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Experimenting with dialogue on Twitter: An examination of the influence of the dialogic principles on engagement, interaction, and attitude



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ABSTRACT

Much of the public relations research on online relationship building has examined social media content for the use of the dialogic principles outlined by [Kent and Taylor \(1998\)](#). These studies, using content analysis as the primary methodology, have found that the dialogic capabilities of social media are under-utilized. However, there is limited research on the effectiveness of these methods. Therefore, the goal of this study is to examine the influence of social media content utilizing these principles on engagement, interactivity, and attitude. Results of this study indicate that usefulness of information can have a significant influence on engagement and attitude.

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1. Introduction

Research in public relations has lauded the use of social media as a means of facilitating two-way communication and relationship building. [Waters and Williams \(2011\)](#) argued that while scholars and practitioners alike have praised social media for its role in helping to connect stakeholders and organizations through engagement and interactivity, the research is not currently available to support a commitment to this kind of strategy. Additionally, to date, there is limited research that actually accounts for the effectiveness of social media as a relationship-building tool ([Saffer, Sommerfeldt, & Taylor, 2013](#)).

Nearly twenty years ago, [Kent and Taylor \(1998\)](#) proposed a framework for building relationships with the public using the Internet, specifically websites, which has guided much of the research on online relationship building. The central thesis of their framework was the use of dialogue to facilitate two-way communication between organizations and publics. Five principles for achieving dialogue using websites were proposed: (1) intuitiveness/ease of interface, (2) the dialogic loop, (3) useful information, (4) generation of return visits, and (5) the rule of conservation of visitors ([Kent & Taylor, 1998](#)). As time and the Internet evolved to include various forms of social media, so did scholars' interest in applying these principles to various organizational and social media settings.

Much of the recent research in this area, guided by this seminal framework, has sought to determine how organizations are using the two-way communication capabilities of social media to build relationships with key stakeholder groups ([McAllister-Spooner & Kent, 2009](#); [Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010](#)). The majority of this work has been done using content analysis methodology ([Men & Tsai, 2013](#)), which provides an indication of how organizations are using the platforms but does not

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provide as much indication of the effectiveness of these strategies in relationship building efforts. Therefore, this project is an attempt to extend the research on the dialogic principles through experimental analysis to determine the effectiveness of the application of dialogic principles on social media, specifically if employing these principles leads to increased engagement, interaction, and positive attitudes.

The context for this research is the Twitter activity of professional athletes. The author(s) acknowledge that most public relations research is conducted in the context of organizations, but in this paper it is argued the celebrity of professional athletes make it an appropriate and interesting context for public relations research. Similar to organizations, athletes and celebrities must maintain relationships with fans and many use social media to connect with fans, keep fans up-to-date with information, and at times, interact with fans (Lim, Witkemper, & Waldburger, 2012). Brazeal (2008) noted that sport public relations is a growing area within the field, with many practitioners taking on the task of managing the image of professional athletes. Additionally, the accessibility, whether perceived or real, that fans feel when following athletes on social media leads to increased levels of fan identification (Sutton, McDonald, Milne, & Cimperman, 1997), which can have positive affects on a team's overall brand equity (cite withheld for blind review).

This paper begins with an overview of the dialogic principles and a synthesis of the recent research in this area. This is followed by an overview of the three main variables under investigation: engagement, interactivity (operationalized as parasocial interaction), and attitude. Results of an experiment of dialogic principles used by professional athletes on Twitter are reported. The paper ends with a discussion of the implications of this research and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Reviewing the dialogic principles

The dialogic principles evolved out of the use of websites as a public relations tool to connect the organization with the public. During that time, according to Kent and Taylor (1998), the Internet was still in its early adoption phase and had not received much scholarly attention. Using dialogic communication theory as a guide, the dialogic principles were born out of the relationship between two-way symmetrical communication and dialogic communication. Two-way symmetrical communication provides an outlet for an organization and its public to seek mutual benefit, whereas dialogue is a product of that interaction (Kent & Taylor, 1998). In this case, the Internet (websites or social media) provides the outlet for interactivity between the two parties and dialogue is the result of that interaction. The end result is a dialogue between the organization and the public, which aids in relationship building efforts (Bruning, Dials, & Shirka, 2008) and is transparent and ethical (McAllister-Spooner & Kent, 2009).

As previously mentioned, five principles for dialogic communication emerged from this research. The first principle was the dialogic loop, which as Kent and Taylor (1998) put it should “allow publics to query organizations and, more importantly, it offers organizations the opportunity to respond to questions, concerns, and problems” (p. 326). Having a dialogic loop includes having a mechanism for the public to ask questions and for the organization to respond to those questions. For websites, it was the responsibility of the organization to include such mechanisms, but as social media sites like Facebook and Twitter became important public relations tools, those sites had their own built-in dialogic loop through comments and “@reply” features (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). The second principle is the usefulness of information principle, which asserts that organizations should provide information that meets the publics' need for information. To cultivate a mutually beneficial organization-public relationship, the public must find value in the information provided by the organization that goes beyond information available in the average press release. Similarly, the third principle, the generation of return visits rests on the same tenet – that there must be some attractive feature available to motivate visitors to return to the website (or the social media feed). Information available on websites and social media should be not only useful, but also updated regularly. The fourth principle, intuitiveness/ease of interface suggests that website interfaces should be easy to navigate. While this is an important principle for website design, this principle has largely been left out of studies focusing on social media (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). Finally, the fifth principle is the rule of conservation of visitors. The idea behind this principle is that organizations should attempt to keep the public engaged in their online spaces rather than link out to other websites. In the social media context, this includes integrating social media platforms (cite withheld for blind review).

Since the conceptualization of these principles for online relationship building, scholars have applied these principles to various research settings and Internet platforms. Early studies examined their use on websites (see Gordon & Berhow, 2009; Park & Reber, 2008; Taylor & Kent, 2004; Ingenhoff & Koelling, 2009). As practitioners adopted more online public relations tools including blogs and social media, so did the research. Beginning with their use on the social networking site Facebook, scholars examined the use of these principles in a number of settings including political candidates (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008), environmental advocacy groups (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009), nonprofit organizations (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009), and university health centers (Waters, Canfield, Foster, & Hardy, 2011). And more recently, the microblogging site Twitter has received attention from scholars examining the dialogic principles (see Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012; Linvill, McGee, & Hicks, 2012; cite withheld for blind review).

The recurring theme through all of these studies is that the two-way dialogic capabilities of these platforms were being under-utilized (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Linvill et al., 2012; Lovejoy et al., 2012; Waters et al., 2009). Levenshus (2010) echoed these findings “. . . scholars have reported a gap between public relations practitioners' beliefs in the Internet's potential for relationship-building and their actual use of the Internet to build relationships with publics” (p. 317). Of the collective

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