Research Article

Organization-Public “Friendship”? Exploring User-Based Engagement in Social Media

Brian G. Smith*
1 Purdue University, USA

Abstract: In the hubbub of scholarship and industry focus on social media, the focus has been on the strategies and benefits of social media engagement for organizations, leaving the meanings, worldviews, and activities of publics on social media under-examined. The purpose of this study is to understand the public-level insights on organizational engagement via social media, and considerations of an organization as a “friend” online. Results suggest that organizations serve a facilitator role, as individuals engage brands online to improve their own personal and social lives. Results also show the possibility of a multi-dimensional and personal relational connection between an organization and its publics through communication integration.

Keywords: Social Media Engagement, Organization-Public Relationships, Integrated Communication

*Brian G. Smith, Brian Lamb School of Communication, Purdue University, Beering Hall of Liberal Arts and Education, Room 2114 100 North University Street, West Lafayette, IN, USA
Email: Smit856@purdue.edu

Introduction

As the next frontier in communication management, the overwhelming focus in communication research has been on social media and its technology-facilitated relationship-building potential (Kent, 2010; Kelleher, 2009; Mulhern, 2009; Groom, 2008; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007; Vorvoreanu, 2006; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003). However, research has left public motives of the organization-public relationship online relatively under-examined. In an age in which organization-public relationships may be defined by a public’s tendencies to “friend,” “follow,” “forward,” and even “tweet” an organization, there is a need to shift attention to social media users’ considerations of communication strategy in the social media space. In short, research is needed to understand why publics enter into a “friendship” with a company online. The current study explores this question through focus groups with arguably the most active social media publics: Millennials (i.e. college students). Results demonstrate that organizational-public “friendship” may be based on a mixed array of personal and commercial needs.

1. Literature Review

Social media has been defined as “a mechanism for an audience to connect, communicate, and interact with each other and their mutual friends through instant messaging or social networking sites” (Correa, Hinsley, & de Zuñiga, 2010, p. 247-248). Social media use involves creating an online persona and connecting with others, as well as communicating about one’s own life and updating activities for friends and associates (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith & Zickuhr, 2010; Carfi, 2009).

Social media use is particularly popular among 18-24 year olds (or millennials) (Lenhart, et al., 2010) who use social networking services to search and connect with other social media users and build and maintain online profiles (Madden & Smith, 2010). In their social media use, millennials...
are particularly cognizant of their online reputation, the information they share and with whom they share it (Madden & Smith, 2010).

Social media use is group-oriented, and much of the research on online behavior considers the social capital or social currency of online use. Carfi (2009) defines social currency as the ongoing connection and conversation exchange involved in the everyday interactions of individuals. The Pew Center has found that nearly all online users (80%) participate in groups, compared to only half of non-Internet users who do the same (Rydberg, 2011). This renders social media use an engaged experience in which participants disseminate information, stay informed, and interact with other users.

1.1. Social Media Use as Engagement

In the professional arena, social media use has been referred to as “engagement” (Mayer, 2011; Paine, 2009; Edelman, 2008). Few studies have defined the concept beyond equating it with basic ideas of involvement and participation (Waters & Williams, 2011; Mayer, 2011; Davis, 2010; Hargittai & Hsieh, 2010). Bennett, Wells, & Freelon (2011) have suggested a deeper consideration of engagement, wherein activity on social networking sites (SNS) involves information processing, exchange, dialogue, deliberation, and even personal identity formation. Engagement is beyond reading a social media post, or as industry expert K. D. Paine has argued, “It doesn’t matter how many blogs mention your brand if no one is engaged in those blogs” (p. 23). Engagement represents an emotional attachment—Bennett (2000) contrasts engagement with “disaffection”—as the concept represents an individual’s shift from a spectator to a committed participant (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Nichols, et al., 2006). As such, Putnam (2000) has suggested the role of trust and Edelman (2008), the emotional endearment capacity of social causes, in harboring engagement.

Above all, engagement represents interactivity, dialogue, and exchange. Hargittai and Hsieh (2011) have suggested that engagement should be viewed as a concept of interpersonal interaction. As such, they categorize SNS activities into strong and weak tie activities, the latter representing interaction with acquaintances and strangers (i.e. meeting new people, browsing photos), and the former involving interactions with friends online. Social media usage is driven by users’ “need for real interaction” (Sweetser, 2010, p. 291) and “desire for interpersonal attachments” (Phillips, 2008, p. 79). Mayer (2011) suggested that engagement involves conversation, collaboration, and outreach (p. 12). As an interpersonal concept, Bennett (2000) has argued that engagement involves personal identification and affiliation, and that the “new forms of family, community... and social association” of online media are “accompanied by more fluid social identities” (Bennett, 2000, p. 308).

1.2. From engagement to relationship cultivation

The promise of social media for public relations and communication is the opportunity to engage publics on an interpersonal level, thereby creating organization-public relationships. Sweetser (2010) argues that social media’s “limitless opportunities to really connect with one’s publics and the humanizing aspect of friending a company through social networks” yields “fewer differences than before in organization-public relationships, compared to interpersonal relationships” (Sweetser, 2010, p. 290). With the relational capacity of engagement via social media, the question becomes: How have public relations scholars mapped the relational territory of social media?

A review of the literature reveals that communication and public relations scholars primarily consider social media a relationship cultivation engine (Yang & Lim, 2009; Wright & Hinson, 2008; Park & Reber, 2008; Cho & Huh, 2007; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007) that garners power for public relations practitioners (Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Porter & Salott, 2005) and generates measurable return for clients (Porter, et al., 2007). In fact, some have claimed that public relations may be a natural leader of organizational involvement in social media, because, like public relations, social media is interactive and relational, which are characteristics “not commonly associated with marketing or advertising” (Avery, Laris, Amador, Ickowitz, Primm, & Taylor, 2010, p. 337).

Scholars theorize that social media facilitates relationship cultivation through textual and a contextual interchange. The textual interchange comprises efforts to build a relationship through discussion and dialogue. Textual-based research is often based on the work of Kent, Taylor, and White (2003), who translated dialogic theory to web-based channels and suggested that online relationships are built via dialogic feedback loops and usefulness of web content. Other scholars
have proposed the value of communicating commitment and using a conversational human voice in cultivating relationships (Kelleher, 2009; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007; Keller & Miller, 2006; Searls & Weinberger, 2001).

Contextual interchange—or the role of organizational behavior in the context of the online relationship—has been the lesser-recognized method of engaging publics. The context of the online relationship represents the nature of social media users to connect, collaborate, and pull information that suits respective public needs (Guillory & Sundar, 2008; Gurau, 2008; Perlmutter, 2008). In this way, users are active and participatory in the issues that relate to them (Guillory & Sundar, 2008), and social media enable organizations to align with social interests and tap into public enthusiasm and involvement (Levenshus, 2010; Edelman, 2008). To this effect, Smith (2010) has argued that the organization-public relationship online may be based on the public’s perceived shared-issue dedication with an organization and the credibility of promoting an online connection with that organization.

Other contextual approaches include organization efforts to build online communities of interest, also known as brand communities (Crain, 2011; Kozinets, de Valk, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010; Moran & Gossieaux, 2010; Ouwersloot & Oderkerken-Schroder, 2008). Strategies proposed to create successful communities include influencing users’ inclination to connect with like-minded individuals (Moran & Gossieaux, 2010), tying community activities with organizational objectives (Carfi, 2009), and ceding control to social media users who generate promotional content (Muñiz & Schau, 2007). In spite of the interpersonal potential of organizational-sponsored online communities, research shows that such communities often focus primarily on brand promotion (Moran & Gossieaux, 2010, p. 236).

1.3. Scope of the Study

Though the promise of social media is user engagement toward relationships between organization and public that border the interpersonal, scholarship emphasizes organizational strategies over user understanding. There remains a clear need to understand the motivations and perspectives of social media users’ decisions to engage with an organization via social media activities like following, friending, and tagging, among others. The relative absence of the depth of social media user perspectives on engagement with organizations in the social media sphere raises the need to investigate the following research questions:

RQ 1: Why do social media users engage organizations via social media?
RQ 2: How do social media users consider their relationships with organizations online?

Under the concept of engagement, in this research, participants were asked about their activities toward an organization, including friending, following, tagging, tweeting, sharing, spamming, or any other social media-based activity. Under the concept of relationship, participants were asked about their attitudes toward their connection with organizations via social media.

2. Method

Because this study sought to uncover address the need to understand the depth of user experience, a qualitative method was used. The purpose of qualitative research is to explore depth of meaning in the engagement experience, and features methods that include in-depth interviews, focus groups, and other meaning-investigation efforts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). This study employed focus groups to acquire a rich description of participants’ meanings and motivations, consistent with the purpose of qualitative research (Cheseboro & Borisoff, 2007).

2.1. Data Sample

This study explored college students’ engagement with organizations via social media. College students are an ideal population for investigating social media activities because of their high levels of involvement online (Hargittai, et al., 2010, p. 520; Lenhart & Fox, 2008). The study involved purposive and convenience sampling techniques by recruiting volunteer college students from
the researcher’s own communication classes in exchange for extra credit.

Because students from the principle investigator’s classes participated in the research, the professor-student rapport between researcher and participant may have influenced findings. Students might have sought to give the answer they thought the principle investigator wanted to hear. However, to minimize this effect, the investigator used depth and probing techniques to go beyond answers students assumed the investigator was looking for. The principle investigator also allowed students to get into debates, playing the role of participant observer during focus groups. Furthermore, students seemed to enjoy discussing their personal views on social media, and the researcher sought to put himself in the role of a student, encouraging students to instruct him on their own ideals of interaction with organizations on social media.

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

This study employed qualitative focus groups because of their utility in establishing knowledge claims via debate (Lindlof, 1995). Per focus group standards (Edmunds, 1999), ten students participated in each one hour and fifteen minute session. A total of two focus group sessions were conducted, and each session was recorded via digital video device, thus allowing analysis of both audio and visual signals. Students were recruited based on their confirmation that they had “friended” or “followed” a company via social media, or had considered doing so.

The principle investigator served as the focus group moderator and used a discussion guide that was pretested with three individuals who did not participate in focus groups. Discussion topics included organizational actions via social media, participants’ motivations to follow, friend, or otherwise engage an organization via social media, and considerations of the nature of a relationship with an organization online. Because of the focus group purpose to establish knowledge claims through discussion and debate, the principle investigator used questions that would encourage interaction and even disagreement between students.

Following data collection and transcription (which featured notations of both verbal and non-verbal cues), data were coded and analyzed using both structured analysis was used (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and a grounded theory style (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to identify all possible themes. Codes for each research question included: (a) RQ 1: Feedback, information, education, exclusivity, company behavior, online identity association, promotions, privacy, and third-person endorsement; and (b) RQ 2: Attention, feedback, one-sided, trust, commitment, satisfaction, and control mutuality or influence.

The principle investigator sought to ensure validity in this study using Kvale’s (1995) three concepts of validity. The discussion guide was flexible and pre-tested (craftsmanship validity), claims were established through discourse (communicative validity), and results were analyzed based on current research and communication practitioner needs (pragmatic validity).

3. Findings

For college students in this study, the desire to be connected and remain “in the loop” rendered social media an unavoidable part of life. Though comments hailing social media as an invaluable resource reverberated through focus group sessions, so did disdain for the habit-inducing nature of the medium. Many echoed the opinion of a male student who bemoaned how habitual staying connected was:

I hate Facebook, but I’m constantly on it. I just don’t understand myself. I want to leave it so bad, I just can’t. And I don’t know if it’s because I can see what’s going on with my friends at home over here. I just sit there for two hours and I realize, I’ve been sitting there for two hours and I don’t understand why. It’s mindboggling.

Throughout discussions, the nature of social media as a medium for sharing and informning was evident. In fact, during sessions participants tended to break off into spontaneous side discussions about a valuable social networking site. Personal insights and preferences were a common theme during focus groups, as was the association of social media activities with an individual’s identity. Participants often debated the ramifications of personal expression in a public medium like Facebook or Twitter and discussed social media as “a screen” between users that allowed users to act or say things differently than they would in real life. These themes of personal expression, online public association, sharing and connection via social media were evident in participants’ considerations of organizational engagement and relationships.
3.1. RQ 1: Why do social media users engage organizations via social media?

In the current study, engagement was discussed as the decision to friend, follow, or otherwise interact with an organization via social media. Themes that arose from the data included personal relevance of information, reputation of the online association and third-person endorsements, and company behavior, including promotional activities.

3.1.1. Information and the Promotion Conundrum

Participant social media use was based on the desire to stay in the loop and receive personally relevant information, as they expressed trust that their online connection would produce reliable and immediate information. Discussions revealed an expectation that information would be “straight from the source” and would be devoid of “media spin”. There was also an expectation of exclusivity—that “being in the know” set participants apart from their peers. In one exchange, a student said, “You just feel like you’re part of the organization in a way because you’re being kept in the loop on stuff that not everybody knows”. Information as a motivator for engagement was based on recognition of the organization as a “know-it-all,” as one student commented. Another student referred to online connections as “real information friends [who] know everything”.

Discussions revealed a conundrum for promotional information. On the one hand, they valued personally relevant promotions, but on the other, they were annoyed by excessive updates and useless information, describing it as “lame,” “superficial,” and even “chaotic”. Many said they terminated their connection with an organization online if they received too much useless information. One student said he preferred not to friend or like companies because, as he explained, “I want to see what my friends are doing. I don’t want to see companies”.

3.1.2. Organizational behavior: Doing good or doing promotion?

Whereas promotional efforts were off-putting, socially responsible organizational messages were a positive influence on participants’ social media use, as reflected in the following discussion:

Female Student 1: I follow Whole Foods online. They’re really involved with the world and do really great world things. They go to Guatemala and help kids. That gets my attention, I see a good company doing good things and I definitely want to follow it. I definitely want to see what they’re doing.

Female Student 2: Yeah. Maybe if you have something in common with them, like I drink a lot of Coffee, so I like Starbucks, and I friended them just to read a little bit about them, and I learned they help farmers, so I can share that.

Though participants were positive toward organizational efforts to represent social causes, they were also suspicious about the promotional benefit organizations gained from such actions.

Female Student: It all goes back to false information. A company wants you to believe something, but in the background, they’re doing bad stuff. They’re not all good.

Male Student: They’re fake in a way…You wonder if they’re really like that.

3.1.3. Socially Engaged: Indirect Endorsement And Personal Association

Social influences and ramifications were another common theme underlying social media use. In many cases, participants cited endorsements from friends and associates as determining factors for following or communicating about an organization online. Particularly evident was the influence of the indirect endorsement, in which a friend’s activities in friending or following a company influenced the participant to follow suit, even without a personal note or specific recommendation from the friend. One female student described the indirect endorsement in the following way: “If one of my friends likes something, then that gets my attention”. The indirect endorsement was also evident in the following:

Male Student 1: When someone likes something on Facebook, I’ll see it.
Female Student 1: And it’s relatable because we are kind of the same, so I’ll probably like it too.
Female Student 2: There are some friends where I’m like, we don’t have that much in common, but then there’s some friends where it’s like, she always puts up this stuff and I want to see it.
Female Student 3: If my boyfriend likes something, I’ll like it.
Female Student 4: I’ll like that too. It may be something I hadn’t thought of. …
Female Student 2: The thing is, maybe that’s what’s catching my attention. Maybe their marketing isn’t doing anything to catch my attention but the fact that my friend likes it will catch my attention.

As evidenced above, participants considered indirect endorsement based on the personal connection with the endorsing party, previous endorsements, and personal relevance of the endorsement. Another consideration was the way an endorsement facilitated a rewarding online experience, as represented by this student exchange:

Female Student 1: I like when I don’t have to do the work to find something. They did the work, so I’m going to go and check it out. It’s so easy.
Female Student 2: It’s access. They make it easy for us. They choose the videos and upload to Facebook; Twitter too. You have easy access to it. It’s easy to like it or share it.

Students said these third-party endorsements worked because of the loyalty they felt to their friend. Several participants echoed the sentiment that engaging with an organization that a friend liked or forwarded “shows you care”. In this way, engagement was personal, because, as one participant commented, “A connection is a personal thing”.

Participants also valued the way their social media activities reflected on their personal reputation, or as one student said, “You’re showing you are actually connected”. This value on personal association was evident in the following:

Female Student 1: I don’t friend [some companies] because I don’t want to be related to them. I don’t want someone to see that and say “oh!”
Female Student 2: I might not always agree with a certain company’s stance or product or their political beliefs. If they’re an anti-gay group, I’m not going to like it on Facebook, because I’m for Gay rights. I think there are some things you don’t agree with so there’s no reason to follow them.
Female Student 3: Yeah, like Tom’s shoes—I want to know more from them, and I want everyone to know that’s what I’m about. If you buy a pair of shoes they give a pair of shoes to someone in need. So I want my friends to see that. I want them to know I do care for that.

Male Student 1: Yeah. You want to show you’re associated with them.
Female Student 4: It’s sharing your personality because you’re not in person. You’re showing your personality. This is who I am, this is what I listen to, this is what I eat, this is what I do.

3.2. RQ 2: How do social media users consider their relationships with organizations online?

The primary theme underlying the organization-public relationship online was resource-connection, or what participants stood to gain from their connection with a company. Salient topics discussed included the direction and nature of the information exchange, participant influence, and dialogue.

3.2.1. One-sided relationship?

Participants complained that organizations use their relationships to “post a bunch of information trying to sell to you,” as one male student commented. Another student added, “Yeah, it’s like, what’s the catch here? Is it all sell?” One student clarified, “I always feel like they want a bigger commitment than I want.”
Participants wanted relationships in which organizations would listen to them and provide them with value beyond coupons and promotions. The following interaction from one session showed student priorities in an organizational relationship:

Male Student 1: You give them your feedback and they can decide if they want to change to make your experience better or not and I think that exchange is definitely a relationship
Female Student 1: It sort of works like an actual love relationship, where you want to feel value that they appreciate that you’re there.
Female Student 2: It’s kind of a two-way thing as well...how they actually treat you. Were they pleasant to you? Did they help you out with their problem? If so, you think of them as a good relationship. If they treat you bad, they’re a bad company, so I think it can kind of be two ways.
Female Student 3: If I take the time to write a company about my concerns, I expect to get feedback. The response is huge because if they don’t respond then they don’t care.
Female Student 4: It can be something as simple as Twitter. They’ll follow you back, so it’s like ‘Hey we know you’re here’.

In response to sentiments that the relationship might favor the organization, students considered actions to make their discontent known. In general, students weighed the option between simply hiding the company from their online newsfeed and terminating the relationship altogether. When asked what students did to show their discontent, the following discussion ensued:

Female Student 1: I yell at them.
Female Student 2: Even if you bad mouth them, if you put it on their status, they will contact you.
Female Student 1: But, I don’t want to give them that attention
Female Student 3: Sometimes I’ll hide them on Facebook, so they don’t show up anymore. I still like them. Like Target—I still like Target, but I’m boycotting them because they’re anti-Gay rights, so right now I just have them hidden. For now, I’m just mad at them.
Female Student 1: Yeah, it’s like, I don’t want to speak to you right now!
Female Student 3: Exactly. That’s how I feel. I’m in a fight with Target and I think once they retract the things they did, then I’ll go back to them
Female Student 1: They have to apologize first!

Participants admitted that they expected their influence on the company to be minimal. Several students commented, “I don’t feel like I influence them at all,” and many shared experiences in which they sent messages to the company that were ignored.

3.2.2. Relationship Qualities

Students were cognizant of the ways organizations used the social media connection for promotional motives. They were particularly suspicious of online advertisements and free promotions. One student said, “Free stuff used to get my attention, but I feel like now it doesn’t anymore because you get free stuff, but you have to go through an hour long click through”. Another added, “It doesn’t feel like it’s free anymore”. When asked whether students considered an online organization as a “friend”—student discussions revealed perspectives on trust and organizational priorities:

Female Student 1: Would I want them to be my friend? I don’t know because they would probably push me to spend my money every two seconds and I would be broke.
Female Student 2: They would want me to buy something.
Female Student 3: I wouldn’t divulge my inner secrets or anything. I wouldn’t call them to cry or anything.
Male Student 1: Certain things I would share.
Male Student 2: I would cry on their shoulder. I would trust them.
Female Student 3: You would trust them? Why?
Male Student 2: Why would I trust them? Well, I would go from the perspective of there’s
a lot of biblical websites that I like, so I would like them because I trust them. It's almost like a relationship because I can trust them because their character is good.

Still, students considered their online relationship based on low expectations of reciprocal attention from the organization, as illustrated by the following:

Female Student 1: I go into a relationship with [a company], knowing that's going to happen—they're not going to respond to me.
Female Student 2: Me too. I don't expect more.
Female Student 3: So you’re pleasantly surprised when it does
Female Student 2: But it's really rare when it does though.
Male Student 1: It’s about expectations. I don’t want to get disappointed.
Female Student 1: Me too. I'd be excited, but I don't expect that. I have realistic expectations.

As might be expected, participants did not consider online organizational relationships in the same way they did interpersonal relationships. Discussions revealed that traditional relational properties like commitment to a relational party were unimportant. For example, one female student said, “If you were restricted to that one website all the time, like if you’re tied to your girlfriend or boyfriend all the time, I wouldn’t be good with that”. As such, participants said there was room for relationships with multiple, even competing, organizations online. Rather than commitment or loyalty, the connecting variable for the relationship with an organization was “liking”. One female student explained that she maintains relationships with companies even if they ignore her because she likes them. “You still like them, you don’t want to cut the relationship. You’ve known them for so long, you trust them, but you don’t want to let it go”.

4. Discussion
The objective of this study was to investigate the phenomenon of friending, following, and otherwise engaging an organization via social media networks (SNSs) and, thereby, expand understanding of engagement and the nature of organization-public relationships online. Though data from two focus groups may be limited in their application beyond the context of this study, results suggest that “friending” an organization is driven by participants’ desires for information exchange. This study’s findings widen the aperture on the motivation of engagement and meaning in the organization-public connection online.

4.1. Motivating Engagement
Underlying this study’s purpose to analyze motives for engagement was to explore the extent to which social media users humanize organizations and personalize their interactions with companies online, as scholars have argued (Sweetser, 2010; Phillips, 2008; Bennet, 2000). Results from this study add more evidence of individuals’ personal expectations of social media-facilitated interaction with organizations. Participants communicated with organizations with hopes of receiving a personal response. However, results also suggest that social media users do not anticipate the type of interpersonal connection that scholars have argued is possible in the organization-public relationship online (Sweetser, 2010).

Rather, findings suggest the primary motivation for connecting with an organization is to gain information from the organization. Discussions in this study suggest social media users may be motivated by a desire to complement their lives with information otherwise unavailable without the connection to an organization, and that is both automated and updated regularly. As such, engagement may be an activity of making life easier. But even more than improving life, engagement may be for the purpose of ownership of information, as discussions often centered on the value of being the one in the know.

Expanding this theme, it is also possible that engagement is a reflection of the user—engagement decisions are based on how the connection may reflect on the personal profile of the individual. Students often considered the social implications of connecting with an organization in a public forum like Facebook. Some research has considered online communication as non-directed self-disclosure (Stefanone & Lackaff, 2009) in which users disclose personal thoughts and
feelings to an unidentified mass to gain online celebrity. This may be true, but this study shows that the nature of communication about a company, whether direct as comments and tweets, or indirect, as friending and liking activities, may be more personal than merely communicating for public visibility. Premeditation about one’s public profile may be an additional variable influencing non-directed self-disclosure activities in engagement.

4.2. From Engagement to Relationship

Findings coupled with the above observations suggest that engagement may be a trial activity toward gaining the sufficient trust for users to be more permanently connected to the organization online. Based on participant discussions, trust may be defined as an individual’s confidence that connecting with an organization online will yield the information and response they expect (i.e. information will be valuable, an organization will respond to inquiries). Discussions also suggest that participant trust includes the expectation that the organization will not engage in activities that will annoy or offend the users (i.e. sharing too much or inappropriate information) or that contradict user interests (i.e. privacy, opposing a user’s position on a social issue). Each of these qualities of user trust demonstrate antecedents to continued interaction with (or about) the organization online, as findings confirm what other research has suggested about social media engagement—it turns spectators into participants (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Nichols, et al., 2006). As such, social media users may read, tweet, comment, tag, or share information about an organization to test the viability of continuous benefit in a relational connection online.

As a trial activity, it would also follow that in many cases engagement leads to a relationship if engagement activities fulfill certain parameters in the same way that an interpersonal relationship forms from interpersonal activities. Some may be direct, as in an organization’s direct response to social media user queries and posting items of user benefit (i.e. promotions, announcements). Some may be indirect, like an organization’s pro-social behavior and other actions that are not targeted at the social media user directly. In either case, participants’ aversion to unwanted information and other mass-media type messages suggests that engagement activities must yield personally-relevant and individually-applicable resources to engender a relationship.

These findings may provide new perspectives on established relationship strategies. For example, pro-social behavior may represent the relationship strategy shared tasks whereby relational partners work together for a mutually beneficial matter (Grunig & Huang, 2000) because through social media interaction, organizations and users may work together to resolve a social issue. Networking (or working through relational partners’ connections) as a relationship strategy (Grunig & Huang, 2000) is facilitated through the ease and public visibility of connection through social media. Similarly, openness, or providing access to information (Grunig & Huang, 2000), is fulfilled through the ability to provide social media connections with exclusive information. Research that enumerates factors that engender a relationship from social media user engagement activities will be valuable to communication and public relations research, specifically those that might reveal social media nuances to already established relationship strategies.

4.3. Organizational Friendship?

If engagement is a precursor to a relationship, the question becomes: Can an organization really be considered a friend? And if so, what constitutes that relationship? Results show that students may not equate the act of engagement with a relationship and they do not consider an organization a “friend” no matter how interpersonal the social media are. Whereas students commonly considered the ways a company, as a friend, “can offer good advice in any situation,” that information-based connection is different than an interpersonal relationship because, according to participants, the connection is not “face-to-face”. Even so, there is an indication that the organization-public connection on social media resembles a relationship because of the undercurrents of trust (i.e. confidence the organization will serve participants’ interests), liking (i.e. positive feelings toward an organization), and commitment (i.e. loyalty toward the connection) in focus group discussions. For example, several students remained connected to organizations toward which they felt discontent. Their rationale for maintaining the connection was that they still felt a connection to the company, but were disappointed with a single organizational action or stance. Participant comments in such cases humanized the organization as a friend—students
used terms like “I’m mad at them right now” to describe the state of their relationship.

The underlying theme in discussions was that an organization could be considered an associate or friend. In addition to comments that humanized the organization, perhaps the greatest evidence for this user-organization relationship was the presence of relationship qualities including trust, liking, and commitment. This study’s results suggest that a social media-facilitated relationship with an organization may comprise both textual and contextual elements. The textual comprises text-based interactions, including dialogue, and the value and exclusivity of information. The contextual comprises elements that may not involve direct interaction, but that social media users consider when entering into a relationship. Based on this study, contextual elements were more present in discussions.

4.4. Relationship Text

The textual elements of the social media user-organization relationship appear to revolve around users’ desires for information as a resource. Promotional opportunities (i.e. coupons, freebies, etc.) only make up the surface of what is involved in the relationship, as the value of several types of information from connecting with an organization appears to be a tangible benefit that keeps users connected. However, information may not be enough to make the relationship as personal as social media users may want. Responsiveness and direct discussion may be needed to make the relationship more interpersonal. This suggests that the key for moving from an information or text-based organization-public relationship to a more interpersonal one is the interactions organizational members (i.e. employees) have with social media users.

4.4.1. Information As A Resource.

Discussions about the value of information available through the organization-public connection online suggest that information in a relationship may be something users can “own” or a tangible resource of the relationship. As such, this resource may also need to be personally relevant and contribute where other connections do not. In fact, findings suggest that information may be considered an element of a user’s online persona, that information updates from organizations may, in turn, represent users and their personal interests, as users forward or share the information to other connections. In this way, personal relevance of the subject matter becomes even more critical. This consideration also raises the need to consider meaning in information seeking and retrieval in organization-user relationships online.

4.5. Relationship Context

Contextual elements of an organization-user relationship online appeared more on display throughout focus group discussions. Participants often discussed organizational actions and reputation as an important element of the relationship. These indirect actions that influence users’ decisions to “friend” a company are primarily contextual, and include users’ considerations of organizational actions, interest overlap, and the personification of the organization itself.

4.5.1. Organizational Actions

Corporate social responsibility activities were one of the principle areas discussed, with participants commonly citing pro-social behavior from companies like Tom’s Shoes, Starbucks, and others as an important element in their organization-based relationships. Part of the draw of these corporate activities appears to be users’ association with a “good” organization, and what it says about the user to his or her social network. Conversely, participants expressed concern about connecting with companies with questionable behavior. This suggests that pro-social behavior not only creates a favorable impression for an organization toward a relationship, but may also serve as an identifying point for user profiles.
4.5.2. Interest Overlap

Looking at the influence of pro-social behavior more broadly suggests that interest overlap may be a consideration in the user-organization relationship online. One participant’s remark is particularly illustrative of this point: “If there are some things you don’t agree with, there’s no reason to follow them”. In other discussions cited above, students mentioned organizations like Whole Foods and Starbucks, and referenced their interest overlaps with those companies in helping poverty-stricken areas of the world. Interest overlap, then, may be a salient factor in a relationship because social media users are active and participatory in the issues that affect them (Guillory & Sundar, 2008).

Looking at interest overlap represents a different direction in social media research from the current focus on dialogue and textual connections. Text and dialogue may, indeed, be important elements, but it may be more fruitful to consider the target of such interaction: common interest. If social media facilitates user involvement in interests that affect them, as has been argued, then a user-organization relationship may comprise the alignment of interests between the two parties. As such, users may partner with an organization (or at least demonstrate partnership) to support a common interest, while an organization taps into user enthusiasm and involvement, placing relational mutuality around the common interest. Dialogue and other textual actions, then, would revolve around the interchange of interests. As such, the partnership may be more important than how an organization communicates (conversational human voice); and communicated commitment may be more appropriately placed in the context of an organization’s commitment to the common interest.

Considering the online relationship as a conduit for work towards shared interests refocuses the direction of communication relationship research in social media from textual strategies to contextual strategies. For example, symmetrical strategies proposed by Grunig and Huang (2000) and which are commonly considered in public relations research, should be contextualized in the concept of common interest. Openness and positivity would reflect the shared interest with the social media user or group. Similarly, organization may earn credibility through partnership on an area of shared interest and communicating those efforts. As such, the communication or public relations practitioner may find value in directing social media efforts around communicating about shared interests with social media users.

4.5.3. Organizational Personification

An underlying theme of focus group discussions was the personification of the organization in the relationship and the personal nature of the relationship itself. It was not evident that this personification was the result of anything the organization had communicated. In fact, participants who had gotten personal responses to queries attributed those responses to a customer service agent, not to the organization, itself. Instead, many discussions in focus groups humanized the organization in the relationship. Comments like, “They nag,” “You wonder if they’re really like that,” “They have to apologize first,” and “It’s like I don’t want to speak to you right now!” demonstrate participants attributing explicitly human characteristics to organizational entities.

Another indication of the personification of the organization is the apparent interpersonal tone of relationships in focus group discussions. Participants who argued that they would hide organizations from their social network feed but not cut off the relational connection, with stated reasoning that they’re “just mad at them right now” or “they have to apologize first” reflect this interpersonal nature of the organization-public relationship online. It may be that because social network sites emphasize personal relationships that users translate this interpersonal tone onto organization relationships. Furthermore, this is consistent with Sweetser’s claim that social media yields “fewer differences than before in organization-public relationships, compared to interpersonal relationships” (Sweetser, 2010, p. 290).

The conundrum in this personification is the implicit assumption that an organization is humanized via the social media network, and that, conversely, this process might not happen outside of the social media realm, presupposing a humanizing effect of social media. This assumption is consistent with scholar claims about “the humanizing aspect of friending a company through social networks” (Sweetser, 2010, p. 290). However, the question worth exploring is what about social media personifies an organization. This study indicates that it may not be dialogue, but the access and involvement with decisions that might humanize an organization (i.e. user support for and input on pro-social organizational behavior). Interactive capacity of the medium, as well, may be a contributing factor.
4.5.4. Public

It should not be discounted that an organization-public relationship online is public. In fact, it may be an ever-present consideration when users decide to connect with an organization, as reflected in one participant’s discretion about her own decision not to friend certain organizations: “I don’t want to be related to them”. A social media-based relationship with an organization reflects on the profile of the user, who in turn considers the both the negative and positive ramifications. It may even be possible that users seek out relationships to better their public profile, as reflected in the participant who friended Tom’s Shoes for status, or as she put it, because “I want people to know that’s what I’m about”. Others’ who remarked that connecting with organizations is about “sharing your personality” similarly convey the influence of the public nature of the relationship.

4.5.5. Loose Connection

One of the apparent prevailing differences between an organization-public relationship online and other interpersonal relationships is the concept of commitment. Discussions in this study’s focus groups would render commitment nearly irrelevant. Participants admitted they do not feel commitment toward organizations with which they connect, and they do not expect much commitment from organizations, either. This may be because the concept of commitment between organization and user may differ in the social media sphere. In marketing literature, commitment, as loyalty, refers to a repeat purchase (Aaker, 2008; Morgan & Hunt, 1994), which makes sense because the marketing-based relationship is predicated on a purchase. However, because the online relationship may be formed without a purchase, commitment may not be relevant as one’s loyalty toward one company in a particular industry. Rather, users consider room for connecting with any and every organization in the social media sphere, in part, because it offers the greatest set of rewards. For example, if a relationship were based on information empowerment or promotional advantage, more connections would yield greater advantage in those areas. The boundary of this open-ended commitment stream may be when users consider an organization as reflective of their personality. For example, it may be assumed that a user may not be a self-avowed “PC” and a “Mac” at the same time. Differences in commitment as a concept in social media suggest that research should expand this concept through further inquiry.

4.6. Moving Communication Research and Practice Forward

The discussion of this study’s findings suggests two main considerations relevant for moving forward in social media research: a) engagement may be preliminary to an online relationship and b) an online organization-user relationship is built from mutual influence in an overlapping area of interest and features differences from other interpersonal and offline relationships. As such, the overall need may be, first, to determine the difference between engagement and social-media facilitated organization-user relationships, and then to establish unique principles of such relationships.

Current scholarship and trade press literature often interchange the terms engagement and relationship, leading to potential difficulties in establishing coherent and consistent research streams. As Chaffee (1991) has pointed out: “The more clearly researchers can specify what their concept means, the more they know about it and the more knowledge they can contribute to others” (p. 30). It would seem that without this clarification of concepts in social media research, “words are just words, and data is meaningless” (p. 14). Therefore, in any social media study, researchers should first answer the questions: What do we mean by the terms engagement and relationship in the digital and online environments? And, where should engagement stand vis-à-vis relationships in research—connected or separate? The more competing responses this question yields, the more fruitful the research stream will be, particularly if scholars emphasize user meaning in engagement and online relationships. For example, considerations of premeditation vs. spontaneity in engagement might reveal levels of meaning heretofore under-analyzed in social media research. How might considering activities such as liking, sharing, retweeting or commenting as yield different levels of meaning than considering the same as premeditated behaviors? Literature seems to position engagement as a peripheral activity with little mental processing, but engagement may certainly be premeditated as well, and involve personal involvement and deliberation.
In defining engagement from an online relationship, scholars and practitioners may also ask: Where does “engagement” end (if at all) and a “relationship” begin? And, what influences the transition from engagement to relationship? It would also be valuable to consider how engagement as a behavior might change once a user considers him- or herself in an online relationship with an organization.

For practice, engagement should be considered against strategic relationship cultivation efforts. Looking at current practice, the assumption appears to be that successful social media management efforts only require offering incentives (i.e. coupons, freebies, and special offers). However, doing so says nothing of the long-term relationship considerations to which such engagement efforts should be connected. In fact, offering incentives might be a point of engagement, but may not yield sustained engagement toward in an organization-public relationship online. Defining engagement as a process, rather than as one-and-done social network updates calls attention toward benchmarks around the initial trial engagement period and into the relationship phase. Engagement activities and what entails a relationship, itself, may also differ between organizations, signaling the need for professional case studies enumerating best practice.

This study suggests that connecting points to an organization-public relationship include expectation fulfillment, personal involvement, and pro-social organizational behavior. Therefore, practitioners may find value in linking initial incentives (i.e. promotions) with long-term considerations that render an organization-public relationship personal, including common interest, power and influence, and personal resources (i.e. exclusive, personalized information). From this study, it can be theorized that publics expect a relationship to be personal and multi-dimensional.

References


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