession, lawyers are often a favored topic of unfavorable critique in popular culture. Being recognized as a profession does not guarantee high public approval for workers within. Yet, it certainly does not hurt the cause. Organizational leaders need their communicators to be trusted. This requires practitioners who hold themselves, and their peers, accountable to standards of practice that are in line with traditional expectations among the professions.

There is a wide array of approaches to defining how professional legitimacy is earned, recognized, or granted. *Institutional theory* explores the criteria that organizations must meet in order to receive professional legitimacy from the public (Lammers & Garcia, 2017). Dzur aligns professional status to those who work in vocations that provide critical societal services, so labeled as *social trustee professionalism* (2019). The *interactionist approach* views professional legitimacy as something that is granted by the public through social contract (Brick, 2018; Galvin, 2011; Saks, 2012). In contrast, Cameron, Sallot & Weaver Lariscy (1996) write that professionalism is declared by a body of practitioners who define what constitutes excellence in their fields. Another perspective offers that professional legitimacy is conferred by those who rely on the services offered by practitioners of certain skills (Johnson, 2018). Yet another perspective theorizes that the difference between occupational workers and professionals is based on the level of autonomy granted by workplace supervisors, thus tying professionalism to formal rank and length of time served in a specific career field (Sorenson, 1994). Definitions of professionalism can differ based on region and culture. A European perspective posits that professional status is based on role of the worker, type of employment, level of education,

enforced ethical standards, and organization (Aydınalp, 2013). The *neo-Weberian* model retains the early European roots of professions as existing solely because of governmental recognition and regulation (Burns, 2014; Parkinson & Parkinson, 2003; Saks, 2012).

Theory of Military Professionalism

The push to formally professionalize military officers gained steam during the period between the U.S. Civil War and the First World War. The U.S. Army claims its members as belonging to the Profession of Arms (Department of the Army, 2015). Military scholarship is split on this topic. Some argue that military members naturally reflect professional characteristics (Battaglia, 2011; Brick, 2018; Galvin, 2011). Nuciari (1994) writes that military officers, in contrast to enlisted personnel, are professionals because their service adheres to the *Career Strategist Interactionist Model*, which includes a code of ethics based on service to others, a high level of self-inflicted expectations, and long-term career aspirations. Sorenson (1994) takes it farther, writing that military officers work on an extra-professional level in their duties to advise government officials. Yet other scholarship argues that military professionalism is not a universal status for those in uniform (Moten, 2011), that it is instead tied to ethical maturity, specifically noted by the ability to make the right decision, even when it contradicts tradition, policy (Denny, 2018), or public trust (Brick, 2018). Whether military service equates to the professions or not, service members want to identify as professionals (Wayne, 2015).

Theory of Communication Professionalism

The discussion on whether to formally professionalize those who work in organizational communication dates back to at least 1968; though, the Public Relations Society of America published its first code of professional ethics for organizational communicators in 1950 (Meyer & Leonard, 2013; The Arthur W. Page Center). There is disagreement among scholars as to whether public relations is a profession. Research findings vary on this topic, some studies alluding to public relations as a *profession*, albeit one that is not necessarily demonstrating confidence in that status (Falkheimer, et al., 2017; Manley, 2014; Powell & Pieczka, 2016), an *industry* or *practice* in pursuit of professionalization (Bivens, 1993; Sha, 2011; Yang & Taylor, 2014), or a *field* (Abel and Tampere, 2013).

Among the community of organizational communicators, there is a growing desire to be perceived as trustworthy professionals in light of the growing role that communication plays in organizational strategy (Cameron, Sallot & Weaver Lariscy, 1996; Zerfass and Simon, 2013). Zerfass and Simon (2013), however, believe that efforts to put the public relations community on par with physicians, attorneys and members of the clergy have failed. “It is left to individual practitioners to discharge what they believe to be a tacit obligation to society” (Bivens, 1993, p. 126). Parkinson & Parkinson (2003) argue that public relations practitioners should be held to licensing requirements because of the tremendous influence they wield in society. Remaining public relations scholarship consulted for this paper decline to categorize just what public relations should consider itself, using descriptors including *profession*, *practice*, *vocation*, *occupation*, or *domain of work*, without offering perspective on which label is most appropriate (Wakefield, Plowman, & Curry, 2014).

The literature is at odds on whether military public affairs officers can claim professional status, specific to their role as organizational communicators. Stephens argued that those who work in public affairs historically demonstrate less communication professionalism than their civilian counterparts because of requirements that divert time and attention from practicing the

communication arts and sciences (1981). A U.S. Army War College report also noted this tendency by saying "we have created a climate in which 'doing certain jobs' takes precedence over developing expertise" (U.S. Army War College, 1970). Other research contends that military public affairs officers are among the world's best communicators (Bedford, 2016). Specific to the military public affairs force, research suggests that professionalism can be measured by experience, training and judgement (Carr, 1996) as well as work routines that include conducting evaluation research and counseling senior leaders (Stephens 1981).

Methods

This paper uses a mixed method of literature review and autoethnography in an attempt to define and apply specific tests of professionalism to civil and military communicators. It surveys recent literature on the topic of military public affairs, civil public relations, military professionalism, and communication professionalism to identify the most commonly accepted professional attributes and identify how military and civil communitors are measuring up. Using the criteria of professionalism identified, this paper evaluates where the U.S. Army's public affairs career field, and the global public relations industry, stands according to professional criteria, in an attempt to add context to the ongoing debate about whether organizational communicators should consider themselves to be members of a profession.

The author conducted a search for scholarly and professional articles related to public affairs professionalism and public relations professionalism using google, google scholar and an R1 research institution library electronic catalogue service in search of writings that make declarative statements about public relations and military public affairs professionalism. Insights were also informed by recent book chapters on military professionalism and research projects conducted at U.S. military higher education institutions to add the most recently published perspective on the military approach to defining a profession. Autoethnographic observation is used to assist in answering questions where the literature lacks conclusive findings.

Limitations

The first challenge of qualitative research of this kind is its subjectivity. "There are no 'brute data' whose meaning is beyond dispute. Dispassionate, rigorous science is possible—but not the neutral, objective science stipulated by traditional analytic methods" (Yanow, 2011, p. 5). Discussion of the state of military public affairs elicits strong emotions among both the service members and civilians who work in the field, military officials in other job specialties, and journalists. It is a field in which there are competing perspectives, many with reasonable justifications. The second challenge is that organizational research is complex, as it deals with entities that include individuals and groups, but are larger than the sum of those actors (Wilhoit, 2017). The way in which stakeholders perceive and react to commentary about institutional issues, that they align with personal identity and value, is much in the eye of the beholder and can be affected by the amount of personal investment made on the topic under discussion. Finally, though the personal perspectives attained through 17 years of experience working in organizational communication is an asset to informing this study, it can also open the door to questions about the reputability of this paper's findings (Jamison, 2019; Jensen, et al., 2020).

Role of Organizational Communicators in Society

The military public affairs force is composed of enlisted members, officers and civilians. For simplicity, from here forward this paper will make a distinction between those who work in

military public affairs as military communicators, and refer to those who work in public relations, or non-military organizational communication, as civil communicators. Ideally, those who work in both fields hold certain levels of accountability to their organizations, and the public, to responsibly manage organizational communication programs focused on a commitment to multi-directional engagement, institutional culture-shaping and preserving public trust (Harrison and Muhlberg, 2014). Executive organizational communicators, often defined as chief communication officers, ideally bring strategic influence to bear on ensuring consistency of organizational actions, communication and values (Arthur W. Page Society, 2016).

Though the vocational entry point for civil communicators requires no formal training, those who advance to corporate chief communication roles traditionally spend many years developing communication expertise by working through the ranks from entry-level practitioner to management, under the supervision of senior communicators and organizational executives. Many hold membership in professional communication associations that place heavy emphasis on excellence in practice, continuing education and ethics, such as the Public Relations Society of America, the International Association of Business Communicators, or the Arthur W. Page Society. These groups spell out the ethical nature of member responsibilities in codes of professional ethics. However, these codes are only enforceable on members.

U.S. Code, Title 10 establishes the requirement for military public affairs programs (Government Printing Office, 2011). Unlike the civil model of developing organizational communicators, public affairs officers in the U.S. Army start off working in any of the traditional career branches, such as infantry, armor, engineering, human resources, etc. After approximately four years of military service, Army officers usually have the opportunity to compete for transfer out of their "basic branch" into a "functional area," such as public affairs. Selected officers are not required to have a communication-related degree, nor any prior experience in organizational communication. Those selected to become public affairs officers attend a nine-week qualification course at the Defense Information School at Fort Meade, MD and are then assigned to a communication director role at a military unit. Determinations about whether to take additional communication-specific education, join communication associations or pursue credentialing are voluntary, and do not play a discriminating role in promotions. The communication-specific ethical nature of the public affairs officer's duties is spelled out in defense public affairs policy, but is not formally enforced by an official representation of the public affairs community. Unlike public affairs officers, enlisted public affairs members and military public affairs civilians enter service specifically to work in military communication. These military communicators also complete job qualification courses at the Defense Information School.

Results

The literature review identified 10 predominant attributes of professionalism from scholarship specific to the military, public relations, public affairs and the study of professions (Table 1).

Attribute 1: Professions Operate with a High Degree of Autonomy

This first attribute holds that professionals enjoy wide leeway to operate without the supervision of officials outside of their respective areas of expertise. The available public affairs literature indicates that U.S. Army military communicators do not operate with a high degree of autonomy. Individual military communicators share different experiences. Within the author's military career, certain commanders grant high autonomy to public affairs staffs, while others do not. Levels of autonomy are dependent on variables that include the commander's leadership

style, unit mission and individual capability of the military communicator. Examined public relations literature speaks to a growing influence of chief communication officers, but indicates similar challenges of influence and resourcing faced by low and mid-level civil communicators.

Attribute 2: Self-Policing to a Vocational Code of Ethics

This attribute holds that professionals hold their peers accountable through a formal process unique to the body of expertise. Traditionally, public affairs officials cite the *Department of Defense Principles of Information* as a guiding ethic (Department of Defense, 2000). In 2020, the U.S. Army published an updated public affairs regulation that includes a code of professional ethics (Department of the Army, 2020). The reviewed literature acknowledges instances in which military communicators violated basic communication ethics, which is not a punishable offense within current operating regulation. Uniformed military personnel are held to other specific standards of personal behavior by the *Uniform Code of Military Justice.* In this way, U.S. Army military communicators are closer to fitting the parameters of professionals than their civilian counterparts, because of being subject to military law. However, this is separate from the concept of formal accountability to the public affairs community for adhering to ethical standards of excellence in communication practices. Military communicators who do not adhere to ethical principles of the vocation are not generally subject to an investigation of malpractice by an agent of the military public affairs community. Unlike physicians, attorneys and members of the clergy, those who work in civil communication are not required to be members of a credentialing body, nor formally subject to compulsory accountability to a communication body.

Attribute 3: Promulgates a Sense of Corporateness among the Community of Practitioners

This attribute holds that professions create and maintain bodies that promote expertise and a sense of community among those who practice the craft. The public affairs force, at large, lacks a general sense of corporateness. Military communicators work for, and are evaluated by, the units they are assigned to rather by senior ranking members of the public affairs career field. There are instances of informal networks among military communicators who share best practices and attempt to enhance the field of work, based on factors including existing relationship, personality and shared perspectives on the status of the career field.

Literature surveyed did not speak to the corporateness of the civil communication community. Personal experience and observation of network events, award programs, and ongoing series of professional development offered held by chapters of the International Association of Business Communicators and the American Marketing Association provide a sense that making community is a priority among those who work in civil communication.

Attribute 4: Provides a Public Service that is Essential to Society

This attribute is based on achieving a perception that a type of work is essential to the proper functioning of society. The mission of the U.S. Army public affairs program is to retain the trust and confidence of the U.S. public in the nation's military (Department of the Army, 2020). The services that military communicators perform are critical to facilitating connection between the public and its military forces, and public accountability for military activities. Its members serve as the bridge between civil publics, and military units and personnel, by coordinating all official community and media interaction. The information reviewed during this study is inadequate to make a determination on this attribute for civil communication workers.

Attribute 5: Regarded as a Life-Long Calling by its Members

This attribute holds that professionals commit to long-term vocations and identify with developing expertise in those fields as a personal value. Research on this topic shows that most chief communication officers in the top global firms are long-term career communicators, while

most recent U.S. Army chiefs of public affairs come to the job from working in other military career fields (Spears, 2019). Literature reviewed for this study could not, however, offer generalizable findings on whether entry and mid-level communication practitioners identify with organizational communication work as a life-long calling. U.S. Army military communicators typically stay in that specialty through the remainder of their military careers, with many going on to careers in civil communication after leaving military service.

Attribute 6: Upholds Standards through Professional Development

This attribute holds that professions promulgate excellence in work practices by facilitating ongoing training, certification and informational events to enhance the professional body's ability to better serve the public. Though U.S. Army military communicators are required to complete military education requirements throughout their careers, most are not required or expected to complete ongoing communication-specific training beyond their initial qualification course at the Defense Information School. Additional communication-specific training and professional development is available at the Defense Information School, and through competitive opportunities to participate in a master's degree program in public relations and corporate communication at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., or a training with industry program at a large company or public relations firm. It is up to individual military communicators on whether to pursue ongoing educational and professional development opportunities. Literature reviewed in this study did not inform expectation for members of the civil communication community to participate in ongoing professional development.

Attribute 7: Full-Time, Non-Manual Occupation

This attribute separates professional workers from vocational workers, based on levels of physical labor versus levels of intellectual labor required for different fields of work. Those who work in military and civil communication are both in full-time, non-manual occupations. In spite of physical military training requirements, most military public affairs duties take place in an office setting, not unlike the environments that civil communicators work in.

Attribute 8: Certification and Specialized Training Controls Access to the Occupation

This attribute holds that professions must hold specific gates on training and certification for members to complete for entry. Military public affairs officials certify for the career field through standard military training required to wear the uniform, and by completing public affairs training at the Defense Information School. There is no standard requirement for entry-level civil communication work. Members of the civil communication community enter it with a wide array of experiences and educational backgrounds, often unrelated to communication studies.

Attribute 9: Operates According to a Theoretical or Practical Body of Theory

This attribute holds that professions revolve around unique and specific knowledge. Both military and civil communicators operate according to theories of communication, backed in research, case studies, and lessons learned from ongoing experiences to inform a practical body of theory that guides work practices.

Attribute 10: Acknowledged by the Public as Meeting the Requirements of a Profession

This attribute holds that professions must ultimately be considered as such through a sort of social contract with the public at large. The literature does not offer insight on whether the representative segments of the public perceive military or civil communicators to be professionals in the formal sense. Though public opinion polling consistently reports high public trust in the military institution, the author could not locate polling that specifically notes public perceptions with regard to military communicators.

Table 1.
Attributes of Professionalism

Evaluation Criteria	Military Communication	Civil Communication
Operates with a High Degree of Autonomy	Unable to Determine	Unable to Determine
Self-policing to a Vocational Code of Ethics	No	No
Promulgates a Sense of Corporateness across the Community of Practitioners	No	Yes
Provides a Public Service that is Essential to Society	Yes	Unable to Determine
Regarded as a Life-Long Calling by Members of the Profession	Yes	Unable to Determine
Upholds Standards through Professional Development	No	Unable to Determine
Full-Time, Non-Manual Occupation	Yes	Yes
Certification Controls Access to the Occupation	Yes	No
Operates according to a Theoretical and Practical Body of Theory	Yes	Yes
Acknowledged by the Public as Meeting the Requirements of a Profession	Unable to Determine	Unable to Determine
Summary of Professional Attributes	Meets Criteria: 5 Does not Meet Criteria: 3 Unable to Determine: 2	Meets Criteria: 3 Does not Meet Criteria: 2 Unable to Determine: 5

Source: Created by author.

Conclusion

This paper suggests that military communicators fit professional criteria more than their civilian counterparts. That said, there is work to do in both fields when it comes to enhancing the craft of organizational communication to play a healthy role in society. Though this paper hypothesizes that military communicators meet more professional attributes than their peers in civil communication, public affairs practices are yet criticized for instances of less effectiveness in comparison to their non-military peers (Bedford, 2016; Felix, 2015). Future research could enhance understanding of this topic by polling both corporate executive officers and senior military commanders to determine their perceptions of the communicators in their organizations, and conducting public opinion polling specifically focused on public perceptions of civil and military communicators. The author further recommends an update to research conducted by Stephens (1981) that surveyed public affairs officers on perception of value placed in their capabilities by the military institution. This line of inquiry should extend to those who work in civil communication, to offer insight on the similarities and differences in how military and civil communicators believe their roles are perceived.

This topic should hold a place of high importance among military commanders, who will face challenges unparalleled in history with the role of dis/misinformation on the future of national defense (Spears, 2021). The national defense apparatus needs communicators who can

think strategically and engage proactively, communicators who understand the array of human and technological factors at play in the public trust equation. Though with potentially less life-critical implications, corporate executives need communicators with the same kind of strategic skill. Moving toward a model of developing communication leaders who seek out professional legitimacy could play a substantive role in preparing communicators who can master the challenges of today and anticipate the challenges of tomorrow.

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Supporting Corporate Social Advocacy through Collective Action: The Role of Shared Group Anger, Efficacy, and Politicized Identity

Anli Xiao
University of South Carolina

Holly Overton
Penn State University

Abstract

This study examines Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA) as a form of collective action that is motivated by individuals' shared group efficacy, anger, and politicized identity. Adopting the Social Identity Model of Collective Action, this online survey (N = 273) found that shared group efficacy with the company led to higher intention to participate in CSA, engaging in PWOM, and providing financial support for the CSA cause. Individuals' identification with the company and the CSA cause also predicted intention to support CSA and PWOM. Sharing CSA cause-related anger with the company negatively predicted PWOM. Results offer practical advice how companies can lead and mobilize efforts to enact change.

Keywords: Corporate social advocacy, collective action, Social Identity Model of Collective Action

On May 26, 2020, George Floyd was killed after an arrest by a Minneapolis Police Department officer, leading to national unrest and protests against police brutality that swept the nation. An article in *The New York Times* suggested that the Black Lives Matter movement may be the largest movement in U.S. History (Buchanan, Bui, & Patel, 2020) with an estimated 15-25 million people participating in demonstrations. Several companies issued strong statements condemning police brutality, many including words of commitment to advocate for change and committing themselves to the cause. The Black Lives Matter movement is a prominent example demonstrating collective action among companies and individuals working together to stand up to police brutality and racial injustice. Other issues such as gender and marriage equality, health care reform, gun violence, and LGBTQ+ issues, also remain at the forefront, and have prompted action among companies that are engaging with sociopolitical issues and publics who are committed to improving conditions and bettering society. What remains unknown, however, is how publics and company efforts can most effectively work together as a form of group-based collective action.

This study aims to examine factors that serve as antecedents of the public's support for company efforts to engage with sociopolitical issues and the role they play in predicting publics' support of company efforts through collective action intention, financial support intention, and positive word-of-mouth (PWOM) intention. Specifically, this study adopts the Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA), which argues that politicized identity, shared group-based injustice (anger), and shared-group efficacy can explain how and why publics may decide to side with companies and advocate for their causes. This study provides new understanding of what drives people's supporting behaviors regarding CSA. Results of this study advance CSA scholarship through its application of the SIMCA model in this area of scholarship, as well as its examination of CSA and collective action. Practically, this study offers suggestions for organizational leaders and strategic communicators to better understand what motivates organizations' publics to work alongside companies to engage in action to drive social change.

Literature Review

Corporate Social Advocacy

The notion of companies taking a stance on controversial social-political issues, termed CSA (Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015), has become a more prominent and widely examined topic among scholars and professionals. While scholars have argued that CSA is worthy of "independent exploration" (Dodd & Supa, 2014, p. 13), widespread agreement of its conceptualization and differentiation from related concepts such as corporate social responsibility (CSR), CEO activism, and corporate political advocacy (CPA) does not yet exist in public relations literature (Browning et al. 2020). However, scholars have made strides toward clarifying CSA in relation to CSR. Researchers have noted that CSA differs from CSR as companies take a public stance on only one side of controversial issues, whereas CSR is generally considered as beneficial for society as a whole (Kim et al., 2020; Rim et al., 2020). Park and Jiang (2020) describe CSA as a corporation taking a definitive stance on a controversial issue and CSR as being "marked by an ambiguous attitude" (p. 5.). Browning et al. (2020) raise an important question about whether advocacy is a subset of CSR or a unique concept, ultimately noting that "CSR typically strives for more universal support that advocacy explicitly shuns" (p. 1029). Therefore, while more research is needed to conceptually distinguish CSA from related concepts, recent public relations scholarship has provided a solid foundation for future investigations.

Extant literature has examined various aspects of CSA, including testing the viability of theoretical arguments as predictors of purchase intention (Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015), investigating psychological determinants of individuals' engagement with companies' CSA (Overton et al., 2020; Park & Jiang, 2020), and focusing on how individuals communicate about CSA on social media (Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Gaither et al., 2018; Rim et al., 2020), among other examples. A number of real-life examples have been examined, including Nike taking a stance on racial injustice through its ad campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick (Li, Kim, & Alharbi, 2021; Kim et al., 2020; Waymer & Logan, 2021), Starbucks' efforts to propel conversations about race in America (Abitbol et al., 2018), and Dick's Sporting Goods taking a stance on gun control reform (Gaither et al., 2018). However, CSA research to date has been largely fragmented, and while antecedents and outcomes of CSA are beginning to be examined, little is known about what specifically drives publics to support companies' CSA efforts by taking action themselves through group-based collective action.

Collective Action and the SIMCA model

Collective action (CA) is defined as representative group actions aimed at improving the conditions of the group in response to an objective or subjective state, or sense of disadvantage (Wright, Taylor & Moghaddam, 1990; Zomeren, Popstmes & Spears, 2008). These actions can range from group-based actions such as participating in demonstrations to individualistic actions such as signing petitions (Van Zomeren, Postmes, et al., 2008). Regardless of the type of actions, the core of CA lies in individuals' self-categorization as a group member and their social identity to support the action. As a complicated form of group action, CA has triggered scholarly inquiries from sociology, psychology, political science, and economics, etc. (Zomeren, et al., 2008). Scholars have investigated CA as a social norm (Ostrom, 2000), the psychological antecedents of CA participation (Duncan, 2012), the economic impact of CA (Bardhan, 2010) as well as what factors lead to CA participation (Ostrom, 1998; Muller & Opp, 1986).

Recent CA research views CA as an outcome of a complicated process that integrates socio and psychological factors. The Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA) incorporates socio-psychological perspectives to explain this complicated human behavior (Zomeren, et al., 2008). Based on thorough analysis of past research, Zomeren et al. (2008) identified three factors that predict collective actions: politicized identity, group-based injustice, specifically group-based emotional experience and group efficacy. Politicized identity is defined as the "politicized collective identity" that people use to "engage as self-conscious group members in a power struggle on behalf of their group knowing that it is the more inclusive societal context in which this struggle has to be fought out" (Simon & Klandermans, 2001, p. 319). Politicized identity enables individuals' "inner obligation" to participate in activities for social change (Stürmer, 2000; Stürmer & Simon, 2004). Group-based injustice is the subjective experience of inequality or deprivation experienced by the group. Group-based injustice resonates with group-based emotions, specifically group-based anger, as group-based injustice usually arouses group-based anger, which invokes collective actions (Zomeren, et al., 2008). Group efficacy is defined as shared belief in a group's ability to unite and resolve the grievances (Zomeren, et al., 2008; see also Bandura, 1995, 1997; Folger, 1986, 1987). In addition, the authors argue that as a core component of CA, politicized identity bridges group-based injustice and group efficacy, as it is positively linked to both (see Figure 1).

The SIMCA model has been empirically examined in various types of collective actions. For example, Ochoa, Manalastas, Deguchi and Louis (2019) utilized this model to explain men's allied CA to improve conditions for women and to reduce gender discrimination in Japan and the

Philippines. SIMCA model was also used to explain support for interreligious violence in Indonesia (Setiawan, Scheepers & Sterkens, 2019) and CA tendencies among Filipino domestic workers in Lebanon (Adra, Hard, Li & Baumert, 2019). One study also examined the impact of online news media using the SIMCA model and confirmed the SIMCA model when predicting people's intention to participate in the Hongkong protest (Chan, 2017). In addition, Chan (2017) found that group anger and group efficacy mediated the relationships between various methods of news consumption and collective action intentions.

[insert Figure 1 here]

CSA, Collective Action and the SIMCA Model

This study argues that an organization's publics' support for CSA is a distinctive form of collective action for several reasons. First, the issues corporations stand for usually speak to improving the conditions for disadvantaged groups, such as people of certain genders, LGBTQ status, races, or people who deprived of certain rights (gun rights, abortion, etc.). Second, by publicly taking a stance on these issues and allocating resources to help with these issues, companies are essentially playing a leading role in organizing and facilitating the movement, which, according to Olson (1965), is critical for successful collective actions. From an individual perspective, when publics demonstrate their support for a corporation's advocacy efforts, they are showcasing both their support to address the issue and their support for the corporation's action of taking a stand on the issue. Extant research has demonstrated how individuals support companies' CSA efforts through purchase intention (Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015), positive word-of-mouth intention (Kim et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021; Overton, 2020), and pro-company support in general (Browning et al., 2020). These actions are, at least partially, driven by their motivation to improve the status of certain disadvantaged groups or to fight for justice or change in some capacity. When it comes to a specific, controversial issue that aims at improving the condition of either objectively or subjectively defined disadvantaged groups, a company and its publics essentially join forces to address the issue through various types of activistic behaviors. Therefore, publics' support for CSA can be seen as a type of collective action. Investigating support for CSA from the angle of collective action can help us understand why and how publics decide to side with companies and advocate for their causes.

This study adopts the SIMCA model to investigate the antecedents of publics' support for CSA. Specifically, this study argues that when publics support a company's CSA stance, they join forces with the company and both individuals and the company they support are obliged to fight for social change. When supporting a company's stance on a controversial issue, individuals and companies form a group to showcase their support on the stance and to resolve a group grievance. Publics believe that the company echoes their experience of inequality on the issue and they all feel angry about the situation. Both publics and the company believe that working together, they can do something to change. And the cause-related relationships between the company and its publics facilitate the collective, politicized identity as members and supporters of the cause. Therefore, individuals' supportive behaviors toward a company's CSA can be explained by the SIMCA model. Specifically, this study hypothesizes the following based on the model's arguments:

H1: Politicized identity positively predicts (a) collective action intention (b) financial support intention and (c) PWOM intention about the company.

H2: shared group-based injustice (anger) about the issue positively predicts (a) collective action intention (b) financial support intention (c) PWOM intention about the company.

H3: Shared group efficacy positively predicts (a) collective action intention (b) donation intention (c) PWOM intention about the company.

H4: Politicized identity predicts (a) group-based injustice and (b) group efficacy.

Method

Participants

An online survey was conducted with a nationally representative U.S. sample recruited through Lucid Theorem, a panel service that "allows researchers to target U.S. nationally representative respondents" (Lucid, n.d.). The final sample included N = 273 participants with an average age of 46.20 (SD = 17.32). Among the participants, 46.3% (125) identified as male, 52.6% (142) identified as female, and 1.1% (3) reported binary. With regard to race, 77.2% (206) identified as White, 11.2% (30) Black or African American, 5.6% (15) Hispanic, 2.2% (6) Asian, and 3.7% (10) reported "Other."

Procedure

A pre-test (N = 149) was conducted via Lucid to test the survey flow and settings, as well as the survey measures. The researchers improved item wording after reviewing pre-test results. The final survey was launched on *Qualtrics* and survey invitations were sent out via Lucid Theorem. After indicating implied consent, participants were provided with the following information: "Many companies are taking a public stance on social issues. Some examples of social issues include immigration, same-sex marriage, and health care reform, among others. Think about an example of a company whose stance on a social issue you agree with/support." They were then asked to write the name of the company and the issue the company supported and were asked to keep this example in mind while they answered the questions in the survey. Participants then answered questions pertaining to their supportive behaviors toward the company and the issue, their politicized identity, group-based injustice (anger), and group efficacy. Demographic information was recorded.

Measures

All items were measured using 1-7 Likert scales with 1 = Strongly Disagree and 7 = Strongly Agree. Measures for shared group efficacy, politicized identity, shared group injustice (anger), and collective action intent were adopted from Zomeren, Postmes & Spears (2012).

Shared group efficacy was measured using four items. An example item was "As a supporter of the company's stance on this issue, I think the company and I can change the current situation related to the issue." The items were combined to form a reliable index (M = 5.12, SD = 1.39, Cronbach's α = .95).

Politicized identity was measured using four items. A sample item was "I see myself among a group that supports the company's stance on the issue." The items were reliable, so they were combined to form an index (M = 5.55, SD = 1.24, Cronbach's α = .92).

Shared group injustice (anger) was measured by using three items. An example item was "As a supporter of the company's stance on the issue, I feel angry about what's currently going on about the issue." Because the items were reliable, they were combined to form an index (M = 4.15, SD =, 1.79 Cronbach's α = .95).

Collective action intention was measured using four items and an example item read, "I would participate in a demonstration initiated by the company to help with the issue." The items were averaged to form a reliable index (M = 4.83, SD = 1.59, Cronbach's α = .93).

Positive word-of-mouth (PWOM) intention was measured using three items adapted from Alexandrov, Lilly, and Babakus (2013). An example item was "I would recommend this

company to others." The items were averaged to form a reliable index (M = 6.03, SD = 1.22, Cronbach's α = .96).

Financial support intention was measured using three items adapted from McKeever et al., (2019). An example item read "I would make a financial contribution to the company." The items were averaged to create a composite measure of financial support intentions (M = 4.33, SD = 1.74, Cronbach's α = .93).

Results

Model Adjustment and Model Fit

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted using AMOS to test the hypotheses. First, a confirmatory factor analysis was employed to test the measurement model. All independent and dependent variables were included in the measurement model as latent variables. The initial model estimation showed a good fit. χ^2 (173) = 324.62, p < .00. χ^2/DF ratio = 1.88, CFI = .976, RMSEA = .06, PCLOSE = .10 (90% CI: .048 - .067), SRMR = .037. These fit indexes indicate that the model is a good fit based on Hu and Bentler (1999).

A structural model was built upon the measurement model to test the proposed model. The initial model showed a good fit, but the model was not structurally specific and distinctive when compared to the measurement model. After removing insignificant regression lines and making model adjustments based on AMOS modification indices and theory, the final model showed a good fit. χ^2 (177) = 330.531, p < .00. χ^2/DF ratio = 1.87, CFI = .976, RMSEA = .06, PCLOSE = .11 (90% CI: .047 - .067), SRMR = .037. The structural model is distinctive from the measurement model based on chi-square difference test, χ^2 (4) = 5.912, p = .21. Figure 2 displays the final model.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

According to the final model, H1(a) and H1(c) were supported, and H1(b) was not supported. H2(a) and H2(b) were not supported. The relationship between shared group anger and positive word of mouth was significant, but negatively related. Therefore, H2(c) was significant, but not in the hypothesized direction. H3(a), H3(b), and H3(c) as well as H4 were supported. In addition, a positive relationship between financial support intention and collective action intention was identified.

Discussion

This study investigated the application of the SIMCA model in the context of CSA to explain what predicts publics' support for CSA. Results showed that the model could be successfully applied to explain why publics support companies' CSA efforts. Specifically, publics' collective action intention was predicted by publics' politicized identity and their sense of shared efficacy with the company to resolve the issue. People's financial support intention was predicted by shared group efficacy, but not by politicized identity or group-based injustice. And PWOM was positively predicted by shared group efficacy and politicized identity. Contrary to our hypothesis, shared group anger showed a negative impact on PWOM about the company. These findings are partially consistent with arguments proposed by Zomeren et al. (2008) with regard to the three factors that predict collective actions, as politicized identity and group efficacy did, indeed, predict collective action in the current study. Publics' support for a company's stance on controversial issues is driven by their internalized identity to join forces with the company to support for the cause as well as their confidence in themselves and the company in resolving the issue. However, group-based injustice (anger) did not serve as a

predictor of collective action intentions. This finding is consistent with Austin et al.'s (2020) study about the role of anger and efficacy in predicting attitudes, communication behaviors, and financial behaviors. The authors found that anger was a weak predictor of attitudes, a moderate predictor of communication behaviors, and a negative predictor of financial behaviors. This suggests that anger itself may not lead to collective action in the context of CSA, but that efficacy is a key factor in driving collective action intentions along with other types of support such as donating to the effort or speaking positively about the company's efforts in this regard.

Results of this study also expand the predictability of the SIMCA model to more supportive behaviors in addition to collective action intention. Specifically, the high regression coefficients showed that politicized identity also strongly predicted PWOM intention (regression coefficient: .61), and shared group efficacy also predicted financial support intention (regression coefficient: .70). Strengthening people's politicized identity and their sense of membership with the company to support a CSA cause can encourage people to share their positive thoughts about the company. Making people feel like they can work together with the company to resolve the issue also raises their financial support intention, which also enhances their collective action intention. Companies should again focus on heightening people's politicized identity and shared group efficacy to bring about positive impact to the company as well as the CSA cause.

The successful application of the SIMCA model to the context of CSA also suggests that publics perceive companies having the power to leverage, lead and organize publics' efforts when it comes to controversial issues, reflecting Olson's (1965) argument about the central role of organizations in collective action. Companies should see their interested publics as resources for their stances when organizing collective actions that are relevant to their values. Results of this study also suggests that collective actions nowadays are taking new forms. Future research should consider companies who are taking stances on controversial issues to be important players in organizing and supporting collective actions.

Theoretical Implications

This study yields many interesting theoretical implications. First, it adopted the SIMCA model to examine publics' support for CSA. Results indicated that factors that are relevant for collective actions are also important for predicting support for CSA. This means that support for CSA can be seen as a way of participating in corporate-sponsored collective actions. In addition, this study extends the SIMCA model in that instead of only focusing on individuals and their participation in social change, this study incorporates the important role of corporations in facilitating social change. Results showed that corporations and their CSA efforts indeed play a positive role of encouraging publics to join corporations to make changes. This study also successfully extended the SIMCA model to include more outcome variables, such as financial support intention and PWOM intention. Moreover, this study enriches our theoretical understanding of CSA as it provides implications on why publics support for CSA and how corporations can play a central role in organizing publics' support while taking stances on controversial issues. Factors identified in this study, including group efficacy, group anger and politicized identity, were important indicators of how much publics will support a company's CSA.

Practical Implications

Results of this study carry important practical implications as well. First, the high regression weight between shared group efficacy and CA intention indicated that when communicating about their CSA efforts, corporations should stress how publics and corporations together are able to change the situation. Doing so would increase publics' intention to take

action and to donate for the cause. Strengthening publics' politicized identity and emphasizing that the corporations and publics are in the same group (to support a cause) can also increase the intention to participate in CA and to spread PWOM about the cause. In fact, it is crucial that corporations emphasize the shared, issue-relevant group membership and make sure the publics acknowledge and understand that the corporations are on their side to support the issue, because the heightened politicized identity can also enhance the sense of group efficacy and shared group anger. In contrast to the original SIMCA model, anger might not be as important in the context of CSA, as indicated by the lack of significant and positive relationships.

While recent movements, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, prompted action from millions of individuals and companies alike, there did not appear to be an established relationship between companies' CSA efforts and individuals' efforts. This research offers insights for how companies can establish effective approaches and communication strategies to better integrate publics with their efforts. This would not only strengthen the efforts of a given movement, but it would also potentially strengthen organization-public relationships in various ways.

Limitations

Although this study contributes to our understanding of how to move individuals toward collective action, it is not without limitations or room for expansion. First, individuals were asked to think about an example of a company whose stance on a social issue they agreed with and/or supported in some way. While efforts were taken to remove poor-quality responses, it is always possible that recalling specific examples may have been challenging for some participants. There are also inherent limitations with using this method, as individuals choose different examples with which they already have varying levels of efficacy and anger toward the issue. It should also be noted that data collection took place during a period of time when social and political issues were especially heightened. Finally, while this study examined reported supportive intentions toward a CSA example during a given time, longitudinal analyses that examine these trends over time could be conducted to examine the relationship more thoroughly between anger, efficacy, and politicized identity. Using experimental research testing the effects of variables would be a useful next step in exploring the SIMCA model in a CSA context.

Conclusion

To summarize, this study successfully extended the SIMCA model to examine publics' support for CSA. Results of this study indicated that factors such as shared sense of efficacy, group anger towards the issue and politicized identity were significant predictors of various supportive behaviors toward a company's CSA effort.

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Figure 1
Hypothesized Model

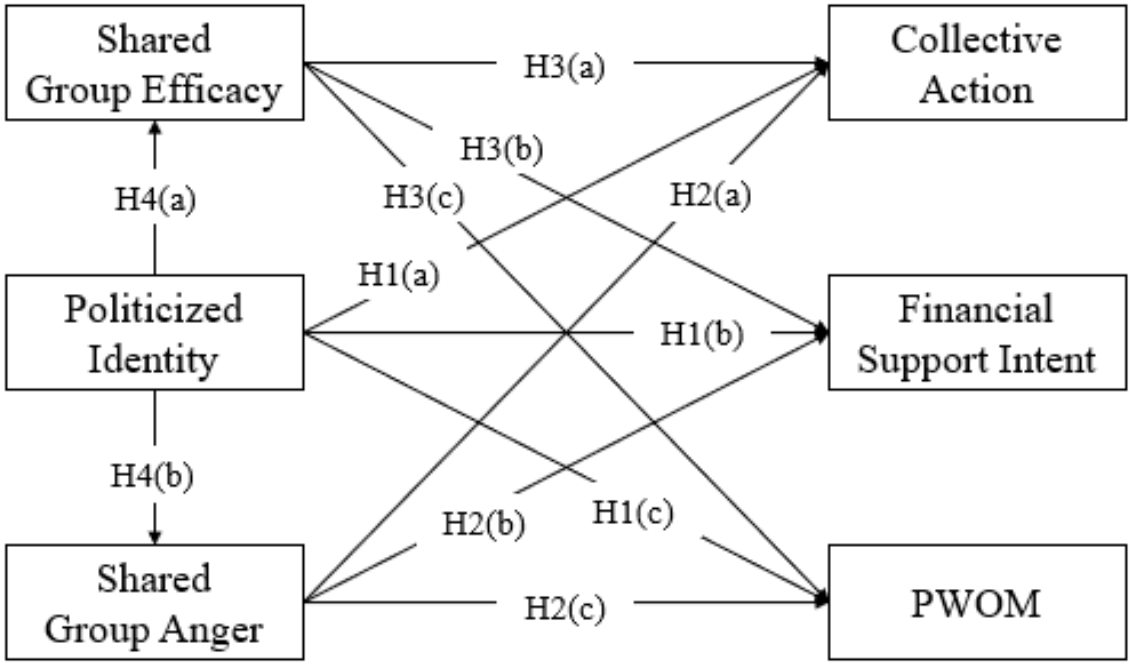
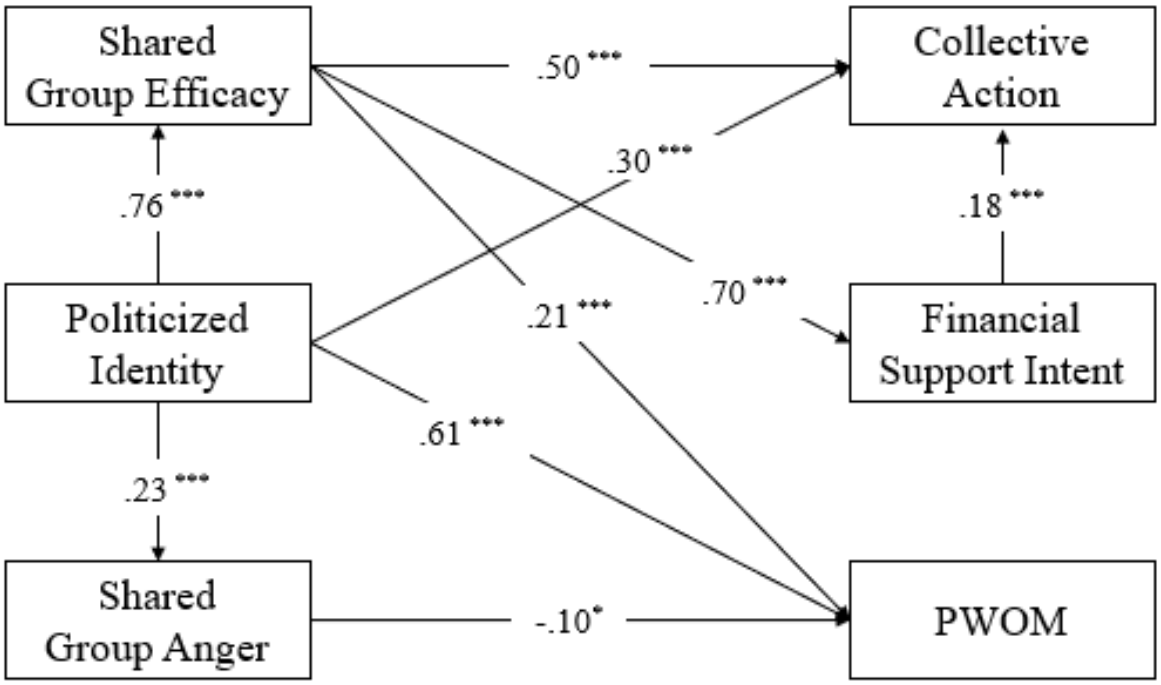


Figure 2
Structural Equation Model Results



Note: χ^2 (177) = 330.531, p < .00. χ^2/DF ratio = 1.87, CFI = .976, RMSEA = .06, PCLOSE = .11 (90% CI: .047 - .067), SRMR = .037.
$^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < 0.1$ $^{***}p < .00$

Corporate Apologies across Cultures: A Mixed Method Approach to Compare American and Korean Apologia during Corporate Crises

Jeongwon Yang
Syracuse University

Abstract

This study qualitatively and quantitatively compared 80 American and Korean apology statements during corporate crises to 1) deductively test Benoit's image restoration theory, 2) inductively develop new crisis strategies through an empirical exploration of different cultural contexts, and 3) examine how cultural differences play into corporate apologia.

Keywords: Corporate communication, corporate apology, crisis communication, intercultural communication

Introduction

A simple three-word sentence like "I am sorry" might carry different weight and interpretations across different cultures. For instance, an apology made by a corporate from western culture might not be considered insincere from East Asian culture whereas profuse apologies in one culture were perceived as an incompetent communication behavior in another culture (Garcia, 1989; Park & Guan, 2009). According to Goffman (1971), apology indicates a "remedial interchange" which involves a process of admitting responsibility, expressing remorse, and imploring forgiveness. Under a corporate context, apologia denotes a communicative effort to protect corporate reputation from accusations of wrongdoings (Coombs et al., 2011) and a rhetorical strategy to restore social legitimacy, which is a consistency between organizational and stakeholder values (Hearit, 1994).

Concerning the rise of multinational corporations and growing needs for effective strategic communication with international stakeholders, numerous scholars underscored the lack of multicultural perspectives and excessive reliance on Western-focused approaches in the field of public relations (Culbertson & Chen, 1996; Wakefield, 1996; Gabriel & Taylor, 1999; Ihator, 2000; Grunig & Dozier, 2003) and crisis communication (Stohl, 2001; Lee, 2005; Coombs et al., 2011). For instance, Grunig and Dozier, (2002) reinforced the need for considering culture when applying the excellence principles as Western practitioners' practice of two-way symmetrical model in the Western style of bargaining may be received by Asian stakeholders as one-way, asymmetrical or even ethnocentric. Other scholars criticized the 'America knows best' cultural worldview, embedded in American organizations' demand for adopting and standardizing their own management styles into other countries (Wakefield, 1996). Shedding a light on a deficiency in international crisis communication writings and underlying ethnocentrism among public relations researchers and practitioners, Stohl (2001) highlighted that international crisis communication is not a simple transfer of Western crisis communication practices to new cultures. Crisis communication should not be confined to adapting Western approaches in different crisis settings but should expand by developing new strategies and approaches, applicable to various cultural settings around the world (Culbertson & Chen, 1996).

The importance of culture in crisis communication is raised through, for instance, Lee 's (2004) study on how Hong Kong and American consumers engage in crisis dissimilarly. In the study, although Hong Kong consumers demonstrated similar patterns of reactions toward a crisis as did their Western counterparts by expressing low trust and purchase intention toward the organization, they did not engage in a collective protest but carried out an individual boycott as a form of punishment (Lee, 2004). Lee (2004) warned PR practitioners that adopting Western-cultural paradigm to interpret such reaction as the absence of grievance will lead to a failure in successful crisis communication. As a result, effective crisis communication is inevitably subject to specific cultural principles as it pertains to what stakeholders of other cultures value and how they interpret and express themselves during a corporate crisis (Lee, 2005). In this vein, it is imperative to examine cultural differences in corporate apologies and their crisis response strategies, as communicative behaviors or speech acts like apology are not simply results of norms of situations but rather, are reflective of cultural attributes like communication styles and an emphasis on relational harmony (Lakoff, 2001; Wierzbicka, 1985; Park & Guan, 2009).

Addressing such research gaps and sustained demands for non-western perspectives in crisis communication, this study qualitatively and quantitatively compared American and Korean apology statements during corporate crises to 1) deductively test Benoit (1997)'s image restoration theory, 2) inductively develop new crisis response strategies through an empirical

exploration of different cultural contexts, and 3) delve into how cultural factors play into corporate apology rhetoric by employing four Hofstede's cultural dimensions that had relatively high discrepancies between US and Korea (power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, and long-term orientation).

Literature Review

Corporate Apologia

As one of the chief rhetorical approaches in crisis communication, corporate apologia is a company-crafted communicative efforts to reduce negative consequences of a crisis, to restore the organization's image (Benoit 1997), to ease public anger (Thomas & Millar, 2008), and for corporations to gain a pro-social status after a crisis (Lyon & Cameron, 2004). Apologia is also depicted as a public ritual in which organizations follow a standardized script and perform conventional expressions of remorse to complete the drama and accomplish a task of escaping from guilt through speech (Miller, 1984; Tavuchis, 1991)(HBH). Bauman (1989) maintained that the use of speech in apologia attests to a fact that it is a performance, designed to be exhibited to the audience, who judges its quality and sincerity (Hearit & Roberson, 2010). The need for apologia is often raised when there exist accusations of wrongdoings (Hearit, 2006), attacks on organization's public persona (Dionisopolous & Vibbert, 1988), and violations of social legitimacy (Hearit, 1994).

Hearit (2006) also established a normative and practice-oriented model called rhetorical model of apologetic ethics which assisted researchers and practitioners to evaluate the quality of communication and ethics of apology statements. The model offers criteria of ideal standards of ethics (truthful; sincere; voluntary; timely; addressing of all stakeholders; and performing in an appropriate context) (Hearit, 2006). In this model, he highlighted six features that constitute a successful apologia: 1) when a guilt is expatiated; 2) when an apology is well-performed and appear sincere; 3) when an apology seems voluntary; 4) when a story is completed to an extent that a guilt is absolved and the social expectations are met through the apologia; 5) when an apologia adheres to the values they initially violated; and 6) when an apologia seems ethical. A successful corporate apologia ends through fulfilling these features and thus, completing the ritualistic script (Hearit, 2006). Additionally, Hearit and Roberson (2010) also described four types of apologetic crisis contexts in their more recent study: scandals and illegalities; accidents; product safety incidents; and social irresponsibility.

Concerning a fact that apologizing is a social and cultural behavior that resonates with social norms in any given culture, culture is an incontestable attribute in forming effective apologia. However, Hearit's model, as illustrated by Frandsen and Johansen (2010) did not address culturally sensitive practices or guidelines in apologia to cope with intercultural crises. The model does not work as intended due to the process of globalization, political, religious, sociocultural, and linguistic dissimilarities which made organizations easier to deviate from sociocultural standards and harder to apologize for their transgressions (Coombs et al., 2010). In regards with this, Coombs et al. (2010) asserted the needs for revision of Hearit's model by considering cultural factors and global settings. Thus, this study adds intercultural perspectives by exploring and comparing corporate apologia of non-western companies to depart from parsimonious application of corporate apologia.

In addition to Hearit's model (2006), other attempts to extend corporate apologia and take rhetorical approaches to present crisis response strategies have been made, as exemplified

by impression management theory (Allen & Caillouet, 1994) and image restoration theory (Benoit, 1997).

Image Restoration Theory

According to Coombs et al. (2010), Benoit's work on image restoration theory (IRT) improved corporate apologia as a more refined tool for crisis communication research. Image restoration theory combines rhetoric, which includes apologia, with social science to induce practical crisis response strategies (Coombs et al., 2010). The theory lies under two assumptions: 1) corporate communication is a goal-oriented process; and 2) sustaining a positive image is a primary goal of organizational communication (Benoit, 1997). Benoit's image restoration theory is composed of five strategies: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Among the typologies, denial is simply denying the offensive action or shifting the blame to others (Benoit, 1997). Evasion of responsibility is comprised of provocation (claiming the act was a reasonable reaction to another's offensive act), defeasibility (absence of information or capacity), accident (mishap), and good intentions (meant well) (Benoit, 1997). Reducing offensiveness is a way of reducing the perceived degree of offensiveness of the act through bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking one's accuser, and compensation. Corrective action is a strategy to restore the situation to pre-crisis stage and prevent the crisis from reoccurring (Benoit, 1997). Lastly, mortification is taking responsibility and asking for forgiveness (Benoit, 1997). Benoit (1997) accentuated that mortification is the most recommended strategy for crisis managers as accepting responsibility for a crisis works most effectively when the public perceives the apology sincere.

IRT has been adopted in wide-ranging crises such as airlines (Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997), politics (Benoit & Brinson, 1999), and chemical industry (Brinson & Benoit, 1999). However, it has been minimally applied in quantitative studies and combined with other theories, to compare with other context-oriented approaches that examined emotions, semiotic form, and communication channels during crises (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010). Therefore, as a theoretical lens to examine crisis response strategies, embedded in the apology statements, this study will adopt Benoit's image restoration theory, the definitive work on the apologetic strategies (Hearit, 2006) under quantitative and multicultural contexts.

Cross-cultural Comparisons of Corporate Apologies

Apologizing is an inevitably cultural process as to whom, how, with what expressions an apology is conveyed embeds underlying cultural values (Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990). Despite its undeniable role in shaping crisis responses, the underdevelopment of intercultural crisis communication is often criticized for ethnocentrisms and cultural insensitivity of the field (Lee, 2005). Crisis communication largely concentrates on managerial and communicative process rather than organization or national cultures (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010). With respect to these issues, some scholars made attempts to address national cultures in responding to crises. For instance, Pindorf (1991) compared case studies of Japanese and American airline responses to airplane crashes and discovered that nationalistic, paternalistic, and collectivistic culture like Japan values human face of an organization and accepts responsibility immediately. Conversely, American airlines were slow and reluctant to take full responsibility (Pindorf, 1991). Additionally, Haruta and Hallahan (2003) attempted to combine image repair strategies with Hofstede's cultural dimensions to compare Japanese and American organizational responses to airplane crushes as they conducted analyses of newspaper stories and disclosed cultural differences in the use of apology, media strategies, and litigation concerns.

Hearit (2006) also examined cultural differences in defense strategies between American and Japanese cultures through a case study of the collision of American submarine and a Japanese fishing boat in 2001. The study demonstrated how difficult it is for Americans to fulfill Japanese expectations in terms of making the proper apology and restore sociocultural order of other cultures once it is disrupted, posing challenges to Hearit's western-focused model of ideal ethics (Hearit, 2006). Similarly, Frandsen and Johansen (2009a) adopted Hearit's model to rhetorically explore how Pope Benedict XVI's apology has been received differently by Muslims due to the cultural and rhetorical differences. They further developed a model called the rhetorical arena to include intercultural aspects in crisis communication (Frandsen & Johansen, 2007). They empirically applied the model to an exploration of how Danish prime minister's apology regarding Cartoon Affair dissatisfied the Muslim community as the apology was perceived insincere to them (Frandsen & Johansen, 2009b).

Furthermore, Taylor (2000) investigated a crisis of Coca-Cola, a multinational corporation and discovered the importance of taking cultural norms into account for crisis response as there were cultural variations within European countries in how they respond to the international crisis. Departing from qualitative approaches, Maddux et al. (2011) conducted a survey and an experiment to compare apologies from collective-agency cultures (Japan) and individualist cultures (American) which induced a result that Japanese apologies were closely associated with remorse rather than assigning culpability. The study also demonstrated that apologies for integrity violations showed higher significant effects on trust repair for Japanese than did for Americans (Maddux et al., 2011). As mentioned above, undertook a comparative study on American and Hong Kong consumers' reactions to an organizational crisis, Lee (2004, 2005) found that compensation aroused more sympathy from the audience than the apology which does not align with the Western counterparts (Lee, 2004). Such finding is attributed to Eastern overuse of apologies, which are far more ritualized and routinized than those of Western cultures (Lee, 2004). Another attempt to contribute cultural perspectives to international crisis communication is Huang et al (2005)'s study on examining western strategies under the Taiwanese context. Although strategies like concession, justification, excuse, and denial were observed from both Western and Asian cultures, diversion, differentiating and generating a new issue were newly generated strategies that only corresponded to Taiwanese strategies (Huang et al., 2005). Such findings implicate potential contributions of cross-cultural studies to broadening and contextualizing crisis communication research.

As demonstrated in the aforementioned literatures, there are dire needs for multicultural approaches to public relations and crisis communication to address increasing demands for communicating with international stakeholders. Although there had been numerous research conducted on exploring crisis response strategies under intercultural contexts, minimal attempts have been made to conduct mixed-methods approaches to deductively test pre-established rhetorical theories on crisis communication and inductively generate new strategies that are derived from both Western and Eastern apologia. Moreover, even though the cross-cultural studies focused on particular crises, the present study examines 80 apology statements to compare repeated patterns in apologia. Therefore, to fill these research gaps, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: What rhetorical devices and crisis response strategies are observed in American and Korean apology statements?

RQ2: How are crisis response strategies embedded in apology statements qualitatively different across two cultures?

RQ3: How are crisis response strategies embedded in apology statements quantitatively different across two cultures?

Methodology

In order to explore aforementioned research questions, the paper conducted a quantitative and a qualitative content analysis of 80 corporate apology statements in English and Korean (40 respectively). To collect the statements, a convenience sampling has been used via google image search and applying the following sampling criteria: a statement should 1) be written and published by corporations; 2) address either American or Korean audiences; 3) be long enough to analyze; and 4) include indicators of an apology. The research aims to quantitatively and qualitatively examined cultural variations in crisis response strategies and rhetorical devices, embedded in apology statements since rhetorical or text-oriented approaches are often utilized to depict what and how an organization communicates during a crisis situation (Frandsen et al., 2010).

For a qualitative content analysis, the first round of line-by-line open coding and the second round of axial and selective coding to collapse similar and relevant codes into overarching categories were performed via the NVivo software. The first round of coding was a line-by-line open coding, a method to freely and unrestrictedly evaluate the texts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). From the line-by-line coding, a total of 13 and 14 initial codes from English and Korean samples have been created respectively in addition to IRT (Benoit, 1997)'s 11 sub-categories (See Table 1). Then, axial coding has been undertaken as the author thoroughly reviewed the texts and grouped recurring patterns of texts into categories, which are stepping stones of generating meanings (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Axial coding linked the main categories with subcategories based on their conceptual similarities and associations (Charmaz, 2014; Simons et al., 2008). In the process, the subcategories that correspond to IRT's original categories were placed whereas subcategories that do not resonate with any of IRT categories were located separately. Finally, to cope with the remaining uncategorized subcategories, selective coding was conducted to further refine and unite categories based on overarching ideas and concepts and to derive new categories that eventually expand the original IRT typologies.

For quantitative content analysis, each line that falls under the generated categories was counted toward a corresponding category. Then, a percentage of the lines was calculated from the total number of lines of the apology statement. This process was performed to capture the proportion of the typologies in each apology statement which standardizes the external variations such as different length and words of apology statements. Then, based on the recorded percentage of each category, the independent sample t-test has been conducted to compare the mean proportion of the used categories between English and Korean apologies via SPSS. Before the procedure, 10% of the sample size has been randomly sampled from both Korean and English apologies for calculating an intercoder reliability. Two bilingual coders were trained and coded the sampled 10% and generated a mean intercoder reliability (Krippendorff's alpha of 0.814) which is a satisfactory level (α>0.75).

Result

As a result, two new strategies were generated by combining sub-categories that did not fall under IRT strategies: 1) gratifying consumers and 2) appealing sincerity. Furthermore, new sub-categories and examples, drawn from both cultures were added under pre-established strategies of IRT (See Appendix). Resulted by the qualitative textual coding, new subcategories have not been added to 1) Denial, 2) Evasion of responsibility, and 5) Mortification for both

countries as they employed these strategies in a relatively congruent manner between themselves and with the original theory. All subcategories of Denial and the subcategory, a) Provocation of Evasion of responsibility were not found in any of the apologies. However, for the reducing offensiveness category, a new subcategory was added for both countries: reminding what corporate stands for. For example, a Korean company stated, "we serve sharing and righteousness as the pillars of our companies" which was similar to an English apology that emphasized, "We consider diversity to be a fundamental value to be fully upheld, respected, and at the forefront of every decision we make." For Korean apologies, another new subcategory called 'Emphasizing fairness and transparency' have been added additionally to 3) Reducing offensiveness as numerous Korean apologies used expressions like "we will thoroughly investigate and inform you," "we will be devoted to full causal investigation and release a subsequent statement for your updates," and "we will promote transparency in all processes so that none of our customers are unfairly disadvantaged."

Furthermore, since subcategories for 4) Corrective action have not been introduced in the IRT, four new categories are added for both countries. Among the new subcategories, a) assurance it will not happen again and b) Promise for improvement were observed for both countries while a subcategory, c) Resource allocation was spotted from English apologies and b) CEO resignation and c) Measures on employees were observed from Korean apologies. Resource allocation indicates a company's proposing of a specific amount of money allocated to resolve the current problems or prevent future occurrence of the crisis, as shown from Airbnb's promise of "implementing a $50,000 Guarantee, protecting the property of hosts from damage by Airbnb guests." On the other hand, both CEO resignation and Measures on employees are exemplified as punitive measures to hold the internal members of responsibility to mitigate public discontent. Although d) Promise for improvement was both found from Korean and English apologies, English apologies frequently used phrases that include "make things right" to highlight their determination for betterment. On the other hand, Korean apologies used expressions to convey messages like "we will try hard" or a metaphoric expression like "turning over a new leaf" to emphasize their vows to start from a clean slate.

To further elaborate on two newly generated categories, a) Empathizing pain and d) Showing gratitude for love among the five subcategories of 6) Gratifying consumers, co-occurred in both cultures. However, only American companies used sentences that correspond with subcategories of b) Reminding customers' values to companies, c) Reminding customers' voices are heard, and e) Humor. English apologies attempted to gratify consumers by highlighting that how much their consumers mean to them and they are open to consumers' voices. Moreover, they used humor and casual tones to overturn negative consumer sentiment:

> We're getting another voucher in the post to you as we speak (one that does work), so please use this voucher instead. It will give you a savings of £2.99 off any innocent drink. The one in your card doesn't, but you can keep it as a memento of our stupidity if you like.

Conversely, Korean apologies had new subcategories like b) Earning trust back and c) Positioning consumers higher which showed a stark contrast from American apologies by approaching customers with more serious tone. For instance, as reflected from their frequent uses of expressions such as "we bow our heads to apologize," "thank you for scolding us," and "we beg for your generosity," Korean companies' gratification strategy is to empower the consumers to reinforce the vertical relationship between consumers and producers. Another new category, 7) Appealing sincerity includes subcategories of 'Reflection' and 'Exaggeration with dramatic

speech' in both countries. Reflection is when the companies state what they lacked ethically and reflect on what they learned from this experience. An example would be "turning this incident into a powerful learning moment for the Gucci team and beyond." Exaggeration with dramatic speech is also another way of Appealing sincerity as American apologies often used adverbs like "extremely," "deeply," 'unequivocally," and "unreservedly" in front of 'sorry' or use superlative adjectives like "our deepest and most sincere apologies" to accentuate their messages. As for Korean apologies, this strategy was employed in a more complicated manner as they used the strategies to appear modest and humble by using phrases like "sorry for causing you concerns" and "we will engrave your criticisms and blames into our hearts" or using rhetorical devices like underlining self-deficiency and self-blame. For example, a company stated, "we are so embarrassed that we can never lift our heads for our mistakes." In addition to these two subcategories, English apologies started off the statement with their own personal accounts and feelings regarding the crisis to build intimacy with the readers which makes their apologies sound more convincing and humane. For instance, a company CEO shared her experiences to explain her wrongdoing:

> As a girl in my teens and early twenties, I had difficulty constructively expressing my intense feelings about what I witnessed in my ancestral land. Like many young people lacking life experience, I expressed myself by making insensitive remarks and statements of passion devoid of thought, not realizing the harm and offense these words would cause.

Another CEO shared his feeling in layperson and casual languages rather than filling the apology with formal sentences to shape the apology appear more straight from the heart by saying, "When we learned of this our hearts sank. We felt paralyzed, and over the last four weeks, we have really screwed things up."

For a quantitative analysis, an independent samples t-test and correlation analysis via SPSS were adopted to complement qualitative findings and thus, to quantitatively compare how the five strategies (Denial, Evading responsibility, Reducing offensiveness, Corrective action, and Mortification) of IRT in addition to the newly derived strategies were utilized similarly or differently in American and Korean apologies. First, according to the independent samples t-test, Corrective action was the only category that had a statistically significant difference between the two cultures with a result of $t(79) = 2.503$, $p = 0.014$. Korean apologies had higher average percentage of Corrective action (31.95%) than did English apologies (21.92%). Although the differences were not statistically significant, a higher tendency of Appealing sincerity has been observed from Korean apologies (38.7%) to compare with English apologies with 31.9%. Pertaining to Gratifying consumers, Korean apologies showed slightly higher percentage of 20.17% than did English apologies (16.39%). Lastly, English apologies had slightly more proportion of sentences that are attributed to Reducing offensiveness (27.96%) than did Korean ones (23.5%). The other two had less than 1% of differences.

Additionally, correlation analyses been conducted to explore which categories co-occur. The results for Korean apologies showed that Mortification and Corrective action had a positive correlation (r=0.388, p<0.05). Moreover, Appealing sincerity was negatively correlated with reducing offensiveness (r= -0.332, p<0.05). Evading responsibility appeared to have negative correlations with Gratifying consumers (r= -0.373, p<0.05) and Corrective action (r= -0.546, p<0.01). For English apologies, Appealing sincerity and Mortification were positively correlated

(r=0.405, p<0.05). On the other hand, Corrective action was negatively correlated with Evading responsibility (r= -0.394, p<05).

Discussion and Conclusion

First of all, the fact that the first strategy of IRT, Denial has been observed from neither of the apologies and that the second strategy, Evasion of responsibility attained relatively low percentages in both cultures reveals how companies in recent years are reluctant to use strategies that do not immediately admit the faults and shoulder responsibility. Such tendency resonates with Benoit (1997)'s suggestions on utilizing Corrective actions more than Denial and Evading responsibility and with an empirical study that revealed how apologies that actively admitted responsibility reduce public anger more than passive admission (Lee & Chung, 2012). In addition, as Evading responsibility has been more frequently observed fro m English apologies, it showed an inconsistent result from what Hofstede and Hofstede (2001) contended on how collectivist culture is more inclined to make more excuses in apologies to save face.

Reducing offensiveness of the current event was used more actively than the previous two in both cultures as forms of Minimization, Bolstering, Compensation, and a newly devised subcategory, Reminding what the corporate stands for. These strategies aim to mitigating the perceived offensiveness of a crisis to restore reputation through self-promotion (Li, 2017). The strategies to positively describe the companies or their past acts can offset negative consumer sentiment toward the corporates by heightening positive feelings (Benoit, 1997). Reminding the stakeholders of their positive relationships with the corporates in the past can also gravitate them to help protect organizational reputations (Coombs, 2010). Unlike American apologies, Korean statements underscored transparency and fairness they will hold in the resolving processes which is attributed to high uncertainty avoidance of Koreans according to Hofstede's dimension. Korea scored 85 for uncertainty avoidance whereas the US only scored 46 which shows a stark gap between the two cultures. People of cultures with high uncertainty avoidance have less tolerance toward risk and ambiguity as they feel uncomfortable in unstructured situations and require strict guidance (Hofstede, 2011). In other words, Korean apologies tended to ensure transparency and fairness in the crisis response statements to address the high consumer demands for unequivocal executions of subsequent crisis actions and continuous updates to overcome the perceived uncertainty.

Such propensity of Koreans' avoiding ambiguity is also reflected from the significantly higher average proportion of Corrective actions in the apologies. The fact that Corrective action was positively correlated with Mortification demonstrates how Mortification, or an act of apology by admitting faults, is subsequently followed by Corrective actions, attesting to the high frequency of Corrective actions. This can also be explained by the long-term orientation in Hofstede's dimensions which is a future-oriented perspective to endure the present for future (Hofstede, 2011). Conversely, a short-term orientation centers around the present and put strong emphasis on quick results (Hofstede, 2011). Koreans scored the highest score out of all countries (100) whereas Americans scored 26. Different rhetorical approaches to promise improvement between two cultures can also be explained by the short-term and long-term orientations as the expression, 'we will make things right' from American apologies is devoted to fixing things in the present while 'we will try hard' or 'we will turn over a new leaf' from Korean apologies are based on future improvement. Hence, drawing on Hofstede's dimensions, Korean consumers' cultural tendency to concentrate on long-term changes and might have induced companies to invest a high proportion of their apologies to explicating corrective actions that are comprised of future plans such as promise for improvement and new measures. In addition, in contrary to

American apologies, Korean apologies frequently mentioned CEO resignation and punitive measures on employees as demonstrations of taking crisis responsibility. CEO resignation can be interpreted in the context of highly collectivist culture in which audiences comprehend the causes of an event from contextual and group-level factors rather than individual actors (Maddux et al., 2011). This is also consistent with a previous finding that Japanese culture, another highly collectivist culture demands that the person at the top of the organization to be responsible and apologize on behalf of his or her subordinates (Haruta & Halahan, 2003). However, the finding that another subcategory, Measures on employees has been observed from Korean apologies deviates from the previously established distinction between collectivist and individualistic cultures. The previous studies described that the fundamental assumption of individualism is that the locus of control for events reside within individuals while casual factors in collectivist cultures are incited at the group or societal level (Maddux et al., 2011).

For Gratifying consumers, even though apologies from both cultures expressed their empathy toward consumers' pain, they employed dissimilar strategies to gratify consumers and eventually assuage their anger. Moreover, American companies vested a number of attempts to gratify consumers by highlighting their values and positions as partners. This view to shed light on the stakeholders' values and roles in collaborating with the organizations to combat a crisis resonates with Grunig (1989)'s two-way symmetrical model that acknowledges interdependent relationships between the organizations and the stakeholders. Additionally, American apologies often used jokes and casual tone in the apologies as jokes have been considered a strategy to cope with a loss of social approval without clearly admitting their faults (Park & Guan, 2009). On the other hand, Korean apologies used more vertical approaches to gratify consumers by reinforcing a hierarchy between companies and consumers. This is attributed to high power distance as Koreans scored 60 which is higher than Americans (40). Power distance is the degree of which less powerful members of the society perceive and expect that power is distributed equally (Hofstede, 2011). An old Korean saying of "customers are the king" in a way, mirrors a high power distance between consumers and producers which is socially and culturally constructed. Moreover, this result also conforms to a stance that an apology is perceived as expressing obedience and restoring back to order (Haruta & Halahan, 2003). Lastly, their uses of appealing sincerity can be explained by a fact that strong sympathetic expression makes apologies appear more sincere (gonodo-Madikizela, 2003) without overtly taking responsibility (Coombs, 2008). Vigorous apologies from Korean apologies to appeal sincerity is linked to collectivist culture's tendency to view feelings as more effective means to cope with conflict (Lee, 2004).

Addressing RQ1-4, the present study qualitatively and quantitatively compared Korean and American apologies by testing and expanding Benoit (1997)'s IRT under multicultural contexts. However, the paper have several limitations. It did not address how different types of crises and level of attributions can affect the rhetorical devices of apologies which calls for future research for applying the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) by using experiments. Also, a small sample size should also be addressed for future improvement. The research also failed to address limitations from globalization of audience and binary division of east and west. However, the study has both theoretical implications as it expands Benoit's IRT by testing it under an Eastern context. It also has practical implications for corporates and crisis managers to distribute higher proportion to addressing audiences' feelings, values, and power over voicing corporates' values and positive sides to grapple with crises. For American apologies, sincere and interactive tones that treat consumers as partners should be used while

Korean apologies should adopt humble yet practical approaches that position corporates lower and provide practical and unambiguous guidance for future. Most importantly, this study provided practical insights on importances of taking culture into account, for PR practitioners, is a way to improve two-way communication with stakeholders by taking an audience-oriented approach in communicating.

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Table 1
A Qualitative Comparison of Crisis Response Strategies between English and Korean Apologies

English	Korean
1. Denial	**1. Denial**
a. Simple Denial	a. Simple Denial
b. Shift the Blame	b. Shift the Blame
1. Evasion of responsibility	**1. Evasion of responsibility**
a. Provocation	a. Provocation
b. Defeasibility	b. Defeasibility
c. Accident	c. Accident
d. Good Intentions	d. Good Intentions
1. Reducing offensiveness of event	**1. Reducing offensiveness of event**
a. Bolstering	a. Bolstering
b. Minimization	b. Minimization
c. Differentiation	c. Differentiation
d. Transcendence	d. Transcendence
e. Attack Accuser	e. Attack Accuser
f. Compensation	f. Compensation
g. *Reminding what corporate stands for*	g. *Reminding what corporate stands for*
1. Corrective action	*h. Emphasizing fairness and transparency*[*]
a) Assurance it will not happen again	**1. Corrective action**
b) New measures	*a. Assurance it will not happen again*
c) Resource allocations[*]	*b. New measures*
d) Promise for improvement	*b) CEO resignation*[*]
1. make things right[*]	*c) Measures on employees*[*]
1. Mortification	*d) Promise for improvement*
a) Admission of faults	1. We will try hard[*]
1. Gratifying consumers	2. Turning over a new leaf[*]
a. Empathizing pain	**1. Mortification**
b. Reminding customers' values[*]	*a) Admission of faults*
c. Reminding their voices are heard[*]	***1. Gratifying consumers***
d. Showing gratitude for love and Support	*a. Empathizing pain*
e. *Humor*[*]	*b. Earning trust back*[*]
1. Appealing sincerity	*c. Positioning consumers higher*[*]
a. Reflection	*1. We bow our heads*[*]
1. General statements on ethics	*d. Showing gratitude for love and Support*
2. Learned lessons	***1. Appealing sincerity***
*b. Personal stories**	*a. Reflection*
a. Exaggeration with dramatic speech	1. General statements on ethics
1. Uses of adverbs for "sorry"[*]	2. Learned lessons
	b. Exaggeration with dramatic speech
	1. Sorry for causing you concerns
	2. Self-blame & Self-deficiency

Note. Italicized texts are inductively generated strategies and sub-categories in addition to five strategies of Benoit's image restoration theory (IRT). [*]= differences between English and Korean apologies.

Towards a Research Agenda for CommTech and Digital Infrastructure in Public Relations and Strategic Communication

Ansgar Zerfass
Jana Brockhaus
Leipzig University, Germany

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic and recent technological developments have accelerated the digital transformation of public relations and strategic communication. However, PR research has mainly focused on channels and instruments when discussing digitalization. This contribution widens the perspective. It presents a framework which elaborates on software and digital tools used for value-creating processes like stakeholder communications and internal advising (CommTech) and for supportive workflows (Digital Infrastructure). The research builds on literature from information systems, management, marketing, and communication research. The framework can be used by practitioners to analyze the current use of digital technology in their organization and guide decisions on future investments. The paper also proposes an agenda for future research in the field and illustrates nine areas of investigation which might expand the international body of knowledge.

Keywords: CommTech, Digital Infrastructure, Digitalization, PR, Strategic communication

Introduction

The digital transformation is perhaps the most important challenge for organizations of any kind in the last and coming decades (Nadkarni & Prügl, 2020). It has increased demands on managing public relations and strategic communication, but also provided new opportunities for the profession. Along this line, public relations scholars have extensively discussed the opportunities of digital technologies for more than two decades. However, the focus was mostly on instruments and platforms provided by those technologies (e.g., social media, websites, intranets) and their use by organizations and stakeholders.

Recently, this debate has been widened by asking how digital technologies modify communication processes along the whole stakeholder journey (Arthur W. Page Society, 2019; Weiner, 2021). This notion of *CommTech* (Communication Technology) in a broader sense was stimulated by a similar, but already more advanced debate in marketing called *MarTech* (e.g., Chaffey & Smith, 2017). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic and recent technological developments have accelerated the digital transformation of workflows in communication departments. *Digital infrastructure* is introduced to support virtual collaboration, to produce and align content, or to track resources and assignments. Moving administrative, creative, and managerial work to digital tools and software has changed the way professional communication is practiced (Zerfass *et al.*, 2020).

Practical challenges: The case of Siemens Healthineers

How do these developments manifest themselves in practice? This can be illustrated using the example of Siemens Healthineers, a global medical technology company which supports hospitals and healthcare providers with medical imaging (e.g., computed tomography scanners), laboratory diagnostics, and advanced therapies equipment. The stock-listed company with over 50,000 employees, headquartered in Germany, is active in more than 70 countries.

Due to the successful and rapid growth of the company since its IPO in 2018, the communication department faced increasing demands: more stakeholders, more topics, more channels. In order to become faster, more consistent, and efficient, Siemens Healthineers launched the “Content Lab” project for international strategic communication in 2020. The Content Lab team plans, creates and publishes relevant content globally for all stakeholders and corporate channels across all business units with the aim of ensuring consistent messaging and safeguarding reputation.

When introducing the new content management process, the communication department combined existing software applications and digital services. It also selected and introduced new digital tools where necessary. This was done “bottom-up” by different project teams. The resulting arrangement of workstreams and digital technologies is illustrated in Figure 1.

Content management at Siemens Healthineers

Software and digital platforms	Brandwatch	Azure DevOps	Office 365	Khoros	Adobe Analytics
	Unicepta Dashboard	Conceptboard	Adobe Create Suite	Yes Press	Domo
	Yammer	Office 365	HRT Tool	Sharepoint / Intranet	Brandwatch
	Brandticker / Adwired	Mind Map	Bynder / Brandville	Scrivito CMS	Acrolinx
		Whiteboard	MusiCurve	Social platforms	Brandticker / Adwired
			Social platforms	CCT (Campaign codes)	UI Path (Bots)
			Azure DevOps	Eloqua	

Figure 1. Digital technologies used for content management at Siemens Healthineers

Looking back at the change process and its results, the complexity of digitalizing communication management became obvious. The head of corporate communications told us that a structured overview of digital tools and how they can support different workstreams in public relations would have been useful. This is however missing in the discipline until now. Another learning was that more knowledge to guide digital investments and avoid double effort is needed, as some solutions were already available in other departments. Last but not least, the practitioners realized that the software and digital platforms shown in Figure 1 support rather different tasks. Some of them are quite specific for communications, others are relevant for other functions as well – which means that decisions will often be taken somewhere else or by the IT department. A better understanding of these differences would help practitioners to manage future digitalization processes more efficiently and effectively.

Research goals and outline of the paper

Against this backdrop, more research is needed to increase the understanding of the differing attainments of digital technologies for public relations and strategic communication. Following the debate in practice, the main aim of this paper is to capture the notion of CommTech and Digital Infrastructure for communications building on literature from information systems, management, marketing, and communication research.

This paper is organized as follows. In the next section, we provide an interdisciplinary literature review. Building on this and value chain theory, we develop a framework which elaborates on the digitalization of value-creating processes like stakeholder communications and internal advising and of supportive workflows. In the subsequent sections, we outline implications for practice, derive suggestions for future research on a macro, meso and micro level, and draw a conclusion.

Theoretical Perspectives on Digitalization and Digital Transformation

To avoid any conceptual confusion and controversy, it is necessary to clarify terminology in a first step. According to information systems research (Tilson *et al.*, 2010), *digitalization* is the "sociotechnical process of applying digitizing techniques to broader social and institutional contexts that render digital technologies infrastructural" (p. 749). *Digitizing*, on the other hand, only describes the technical process of converting analogue signals in a digital form. As technologies, organizations, and people are subject of our analysis, we will use the term digitalization in this research.

Digitalization comprises the integration of digital technologies into processes and products. In line with Vial *et al.* (2019, p. 12), we use *digital technologies* as an umbrella term including digital tools, software and services, online platforms, information systems, as well as devices such as smartphones and tablets. Referring to organizations, digital technologies are considered a major asset for leveraging organizational change. As this needs both technology and people, the *digital transformation* is defined as "the intercept of the adoption of disruptive digital technologies on the one side and actor-guided organizational transformation of capabilities, structures, processes and business model components on the other side" (Nadkarni & Prügl, 2020, p. 4). To achieve a successful digital transformation within an organization, changes must occur at various levels, e.g., a reconfiguration of processes and structures, new resources and capabilities, adjustments in leadership, and a digital culture (Nadkarni & Prügl, 2020, pp. 3-4). Similarly, different aspects must be considered for the digital transformation of a communication department or agency and its processes.

Digitalization in public relations and strategic communication

Digitalization has a strong influence on how organizations and their stakeholders communicate and interact. In public relations, many theoretical discussions and studies refer to the ideal of two-way symmetrical communication between an organization and its publics or stakeholders introduced by Grunig and Hunt (1984). With digitalization, relationships between organizations and stakeholders have changed fundamentally (Lock, 2019). Therefore, most debates in public relations scholarship and practice focus on using digital technologies for stakeholder relations. Channels and instruments like social media and intranets, their use by communicators and stakeholders, as well as its adoption by organizations have become a major research topic (e.g., Chambers, 2017; Ewing *et al.*, 2019; Men & Tsai, 2016; Sundstrom & Levenshus, 2017; Verčič *et al.*, 2015; Wilson *et al.*, 2020; Wright & Hinson, 2017). Other studies review digital dialogue practices (Morehouse & Saffer, 2018; Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018; Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018) and research the influence of mediators (Frandsen & Johansen, 2015; Willson, 2017).

Another line of research addresses big data, automation, and artificial intelligence in strategic communication and public relations, and how analytical tools allow practitioners and scholars to evaluate the online behavioral patterns of key stakeholders (e.g., Galloway & Swiatek, 2018; Weiner & Kochhar, 2016; Wiencierz & Röttger, 2019; Zerfass *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, studies examine the opportunities of digitalization, i.e., in engaging in dialogues with stakeholders (e.g., Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018), as well as risks such as cyber-attacks and data fraud (e.g., Zerfass *et al.*, 2020). Just and Rasmussen (2019) outline a continuum that ranges from techno-optimism to techno-pessimism: "While the optimists focus on the constructive potential of online phenomena like big data, interconnectedness, spreadability and stakeholders-as-prosumers, sceptics highlight the pitfalls of exactly the same features" (p. 28-29). The authors

propose an approach in which technological affordances go hand in hand with human efforts in the configuration of communicative assemblages.

Overall, many studies in communication research focus on the usage of digital technologies as channels and instruments for stakeholder communications. Recently, the term "CommTech" has been introduced in the profession to widen this view and focus on all aspects of the stakeholder journey. Following the A.W. Page Society (2019), Bernstein (2020) and Edelman (2020), *CommTech* can be defined as applying digital technologies to execute stakeholder communications. "Otherwise known as Communications Technology" (Bernstein, 2020, n.p.), these practices refer to "digitally engaging target audiences and nurturing them along a designed journey toward some action" (A.W. Page Society, 2019, p. 8). They "bring together technology, tools, data and analytics to provide actionable intelligence for communicators to precisely target, measure and shape trust and behavior at the individual level" (Edelman, 2020, n.p.). CommTech, as term mainly pushed by the A. W. Page Society (2021), parallels the already very popular "MarTech" concept in marketing research and practice. This needs to be explored in a next step.

Digitalization in marketing research

The digital transformation stimulates a growth of digital data (Berghofer *et al.*, 2018). Although using data and analytics for competitive advantage is not new for marketing, approaches for managing the growing volume and variety of data have become more popular in the marketing literature. One example is "data-first marketing", which combines data-driven marketing with business strategy. This requires a transformation of people, processes, technology, and culture (Miller & Lim, 2020, p. 4). Marketing departments increase their investments in technologies to synchronize the amount of data and create costumer-oriented solutions (Berghofer *et al.*, 2018, p. 52). As customers spend an increasingly part of their lives in the digital world, marketers need to analyze costumers' demands (Chaffey & Smith, 2017, p. 9.). Digital marketing involves getting closer to customers, identifying, anticipating, and satisfying their needs efficiently and creating a constant dialogue with them via digital technologies (Chaffey & Smith, 2017, pp. 13-14, 20). This has been made possible by the vast growth of marketing technology (MarTech). MarTech explains "how different forms of technology are used for marketing today" (Chaffey & Smith, 2017, p. 638).

> In its simplest definition, martech is the intersection of marketing and technology. Any technology a company uses to deliver its marketing, is marketing technology – bundled together this collection of tech is referred to as your marketing or tech stack. However, martech is much more than just platforms. It's understanding what happens at that critical intersection, the impact this has on your marketing plan, people, process and ultimately the customer. (Doughty, 2019, n.p.)

The MarTech landscape is illustrated by Scott Brinker on a popular website since 2011. Today, he categorizes more than 8,000 digital solutions into distinct groups (Brinker, 2020a).

In recent years, automation has become an increasingly important topic for marketing as well (Mero *et al.*, 2020; Murphy, 2018; Berghofer *et al.*, 2018). Literature presents key antecedents of marketing automation success such as reviewing and implementing new business processes, the availability of human resources and expertise, and continuing investment (Murphy, 2018), reveals indicators to choose a suitable marketing automation solution (Berghofer et al., 2018), and addresses the adoption of marketing automation technology (Mero

et al., 2020). Most of the work is characterized by guidelines how to build up a so-called tech stack and digital infrastructure.

Digitalization in information systems and information technology

Information technology drives the digitalization of business processes. Since it supports business processes aiming at increasing efficiency, digital technologies have become a decisive success factor for value creation in organizations. Literature from information systems and information technology helps to sharpen our understanding of technologies and infrastructures in the digital age.

In information systems research, *digital infrastructures* are defined as „computing and network resources that allow multiple stakeholders to orchestrate their service and content needs." (Constantinides *et al.*, 2018, p. 381) Digital infrastructure comprises two layers: "heavyweight" and "lightweight" (Bygstad, 2017; Constantinides et al., 2018). *Heavyweight infrastructure* is considered mainstream IT, which includes back-end solutions like the Internet and enterprise resource planning systems (e.g., SAP) "and other transaction systems, based on databases servers and integration software, such as enterprise bus frameworks […] and service-oriented architecture" (Bygstad, 2017, p. 181). Whereas heavyweight IT is usually owned by specialized IT units and realized through software engineering, lightweight IT is driven by immediate needs of users and are often linked to bottom-up initiatives bypassing IT departments (Bygstad, 2017, p. 182). *Lightweight infrastructure* "directly supports action and activities" (Ludvigsen & Steier, 2019, p. 417), e.g., through front-end solutions like digital tools, apps, software, and consumer devices. Lightweight IT may be seen as complementary to heavyweight IT. Both are governed by different development cultures and imply diverse problems. As needs of users in organizations change fast, the development culture of lightweight IT is mostly shaped by innovation and experimentation. Due to poor integration, lightweight IT can easily become isolated gadgets, and security issues may arise quickly. In contrast, heavyweight IT can handle scaling and cross-functional integration, which may result in complexity and rising costs. Its development culture is driven by systematics, quality, and security (Bygstad, 2017, p. 182). Which approach is more appropriate depends mainly on the kind of workflow within an organization which will be supported by digital infrastructures. It is necessary to consider concrete applications and the people involved, as digital technologies are part of *sociotechnical systems* (Bostrom & Heinen, 1977; Tilson *et al.*, 2010).

Research Questions

The interdisciplinary literature review reveals that different aspects of communication management can be transformed through digital technologies. In view of the lack of a broader understanding of differing attainments of digital technologies in public relations and strategic communication, we propose a new framework to reflect on the different aspects of communication management which can be digitalized, and how they can be differentiated. The aim is to combine the debates on CommTech and Digital Infrastructure in communications, and to outline a multifaceted research agenda on different levels. This shall be done by answering two research questions:

RQ1: Which aspects of communication management can be transformed by digital technologies, and how can they be differentiated?

RQ2: Which fields of research are opened up by this development?

A Framework for CommTech and Digital Infrastructure in Public Relations

Theoretical background: Process analyses and value chains

The three lines of research outlined above show that digital technology can support many aspects of communication management, but clear distinctions are missing until now. This is why practitioners – as shown in the case study – seek orientation. An established approach to address complexity in organizational settings is *Business Process Analysis and Management* (Jeston, 2018). Its basic idea is to analyze all workstreams and activities and their relations, in order to identify options for conceptual improvement as well as for technological support. The *Value Chain* concept in management research (Porter, 1985) combines this with the proposition that business processes should be distinguished according to their contribution to value creation. The value chain describes all organizational activities connecting a company's supply side (raw materials, inbound logistics, production processes) with its demand side (outbound logistics, marketing, sales). A key insight is the distinction between primary and support activities (Simatupang *et al.*, 2017):

> Primary activities are those involved in the physical creation of the product, its marketing and delivery to buyers, and its support and servicing after sale. Support activities provide the inputs and infrastructure that allow the primary activities to take place. Every activity employs purchased inputs, human resources, and a combination of technologies. Firm infrastructure, including such functions as general management, legal work, and accounting, supports the entire chain. (Porter, 1985, p. 3)

Porter (1985) suggests that cross-functional linkages, which can be better achieved with digital technologies, should be exploited for competitive advantage (p. 12). This process-oriented and value chain approach can be transferred to communication management. It helps to structure primary activities which create value for organizations through communication, and supportive activities, and thus helps to prioritize processes which can be supported by digital technologies.

Description of the framework

The value chain perspective and the debate on integrating virtual aspects into this approach (Rayport & Sviokla, 1995; Simatupang *et al.*, 2017) help us to differentiate key aspects of communication management which can be transformed by digital technologies. Communications creates value for organizations by listening, creating and conveying messages, co-creating meaning, framing debates, etc., and in the end by stimulating cognitive, affective and behavioral effects on stakeholders which impact organizational goals. Moreover, communications creates value by advising top executives and (internal) clients on public opinion building and strategic issues (Zerfass & Volk, 2018). Therefore, managing and executing communication processes with external and internal stakeholders (stakeholder communications) and internal advising can be characterized as *primary activities*. However, communication professionals and departments spend only part of their worktime with messaging, listening, and advising. They are engaged in managing and executing many s*upport activities* as well. These workflow processes are necessary to make primary activities happen – e.g., hiring and training staff, budgeting, providing and maintaining an infrastructure for collaborative work, etc. All of those activities can be supported by digital technology. The literature review revealed that the current debate in public relations and marketing focuses mainly on digitalizing stakeholder communications (CommTech, MarTech), whereas research in information systems focuses on internal workflows (Digital Infrastructure).

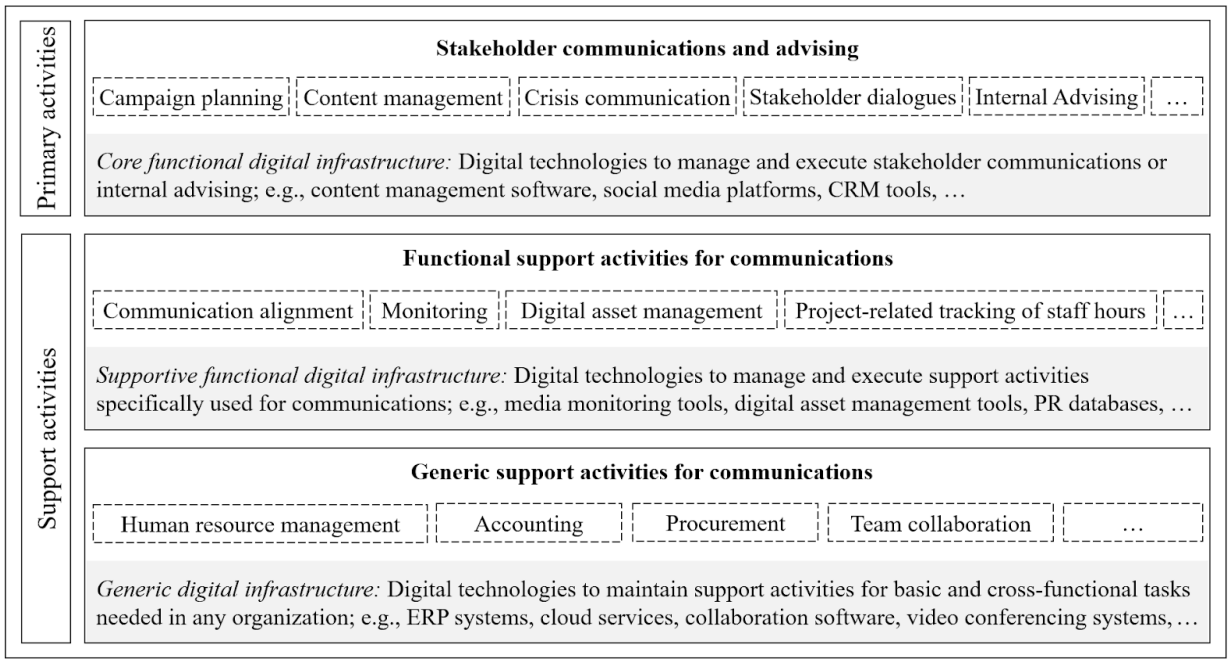

Figure 2. Framework for digitalizing communication management processes and activities

This can be further differentiated when the proximity to value creation is taken into account. Figure 2 depicts our framework. It shows three layers of activities and processes in public relations and strategic communication which can be supported and transformed by digital technology (RQ1):

(1) *Digital technologies for primary activities which are part of communication processes between the focal organization and stakeholders / publics, or advisory processes towards (internal) clients and executives (Core functional digital infrastructure).* Such activities are directly linked to value creation through communications. They include preparing, creating and executing as well as evaluating and adjusting stakeholder communications, e.g., campaign planning, content management, crisis communication, stakeholder relationship management etc. Activities like analyzing and preparing insights, delivering presentations, or reflecting and discussing relevant issues are part of advisory processes. This first layer is the most specific one. Most industry-specific software and service solutions for public relations and strategic communication fall within this domain. The *core functional digital infrastructure* mostly comprises lightweight IT solutions driven by immediate needs of communication practitioners, i.e., content management software (e.g., Drupal, Presspage), social media management tools (e.g., Hootsuite), or relationship management and distribution tools (e.g., Cision Communications Cloud, Prezly).

(2) *Digital technologies for functional support activities which are part of secondary processes specific for communication management (Supportive functional digital infrastructure).* The second layer is also related to specific tasks in communications, but includes workflows that are necessary to manage communication in organizations professionally without being part of stakeholder communications or advisory processes. Such activities include overall planning (aligning communication and business goals) and monitoring, but also handling digital assets (logos, templates, pictures, videos) or tracking staff hours and resources for projects. On this

layer, digitalization relies either on specific software and services for the communications profession (e.g., media monitoring tools like Meltwater) or digital tools used in many functions (e.g., digital asset management like Adobe Experience Cloud; timesheets like TSheets), which can be customized if necessary.

(3) *Digital technologies for generic support activities which are part of secondary processes needed in any organization for task fulfilment based on a division of labor (Generic digital infrastructure).* The third layer includes software and services which will be used by communication professionals, departments and agencies in a similar way to other functions. They support basic workflows, especially for collaboration and workplace needs. These solutions are usually provided by IT departments or providers and will not be specifically developed or adopted for communications. This might include lightweight as well as heavyweight IT. Examples are enterprise resource systems for budgeting and sourcing (e.g., SAP), cloud services for filesharing (e.g., Dropbox, Google Drive), collaboration and office software (e.g., Office 365, Sharepoint), video conferencing tools (e.g., Zoom), but also hardware and software solutions for mobile work with remote access to internal databases.

The differentiation between the three layers provides guidance, but is not always completely distinct – like any application of business process and value chain thinking. Nonetheless, the framework supports reflection in research and practice in a variety of ways.

Practical Guidelines for Using the Framework

The framework can be used by communication practitioners to reflect upon the different aspects of communication management which can be digitalized. It can be applied as an analytic tool which identifies communication processes and activities, the (potential) use of digital technology in each activity, and its integration into the IT landscape. This will usually include three steps:

- *Analyzing and reflecting upon the current use of digital tools and software applications within the communication function, department or agency:* Which CommTech stack and digital infrastructure is available today? What is used extensively; how satisfied are users?; etc.
- *Identifying and prioritizing activities which should be transformed by digital technologies:* Which activities are carried out frequently; what is critical for creating communication value?
- *Supporting decision-making for digital investments:* The framework can be used to focus management attention and guide software selection: Where is specific software needed? When does it make sense to consider adopting digital tools already used for other functions, or to share costs by joining forces with other departments? In what cases should team initiatives be revised because only generic activities are being addressed?

Organizations often struggle to find a balance between new and tailored software applications, and to connect information technology to the established digital infrastructure (Fürstenau *et al.*, 2019). Developing routines to manage digital tools and software helps communication leaders to address this challenge, make a difference, and profile their teams. It helps to avoid over-licensing of IT applications and a subsequent rise of maintenance costs. As no “one fits it all” selection of solutions is available, practitioners need to build a distinct “PR Stack” (Smith, 2020) based on the objectives, realities and resources of their organization (Weiner, 2021).

Towards a Research Agenda for CommTech and Digital Infrastructure

The framework introduced above does not only support reflections in practice, but it also helps to identify potential areas for further research on different levels (RQ2).

Macro level: The communications profession and industry

Proposition 1: Market observation of CommTech and Digital Infrastructure. The wide range and complexity of digital technologies in communication management might be better understood if the market for CommTech and Digital Infrastructure will be examined along the three layers outlined in the framework. For MarTech, Brinker and Baldwin (2020) identified a consolidation in platforms and at the same time a massive expansion and diversification in apps. Research in features of CommTech tools, of suppliers and their business models, of user demands on a macro level, and of future market developments could be a worthwhile endeavor.

Proposition 2: External and internal drivers of introducing CommTech and Digital Infrastructure. Adopting software and digital tools for organizational processes is a change process influenced by many factors (Henfridsson & Bygstad, 2013), ranging from unexpected developments like the COVID-19 pandemic to individual preferences of team members. Analyzing what drives the digitalization of public relations and strategic communication on the three layers illustrated in the framework can help to understand the complexity of such processes.

Proposition 3: Opportunities and challenges of CommTech and Digital Infrastructure for the communications profession. The technological transformation of processes and activities creates opportunities and threats for the communications profession and its relationship to other disciplines like marketing, HR, or IT. Research in commonalities and distinctions in professional and academic debates can help to identify areas which deserve more exploration.

Meso level: Communication departments and agencies

Proposition 4: Institutionalization and maturity of CommTech and Digital Infrastructure in organizations. Information technology does not only affect technical systems, but affect people and structures in organizations as well (Nadkarni & Prügl, 2020). Researching the institutionalization of digital technologies and concurrent social practices in communications along the three layers can generate multiple insights. Recent research found that only a few communication departments or agencies in Europe have reached maturity in digitalizing stakeholder communications and building digital infrastructure. For instance, only a minority (43.8%) of communication departments and agencies is considered mature when it comes to providing digital tools for functional support activities like managing digital assets (Zerfass *et al.*, 2021, p. 20). Qualitative research would allow for interesting insights into the obstacles reaching maturity.

Proposition 5: Selection and assessment of digital technologies. Introducing CommTech and Digital Infrastructure involves selection processes. De Bernadis (2012) differentiates between an immediate choice without contextualization, and a mindful choice, which is contextualized and requires a set of selection criteria. In MarTech, the integration into existing IT systems has been identified as the most important selection criterion (Brinker, 2020b). Similar research for public relations and strategic communication could inform the body of knowledge in the field.

Proposition 6: Implications of CommTech and Digital Infrastructure for positioning communication departments and agencies. Introducing digital technologies changes the parameters of success for any entity. Some collaborations will become more important (e.g., with software vendors and IT departments). Digital technologies can create path dependencies (Fürstenau *et al.*, 2019; Sydow *et al.*, 2020) and lead to power shifts which might have an impact

on future performance and success. Exploring these dependencies would be an interesting field of research.

Micro level: Communication practitioners

Proposition 7: Adoption of CommTech and Digital Infrastructure by practitioners. The success of digitalization will ultimately be decided in the daily work of practitioners. To what extent will they adopt technologies on the three layers outlined in the framework – and what are the antecedents and consequences of their adoption decision (Mero *et al.*, 2020)? Empirical research in the adoption of different technologies for stakeholder communications, internal advising, functional and generic support activities can use the technology acceptance model (King & He, 2006) or other established approaches to identify drivers and obstacles on the individual level.

Proposition 8: Importance of digital and technological competencies. The adoption of new digital technologies changes job profiles and competence requirements. Recent research identified large competency gaps among practitioners in the fields of data and technology competence, including software and hardware usage and digital savviness (Zerfass *et al.*, 2020, pp. 80-97). Hence, research identifying specific competency needs related to the three layers and approaches to include appropriate training in strategic communication education could provide interesting insights.

Proposition 9: Mindset towards CommTech and Digital Infrastructure. Leveraging the full potential of digitalization along the three layers presented in the framework requires not only competencies, but also a new mindset among practitioners (A. W. Page Society, 2019, p. 17). It is easy to advocate lightweight IT which supports stakeholder communications and immediate needs of communicators. Understanding and managing Digital Infrastructure is more complicated. Thinking in processes and scalable solutions is quite different from creative approaches used by many practitioners. The rising use of information and communication technology may even lead to technostress (Korzynski *et al.*, 2020). Researchers might be interested in exploring different mindsets and their consequences among public relations and strategic communication professionals both nationally and internationally.

Table 1 summarizes our propositions, which form a potential agenda for future research. This is obviously a first outline, which can be expanded in many ways. To advance the understanding about the digitalization of public relations and strategic communication on different layers, scholars should consider research across countries, different industries, and organization types, as well as building longitudinal datasets that allow for multi-level analysis. Apart from this, the framework can lay ground for further conceptual discussions and to stimulate both managerial and critical research upon the topic.

Table 1. Summary of research propositions and a potential agenda for future research

Macro level The communications profession and industry	*Meso level* Communication departments and agencies	*Micro level* Communication practitioners
1) Market observation of CommTech and Digital Infrastructure	4) Institutionalization and maturity of CommTech and Digital Infrastructure in organizations	7) Adoption of Comm Tech and Digital Infrastructure by practitioners

2) External and internal drivers of introducing CommTech and Digital Infrastructure 3) Opportunities and challenges of CommTech and Digital Infrastructure for the communications profession	5) Selection and assessment of digital technologies 6) Implications of CommTech and Digital Infrastructure for positioning communication departments and agencies	8) Importance of digital and technological competencies 9) Mindset towards CommTech and Digital Infrastructure

Conclusion

This contribution offers a novel perspective on digitalization within public relations and strategic communication, which contributes to the academic discussion and is also useful for PR practitioners managing and investing in digital technologies. While most research in the domain so far has focused on digital technologies as channels and instruments, this paper shifts the focus to the growing importance of software and digital tools for value-creating processes like stakeholder communications and internal advising (CommTech) and for supportive workflows (Digital Infrastructure). This contribution sets out to link the ongoing debate about digital technologies in the PR profession to academic research in information systems, marketing, and management. Business process analyses and the value chain concept have been used to differentiate three layers of digitalization in communication management in a newly developed framework. Practical applications and potential areas for further research have been outlined. While this research has been inspired by questions emerging in practice (illustrated in a small case study), it did not collect empirical data based on the framework. The European Communication Monitor 2021 provides first empirical data on the maturity of communication departments and agencies in digitalizing communication processes and building a digital infrastructure by applying the framework (Zerfass *et al.*, 2021).

The insights presented here challenge much of the traditional thinking on digitalizing public relations and strategic communication. This research does not suggest that public relations practitioners and scholars need to become technology experts. But they should develop a sufficient understanding of differing attainments of digital technologies, which in turn requires a process-oriented thinking and a closer look at interdisciplinary knowledge from various fields. This is relevant for strategic communication internationally across all continents.

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