Why Does Social Media Engagement Matter? Perceptual, Attitudinal, and Behavioral Outcomes of Organization–Public Engagement on Corporate Social Networking Sites

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Background
- With the ubiquity and popularity of social media platforms, various organizations are striving to adopt social media as a strategic communication channel to engage digital-savvy publics.
- The interactive, participatory, collaborative, personal, and communal features of social media allow organizations to engage publics in constant conversations, supportive behaviors, and meaningful relationships.
- Earlier social media studies in public relations examined the communication strategies employed by corporate communicators, users’ motivations to engage, and the underlying mechanisms that drive users’ response to various corporate Social Networking Sites (SNSs) communications.
- However, existing research has yet to achieve a holistic understanding of the process and, more importantly, the consequences of public engagement with organizations on social media.

Purpose of Study
- To evaluate the key perceptual, relational, and behavioral outcomes of public engagement
- In particular, it links public social engagement behavior to perceived corporate transparency and authenticity, two emerging trends that drive communications on social media, and relationship and advocacy outcomes.

Theoretical Framework/Hypotheses/Conceptual Model
- **Engagement**
  A behavioral construct with hierarchical activity levels, from reactive message consumption (e.g., reading posts, viewing pictures, watching videos, etc.) to proactive contributing—active two-way conversation, participation (commenting, responding to comments, posing questions), and online recommendation (sharing posts/page to one’s own SNS page; uploading reviews, company/brand/product related videos, pictures, etc.) (Men & Tsai, 2013; Tsai & Men, 2013)

- **Perceived Authenticity and Transparency**
  **Authenticity: Truthfulness and consistency.** Being truthful to an organization itself and its publics is at the core of organizational authenticity (Shen & Kim, 2012). An organization’s conduct should be congruent with its values, beliefs, mission, principles, and rhetoric (Molleda, 2010; Shen & Kim, 2012).
  **Transparency: Openness and visibility.** Rawlins (2009) theorized that organizational transparency involves three aspects—substantial information, participation, and accountability.
• **Organization-Public Relationships (OPRs)**
  Outcome variable indicated by trust, control, mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction (Hon & J. Grunig, 1999). As an ongoing, dynamic, dialogic process, OPRs should be managed through continuous communication and evaluated as an important outcome that can be cultivated over time with reciprocal consequences for both parties in the relationship (i.e., organizations and publics).

• **Public Advocacy**
  A behavioral construct—the voluntary promotion or defense of a company, its products, or its brands by a member of the organizational publics based on Walz and Celuch (2010). The communal and collaborative environment of social media naturally and readily contributes to publics’ awareness that their advocacy or criticism behavior can have a rapid and broad impact, and thereby increases the likelihood that they will engage in advocacy activities (Pinar Ozdemir, 2012).

• **Conceptual Model**

![Diagram showing the relationships between Public Engagement, Perceived Transparency, Perceived Authenticity, Organization-Public Relationships, and Public Advocacy.]

**Methodology**
- An on-line survey was conducted with 250 SNS users who followed at least one company on Facebook in 2013. The first stratum of the sample included 170 college students from two private Universities in the U.S. Recognizing that SNSs are increasingly used among young professionals and other demographic groups, we also solicited nonstudent older participants via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk). 80 adult respondents were recruited via MTurk.
- **Sample demographics:** The average age of the respondents surveyed was 24 years. 69% were women and 31% were men. 71.9% Anglo Americans followed by Latino/Hispanic (12.9%), Asian (8.0%), African Americans (10.4%), and other (4.4%). Over 96% of the respondents had used Facebook for more than 3 years, and 68% spent more than 1 hour per day on Facebook.
- The measures of key concepts were adapted from previous literature (Hon & J. Grunig, 1999; Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit, 2011; Rawlins, 2009; Shen & Kim, 2012; Walz & Celuch, 2010) and all demonstrated high reliability (alpha value ranged from .73 to .92). A pretest was conducted with 100 students to ensure the reliability and validity of the measures.
Results

- Satisfactory CFA model fit: $\chi^2(15) = 43.18$, $p < .001$, $\chi^2/df = 2.88$, RMSEA = .08 (90% confidence interval: .05-.10), SRMR = .04, TLI = .94, and CFI = .97. Satisfactory structural model fit: $\chi^2(15) = 43.18$, $p < .001$, $\chi^2/df = 2.88$, RMSEA = .08 (90% confidence interval: .05-.10), SRMR = .04, TLI = .94, and CFI = .97.

Discussion

- The more the publics are engaged on corporate SNSs, the more likely they tend to view the organization as transparent. Corporate SNS pages provide companies an easily accessible tool to disseminate detailed and up-to-date information in a timely manner. The viral nature of social networking allows messages to rapidly reach a wider range of publics and audiences. Constructed with two-way interactive features, corporate SNS pages allow companies to listen closely to their fans and incorporate their voice in deciding what information is truly needed by the publics.
- Corporate SNSs allow companies to be embedded in the publics’ personal networks and communicate in a personal, intimate, genuine, and friendly manner. Organizations can be imbued with a unique character and a genuine personality, and in turn be perceived as an authentic corporate person.
- Results showed that respondents who were more deeply engaged with corporate SNS pages tended to be more trusting of, more satisfied with, more committed to the organization, and more empowered in the relationship. Even though users who participate in corporate SNS communities are believed to already have a baseline relationship with the organization, such a relationship can be enhanced via engagement with corporate SNS communities (Gummerus et al., 2012).
- Perceived organizational transparency and authenticity significantly and largely contribute to the relationships between an organization and its online publics. Interestingly, perceived
authenticity demonstrated a larger impact on the quality of OPRs than perceived transparency.

- The way social media revolutionize public relations is not through technologies, but through the manner in which authentic organizations can act as authentic people to instill spirit and emotions in the communication messages to generate public resonance, understanding, and identification.
- The more the publics are engaged with corporate SNS pages, the better relationship they develop with the company, and the more likely they are to become advocates of a company who support, protect, and defend the organization, and to recommend it and its product or services within their personal networks.

Conclusion

- This study highlights the importance of social media engagement and illuminates the underlying mechanisms of how engagement could affect various key public relations outcomes.
- Provides much-needed evidence that confirms the value of social media engagement in nurturing positive public perceptions, attitudes and behaviors toward organizations that was merely speculated about and assumed in the professional literature; illustrates why social media communications are worth organizations' investment.
- Enriches the understanding of public engagement by addressing the growing concerns of corporate authenticity and transparency, two overused yet under-researched constructs in the professional literature, and documents their impacts on public relational and behavioral outcomes.
- The conceptual model of public engagement on SNSs also provides guidelines for public relations professionals and social media strategists to measure the effectiveness of social media engagement efforts, which goes beyond evaluating descriptive and superficial outputs (e.g., number of followers, likes, posts/comments).
- For best practices of social media engagement, companies need to embrace transparency, create up-to-date social content tailored to meet and gratify publics' needs, constantly manage their social media presence, disseminate truthful, complete, substantial, unbiased, and relevant information, and engage publics in conversations, collaborations, communities, and activities in an authentic manner.