Public Relations Review 41 (2015) 395–403

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Public Relations Review

Infusing social media with humanity: Corporate character, public engagement, and relational outcomes

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 8 May 2014
Received in revised form
14 December 2014
Accepted 13 February 2015

Keywords:
Social media
Public engagement
Corporate character
Organization–public relationships
Interpersonal approach

ABSTRACT

This study links the factors central to social media communications, including perceived corporate character, parasocial interaction, and community identification, to public engagement and organization–public relationships. Based on American users' engagement behaviors on corporate Facebook pages, the study underscores the effectiveness of a personification approach in social media communication to construct an agreeable corporate character for enhancing public engagement and inducing intimate, interpersonal interactions and community identification, which in turn improves organization–public relationships.

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1. Introduction

With the ubiquity and dominance of social media, organizations endeavor to incorporate social media to engage today's digital-savvy publics. Distinct from the one-way communication of traditional media, the interactive, personal, and communal characteristics of social media communication allow organizations to engage publics in conversations, supportive behaviors, and meaningful relationships. Within the sphere of the proliferating social media activities, social networking sites (SNSs) are viewed as the main drivers of the digital media revolution. Particularly among young adults (Glynn, Huge, & Hoffman, 2012), SNSs have become the primary source of information. Social networking as a paradigm shift in the communication field demands in-depth theoretical investigation of the mechanisms underlying organization–public engagement in the SNS context. This study adopts a multifold theoretical framework that links the factors central to social media communications, including perceived corporate character, parasocial interaction (PSI), and community identification, to public engagement and organization–public relationships (OPRs).

Public relations research has consistently emphasized the importance of interpersonal approaches in building and enhancing OPRs (e.g., Men & Hung, 2012). Interpersonal approaches to communication are often discussed in face-to-face communication settings and are deemed difficult to apply in digital platforms (Yoon, Choi, & Sohn, 2008). However, SNSs present unprecedented opportunities for organizations to overcome such limitations through interactive and personalized features (e.g., Zhong, Hardin, & Sun, 2011), and thus constitute an "important social milieu that enables interpersonal communication" (Zhong et al., 2011, p. 1266). Replacing the traditional tone of corporate websites, organizations are frequently using

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2015.02.005
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conversational tones that mimic interpersonal communication on SNSs (Kelleher, 2009). More importantly, interpersonal communication in online environments effectively contributes to positive organization evaluations (Kelleher, 2009).

To capitalize on the advantages of a personal touch through social communications (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009), organizations endeavor to create corporate characters on social media to engage publics in conversations and relationships. A positive corporate character enhances favorable organizational reputation and meaningful relationships with stakeholders (Arthur Page Society, 2012; Verčič & Verčič, 2007). Further, organizations with enhanced human associations often draw positive reactions from publics since people naturally tend to react more positively toward an entity that resembles a person (e.g., Delbaere, McQuarrie, & Phillips, 2011). In other words, through interacting in a personal manner and posting information in an informal, conversational style on social media, organizations can build an enduring, unique, and positive corporate character. However, despite the importance of interpersonal communication in the relationship management literature, the construct of corporate character has not been sufficiently analyzed, and no empirical evidence exists regarding the effectiveness of the personification approach in the social media setting. Following Davies, Chun, Silva, and Roper (2004) and Verčič and Verčič (2007), this study adopts personality metaphors to examine corporate character as perceived by publics through social media communications. We explore how different corporate characters affect public engagement and online OPRs. The study thus aims to provide empirical support for the personification approach as a relationship management strategy, and to illuminate the importance of corporate character for boosting engagement and building high-quality relationships in the social media context. Further, this study incorporates other key factors identified in prior studies (i.e., parasocial interaction and community identification) to test an integrative model involving the antecedents, process, and relational outcomes of public engagement with corporate SNS communications.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Public engagement and OPRs

With the growth of the relationship management field in public relations, engagement has been proposed as a new paradigm as organizations endeavor to integrate, interact, and collaborate with their stakeholders (Edelman, 2008). Scholars have studied engagement in various contexts with varied definitions and operationalizations. In public relations, Bruce & Shelley (2010) define stakeholder engagement as “the interaction between an organization and those individuals and groups that are impacted by, or influence, the organization” (p. 30). Engagement is often used as an umbrella term that encompasses a wide range of an organization’s efforts to involve stakeholders in its activities and decisions (e.g., Bruce & Shelley, 2010), and the broadly defined engagement is often used interchangeably with such terms as “involvement” and “dialogue” (e.g., Lewis, Hamfel, & Richardson, 2001). Others studied engagement in specific settings. For instance, Cumming (2001) studied business organizations’ engagement with stakeholders for designing accountability programs. Jaakson (2010) analyzed stakeholder engagement in the process of formulating organizational values statements and proposed three levels of engagement—information, consultation, and partnership. Therefore, prior conceptualizations of engagement tend to be either loosely defined without concrete measurements or narrowly delineated according to the specific study context. Pertinent to the study focus of understanding publics’ engagement with organizations on social media, Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit’s (2011) study on consumers’ online brand-related activities offered a typology to classify engagement levels and their associated activities. Based on their qualitative interview findings, the typology includes content *consumption* as the lowest level (e.g., viewing videos, reading reviews), *contribution* to page content as the moderate level (e.g., rating products or companies, engaging in wall post conversations), and *creation* as the highest level (e.g., creating and sharing user-generated content). Tsai and Men (2012) further revise this typology into reactive *consuming* and proactive *contributing*. The study adopts Men and Tsai’s conceptualization of public engagement as a behavioral construct with hierarchical activity levels, from passive message consumption to active two-way conversation, participation, and online recommendation (Men & Tsai, 2013; Tsai & Men, 2013). Virtual communities like those embedded in corporate SNS pages may emerge organically, but public engagement is strengthened when organizations proactively and strategically provide resources and create values for the users (Porter, Donthu, MacElroy, & Wydra, 2011). This study thus focuses on identifying the factors and strategies that contribute to public engagement.

Given the relationship-oriented nature of SNSs, this study focuses on OPRs—a major objective of effective public relations (L. Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002)—as a vital consequence of public engagement. Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (2000) defined OPRs as “the patterns of interaction, transaction, exchange, and linkage between an organization and its publics” (p. 18). To assess OPRs, this study used Hon and J. E. Grunig’s (1999) scale, which has been widely adopted to measure relationship quality, to assess publics’ relational outcomes (i.e., trust, control mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction) with organizations on corporate SNS pages. The emerging literature on social media engagement provides preliminary evidence that public engagement cultivates and reinforces relationships (Men & Tsai, 2013). By partaking in conversations on a company’s SNS pages (e.g., commenting on the organization and its offerings and policies, raising questions, expressing support, and sharing corporate posts with online contacts), stakeholders can directly engage with the organization and each other on a more personal and social level. Thus, user engagement with strategically managed corporate SNS pages can naturally lead to forming and maintaining relationships with an organization.

H1. Public engagement with organizations on corporate SNS pages positively influences the quality of OPRs.

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