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Public engagement with CEOs on social media: Motivations and relational outcomes

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ABSTRACT

This study provides one of the earliest empirical analyses to explore how and why publics engage with corporate CEOs on social media and why such engagement matters. It tested a conceptual model linking CEO-public engagement to the interpersonal communicative variables of perceived authenticity and approachability as well as organization-public relational outcomes. Through a web survey of 332 social media users, results showed that publics are primarily motivated by reasons of thought leadership and task attraction when they engage with CEOs on SNSs. CEO-public engagement showed significant positive effects on perceived CEO authenticity and approachability, which in turn, positively influenced public trust and satisfaction. Public engagement with CEOs on social media also directly influenced the quality of organization-public relationships.

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1. Introduction

Powered by the digital technologies for interactivity, connectivity and collaboration, social media has spearheaded the recent paradigm shift from public relations to public engagement (Taylor & Kent, 2014). As social media usage increases, so too does the potential for organizations to connect with stakeholders not conventionally accessible through traditional communication channels. With the direct, spontaneous, interactive, and relationship-centric features, social media has been advocated as a unique "social milieu that enables interpersonal communication" (Zhong, Hardin, & Sun, 2011, p. 1266), providing unprecedented opportunities for organizations to engage stakeholders in more personal and meaningful ways. Not surprisingly, an increasing number of organizations around the world have embraced social media to personify themselves and engage today's digital-savvy publics (Men & Tsai, 2012).

The importance of interpersonal approaches to communication in building and enhancing organization-public relationships (OPRs) has been well documented in the public relations literature (e.g., Toth 2000). While the interpersonal approach is often studied in offline, face-to-face interactions (e.g., Hendriks, van den Putte, de Bruijn, & de Vreese, 2014; Zillich, 2014), recent research has stressed the importance of adopting this approach for organizational social media communications (Sung & Kim, 2014). Blurring the boundary between mass and personal media, social platforms provide an ideal environment for organizations to engage publics in a personal, intimate way. Interpersonal communication in online environments was found to positively impact organization evaluations (Kelleher, 2009). As an interpersonal communication tactic, an engaging corporate character on corporate SNS pages also enhances favorable organizational reputation and meaningful relationships
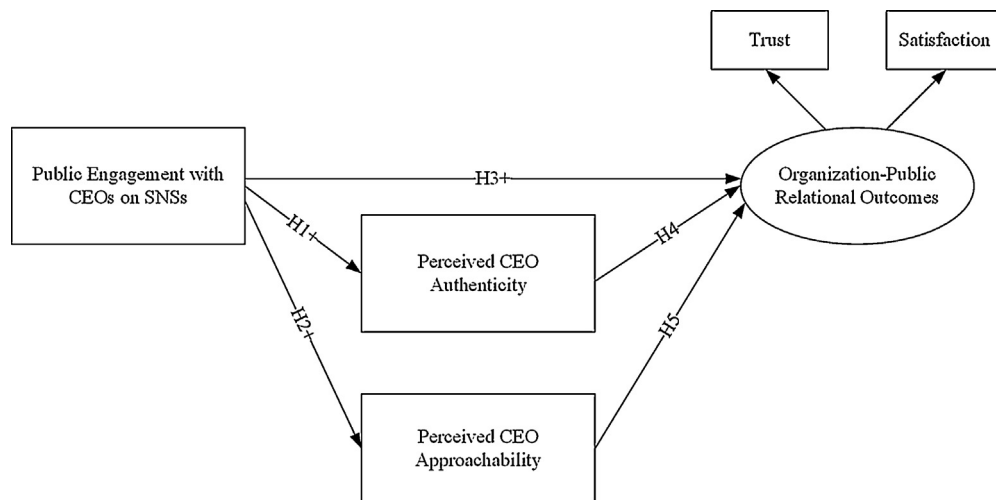

Fig. 1. Proposed model of public engagement with CEOs on SNSs, perceived CEO authenticity and approachability, and organizational-public relational outcomes.

with stakeholders (Men & Tsai, 2014; Verčič & Verčič, 2007). Additionally, Sung and Kim's (2014) experiment revealed that organizations' interpersonal approaches to communication characterized by non-commercial, non-promotional messages and high degrees of interactivity leads to more favorable evaluations. As organizations strive to build and maintain relationship with stakeholders, it is important to develop theoretical frameworks for illuminating the dynamics influencing the effectiveness of interpersonal approach in social communication and relationship management. From the perspective of leadership branding, this study aims to advance the emerging literature on social media engagement by providing original insights on how the interpersonal approach of public relations may function in the social media environment. We focus on publics' engagement with corporate leaders, specifically chief executive officers (CEOs), on CEOs' personal pages on social networking sites (SNSs).

Recognizing the potential of social media to humanize organizations and cultivate meaningful relationships (Vidgen, Sims, & Powell, 2013), an increasing number of CEOs are embracing social media to change their images from distant and intimidating to personable and approachable, including such high-profile corporate executives as Burberry's Angela Ahrendts and Virgin Group's Richard Branson. Industry reports suggested that more than 80% of executives surveyed believe social media is an important gateway for CEOs to deepen connections with customers, employees, and investors (Brandfog, 2013), proclaiming that "social CEOs" who can engage their stakeholders in genuine conversations will become the new wave of corporate leaders (Weber Shandwick, 2012). Many CEOs themselves also believe their social media presence and engagement demonstrate innovativeness and improve their companies' reputation (Weber Shandwick, 2012). However, despite the hypes and speculations in trade publications, there is little empirical evidence regarding why and how CEOs' engagement with publics on social media is crucial for organizations.

It has been widely acknowledged that CEOs play a critical organizational role. Specifically for the purpose of public relations, CEOs serve as public figures for their organizations to communicate a vision. Fanelli and Misangyi (2006) argued that successful CEOs create a positive image that not only enhances identification among the firm's members but also increases external stakeholders' identification with the organization and creates a favorable reputation for the firm, forging positive relations with various stakeholders.

Especially in the Web 2.0 era, the role of CEOs has evolved to become more visible, social, connected, and accessible than ever before (Brandfog, 2013). Publics have come to expect greater access to the insights and vision of corporate leaders in more open dialogues. In other words, CEOs are pivotal in companies' social media communications. Specifically, as social CEOs could be perceived as more approachable and authentic, their personal SNS pages can serve as a more personal platform that helps their organizations to get closer to their online stakeholders. CEO sociability, tentatively defined as CEOs' social media presence and engagement activities in the current study, thus may work to personify and humanize monolithic corporations to stakeholders and engage publics in a more personal level that cultivates quality relationships (Vidgen et al., 2013).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to verify the proposition that a CEO's personal SNS page can be an effective medium for leveraging the interpersonal approach to enhance high quality relationships between online stakeholders and the organizations that the CEO represents. Specifically, it tests a conceptual model that links CEO-public engagement on SNSs, interpersonal communicative variables of CEO approachability and authenticity, and public relations outcome of OPRs. Additionally, to understand the phenomenon of social CEOs, the study draws upon uses and gratification theory and previous literature on public-organization social media engagement to analyze publics' motivations to follow and interact with CEOs on SNSs.