Connecting to a Cause: An Experiment Testing Dialogic Theory and Relationships

within Social Marketing

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Abstract:

These days, it isn't enough for a product to be good – people have to feel good about the product. In servicing that need among consumers, the social marketing practice has emerged at within the public relations industry. Social marketing can involve selling an issue alongside a product. That is, a consumer isn't just buying a stylish pair of shoes, instead that purchase of the stylish shoes enables a free pair of shoes being donated to someone who doesn't have shoes. Simply put, in an effort to break through the information clutter and catch one's attention, companies are incorporating social issues into the communication efforts. As with much activism, or slackivism as some may call it, the Internet presents an ideal vehicle for pushing those issue-wrapped corporate messages.

Along these lines, the growth of the Internet and social networking sites is facilitating a record opportunity for organizations to connect and engage with publics. Research shows that using social media develops mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and target publics (Yang & Lim, 2009). Blogs, in particular, offer a distinct opportunity for developing and maintaining relationships between parties due to their unlimited nature of message dissemination (Kelleher & Miller, 2006).

This study seeks to provide empirical insight into blogs' potential in building and strengthening the organization-public relationship, and examines how one's connection to an issue (in this case the social issue touted by the stimulus organization) interacts with dialogic capacity and relationship. Studying dialogic capacity via experiment on actual prospective publics is an extension of the dialogic method, which has traditionally employed content

analysis. Using public relations material written for a series of researcher-created organizational blogs, experimental cells were presented as being a corporate blog from a social marketing company; only dialogic capacity was manipulated.

Participants ($N = 165$) were randomly assigned to one of three cells: high dialogic ($n = 57$, 34.5%), low dialogic ($n = 51$, 30.9%), or control ($n = 57$, 34.5%). Through the comparison of a high dialogic blog and a low dialogic blog – both containing the same public relations messages where only dialogic capacity was manipulated – this study was able to experimentally identify how dialogic capacity influences organization-public relationships and individual levels of issue involvement. The post-test only questionnaire included an exploratory dialogic experience scales, relational maintenance scale, and a measure to gauge issue involvement.

Results indicate that (1) the presence (or absence) of dialogic features on a blog indeed affects visitor experience, (2) dialogic capacity of an organizational blog impacts how effectively an organization-public relationship is established, and (3) one's issue involvement is not impacted by exposure to a blog.

Findings from this study will have implications for developing a clearer understanding of how online organization communication tools can be better developed into dialogic communication outlets, how the resulting effect on organization-public relationships can be measured and improved upon, and if varying dialogic capacities can effect individual levels of issue involvement.

INDEX WORDS: Dialogic Theory, Dialogic Principles, Dialogic Features, Public Relations, Relationships, Issue Involvement, Online Communication, Blogs, organization-public relationship

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publics (Yang & Lim, 2009). Blogs, in particular, offer a distinct opportunity for developing and

maintaining relationships between parties due to their unlimited nature of message dissemination

(Kelleher & Miller, 2006).

Using a social marketing company as a stimulus, this study is an extension of previous

research by Kent, Taylor, and White (Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003;

Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001) regarding the dialogic theory and websites, and of Seltzer and

Mitrook (2005, 2007) regarding the dialogic theory and blogs. This study seeks to provide

experimental insight into blogs' potential in building and strengthening relationships between

organizations and target audience members. Furthermore, this examines how one's connection to an issue (in this case the social issue touted by the stimulus organization) interacts with dialogic capacity and relationship.

This study moves beyond the constraints of a content analysis to identify experimentally how dialogic attributes influence relationships. This experiment aims to fill the research gap identified by Rybalko and Seltzer (2010) who concluded that "eventually, the study of dialogue and online communication will need to move from analyzing the dialogic features of online communication and start determining what effect engaging in dialogue has on stakeholders" (p. 340). Findings from this study will have implications for developing a clearer understanding of how online organization communication tools can be better developed into dialogic communication outlets, how the resulting effect on organization-public relationships can be measured and improved upon, and if varying dialogic capacities can effect individual levels of issue involvement.

Literature Review

Public Relations as Relationship Maintenance

A relationally-based focus of public relations supports Ferguson's (1984) suggestions pertaining to theory development opportunities within the field. Since then, extensive research effort has been devoted to studying theories and their capacity to build and maintain organization-public relationships and subsequently the constructs in which these relationships can be described, measured, deemed important, and affected by various conditions. The identification of this research potential and the outcomes that have followed have caused a strong shift in the field, both academically and professionally, toward a relational action emphasis (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). As a result of this shift, relationship theory has become the second-

most researched area in public relations scholarship, only behind the related concept of

symmetrical communication, also referred to as the Excellence Theory (Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-

Alzuru, & Jones, 2003).

From the public perspective, any relationship formed should satisfy the needs of the

public and their expectations, desires similar to those of interpersonal relationships (Bruning,

2000). While from the organization perspective, continual relationship management serves an

organizational management function that focuses on utilizing communication and dialogue

strategically to achieve organizational goals (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998).

Social media has become an increasingly popular manner through which companies step

away from their normal organizational/official voice and communicate with online publics using

a more human/relational voice (Sweetser, 2010). According to Kelleher (2009) human voice

describes "an engaging and natural style of organizational communication as perceived by an

organization's publics based on interactions between individuals in the organization and the

individuals in publics" (p. 177). Specifically, the conversational/human voice that blogs embody

is perhaps one of their most important and defining characteristics in the process of building and

maintaining relationships (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). Experimental data by Kelleher and Miller

(2006) on blogs and relational measures found that organizational blogs are more effective at

communicating in a conversational/human voice than traditional online material.

Dialogic Relationships

By applying dialogue and the related dialogic theory to online communication,

practitioners can orchestrate the construction and maintenance of organization-public

relationships.

Public relations practitioners can effectively facilitate dialogue by establishing means for dialogic communication to take place (Kent & Taylor, 2002). In their 1998 study on how to facilitate relationship building through the Internet, Kent, and Taylor defined dialogic communication as "any negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions" and "a communicative give and take …[through] the process of open and negotiated discussion" (p. 325). In follow-up studies regarding online relationship building and the dialogic theory, dialogue was found to be effective at guiding mediated relationships such as those created via online communication (Taylor et al., 2001), which in turn, was found to provide an ideal venue for fostering dialogue (Kent & Taylor, 2002). As dialogic media, the proper use of Internet-based tools has potential to influence the creation of organization-public relationships (Kent & Taylor, 1998). The use of the Internet and these tools holds unique relationship building potential as dynamic and long-lasting relationships between publics and organizations can be created, adapted, and changed through their strategic use (Kent & Taylor, 1998).

As the Internet has taken hold of communication efforts over the past decade, a plethora of new vehicles now exists for organizations to directly connect with their publics. The Internet's use as an information dissemination tool and its ability to "get the message out" (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 325) has led to its emergence as an important public relations tool for organizations (Kent et al., 2003). Specifically, it provides a controlled channel through which organizations can communicate with publics and the media, and through which publics can better understand organizations (Kent et al., 2003). Newsom, Turk, and Kruckeberg (2000) believe that in today's society it would be impossible to practice effective public relations without the Internet. It has become a personal and strategic tool in the public relations process that aids organizations in their day-to-day activities (Porter & Sallot, 2003).

The extensive dialogic theory research by Kent, Taylor, and White (Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002; Kent et al., 2003; Taylor et al., 2001) has provided a framework for facilitating dialogic relationships through the Internet and serves as a guide to scholars and practitioners interested in online dialogic relationship building (McAllister-Spooner, 2009). Research on the theory and website design has positioned the theory as an "honest and ethical means to guide practitioners and scholars in the creation and maintenance of effective organization-public relationships" (McAllister-Spooner, 2009, p. 320). Findings suggest that relationships are best facilitated by organizations engaging in open-minded discussion with communicative give and take through honest channels (Kent & Taylor, 1998) and when organizations create interactive, organization-to-public communication channels based on honest, effective media (Kent et al., 2003). However, to achieve these relationship-building results, organizations can not depend on technology itself, rather the way technology is used determines the potential that exists and it is important that aspects of the dialogic theory principles are incorporated in the technology to achieve relational success (Kent & Taylor, 1998).

Blogs that successfully incorporate elements of the dialogic theory have been found to effectively cultivate organization-public relationships (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007). Research by Seltzer and Mitrook (2007) extending dialogic findings from Taylor et al. (2001) to blog use revealed that blogs are a social media tool that have potential to be more effective than traditional websites in relationship building efforts (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007). Social media and blogging have become factors that practitioners and scholars must consider when deciding how to appropriately manage relations with different publics in different scenarios (Kelleher, 2008).

To broaden the scope of dialogic theory research, this study features several important changes. First, to decrease the research gap as it pertains to research methods, this study uses an

experiment rather than a content analysis. Even more this experiment directly includes findings pertaining to the relationship management theory through the use of the relational maintenance strategy scale. Lastly, this study uses a fabricated TOMS Shoes blog as the treatment, allowing individual levels of issue involvement to be measured and shifting dialogic study from activist blogs to corporate blogs

Research Questions

RQ1: Are dialogic experience levels higher for blog visitors for each of the dialogic principles when engaging with a high dialogic blog than with a low dialogic blog?

RQ2: Do blogs that incorporate a high number of dialogic features more effectively establish organization-public relationships than those that incorporate a low number of dialogic features?

RQ3: Do blogs that incorporate a high number of dialogic features more effectively establish higher degrees of issue involvement for blog visitors than those that incorporate a low number of dialogic features?

Method

This study employs a full experiment with two conditions (high dialogic blog and low dialogic blog) plus control. The corporation presented as hosting the blog, TOMS Shoes, was selected carefully to bridge the gap between the existing reliance on nonprofit websites in dialogic research and the more corporate-based research focus of relationship theory. An organization such as TOMS Shoes, which has a one-for-one shoe charity component, provides an opportunity to take advantage of an issue while still promoting a product.

Sample

The sample for this research study includes college students, ages 18 and older, at a large Southeastern research university (N=165; $\underline{M}$ age = 21.09). This sample of young people was

ideal because of their familiarity with blogs and that they are TOMS Shoes' target demographic of 18 to 24 year olds (Microsoft Advertising, 2010). Familiarity amongst this ideal-aged participant group, as expected, was achieved with 95.2% of participants reporting to be aware of TOMS Shoes ($n = 157$).

Treatment

This experiment focuses on the comparison of two blogs: a high dialogic TOMS blog and a low dialogic blog TOMS blog. Both blogs were created by the researcher on the Wordpress blog platform for the purpose of this study as a means to maximize control, ensure consistency of information presented, and create ideal dialogic capacity differences. Consistent information (i.e., content) was presented through posts on both blogs, however the high dialogic blog portrays the information using a larger variety of dialogic features. Additional information is also present on the high dialogic blog through the use of supplementary content pages. The low dialogic blog featured only the required default features in the Wordpress system and the high dialgic blog featured all of the possible additional features offered in the Wordpress system.

To ensure that these were indeed a high and low dialogic set of blogs, dialogic capacity was determined by quantitatively coding both blogs based on the standard dialogic content analysis coding system (Kent et al., 2003; Taylor et al., 2001; Seltzer & Mitrook 2005, 2007), adding additional feature items which were offered in the Wordpress system to update the coding scheme. Based on the procedure of Seltzer and Mitrook (2005, 2007), the blogs were coded to identify features related to the dialogic principles and noted whether a feature was present. The high dialogic blog received a coding score of 37 and the low dialogic blog received a coding score of 8.

Procedure

All facilitation sessions were held in a controlled research setting in 2012. Participants in each facilitation session were randomly assigned using a random number generated to one of three experimental cells: high dialogic ($n = 57$, 34.5%), low dialogic ($n = 51$, 30.9%), or control ($n = 57$, 34.5%). Treatment groups were exposed to one of the two blogs. During the 15-minute exposure period, participants were asked to familiarize themselves with the blog and interact with all aspects of interest to them. Headphones were placed at each computer station so that participants could interact, if desired, with audio and video features without disturbing other participants. Upon completion of the exposure period, participants completed an online post-test questionnaire based on their observations and interactions with the blog.

The control group, likewise, completed the online post-test questionnaire. However, they were directed to complete the questionnaire based on their perceptions and previous experiences with blogs in general rather than their interaction with a treatment.

Though all experimental materials (stimulus and questionnaires) were online, the experiment itself was facilitated in laboratory setting to ensure maximum control.

Instrument

Using a posttest-only experimental design with control, participants, completed a post-test questionnaire. Regardless of cell assignment, questionnaires included all the same items, re-worded as appropriate, with the exception of manipulation check items, which were only included on the treatment questionnaire.

Dialogic principles experience as a result of manipulation, was measured using a dialogic principles scale created for the purpose of this study and the content/formatting of the blogs. The dialogic principles scale was created to measure key components of each dialogic principle as it has been defined in previous dialogic theory research (Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2000; Kent et al.,

2003; Seltzer & Mitrook 2005, 2007; Taylor et al., 2001). Based on an in depth analysis of each of the principles defining characteristics, a 20-item scale was created with each of the five principles being analyzed on a set of three to six questions. Agreement levels with each of the items were measured on a five-point Likert scale. Because this was the first use of an actual scale for human subjects in measuring dialogic principle experience, this exploratory scale was divided into separate indices that correlated with the content analysis categories used in previous studies. Four of the five principle indices were found to be reliable: dialogic loop (alpha = .74), usefulness of information (alpha = .82), return visits (alpha = .79), and ease of interface (alpha = .76). One variable within the conservation of visitors index (links that lead away from the blog) did not load and was removed, leaving two variables within the index that loaded reliably (alpha = .79). The listing of variables within each newly created dialogic principle index can be found in Table 1.

This relationship was measured using the relational maintenance strategy scale, based on Stafford and Canary's (1991) taxonomy of relational maintenance strategies and used by these researchers in previous studies related to social, personal, and romantic relationships, and marriage. A version of the scale previously adapted for social media was employed (Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller 2006, Sweetser, 2010; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007; Sweetser & Tedesco, 2013). This 25-item Likert scale ranging from 1, *strongly disagree* to 5, *strongly agree* measures relationship items such as task sharing, relational commitment, conversational style, responsiveness, and tone. The relationship scale was divided in the same fashion as previous study's concept groupings. Separate indices were made for each of the concepts based on the historical groupings from Sweetser (2010). Six of the seven of indices here were found to be reliable: task sharing (alpha = .80), communicated relational commitment (alpha = .90),

conversational human voice (alpha = .73), responsiveness/customer service (alpha = .76), dialogue (alpha = .84), and positivity/optimism (.91). While the responsive to criticism alpha (.53) is lower than the standard threshold, it was consistent with the Sweetser (2010) alpha for this index (.56) and only contains two variables. The listing of variables within each index can be found in Table 2.

To understand the role of social marketing here, individual levels of issue involvement (Van Gorp et al., 2009) gauged participants' involvement with the issue of children without shoes. The scale was a 5-item, 5-point Likert scale worded to be relevant to the issue of children with no shoes. The five issue involvement items were summed into a single index (alpha = .78). Mean scores for individual variables are shown in Table 3.

Demographic questions, to include media diet, were also asked of each participant. Additionally, familiarly with the stimulus company, TOMS Shoes, was gauged: 47.3% reporting to be very familiar (n = 78) and 33.3% being familiar (n = 55). Even more 60 participants (36.4%) reported to own at least one pair of TOMS Shoes.

Treatment cell questionnaires concluded with a manipulation check to confirm the dialogic categorization (high/low) for each stimulus. The manipulation was successful: participants understood whether they were exposed to a high or low dialogic stimulus χ^2 (1) = 100.27, p = .001.

Results

Experimental results and answers to this study's research questions aim to demonstrate how the dialogic capacity of online organization communication outlets, such as blogs, can influence organization-public relationships and issue involvement.

Dialogic Experience

RQ1 asked whether dialogic experience levels were higher for blog visitors for each of the dialogic principles when engaging with a high dialogic blog than with a low dialogic blog. Results indicate this is the case. Comparing the mean score for each of the dialogic principle indices across cells revealed that blog visitors report higher levels of dialogic experience for all five of the dialogic principles when engaging with a high dialogic blog than with a low dialogic blog. It appears high dialogic conditions have the highest levels of dialogic experience potential, followed by control (no blog exposure), and then low dialogic conditions.

An initial one-way analysis of variance showed statistically significant differences were present based on dialogic condition cell for all of the dialogic principle indices: dialogic loop, F $(2, 161) = 38.43$, $p = .001$; usefulness of information, $F (2, 160) = 18.62$, $p = .001$; return visits, $F (2, 160) = 73.49$, $p = .001$; ease of interface, $F (2, 161) = 25.06$, $p = .001$; conservation of visitors, $F (2, 162) = 23.99$, $p = .001$. A series of follow-up Bonferroni post-hoc tests were conducted to determine differences between cells. For each of the indices, post-hoc analyses revealed that the high dialogic manipulation cell reported statistically significantly higher levels of dialogic experience than the low dialogic manipulation cell. Consistent results were found in regard to the control, with the control cell having statistically significantly higher levels of dialogic potential than the low dialogic manipulation cell.

Post hoc analysis on the dialogic loop principle index revealed that the mean score for the high dialogic manipulation cell was statistically significantly higher than the low dialogic manipulation cell (mean difference = 3.32; $p = .001$), and the mean score for the control cell was likewise statistically significantly higher than the low dialogic manipulation cell (mean difference = 2.98; $p = .001$).

Post hoc analysis on the usefulness of information principle index revealed that the mean

score for the high dialogic manipulation cell was statistically significantly higher than the low dialogic manipulation cell (mean difference = 3.59; p = .001). The mean score for the control cell was also statistically significantly higher than the low dialogic manipulation cell (mean difference = 2.18; p = .001).

Post hoc analysis on the return visit principle index revealed that the mean score for the high dialogic manipulation cell was statistically significantly higher than the low dialogic manipulation cell (mean difference = 4.00; p = .001). The mean score for the control cell was statistically significantly higher than the low dialogic manipulation cell (mean difference = 4.75; p = .001).

Post hoc analysis on the ease of interface principle index revealed that the mean score for the high dialogic manipulation cell was statistically significantly higher than the low dialogic manipulation cell (mean difference = 3.77; p = .001). Likewise, the mean score for the control cell was statistically significantly higher than the low dialogic manipulation cell (mean difference = 2.38; p = .001).

Post hoc analysis on the conservation of visitors principle index revealed that the mean score for the high dialogic manipulation cell was statistically significantly higher than the low dialogic manipulation cell (mean difference = 1.70; p = .001), and the mean score for the control cell was statistically significantly higher than the low dialogic manipulation cell (mean difference = 2.14; p = .001).

Thus, with blog visitors experiencing different levels of dialogic potential based on dialogic exposure, an affirmative answer is provided for research question one. This reveals that the presence or absence of dialogic features on a blog affects blog visitor experiences within each of the dialogic principles.

Dialogic Capacity and Relationships

RQ2 asks if blogs that incorporate a high number of dialogic features are more effective at establishing organization-public relationships than those that incorporate a low number of dialogic features. This appears to be the case. Data reveal that dialogic capacity impacts how effectively a blog establishes organization-pubic relationship. Blogs that incorporate a high number of dialogic features have been found to be more effective at establishing organization-public relationships than those that incorporate lower numbers of dialogic features.

An initial one-way analysis of variance showed statistically significant differences were present based on cell for all of the relational maintenance strategy indices: task sharing, F (2, 162) = 12.76, p = .001; communicated relational commitment, F (2, 161) = 14.84, p = .001; conversational human voice, F (2, 160) = 7.97, p = .001; responsiveness/customer service, F (2, 161) = 7.63, p = .001; dialogue, F (2, 162) = 8.37, p = .001; responsiveness to criticism, F (2, 161) = 10.69, p = .001; positivity/optimism F (2, 161) = 9.33, p = .001. A series of follow-up Bonferroni post-hoc tests were conducted to determine the specific statistically significant differences between cells. For each of the indices, post-hoc analyses revealed that the high dialogic manipulation cell statistically significantly established a better relationship with the blog visitors than the low dialogic manipulation cell. Similar results were found in regard to the control, with the control cell establishing a better relationship with the blog visitors than the low dialogic manipulation cell, however, significance levels for control had mixed results.

Post hoc analysis on the task sharing relationship index revealed that the mean score for the high dialogic manipulation cell was statistically significantly higher than the low dialogic manipulation cell (mean difference = 2.98; p = .001), and the mean score for the control cell was

statistically significantly higher than the low dialogic manipulation cell (mean difference = 1.73; p = .011).

Post hoc analysis on the communicated relational commitment relationship index revealed that the mean score for the high dialogic manipulation cell was statistically significantly higher than the low dialogic manipulation cell (mean difference = 3.41; p = .001), and the mean score for the control cell was statistically significantly higher than the low dialogic manipulation cell (mean difference = 3.36; p = .001).

Post hoc analysis on the conversational human voice relationship index revealed that the mean score for the high dialogic manipulation cell was statistically significantly higher than the low dialogic manipulation cell (mean difference = 1.88; p = .001). However, statistically significant mean score differences were not found between the control cell and the low dialogic manipulation cell (mean difference = .54; p = .807).

Post hoc analysis on the responsiveness/customer service relationship index revealed that the mean score for the high dialogic manipulation cell was statistically significantly higher than the low dialogic manipulation cell (mean difference = 1.33; p = .001). Statistically significant mean score differences were not found between the control cell and the low dialogic manipulation cell (mean difference = .79; p = .066).

Post hoc analysis on the dialogue relationship index revealed that the mean score for the high dialogic manipulation cell was statistically significantly higher than the low dialogic manipulation cell (mean difference = 1.62; p = .001), and the mean score for the control cell was statistically significantly higher than the low dialogic manipulation cell (mean difference = 1.43; p = .003).

Post hoc analysis on the responsiveness to criticism relationship index revealed that the

mean score for the high dialogic manipulation cell was statistically significantly higher than the low dialogic manipulation cell (mean difference = .55; p = .014), and the mean score for the control cell was statistically significantly higher than the low dialogic manipulation cell (mean difference = .89; p = .001).

Post hoc analysis on the positivity/optimism relationship index revealed that the mean score for the high dialogic manipulation cell was statistically significantly higher than the low dialogic manipulation cell (mean difference = .78; p = .003). However, statistically significant mean score differences were not found between the control cell and the low dialogic manipulation cell (mean difference = -.12; p = 1.00).

Thus for all seven of the relational maintenance strategy indices, it was determined that organizations with blogs that incorporate a high number of dialogic features are more effective at establishing relationships with the public than those that incorporate a low number of dialogic features. However, the task sharing, communicated relational commitment, dialogue, and responsiveness to criticism indices were found to support the notion that no blog exposure is better at establishing a relationship between an organization and the public than exposure to a low dialogic blog. Meanwhile, the conversational human voice index, responsiveness/customer service index, and the positivity/optimism index revealed that exposure to a low dialogic blog would be more effective at establishing a relationship between the public and an organization than no blog exposure. While results are mixed, an overall affirmative answer to research question four reveals that dialogic capacity of an organizational blog impacts how effectively an organization-public relationship is established.

Dialogic Capacity and Issue Involvement

RQ3 asks whether blogs that incorporate a high number of dialogic features are more

effective at establishing higher degrees of issue involvement for blog visitors than those that

incorporate a low number of dialogic features. Results indicate they are not. It was found that

dialogic capacity of a blog does not impact degrees of issue involvement for blog visitors. An

initial one-way analysis of variance showed statistically significant differences were not present

based on cell for the issues involvement index, $F(2, 159) = .841$, $p = .433$. This finding indicates

that an individual does not become more or less involved in an issue following exposure to a

blog of one dialogic capacity versus another.

Discussion

This study sought to expand on Kent and Taylor's account of how dialogic approaches

can be used by practitioners and scholars and provide an understanding of the benefits that can

result from these approaches (2002). By doing so, existing research gaps are narrowed and the

body of scholarship is provided with a true understanding of dialogic effect. This need to

understand dialogic effect was acknowledged by Rybalko and Seltzer (2010) in their mention of

limitations within the dialogic research stream. They stressed the need to understand whether

exposure to dialogic features has an effect on visitors or users. To measure these possible effects,

this study examined causation between dialogic capacity, and each of the dependent variables,

relationship building, dialogic experience, dialogic feature importance, and issue involvement.

This study is able to provide an initial understanding of dialogic effect by empirically measuring

it through stakeholder manipulation and feedback.

Broadly, this study exposes ties between dialogic capacity and organization-public

relationship building and negates the possibility of a connection between dialogic capacity and

individual levels of issue involvement. Even more, results reveal that dialogic capacity has a

direct effect on visitor experiences but reveals that the incorporation of a select few features is

most important. This study provides the first empirical support that dialogic capacity impacts organization-public relationship building. Specific results from this study confirm that the use of high dialogic online communication is more effective than low dialogic communication at establishing and maintaining public-organization relationships. The final avenue of inquiry for this study pertained to the effect of dialogic capacity on individual levels of issue involvement. No previous research of this nature exists, but at this time, results reveal no cause and effect relationship exists and thus this many not be a fruitful area of future study.

Dialogic Experience

For each of the five dialogic principles, participant experiences were parallel to the dialogic capacity of the blog to which they were exposed. Thus participants exposed to a high dialogic blog reported higher dialogic experiences for each of the principles, while participants exposed to low dialogic blogs reported lower dialogic experiences for each of the principles. In the direct comparison of a high dialogic blog versus a low dialogic blog, participants reported higher quality experiences when engaging with a high dialogic blog.

The greatest dialogic experience difference was in the return visit principle, revealing that ones likelihood to return to an organizational blog is highly dependent on dialogic capacity. This suggests that users stress the inclusion of key dialogic factors such as updated information and interactive elements when gauging their experience and probability of returning. This pressure placed on the return visit principle is extremely important as past research reveals that repeat interactions are a key component of successful and ongoing relationships (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Kent et al., 2003; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2005/2007; Taylor et al., 2001). Quality, lasting relationships are dependent on attention in which organizations view publics as partners in communication rather than clients or customers (Kent et al., 2003).

Consistent differences were found for each of the other dialogic principles with varying degrees of disparity. This reveals that users factor two-way communication opportunities, the value of content and information, the ease of navigation, and the value of their visit time when gauging their overall experience but not quite to the degree of elements generating return visits. While users may evaluate their experience less on these four principles, organizations should think twice before discrediting the importance of the individual features within them. All eleven dialogic features identified a most important in research question two fall in three of these four principles.

In sum, this study reveals that stakeholders and their experiences are subject to dialogic effect. This confirms that although stakeholders may not be aware of the dialogic theory or its principles and features, they recognize a difference in experience quality when interacting with a dialogic medium versus a non-dialogic medium. Accordingly, organizations should note the impact that dialogic capacity has on visitor experiences and should aim to be highly dialogic in order to provide visitors with positive online experiences. This can be achieved by ensuring all online communication including, websites, blogs, social media profiles, email blasts, and electronic newsletters are all built to be highly dialogic and aimed towards relationship building. A positive experience resulting from online dialogic communication is indicative of future positive experiences with a company.

As the first study to include dialogic exposure and measure visitor experiences, the strong association found between high dialogic blogs and positive experiences is an important contribution to the dialogic research stream. Past dialogic research has provided a solid understanding of how to properly design and execute online communication outlets and facilitate and foster online dialogic relationships through the successful use of highly dialogic websites

and blogs (Kent et al., 2003; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2005/2007; Taylor et al., 2001). However, never before has it been questioned how dialogic capacity directly affects visitor experiences. The new knowledge gained in this study provides answers to this previously unanswered question and reaffirms past arguments that organization's should be strategic in web design and communication to meet a variety of visitor needs and produce positive visitor experiences (Kent et al., 2003). This is essential to understand and embrace when working to sort through all facets of the dialogic theory and its true cause and effect potential.

Dialogic Capacity and Relationships

Broadly, the data suggests that dialogic capacity has a direct effect on organization-public relationships. Results reveal that visitors engaging with a high dialogic blog report to establish a better relationship with the organization than visitors engaging with a low dialogic blog. Thus results from this study confirm that exposure to high dialogic online communication, aids organization-public relationship building. When high dialogic relationship building potential is directly compared to low dialogic relationship building potential, significant differences exist among all seven relational maintenance strategies, supporting that high dialogic levels should be the first goal of any organization aiming to use blogs to build relationships. This finding provides support for Kelleher and Miller's (2006) notion that blogs have value in organization-public relationship building efforts and provides clarity to their notion by addressing the specific benefit of high dialogic blog use.

Knowing that high dialogic blog use is most beneficial to organization-public relationships, organizations must know what to do if faced with the situation of using a low dialogic blog or no organizational blog at all. Mixed results were found regarding the relationship potential of each option. Examining the relational maintenance strategies according

to those aided by low dialogic blog use and those damaged by low dialogic blog use may be the best way to review these mixed results.

For three of the seven relational maintenance strategies, conversational human voice, positivity/optimism, and responsiveness/customer service, data supports the use of a low dialogic organizational blog. Data here reveals there are situations in which an organization's relationship with its public is better aided by the use of a low dialogic blog than the use of no blog. In these cases, not having an organizational blog would damage the organization-public relationship more than the use of a blog of any dialogic capacity.

The potential aid provided by a low dialogic organizational blog may be explained by a simple public desire to hear from an organization. This study posits that circumstances exist where individuals seek any positive, optimistic, enjoyable, humorous, interesting, or conversational communication, regardless of dialogic capacity. It is suggested this may hold more truth for smaller organizations with weak web and social media presences. Blog use is simple and low cost and could supplement for otherwise lacking web communication, thus filling visitors needs to connect to small or growing organizations.

Opposite results are true for the four remaining relational maintenance strategies, task sharing, relational commitment, dialogue, and responsiveness to criticism. Results reveal that an organization-public relationship is better aided by no blog use and a higher degree of damage would be caused by low dialogic blog use. Blogs of low dialogic capacity are generally set-up poorly and cause frustrating visitor experiences in which desired information is either not present or is difficult to find. This frustrating experience is likely to damage a relationship that could have been otherwise un-affected had no blog exposure occurred.

The items in these four strategies directly discuss relationship dialogue, commitment, future, and quality along with organization actions and responses. It can be considered that these strategies directly affect feelings toward an organization and a relationship, more so than the other three strategies, which focus on the nature of organizational communication. This consideration could explain why a relationship suffers more damage when low dialogic communication occurs.

These results reveal that less damage is associated with a higher number of relational maintenance strategies when no blog is used. Thus, this study posits that no blog use should be chosen over low dialogic blog use when working towards fostering organizational-public relationships. However, the benefits of either option cannot begin to compare to the relationship benefits associated with high dialogic blog use.

In sum, organization-public relationships are subject to dialogic effect. The impact of dialogic capacity should be noted and it must be understood that research now shows that highly dialogic communication outlets must be used to foster the best organization-public relationship possible.

Dialogic Capacity and Issue Involvement

While tremendous strides were taken in terms of linking the dialogic theory and organization-public relationship building, no relationship was found to exist between the dialogic theory and individual levels of issue involvement. This study was ambitious in extending dialogic research beyond organization-public communication and relationships, and explored a new concept of issue involvement. It was questioned whether the dialogic theory could effect individual levels of issue involvement. The inquiry was examined through a comparison of a

high dialogic blog and a low dialogic blog and associated degrees of issues involvement

established. Here dialogic feature capacity served as the independent variable while the

exploratory issue involvement index served as the dependent variable

In sum, this study posits that these results indicate that individual involvement with an

issue is more deep-rooted than the structure, formatting, and content of one communication

outlet such as a blog. The deep-rooted nature of issue involvement reinforced in this study

corroborates with Van Gorp et al.'s (2009) finding that levels of issue involvement are not

effected by the framing of any one given news article.

Advancements for the Public Relations Field

It is incumbent upon organizations to develop exchanges with the public that provide

building blocks for relationships (Bruning & Ledingham, 1999). This study asserts that dialogic

communication is one of those key building blocks. By embracing the knowledge this study

provides, practitioners can weigh the benefits and consequences to dialogic experiences and

organization-public relationships when using online communication outlets of different dialogic

capacities.

Future Research

Future dialogic research should look at blog use in the political sector as well as personal

blogs maintained by individuals for profit. Scholars should also investigate other online social

media tools to observe the impact of two-way communication strategies on dialogic experience,

dialogic feature importance, and relationship building. Even more importantly, future research

should focus on experimental data that makes use of the experimental dialogic scales used in this

study or similar variations. Dialogic research cannot be dependent on content analysis findings

alone. Experimentally proven data must continue to emerge to provide solid cause and effect

relationships between dialogue and an array of other mass communication and public relations topics.

Limitations

As one of the first empirical dialogic theory studies, this research takes the needed step of further developing the dialogic theoretical concept. The findings here should be considered carefully, and not too broadly so as to be considered a full account of the potential for dialogic communication to build and strengthen organization-public relationships or alter levels of personal involvement with an issue.

Only one social media tactic, the use of an online blog, was examined here. The concepts of relationship and issues involvement cannot be confined to blog activity, but must be measured in a way that accounts for all aspects of communication and knowledge between parties. Additionally, although generalizations are made here extrapolating the current findings out to organizations as a whole, it must be noted that this experiment only tested one specific organizations' blog, TOMS Shoes, and the results may not generalize to other companies in other industries or sectors. Furthermore, it is important to note that while TOMS is a for-profit shoe company, it contributes to a cause, which may manipulate feelings of audience connectedness.

In terms of measures, this study used exploratory dialogic scales in an experimental setting. Without any previous experimental dialogic research, this study was ambitious in its creation and testing of new investigative dialogic scales. The dialogic principles scale and the dialogic features scale, created for this study, were solidly based on a combination of all past dialogic theory definitions and codebooks that were accepted as fact in past dialogic theory research. The infancy and untested nature of these scales serves as a limitation for this study but

overall has little effect on the study's ability to close the dialogic theory research gap as it pertains to research method.

Lastly, exposure can be considered a limitation because of ecological validity. Participants were directed to visit and interact with the treatment blogs. However, it is unknown if these individuals would have visited these blogs naturally.

Conclusion

This study's findings are pioneering to the study of the dialogic theory as stakeholder exposure and related effects have never been examined before. The success of this experiment provides empirical support for the application of the dialogic theory of communication in organization-public relationships and the effectiveness of dialogic blog use. Its findings illustrate what can happen if and when an organization provides an open, interactive mode of online communication with its public and offers a clearer understanding of how online organization communication tools can be developed into dialogic communication outlets. Findings such as these, and the many related ones to come as a result of future research, will ultimately influence the Internet's growth as a relationship-building tool.

Table 1. Dialogic Principe Index Mean Scores

	Overall	High	Low
Dialogic loop principles index (alpha = .74)	*10.43*	*11.56*	*8.24*
Interactive	3.23	3.75	2.18
Communicates with visitors	3.76	3.89	3.22
Provides opportunities for me to communicate	3.43	3.91	2.82
Usefulness of information principles index (alpha = .82)	*23.71*	*25.32*	*21.72*
Information is useful to visitors	3.99	4.25	3.76
Information is useful to me	3.62	3.81	3.02
Information is purposeful	4.12	4.51	3.82
Information is interesting	4.04	4.23	3.69
Information is informative	4.07	4.40	3.80
Information is not valuable (reverse coded)	3.90	4.19	3.63
Return visit principles index (alpha = .79)	*9.61*	*10.58*	*6.58*
Attractive for repeat visits	3.18	3.35	2.22
Up to date	3.36	3.74	2.37
Contains interactive elements	3.07	3.52	2.00
Ease of interface principles index (alpha = .76)	*17.63*	*19.28*	*15.50*
Easy to navigate	4.05	4.26	3.96
Not well organized (reverse coded)	3.56	3.96	3.33
Information pertaining to my individual needs	3.24	3.75	2.35
Displays information in a logical structure	3.54	3.98	3.18
Interface provided positive experience	3.24	3.32	2.69
Conservation of visitors principles index (alpha = .79)	*6.27*	*6.64*	*4.94*
Encouraged me to stay	3.09	3.25	2.35
Valuable use of my time	3.18	3.40	2.59

Note. Items asked on a 5-point Likert scale where 1= strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree.

Table 2. Relational Maintenance Strategy Index Item Mean Scores

	Overall	High	Low
Dialogue index (alpha =.842)	*10.74*	*11.31*	*9.68*
Invites visitors into conversation	3.38	3.54	2.96
Is open to dialogue	3.56	3.70	3.22
Communicates in a conversational style	3.81	4.07	3.51
Conversational human voice index (alpha =.733)	*14.90*	*15.94*	*14.06*
Communicates in a human voice	4.05	4.19	4.00
Is interesting in conversation	3.76	4.09	3.31
Uses a sense of humor in communication	3.32	3.61	3.10
Makes communication un-enjoyable (reverse coded)	3.78	4.05	3.67
Responsiveness to criticism index (alpha = .530)	*5.87*	*5.92*	*5.37*
Admits mistakes	2.90	2.89	2.65
Prompt uncritical feedback when addressing criticism	2.98	3.05	2.73
Communicated relational commitment index (alpha =.901)	*17.84*	*18.92*	*15.50*
Treats visitors as humans	3.95	4.21	3.84
Commitment to maintaining relationship w/ visitors	3.51	3.81	2.94
Communicates desire to build relationship w/ visitors	3.61	3.88	3.02
Stresses commitment to visitors	3.40	3.56	2.86
Implies a long-term relationship with visitors	3.40	3.48	2.84
Task sharing index (alpha =.805)	*19.45*	*20.80*	*17.82*
Discusses the nature of the organization	4.16	4.53	3.84
Emphasizes relationship quality	3.68	3.91	3.14
Performs organizational responsibilities	3.91	4.18	3.61
Directly addresses organizational responsibilities	3.83	4.12	3.47
Avoids duties (reverse coded)	3.87	4.07	3.76
Responsive/customer service index (alpha =.761)	*10.55*	*11.16*	*9.82*
Accepts visitor feedback/comments	3.81	4.02	3.76
Accepts visitor emails	3.53	3.88	3.08
Positively addresses complaints or queries	3.23	3.29	2.98
Positivity/optimism index (alpha =.911)	*8.81*	*9.36*	*8.58*
Expresses cheer and optimism about the future	4.36	4.67	4.20
Uses a positive/optimistic tone	4.45	4.70	4.38

Note. Items asked on a 5-point Likert scale where 1= strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree.

Table 3. Issue Involvement Mean Scores

	Overall	High Dialogic Cell	Low Dialogic Cell
Interest level	2.47	2.51	2.12
Attention level	2.79	2.82	2.65
Follow level	2.08	2.09	1.94
Discussion level	2.35	2.37	2.29
Involvement level	2.22	2.28	2.18

Note. Items asked on a 5-point Likert scale where 1= low involvement measure and 5 = high

involvement measure. Alpha for entire index is .78 and *M* for the entire index is 11.77.

M for the high dialogic cell index is 12.07 and *M* for the low dialogic cell index is 11.17.

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