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Like, comment, and share on Facebook: How each behavior differs from the other

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ABSTRACT

People engage in communication on Facebook via three behaviors—*like*, *comment*, and *share*. Facebook uses an algorithm that gives different weight to each behavior to determine what to show in user's screen, suggesting that the strategic implication of each behavior may differ from the other. This study investigates when each behavior can be encouraged by organizational messages, thereby making clearer distinctions between three behaviors. A content analysis of organizational messages was conducted, where the researchers assessed message features and related them to each behavior separately. The findings indicated that different message features generated different behaviors: Sensory and visual features led to *like*, rational and interactive to *comment*, and sensory, visual, and rational to *share*. This suggests that *like* is an affectively driven, *comment* is a cognitively triggered behavior, and *share* is either affective or cognitive or a combination of both.

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1. Introduction

Individuals engage in organizational communications on Facebook through three behaviors: *like*, *comment*, and *share*. People's behaviors on Facebook are not always the same. They *like* a post, *comment* on another, or *share* the other. Facebook gives different weight to different behaviors to determine what to show in user's screen. A *share* weights approximately as much as 2 *comments*, each of which has roughly equal weight to 7 *likes* (Calero, 2013). This suggests that the strategic implication of each behavior may differ from the other. Thus, it is imperative for public relations researchers and professionals to understand how each behavior differs from the other. However, to date no public relations research has clarified differences among three Facebook behaviors.

The goal of this study is to investigate when each Facebook behavior can be encouraged by organizational messages, thereby clarifying distinctions between three behaviors. To this end, this study classifies three Facebook behaviors into discrete levels, assesses message features, and relates each feature to each Facebook behavior separately. This study conducts a content analysis of Facebook messages of 20 famous companies. The findings of this study provide insights into distinctions between three Facebook behaviors and strategic implications for message strategies for organizations' Facebook campaigns.

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2. Approaches to organizational social media campaigns

Public relations scholarship has investigated how organizations engage publics to develop and maintain relationships on social media such as Facebook and Twitter. However, approaches to evaluating organizations' public relations campaigns on social media have differed. Some have investigated organizational social media communications from the organizational view (Men & Tsai, 2012; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009; Waters & Jamal, 2011). Their focus has been primarily on what organizations do on social media for relationship management. For example, guided by the dialogic principle on organizational Web sites (Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001), Rybalko and Seltzer (2010) examined whether organizations used the five dialogic strategies (usefulness of information, conversation of visitors, generation of return visits, ease of interface, and dialogic loop) on Twitter. While the organization-oriented approach has clear benefits, it lacks in testing the effectiveness of organizations' public relations efforts.

On the other hand, others have tested the effectiveness of organizations' public relations efforts on social media from the public side. Extant studies that employed the public-oriented approach can be split into two groups: Those that measured public perception of organizations' public relations efforts through survey (Men & Tsai, 2014, 2015; Waters, 2009) and those that collected behavioral data on publics' responses to organizations' social media messages (Cho, Schweickart, & Haase, 2014; Saxton & Waters, 2014). While the former group has investigated publics' long-term reactions to organizations' public relations efforts, the latter has examined publics' immediate, short-term reactions to organizational messages (Saxton & Waters, 2014).

Facebook provides the environment in which public relations researchers to investigate publics' immediate reactions to organizational messages in a relatively convenient way. In other words, Facebook allows researchers to get solid measures of public behaviors such as numbers of likes, comments, and shares. Nonetheless, save for a few studies (Cho et al., 2014; Saxton & Waters, 2014), public relations researchers have neglected to use tangible Facebook-provided behavioral metrics to investigate the relationship between public behaviors and organizational public relations efforts.

In addition, although public behaviors on Facebook are not always the same and therefore have different strategical implications for organizational campaigns, the findings of prior studies have not provided a sound understanding of distinctions between publics' Facebook behaviors. For example, Cho et al. (2014) held that different Facebook behaviors such as like, comment, and share represent different levels of engagement with organizational posts. However, they did not explain how and why. Accordingly, for a better understanding, differences between publics' Facebook behaviors should be theorized and evidenced. In addition, prior studies employed real numbers of likes, comments, and shares as outcome measures without considering factors that may affect them. For example, organizational resources for Facebook campaigns may differ organization to organization. If an organization has a more budget for Facebook, they can hire more staffs for Facebook activities. Furthermore, Facebook has a service in which organizations can purchase audiences. This suggests that the more budget an organization has for Facebook, the greater audiences the organization can reach with their messages in the form of "sponsored" posts, which in turn may lead to greater numbers of likes, comments, and shares. Thus, previous findings might not show genuine relationships between organizational messages and publics' Facebook behaviors.

This study addresses these limitations in the prior public relations literature. To do this, this study first discusses how each Facebook behavior differs from the other with respect to the cognitive aspect of each behavior. Then, organizational message features available on Facebook are discussed. Finally, by relating each message feature to each Facebook behavior separately, this study attempts to clarify differences between Facebook behaviors further.

3. Facebook behavior: like, comment, and share

Social media behaviors fall into three levels: *consuming*, *contributing*, and *creating* (Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011, p. 15–17). *Consuming* is the lowest, involving participative behaviors without contributing to or creating contents such as reading and watching. As the middle level, *contributing* is the interactions between users and contents as well as among users, which include participating in forums or commenting on posts. *Creating* is the highest level, which involves producing and publishing content.

Each social media behavior needs a different amount of cognitive effort from the other. People use more cognitive effort when creating (e.g., writing) than when consuming a message (e.g., reading) (Piolat, Olive, & Kellogg, 2005). Similarly, as people commit to a higher level of social media behavior (i.e., creating), they exert more cognitive effort into the behavior. Thus, diverse social media behaviors that can be categorized as consuming, contributing, and creating can manifest different levels of psychological effort.

In a similar way, Facebook behaviors also fall into discrete levels. First, *like* is the lowest. *Like* requires less commitment than others do. While a click is enough for *like*, *comment* and *share* need additional actions that ask extra commitment or cognitive effort. Second, *share* may be a higher level than *comment*. When *commenting* on a post, the post appears on News Feed, but other posts push it out of News Feed before long. On the other hand, when *sharing* a post, the post not only appears on News Feed but also goes to user's profile page, suggesting that the shared post constitutes a part of user's self-presentation. Social media users are strategic in self-presentation (van Dijck, 2013). For example, when presenting the self on Facebook, individuals carefully consider public evaluation of the self (Rui & Stefanone, 2013) and whether online self-presentation is consistent with offline self-presentation (DeAndrea & Walther, 2011). This suggests that *share* may be a strategic behavior related to self-presentation and thus needs more cognitive effort than does *comment*. In other words,

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