

Conceptualizing Credibility in Social Media Spaces of Public Relations

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ABSTRACT

There is not an organization today that can afford to ignore the power of social media. Public relations professionals have recognized that it is essential to leverage social media to build and maintain relationships with increasingly interactive publics in a credible way that will foster strong relationships. The purpose of this national study is to re-conceptualize our understanding of credibility in the context of social media by analyzing how organizations employ social media to build credibility. The findings of the study not only extend source and medium credibility research into a timely context, but also contribute to theoretical development and practice in the public relations field. Findings indicate that trustworthiness, expertise, personable interaction and invitational rhetoric are critical dimensions for the credibility of an organization interacting through social media.

There is not an organization or brand in operation today that can afford to ignore the power of social media. In 2013, engaging through social media became the number one single online activity for individuals (Smith, 2013). Publics that interact with organizations through these dynamic platforms seem to expect greater levels of transparency, interaction and dialogue from public relations professionals and organizations (Duhé, 2012).

Among the many ways social media has changed the relationship between organizations and publics is the perception of credibility. Source credibility is a concept that has fascinated communication scholars for many decades, with studies examining the characteristics required in a communication source in order for it to be perceived as credible (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953; Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Whitehead, 1968). In addition, with the advent of mass communication, credibility scholars also focused on *medium* credibility, looking not at the person or source, but at the conduit delivering information (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Kioussis, 2001; Meyer 1988). Therefore, while many credibility studies focus on either the source *or* the medium, in more recent years some scholars have suggested that this may actually result in an incomplete understanding of credibility. One such scholar, Moriarty (1996), advocated that credibility is an issue for *both* the source of a message as well as for the channel or medium carrying the message. Arguably, this is especially true in today's digital media environment.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Two-Way Dialogue in Public Relations Development

The history of public relations reveals several distinct phases of how the industry perceived the process of communication and the role of publics. This background is crucial in understanding how social media directly influences the communication paradigm held by modern public relations practitioners. In a seminal work on public relations, Grunig and Hunt (1984) identified four models of public relations: (1) press agency, (2) public information, (3) two-way asymmetrical, and (4) two-way symmetrical. While they acknowledged that some activities that appear to be public relations occurred early in history, they suggest that the first “full-time specialists to practice public relations” began in the mid-19th century, marking the moment in history public relations became an actual professional field. These early public relations figures primarily used mass media to reach publics with one-way dialogue communication model that promoted a client. The public information model, the second model identified by Grunig and Hunt (1984), emerged at the beginning of the 20th century. Grunig and Grunig (1992) point out that this model “developed as a reaction to attacks on large corporations and government agencies by muckraking journalists” (p. 288). Realizing that they needed more than propaganda to impact public opinion, public relations professionals began working to *inform* the public on issues through presenting information (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The third model, two-way asymmetrical, is attributed to the time period that Edward Bernays practiced public relations. This third model uses two-way communication in order to gather research and develop a systematic way of creating public consent for organizational purposes. The focus of this third model of communication is not on mutual understanding, however, but rather on audience research to achieve objectives. Finally, a two-way symmetrical model, which is the fourth model of public relations, is recommended as the best for the practice of public relations (Grunig & Hunt 1984). The reason this model is different from the asymmetrical approach is because it “uses research to facilitate understanding and communication rather than to identify messages most likely to motivate or persuade publics. In the symmetrical model, understanding is the principle objective of public relations rather than persuasion” (Grunig & Grunig, 1992, p. 289).

Public Relations and Social Media

Today’s public relations practitioners conceptualize public relations as engaging in asymmetrical information sharing and communication with both the press and the public (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). This model is research-based and places the creation of meaning and dialogue as the principle objective of public relations instead of persuasion (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). This commitment to interaction and mutual communication between an organization and public is one reason that social media has become a crucial tool within public relations. Social media allow not only for organizations and publics to develop symmetrical ways of sharing information, but also facilitate both

groups to actively contribute to the creation of ideas by providing publics with a platform to actively participate in creating meaning with organizations. Social media, therefore, have had a dynamic impact on organizational relationships with publics.

Scholars who have advanced the understanding of organization-public relationship (OPR) examine key dimensions that are central to understanding relationships between organizations and publics such as trust, satisfaction and commitment (Hong & Grunig, 1999; Broom, Casey & Ritchey, 1997). Due to the way social media have the opportunity to influence the credibility of an organization, and ultimately the OPR, public relations scholars have also begun wrestling with how social media directly impacts the quality or nature of relationships with key stakeholders. This influence is what led Smith (2010) to propose a “social model” that explored the dynamics to communication between publics and organizations. He suggests “social public relations are based on user-initiation, and comprise three concepts: viral interaction, public-defined legitimacy, and social stake” (p. 333). Essentially, for public relations to really thrive and have authentic two-way dialogue and genuine relationships with key stakeholders via social media, the communication needs to be driven by the public and not the organization (Macnamara, 2010). Key elements that have been recognized by scholars as important include transparency, two-way dialogue, expertise and consistent communication with key publics (Duhé, 2012). What is still largely unexplored, however, is how social media influence the publics perception of credibility in the digital world.

Credibility Studies

Since the early 1950s, researchers have examined the influence of credibility. In these early days, credibility studies focused on *source* credibility (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Kiousis, 2001). These studies examined the way various characteristics of a communicator influenced individual and audience acceptance of a message (Markham, 1968). As communication technologies advanced and mass media platforms garnered considerable attention and influence, scholars began to focus on how the credibility of *media* or particular *mediums* were perceived by its audiences (Rimmer & Weaver, 1987; Kiousis, 2001; Gaziano & McGrath, 1986). Rather than examining the source, as previously done, researchers studied the influence of the platform used to deliver a message and the influence on publics’ acceptance of that message. These two lines of research, source and medium credibility, both have a robust history that is worthwhile examining, especially in light of the digital media environment in which public relations practitioners are working today. Before reviewing the literature within these two areas, however, it is helpful to look at how *credibility* itself has been defined by scholars.

Credibility Dimensions. Credibility research is riddled with differing definitions (Burgoon, 1976; Falicone, 1974; Singletary, 1976). Scholars who study credibility understand that there is no definitively agreed upon definition for the dimensions of credibility (Burgoon, 1976; Falicone, 1974; Singletary, 1976). There are, nevertheless, some foundations that provide a framework upon which the study of credibility can take shape. In fact, scholars within credibility face the challenge of studying the concept without a clearly articulated definition to guide the process. However, despite the lack of a concrete definition, there are foundations that unify the study of credibility and give

shape to research within this sphere. Credibility is a concept that is generally composed of and described by multiple *dimensions* such as reliability, trust, believability, accessibility and openness (Tseng & Fogg, 1999; Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008). One of the earliest researchers to examine credibility was Carl Hovland, who conducted studies focused on source credibility (Hovland, et al., 1953; Hovland, Lumsdaine, & Sheffield, 1949; Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Findings from these studies suggested that two dimensions were central to credibility: expertise and trustworthiness (Kiousis, 2001; Hovland et al, 1953; McCroskey & Young, 1981). These two areas are what many researchers default to as a base definition for credibility today.

Source credibility. As discussed above, one of the most prominent scholars in the area of source credibility is Hovland. Throughout his career, he worked to discover what characteristics in a source would influence people's attitudes, willingness to believe, values, or cause people to behave in a certain way in response to a source (Hovland, et al., 1953; Hovland, Lumsdaine & Sheffield, 1949; Hovland & Weiss, 1951). While Hovland's assertion was that credibility is largely composed of expertise and trustworthiness, there have been many other dimensions of credibility that scholars have explored. Because the concept of credibility is so complex, Berlo, et al., (1969) challenged the traditional static Hovland model with a multidimensional model rooted in perception. This is a particularly important differentiation as credibility in this context is viewed as something that publics *perceive* rather than being a set characteristic held by an organization. Belo et al. (1969) argued that "safety," "qualifications," and "dynamism" are primary factors in the image, or perception, of the source by people. This new study moved source credibility studies from focusing on static qualities into a dynamic construct of perceived images. It is likely that this contributed to the proposal that perception of good will from a source is inherent in source credibility (Teven & McCroskey, 1997). However, measuring the construct of a source's intent towards someone separately from the perception of a source's trustworthiness has posed problematic for some credibility constructs (McCroskey & Young, 1981).

Media credibility. Seminal research in media credibility can be traced to Mitchell V. Charnley's (1936) "*Preliminary Notes on a Study of Newspaper Accuracy*" (as cited in Gaziano and McGrath, 1986). Media studies really did not begin to blossom, however, until the late 1950s and early 1960s, largely in part due to surveys conducted by the Roper polling organization, which began including a question that gauged publics' trust in television versus newspapers (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Roper Center, 1990). Scholars soon began to compare channel credibility across mediums. One such study by Westley and Severin (1964) was the "first comprehensive analysis of channel credibility across media outlets" (Kiousis, 2001, p. 384). They found that factors related to the audience's demographics, such as age, education and gender, mediated the perception of a medium's credibility (Westley & Severin, 1964). In another study, Gaziano and McGrath (1986) conducted research that used a factor analysis of 16 items, eventually finding that 12 of those grouped together into a credibility index. While this is a widely accepted index for media credibility (Kiousis, 2001), not all scholars felt that the factor loading accurately represented a single concept of credibility. Meyer (1988), for example, suggested that the analysis actually measured two separate

dimensions of credibility: believability and community affiliation. West (1994) attempted to find a conclusion to the debate by examining both constructs. While he concluded that Meyer's believability dimension was reliable, he suggested that the community affiliation dimension proposed by Meyer was not reliable. Nevertheless, West did agree with Meyer's premise that Gaziano and McGrath had, in fact, measured more than one credibility dimension. Despite West's findings, Rimmer and Weaver (1987) also decided to examine the Gaziano and McGrath's credibility index and concluded that, contrary to West's findings, the credibility dimensions "reported a Cronbach's alpha score of .90 for a credibility scale based on Gaziano and McGrath's work, implying that it does measure a single construct" (Kioussis, 2001, p. 385). Not able to come to an agreement, some scholars have continued to examine medium credibility as a single index, following the work of Gaziano and McGrath (1986) and Rimmer and Weaver (1987), while others such as Meyer (1988) and West (1994) have opted to divide the concept of credibility into sub-variables.

This merging of source and media credibility in the online environment has led many to the conclusion that "perceived credibility is primarily a function of both source and channel characteristics" (Kioussis, 2001, p. 388). In the field of public relations, which is the context of this study, understanding the source's and the medium's role in the perceived credibility of publics is an essential part of the communication process.

Organizational credibility. An additional element that comes into play for public relations professionals is the fact that they are representing organizations, not necessarily individuals, on social media. Therefore, organizational credibility via social media, in addition to source and medium credibility, influences publics' perceptions. Newell and Goldsmith (2001) produced a study with a scale to measure organizational corporate credibility after identifying more research focused on advertising or spokesperson credibility rather than the perceived credibility of the entire organization or brand. In a study with five data sets and multiple tests, they proposed two dimensions for corporate credibility: expertise and trustworthiness. These are the same dimensions that were often suggested as the primary dimensions of source credibility discovered in previous research discussed in the preceding sections. The impact of these two dimensions plays a key part in ensuring that an organization or brand can effectively reach its publics and build relationships (LaBarbera, 1982; Fombrun, 1996; Newell & Goldsmith, 2001). Finally, an area to consider in the context of this study is previous research dealing with online credibility, as it relates to the topic of social media's credibility.

Online credibility. Many scholars (Friedman, Kahn & Howe, 2000; Ha & Perks, 2005) have explored ways to build trust in a virtual environment. The conclusion has been that the issue of credibility online, as with both source and media credibility studies, is one of complexity (Ha, 2004). Ha (2004) found that not only did online factors contribute to the perception of trust in the brand, but also that offline factors, such as traditional advertising, influence the perception of the brand's online presence (p. 336). Essentially, the findings showed that the online world is not a self-contained culture and should not be approached as an incubator with separate environments of credibility. Rather, the

online world is highly influenced by other activities of the organization or brand. For example, Martin and Johnson (2010) suggested that online credibility should be explored largely in two facets: visual and technological dimensions. However, this seems to largely ignore the role of message and source, which still play a role in credibility. This is exactly what Hwang (2013) also suggested, arguing that in the online environment a mixture of source and medium dimensions should be used to explore credibility. Whereas past studies have used expertise and trustworthiness (Gass & Seiter, 2004) as primary dimensions, the online environment is not necessarily confined primarily to those two. Martin and Johnson (2012) recommended that a third element, “attractiveness,” should be considered as a dimension. The dimension of attractiveness is not a new consideration, as it also has previously been explored primarily as a source credibility dimension (Hwang, 2013).

Considering the numerous facets and approaches to understanding credibility, including source, medium, organizational and online dimensions, this study will incorporate considerations from each of these lines of study when exploring organizational or brand credibility through social media. Based on this research need, the following research questions will guide the present study:

RQ1: What dimensions of credibility influence publics’ perceptions of an organization’s credibility when using social media?

RQ2: How do the dimensions of credibility influence publics in their use of social media?

METHODOLOGY

This study used an online survey to collect responses using a purposive sampling strategy to focus specifically on social media users (Isaac and Michael, 1995, p. 223). The online questionnaire was provided via Survey Monkey, a company that facilitates the creation and implementation of online research. To encourage participation, there was an opportunity to participate in a random sample drawing for one of five, \$100 gift cards. Participants had the option of providing their email, which would not be included with any of their survey response information for the drawing.

Survey Design and Item Generation

As identified previously, credibility is a complex construct that has been explored using many dimensions. Thus identifying the particular items to include within the survey was a significant step. Items for this study were developed from previous studies that explored historically identified dimensions of credibility in both source and media studies as well as new scholarship that explored particularly important dimensions relevant to the environment of social media.

Previous credibility research has used factor analysis to develop measurement scales that explore multiple dimensions of credibility (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Rimmer & Weaver, 1987, Hovland & Weiss, 1951), often using Likert-type questions. Berlo, et al.,

(1969), for example, used differential scales to validate the dimensions of “safety,” “qualifications” and “dynamism” in source credibility. McCroskey (1966), on the other hand, chose to combine both Likert-type questions with differential scales to explore two specific dimensions in source credibility: authority and character. McCroskey (1966) suggested that both authority, or competence, and character are evaluative factors which, when combined, compose the ethos of the source. Studies that explored medium credibility also used factor analysis as a way to explore credibility. Gaziano and McGrath (1986), for example, used a factor analysis of 16 items, eventually finding that 12 of those grouped together into a credibility index in order to validate medium credibility dimensions.

While previous studies have explored dimensions in sources, mediums, websites and organizations, this study seeks to fill a unique gap in research, specifically exploring credibility scales within the social media environment. Therefore, items to measure the dimensions of credibility from long-standing research were selected by identifying those dimensions that were most often cited or used rigorously within an area of credibility scholarship indicating that those dimensions should be considered in any scale that explores credibility. The selected dimensions are: trustworthiness, expertise, personable, believability, and fairness. In addition, based on new research that explored the nature and role of social media in facilitating two-way dialogue, the following eight new dimensions were also included within the survey instrument due to their repeated identification in new scholarship within social media: reputation, social media presentation, engagement speed, personal interaction, transparent communication, altruism, shared values and collaboration (Newell & Goldsmith, 2001; Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008; Greer 2009; McAlexander et al., 2002; Edelman, 2013a).

The final instrument included 27 Likert-type questions measuring the 13 items identified as potential dimensions that may be relevant in developing a scale of credibility in social media. In addition, to help clarify the participant response to survey questions dealing with credibility, the survey had an auto-fill portion to its design. Before starting these Likert-type questions on the survey, participants were asked to choose an organization or brand that they regularly interacted with through social media. Once participants identified an organization or brand, the survey populated that organization’s name throughout the rest of the survey. The goal of using this approach in the survey was to have participants respond with an idea in mind toward a particular organization that they were very familiar with or often engaged with through social media. In using this approach, the goal is that it will enable them to recall concrete levels of engagement and strategies that they have either found effective or ineffective by organizations. Furthermore, by having the respondents base their responses on a personal experience, results provided a deeper analysis of actual interaction between organizations and publics.

Participation and Data Collection

Recruitment of participants took place via social media and through email requests. More than 1,100 participants (n=1,127) began the survey over the twenty-five day period. A total of 808 respondents completed the survey, providing a 71.7% completion

rate. Though this study used purposive sampling, focusing only on participants who engaged with organizations through social media, there was still strong diversity in participants. The majority of participants were female (67.0 %) compared to male (32.3%). Ages spanned from 18 to over 75, but, as expected, the largest age demographic represented was from the 18 to 24 group (46.9%). However, there was still strong representation from the other age groups, including those from the 25-34 years old (25.0%), 35-44 years old (10.4%) and 45-54 years old (11.0%) groups. Additionally, there was some representation from older demographics, which is a growing population on social media sites: 55-64 years old (5.0%) and 75 years old and more (0.6%).

RESULTS

Before exploring the results of the statistical analysis of data that addressed the research questions, a correlation matrix was computed in order to understand whether there were any relationships between factors that were exceptionally high or low (Field, 2009, 647). The correlation matrix reveals if the continuous variables in the study have linear relations with each other. No exceedingly high correlations (.90 or higher) were found among the items used within this study. The reason highly correlated variables can pose a problem within a study is because it “becomes impossible to determine the unique contribution to a factor” (Field, 2009, 648). Thus, using a correlation matrix, it is possible to verify that this study’s factors avoid problematic multicollinearity among the continuous variables.

RQ1: Dimensions of Credibility in Social Media

Factor analysis. In order to determine whether the 27 Likert-type items had clustered into identifiable scales, a factor analysis was conducted. A promax with kaiser normalization method was applied to an oblique rotation of the factor analysis, which is an appropriate method used for factor analysis when dealing with large data sets such as this study’ data (Field, 2009, p. 644). Four strong scales emerged from the analysis, accounting for 65.0 percent of the total variance in the model, shown in Table 1. Analysis and identification of what each scale included is explained below.

Table 1
Total Variance Explained by Factor Analysis

Scale	Initial Eigenvalues			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total
1. Personable	12.82	47.47	47.47	9.24
2. Expertise	2.39	8.87	56.33	7.30
3. Invitational	1.28	4.74	61.07	10.12
4. Trustworthiness	1.06	3.91	64.98	10.39

Note: Extraction Method: Maximum Likelihood. When factors are correlated, sums of squared loadings cannot be added to obtain a total variance.

Analysis of the items that loaded on the scales showed that scales 1 (*personable*) and 3 (*invitational*) loaded most closely with items that related to new dimensions of credibility while scales 2 (*expertise*) and 4 (*trustworthiness*) loaded most closely with items that related to the previously identified dimensions of credibility.

Personable Interaction. The first scale was titled *personable Interaction*. The reliability analysis for this scale was $M=26.89$, $SD=4.81$ with a very strong *Cronbach's α* of 0.86. This scale accounted for 47.46% of the variance in this study's model, revealing that personable interaction engaged in by organizations on social media significantly influences the publics' perceptions of an organization's credibility.

Expertise. The second scale was titled as *expertise*. The reliability for this scale ($M=28.85$, $SD=4.46$) was high with a *Cronbach's α* of 0.86. It accounts for 8.87% of the variance within this study's model.

Invitational Rhetoric. The third scale was titled as *invitational rhetoric*. The reliability for this scale ($M=26.65$, $SD=5.60$) was high with a *Cronbach α* of 0.90. While *invitational rhetoric* was not one of the potential new dimensions first envisioned in the design of this study, analysis of the items revealed that they correlate around this construct. Foss and Griffin (1995) proposed the concept of invitational rhetoric being a communication process not designed to coerce or persuade, but rather as a method of understanding the other and valuing individuals' unique contributions and perspectives to dialogue. The combination of items that loaded on this scale closely resemble an overarching dimension that focuses on the value and intrinsic worth of individuals within a brand community and the interaction by the organization with those individuals.

Trustworthiness. The fourth scale was titled as *trustworthiness*, based on the 6 items that loaded in relation to the previously identified dimensions. The reliability analysis for this scale ($M=24.72$, $SD=4.34$) was very high with a *Cronbach's α* of 0.92. To help summarize the dimension scales, Table 2 provides descriptions of the reliability analysis for each scale identified through the factor analysis.

Table 2

Scale Statistics

Scale	Items	Sample Range	Mean	Std. Deviation	Cronbach Alpha
1. Personable Interaction	7	7-35	26.48	4.99	.86
2. Expertise	7	7-35	28.85	4.46	.86
3. Invitational Rhetoric	7	7-35	26.65	5.59	.90
4. Trustworthiness	6	6-30	24.72	4.33	.92

RQ2: Dimensions of Credibility Leading to Action in Social Media

Credibility leading to action. Next, the four scales of credibility identified as being relevant in social media were used in a regression analysis to determine whether the scales have any influence on behaviors, or intention to participate, among participants.

As part of the survey, participants identified whether they would be likely to (1) support causes, (2) purchase products or services, or (3) make decisions based on social media engagement by organizations.

Supporting causes. *Invitational rhetoric* ($\beta = 0.4, p < .01$) was the only dimension of credibility that was significant in determining if someone would be more likely to support a cause that the organization advocates for through social media.

Purchase a product or service. *Personable interaction* ($\beta = 0.2, p < .01$) and *expertise* ($\beta = 0.3, p < .01$) were the only predictor variables that were both significant and positively supportive in whether someone would be likely to purchase a product or service from the organization because of social media.

Make decisions. *Expertise* ($\beta = 0.1, p < 0.01$) was the only significant predictor variable for whether someone would make a decision based on information from an organization's social media site.

DISCUSSION

Dimensions of Credibility in Social Media

Personable Interaction. Our results show that individuals find organizations more credible when they interact and relate in a personal way that shows a level of transparency and altruism. A core component of social media is the intent to connect people and provide a platform for "social" interaction. In light of this, it is not surprising that *personable interaction* accounted for 47.5% of the variance in the factor analysis of social media credibility dimensions. While organizations have grown in prominence on social media, the medium itself is inherently created for individuals as opposed to organizations. It is about humanizing communication and ethically engaging with each individual. This study indicates that not only is personable interaction important because it builds engagement, but also because it goes to the very core of publics' perceptions of the organization's credibility. Previously, certain tactics were valued in social media because of the engagement that would result and eventually lead to online growth (Kerpin, 2011; Kietzmann, et al., 2011; Lin, 2006). This study suggests that personable interaction should be paramount not only for the purpose of brand community growth, but also because it may be the single most significant dimension of credibility to publics as they assess organizations through social media.

Expertise. *Expertise* has been identified as foundational within previous credibility research. It is often paired with *trustworthiness* as the two most influential dimensions of credibility (Berlo et al., 1969; McCroskey, 1966; Meyers, 1988). Our findings indicate that this dimension still is quite significant in the perceived credibility of organizations in social media. While it may be presumed that some presence on social media is better than no presence, this study's findings indicates that both appearance and content come together to form the view of expertise within social media (Martin & Johnson, 2012). By going public with a social media presence that is under-developed and

visually unattractive, organizations may be communicating to their social media publics that their expertise is limited.

Invitational Rhetoric. The scale of *invitational rhetoric*, which suggests that dialogue should recognize the value and worth of others' perspective, is also an important dimension of social media credibility. Publics view organizations as more credible when they use invitational rhetoric rather than attempting to control conversations. Social media are platforms where users generate the majority of content and information (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Therefore, in the social media world, censorship and control are perceived by many to be contradictory to the purpose of social media. *Invitational rhetoric*, with a focus on respecting others and building understanding, provides a powerful means for organizations and brands to engage their publics and ultimately build credibility.

Trust. Results indicate that *trustworthiness*, defined as the organization or brand's social media being perceived as honest, reliable, and with integrity, is at the core of social media credibility. This is not surprising as this dimension has been central to all conceptualizations of past media credibility studies (Wilson, 1983; Hilligoss and Rieh, 2008; Morgan and Hunt, 1994, p. 23). Trust is the primary determining factor for how publics establish and maintain long-term committed relationships with organizations (Gundlach & Murphy, 1993). However, what was interesting in the findings from this study is that the role of trust seems to be *less* influential in comparison to other dimensions of credibility within the context of social media. While previous studies identified trust as the primary dimension in credibility, this study found that it is a secondary influence. Nevertheless, organizations engaged in public relations through social media that are not perceived as trustworthy by its publics may discover their efforts are ineffective. At the very least, it should be considered that the overall perceived trustworthiness of an organization by publics through social media is intricately related to the other overarching dimensions discovered in this study (i.e. expertise, personable interaction and invitation rhetoric) and in combination they play an important part in the organizational efforts to cultivate meaningful relationships with publics.

Implications for Public Relations Theory and Research

This study has advanced an important area of public relations scholarship that has been largely unexplored: dimensions of credibility influenced by social media. By identifying four scales of credibility (*personable interaction*, *expertise*, *invitational rhetoric*, and *trustworthiness*) that are particularly important to public relations efforts by organizations that use social media, this study adds to the scholarly research that seeks to understand which dimensions of credibility are important in today's socially mediated public relations environment.

In addition to contributing to the study of public relations and credibility, this study also contributes to scholarship pertaining to the theoretical models for public relations as a practice. As discussed above, Grunig and Hunt (1984) proposed that two-way symmetrical communication was the best model for public relations. As public relations has become immersed in a digital media environment and increasingly involves using digital communication tools, this focus on two-way symmetrical is even more important. The study results provide support for this model being effective for organizations to use in establishing credibility with its publics and enhancing two-way social media dialogue.

Limitations & Future Research

One limitation to this study was that a random sample was not acquired. Purposive sampling was employed in order to limit the survey participants to those who actually use social media to interact with an organization. However, to fully explore what perceptions publics have of organizational credibility online, there may be value in including non-social media users. Another limitation to this study is that it sought to identify dimensions of credibility specifically pertaining to social media, without necessarily accounting for other types of communication.

Future research would benefit from validating the scales that emerged in this study in other settings or contexts. It also would be beneficial to conduct a study solely focusing on developing a new credibility scale across all communication platforms for organizations that could potentially lead to additional scales being identified.

CONCLUSION

While social media platforms were originally designed to connect individuals to other individuals, they are now a massive conduit through which publics directly engage organizations. This kind of relationship with key publics is unprecedented in the world of public relations. While there are many challenges organizationally to maintaining a strong social media presence, the opportunity to increase publics' perceptions of an organization's credibility has never been greater as organizations leverage the ability to personally interact, display expertise in content and presentation, invite dialogue with publics and build trust. Social media allow publics to feel seen and heard by organizations in dynamic ways. When organizations value this interaction and capitalize on the capacity of social media to dialogue and interact, they will experience unparalleled opportunity to ignite, build, and maintain healthy and robust relationships with publics.

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