

**Exploring Digital, Social and Mobile Dialogic Engagement with Low-Income Publics**

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### **Abstract**

This exploratory, qualitative study aimed to revitalize the understanding of digital, social, and mobile public relations efforts with low-income publics to best meet their complex and evolving dialogic engagement needs. Interviews with 39 public relations and communications professionals representing organizations serving low-income publics offered insights regarding dialogue and engagement via digital, social, and mobile technologies (DSMTs). Findings suggest that dialogue is fostered with low-income publics via social media partnerships and networks, a mobile-first approach to engagement, acknowledgement of digital divides, incorporation of traditional face-to-face engagement, and empathetic consideration of individuals' identities and statuses. Authentic, respectful, and empathetic dialogue with low-income publics may still be best achieved via face-to-face engagement. Practitioners must be prepared to navigate a complex spectrum of digital divides, evolving demographics, digital and social media engagement preferences, and risks.

**Key Words:** Dialogue, Digital, Mobile, Low-Income, Qualitative

### **Introduction**

Among the diverse stakeholders every organization must recognize, low-income publics (individuals earning less than \$18,210 in taxable income per year) ([www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov)), remain especially marginalized. Low-income and minority publics are often forgotten by, absent from, or misrepresented by mainstream public relations practices, especially by crisis communication and public health campaigns (e.g. Henrici, Childers & Shaw, 2015; Waymer & Heath, 2007; Tindall & Vardeman-Winter, 2011; Vardeman-Winter, Jiang, & Tindall, 2013). Moreover, low-income individuals lag in overall technology adoption ([pewresearch.org](http://pewresearch.org)), carry less trust in organizations, and are less inclined to vote or voice their needs (e.g. Park, Mosley, & Grogan, 2018; [pewresearch.org](http://pewresearch.org)). Organizations, therefore, have a civic responsibility to listen to oft-forgotten low-income publics, who provide meaningful perspectives on community, legislative, and corporate issues, but may not readily voice them. Public relations professionals, too, can no longer afford to ignore this large, complex, important low-income public: The number of individuals living in poverty in the U.S. has increased since 2009 to 15% of the nation's population or 47 million people ([usccb.org](http://usccb.org)) – a substantial public, indeed.

Although scholarship has made great strides to understand public relations efforts from the perspectives of diverse publics, little, if any, research has been conducted to understand the engagement needs of low-income publics. Only Collins and Zoch (2001) investigated the most effective methods for engaging low-income individuals. In their study regarding adult education public relations efforts, the authors found that traditional forms of mass media and the Internet are not as effective at reaching low-income individuals as interpersonal sources, such as friends or family. Therefore, nearly two decades after Collins and Zoch (2001) explored low-income communication techniques, this exploratory study strives to revitalize understanding of public relations efforts with low-income publics to best meet their complex and evolving engagement needs.

Since the publication of the Collins and Zoch (2001) study, digital and social media have compounded the marginalization of publics who lack broadband access or who do not represent a dominant consumer class (Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015), whereas mobile technologies have empowered low-income publics in regard to public relations messaging (e.g. Smith, 2013).

According to a 2019 report by Pew Research Center, 30% of adults with household incomes below \$30,000 still do not own a smartphone and roughly 45% do not have a traditional computer or broadband services. In contrast, the majority (94 to 97%) of adults with household incomes of \$100,000 or more have ready access to each of these technologies (pewresearch.org). Given the influx of social and mobile media, yet their potential for isolating marginalized communities (Kennedy & Sommerfeld, 2015), it is also necessary to re-evaluate the means of utilizing technology to engage and cultivate mutually beneficial relationships with low-income publics.

Dialogic theory of public relations (e.g. Botan, 1997; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Pearson, 1989a) and scholarship addressing dialogic communication via digital, social, and mobile technologies (e.g. Avidar, Ariel, Malka & Levy, 2015; Kent, 2013; Lee & VanDyke, 2015; Reitz, 2012; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010) offer a strong theoretical and practical base from which to explore this issue. Dialogue is considered the most ethical form of communication (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Lane & Bartlett, 2016; Pearson 1989b), based on its emphasis on genuine concern, humility, mutual acknowledgement, empathy, and trust (Buber, 1970/1923; Kent & Lane, 2017; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Kent & Theunissen, 2016). Dialogue also enables organizations and publics to challenge preconceived ideas, generate new ways of understanding concepts, and forge new beliefs, meanings or relationships (Kent & Theunissen, 2016).

Public relations professionals still face a daunting task of ensuring that *all* publics, regardless of power and class differences, have an equal opportunity to be heard, respected, and considered (Toledano, 2018). In light of this challenge, this study ultimately answers the call for more research that explores how organizations use dialogue effectively (Kent & Theunissen, 2016) in social, mobile, and digital spaces (Morehouse & Saffer, 2018; Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018) while ethically engaging and respecting stakeholders (Toledano, 2018).

## **Literature Review**

### ***Dialogue***

Dialogue is defined as an orientation to engagement and a complex conversational practice that prioritizes sharing, mutual understanding, humility, empathy, trust, self-disclosure, ethical duty, and co-creation of meaning among individuals (Buber, 1970/1923; Kent & Lane, 2017; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Kent & Theunissen, 2016; Paquette, Sommerfeldt & Kent, 2015; Pearson, 1989a; Taylor & Kent, 2014). Dialogue enables individuals to form relationships with one another (Kent & Lane, 2017) based on mutual respect and trust (Kent & Theunissen, 2016; Taylor & Kent, 2014). True dialogic interaction goes beyond simple two-way encounters (Theunissen & Wan Noordin (2012), customer service interactions (Kent & Theunissen, 2016), or self-serving organization-centric communications (Toledano, 2018) and instead uses an open and forthright flow of communication (Kent & Theunissen, 2016) and considers all publics as equal partners in a respectful relationship (Toledano, 2018). As such, it is considered to be the most ethical form of communication (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Lane & Bartlett, 2016; Pearson, 1989b) based on concepts of genuine concern, humility, empathy, and trust (Buber, 1970/1923; Kent & Lane, 2017; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Kent & Theunissen, 2016).

The dialogic theory of public relations (Kent & Taylor, 2002) features five elements that comprise dialogue in public relations contexts. These include “mutuality, or the recognition of organization–public relationships; propinquity, or the temporality and spontaneity of interactions with publics; empathy, or the supportiveness and confirmation of public goals and interests; risk,

or the willingness to interact with individuals and publics on their own terms; and finally, commitment, or the extent to which an organization gives itself over to dialogue, interpretation, and understanding in its interactions with publics” (Kent & Taylor, 2002, pp. 24-25). Regarding low-income publics, a dialogue is beneficial because it fosters trusting and supportive communication, engages all individuals as equals (Kent & Taylor, 2002), and promotes working together for the good of a community (Taylor & Kent, 2014).

### ***Digital, Social and Mobile Technologies (DSMTs)***

For purposes of this study, digital, social, and mobile technologies (DSMTs), such as smartphones, tablets, and social media networks, have been combined as an umbrella category through which to explore the dialogic engagement of low-income publics (e.g. Curran, Matthews, Fleet, Simmons & Gustafson, 2017). Digital, social, and mobile technologies have been touted for their ability to facilitate dialogue and create mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and publics (Avidar, Ariel, Malka & Levy, 2015; Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Men, Tsai, Chen, Ji, 2018; Reitz, 2012). Digital and social media, in particular, have been found to help organizations quickly disseminate and exchange information, acknowledge and respond to publics’ questions and comments, to “build information communities” via hashtags (Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012, pp. 314-316). Although organizations often utilize social media to distribute information, Saxton and Waters (2014) found that organizational publics prefer social media engagement that promotes interactivity or solicits the individuals’ feedback or help.

Relationships were initially thought to be cultivated using five types of online dialogic behaviors: a dialogic loop, which allows for the process of query and response between organizations and publics; usefulness of information, which ensures that valuable and trustworthy information is conveyed to publics; generation of return visits, which enables individuals opportunities to return for engaging and updated information; intuitiveness or ease of interface, which enables individuals to find information easily and quickly; and conservation of visitors, which engages individuals as respected and valued ends in themselves (Kent & Taylor, 1998, pp. 326-329). Later, scholarship found that organizations can more actively cultivate dialogic engagement via frequent postings, questions, and comments (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009) and balanced messaging using useful information and attitudinal sentiments (Watkins, 2017). Additionally, quality digital dialogic engagement can occur when organizations communicate using a personalized, human-like voice (Kang, 2014) and when organizational leaders cultivate a social media presence by engaging in interpersonal conversations based on genuineness, humanity, intimacy, and personality (Men, Tsai, Chen & Ji, 2018). Ideally, dialogue on social media must be transparent, reflexive, interactive, and interpersonal while fostering trust and commitment among organizational representatives and publics (Kent & Lane, 2017; Kent & Theunissen, 2016).

The practice of listening has also been cited as essential for dialogic engagement with publics on digital and social media (Maben and Gearhart, 2018). In order to align social media engagement with dialogic principles (Kent & Taylor, 2002), Maben and Gearhart (2018) recommend that organizations practice “pertinent listening” by listening and responding to publics’ questions or comments by using individuals’ names, personalized messages, and specific solutions – instead of a standard response script or directions to call a telephone hotline (p. 106). Additionally, the authors recommend that organizations practice active listening on

social media with their publics by sustaining two-way conversations via answering and asking questions, offering detail or elaborating on topics being discussed, or empathetically responding to publics' thoughts and feelings (pp. 106-108).

Scholars have cautioned, however, that digital, social, and mobile technologies have been utilized too often as a one-way broadcasting or messaging tool (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Lee & VanDyke, 2015; Men, Tsai, Chen & Ji, 2018; Taylor & Kent, 2014; Waters & Jamal, 2011; Xifra & Grau, 2010) or as a promotional or sales tool to reach stakeholders rather than a means to foster true dialogic and communitarian principles (Avidar, Ariel, Malika & Levy, 2015; Kent, 2013). Lee and VanDyke's (2015) study regarding social media use by governmental and science agencies, for example, found that such organizations are utilizing social media as a form of broadcast media (p. 538). Likewise, Men, Tsai, Chen, and Ji (2018) found that organizational chief executives utilized social media as a one-way informative tool to post news updates, links to information, or opinion pieces instead of a means engage in interpersonal dialogue. Ultimately, social media may not readily allow for dialogue but could foster private dialogic engagement among individuals or small groups via instant or private messaging (Kent & Lane, 2017).

### ***Implications for Low-Income Publics***

Especially forgotten by organizational public relations efforts are publics who, by the basis of ability, level of education, or housing or income status, face constraints engaging with or accessing information via digital, social, or mobile technologies. Gonzales (2015), citing Pew Research Center (2014), for example, warned that nearly a quarter of households earning less than \$30,000 per year lack Internet access and must rely on intermittent and infrequent access to digital and social technologies at libraries or community centers. Additionally, low-income individuals often comprise a segment of Internet users described as "Digital Doubters." These users recognize the Internet's potential for social connections but may perceive the Internet as frustrating, lacking value and privacy, and a source of inappropriate material (Dutton & Reisdorf, 2019). Despite access and privacy issues, mobile technology features have been found to provide informational, self-esteem, networking, and emotional support to low-income publics (Gonzales, 2015). Nonetheless, social and mobile media may not offer the dialogic engagement needed by low-income publics with complex needs. Face-to-face communication between organizations and low-income publics is often preferred, as it promotes the likelihood that communication will be received, understood, and respected (Shafir & Yuan, 2012). Regardless of communication technology or method, all organizations should strive to engage publics with a dialogic orientation that emphasizes a moral duty to respect others and a commitment to valuing the perspectives of marginalized or low-income publics (Paquette, Sommerfeldt & Kent, 2015). Inclusion of such perspectives is the right thing to do. After all, low-income publics comprise a substantial segment of our society and workforce, benefit from a wide spectrum of governmental, non-profit, and corporate assistance or social responsibility programs, and embody a growing and pivotal voting bloc.

From the literature, regarding dialogic public relations, digital, social and mobile technologies, and low-income publics one research question guided the study: RQ: How do organizations use digital, social, and mobile technologies (DSMTs) to foster dialogue with low-income publics?

### ***Method***

A qualitative method guided this exploratory study, as it was most appropriate for understanding the experiences of participants and to determine how meanings and practices regarding low-income publics are formed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 12).

#### ***Sampling and Recruitment***

Upon receiving institutional review board (IRB) approval for all aspects of the study, public relations professionals representing diverse organizations serving low-income publics were recruited via purposive and snowball sampling methods. First, an e-mail recruitment letter was sent purposively to practitioners representing diverse organization types and expertise. Then, a snowball sampling method was utilized, as early interviewees then recommended additional public relations practitioners to receive a recruitment e-mail for participation in the study. Sampling and recruitment ended after a “saturation point” was achieved (common responses or themes began to emerge among participants) (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 145).

The resulting sample of participants included 39 East Coast and Midwestern public relations professionals representing agency (5), corporate (5), government (5), and nonprofit (24) work environments. Twenty-four women and 15 men participated in the study. The majority of participants (24) represented the most senior- or executive-level position responsible for communications within their organization, such as Director of Communications, Director of Marketing and Public Relations, or Executive Director. The remainder (15) represented mid-level communications professionals who oversaw the public relations functions within their organizations, such as account executive, media relations coordinator, or public relations and social media specialist. Many participants’ titles incorporated the words “communications,” “social media,” or “marketing;” however, these participants were asked to participate because they represented the point-person for public relations work at their respective organizations.

#### ***Procedure***

Interviews were guided by a 10-question interview protocol featuring rapport-building, broad, and open-ended questions of a pre-determined order, as well as probes and follow-ups (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 13). Interview questions were derived from extant literature regarding dialogic communication and public relations (i.e. Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002). Rapport-building questions, such as “What do you like best about social and mobile media?” were first used to acquaint the participant to the researcher and the interview process. Next, open-ended questions were asked, such as, “How are the needs of low-income publics factored into the public relations and social media work you do?” “What communications techniques are most commonly used to engage low-income publics?” “How are social and mobile media used to engage in dialogue with low-income publics at [organization name]?” Probes and follow-up questions, such as “Why?” “How?” or “Please give me an example of...” were used to encourage participants to offer an explanation or elaborate upon their initial responses. Interviews were audiotaped, conducted face-to-face or via telephone (only when geographic location or schedule dictated such), and ranged in length from 30 to 100 minutes.

#### ***Data Analysis***

Interviews were transcribed fully and analyzed for patterns and themes using a thematic analysis approach (Boyatzis, 1998). First, the researcher read each transcript line-by-line multiple times to identify themes and patterns. Second, a list of codes was created to represent each emerging theme or pattern. Next, themes were then assigned corresponding codes applying

to the research question. During the analysis and coding process, the researcher remained mindful of how their identity or personal biases could affect how the data was collected, analyzed, and interpreted. Additionally, e-mail or telephone member checks with participants (e.g. Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were utilized to validate or ask questions about the meanings of particular passages, when needed.

### **Findings**

Five themes emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts, suggesting that dialogue is fostered with low-income publics via social media partnerships and networks, a mobile-first approach to engagement, acknowledgement of digital divides, incorporation of traditional face-to-face engagement, and empathetic consideration of individuals' identities and statuses. Evidence for each theme is presented below.

#### *The Power of Partnerships and Networks*

Participants perceived that digital, social, and mobile networks maximized dialogue and helped to spread information among low-income publics. Social media and community partnerships were especially important for nonprofits that operated with little funding to support external or internal communications. For example, partnerships among 211.org / The United Way, social services organizations, local churches, and food banks (via tagging, cross-posting) are used to identify, inform, and engage low-income individuals on social media platforms to ensure that a range of needs is being met.

Practitioners illustrated the power of a strong network for identifying the needs of low-income individuals and engaging them with appropriate information and support. Cora, a director of a regional food bank, described partnerships on social media for effectively and economically engaging low-income publics. "In order to make sure people know that we exist, we have made efforts to partner with other social service organizations. So, that's sort of how we've gotten our face out there. I will say Facebook has been really amazing at this." Likewise, Maggie, a director of public relations and marketing for a science nonprofit, spoke to the value of social media partners for engaging low-income publics, who were "discreet" or difficult to identify:

I think there's a lot of power in nonprofits partnering together... Because I think it's sometimes it's a discreet audience... and you want to be, we want to be inclusive... So, we always try to make sure that we're representing diversity on our pages and in our advertising... I think the best way to do that is sort of connecting with others and using the power of social media as a whole.

In addition to digital and social media partnerships, face-to-face or on-the-ground community partnerships were important for engaging in dialogue with low-income publics, especially those without access to digital, social, or mobile technologies. Dan, a director of a regional charity nonprofit, explained the value of a committed network of community organizations engaged in dialogue with each other and low-income publics:

Whether it's a homelessness issue, whether it is a food insecurity issue, whether it is medical, or substance use or whatnot, we ask, 'How can we best help Joe get to a better place?' And if I know that Joe goes to [food pantry] and goes to [soup kitchen] for breakfast and lunch every day, then you know I hook up with

[director of a soup kitchen] and I say, ‘You know, when Joe comes in, grab his ear and see what we can do for him here. When is the next time the mobile clinic is gonna be here? We can get Joe to see a nurse practitioner or see a medical intern from [hospital].’

Similarly, Gus, the vice president of development for a homeless services organization, explained the importance of partnerships with law enforcement “community resource officers” for facilitating dialogue with low-income or homeless individuals in urban communities:

They know everybody, good and bad, and they know who’s connected to who. You know, if you’re with them and there’s a call for, we’re looking for John Jones, he’ll pick up the radio and say his aunt lives at 955 [Name] Street, check there. So again that network, that community... And the guy that I’m thinking of is well respected in the community. He’s a cop, but he’s a friend. It’s those conversations that become life-changing.

Further discussion with participants revealed that partnerships were especially important for cultivating trust among low-income publics on social media and beyond. Martha, a senior director of marketing and development for a community action nonprofit, best illustrated the value of online partnerships with other service providers in fostering a sense of trust:

I try to share online posts from our partner agencies on a regular basis. I think that helps with the trust of our partners, but also reminding people that we’re part of this larger community of service to them and that they can trust us that we’re working in partnership with these other organizations. It’s unlikely that people who need our services don’t necessarily know our organization, but if by some chance they don’t, or if they’re already working with one of our partner organizations and see that we’re working alongside them, I hope that would ensure their trust as well.

### ***Mobile-First Engagement***

Despite access challenges, interview participants touted a “mobile-first” approach to engaging low-income publics via mobile apps, text, or direct messaging functions, as it was assumed that many low-income individuals have a state-issued mobile device. Steve, the director of marketing for a civic engagement organization, explained, “We try to make everything as accessible as possible to the greatest number of citizens. So, even if you’re low income, you may not have a computer at home. You may not have Internet at home. Most likely you have a smartphone.” Similarly, Cora, the director of the regional food bank, explained the importance of a mobile-first approach for low-income publics’ information access and management.

Almost everyone has a cell phone. Some of them call it a State Phone or Obama Phone...so far as these phones have internet access, they can access information about us. If they’re using 211 on their phones, they can find information about us, they can get our number, and they can call us quickly. Once a year we do a proof of income and expenses for all of the people that use our food bank. And

oftentimes they'll show me things on their phone because the paper is disappearing.

Similarly, Susan, the director of public relations for a religious organization, explained why she takes a mobile-first approach because it's assumed to reach individuals without mobile access who are connected to an individual *with* mobile access. She explained, "We want to include everybody. Even in segments that you would consider not well-off, you still find though that they know the value of the phone...So, even in low-income constituencies, you find that mobile phones are important. They'll have access to it, even if it's one per family...That one person will certainly share with the rest of their family members."

Participants cited ease of information access and immediacy of responsiveness as key benefits of a mobile-first approach to engaging low-income publics. Touting the ease and safety of mobile-first engagement regarding environmental risks or outages, Mark, a director of communications for a state environmental agency, explained, "From a safety perspective, I ask how can we make things easier for folks and how can we educate? So we have a mobile app." Offering more nuance, Sarah, the director of public relations and marketing for the international charitable organization, described how mobile phones serve as a primary means through which low-income publics access the Internet and initiate dialogue with them. She shared, "We do get quite a few people that will contact the Facebook pages. And direct message 'Hey I need assistance with holiday toys. Or I'm living out of my car, where can I get help?' Some people don't even have a car and they're just looking for a coat to wear. But they have a phone. So, they're able to contact us that way." Likewise, Delia, a public relations director for a state low-income services nonprofit, explained their mobile-first approach to best address changing demographics and engagement preferences of their publics:

One of the big focuses in [State] is youth homelessness. It's typically 18 to 24 [years old]. They're not calling. They're only going to chat. They're going to text. And so, we've enabled a mobile chat function... So, we are really having to evolve to the ways people do things and texting back and forth is a lot less minutes and a lot more possible than sitting on a line for a long time.

As evidenced by participants' comments thus far, true instances of interpersonal dialogue with low-income individuals via mobile technology were rarely described. Instead, mobile, social, and digital technology were viewed as a tool to identify and distribute information to low-income individuals or for low-income individuals to access information or assistance. Even during the rare circumstance when mobile technology facilitating dialogue with low-income citizens was described, such dialogue was asynchronous and discontinuous.

### ***Acknowledging Technological Divides***

When discussing approaches to engaging low-income publics, participants expressed concern for divides regarding access to digital, social, and mobile technologies. Bob, a director of communications for a state government agency, shared, "When we put together anything that's got a component of going online, we're always concerned about the people who don't have access...it's become more of a deeper divide...And you have this gulf, this deep gulf of whether they be lower-income, whether they be senior citizens who have no ability to navigate online or those who have a weakened ability to know how to navigate online. That's a concern."

Likewise, Will, a mobile communications expert for a legal services nonprofit, described the dialogic potential of mobile apps for low-income individuals but also acknowledged the importance for communications professionals and developers to consider access and usability divides when implementing mobile tactics. He explained:

We know there are so many who have flip phones and can't open the app up on their phones. We made sure that [our app] is a phone portal that enables them to call in and then everything is done on the database and the cloud. It's important to recognize digital divides...Usability and user design are key.

In consideration of digital divides, participants thus described using an array of digital, social, mobile, print, and face-to-face communications tactics to facilitate dialogue with low-income publics. Ethan, a digital marketing director for a science-based nonprofit, for example, described the array his organization uses to address technological divides and engagement preferences, explaining:

There is a digital divide where people don't have mobile devices or they're not really on social media. And so, overall, the way that we address that is to have a good marketing mix. You know, we'll have billboards still. We'll have commercials. We'll have brochures at local libraries. So, we address that by having a strong mix of different things where people can find information and connect with us any way that they can. The local library is a really good way to connect with people with very low accessibility to technology.

Similarly, Troy, another public relations specialist at the state low-income services nonprofit, described addressing digital divides using a spectrum of digital, print, and interpersonal relationship-building strategies:

Social media where maybe 5 or 10 years ago was like, 'this is where it all is. This is the whole world where everything is going!' I think now it's on the checklist, but it's not at the top. It's like a spectrum...We're trying a layered strategy. And it's more like an up and down and in between and all the flyers, and we've got great social media, we've got beautiful materials, we've got great writing, strong relationships, and good systems to deliver things. For this audience support, there also needs to be some type of trusted broker as an intermediary.

### ***Face-to-Face Dialogic Engagement***

Despite the benefits of a mobile-first or spectrum approach to engaging low-income publics, participants described how face-to-face communication supported more "organic" and personalized dialogic engagement (often in coordination with mobile and social technology). For example, Vivien, the director of marketing and communications for a regional YMCA, touted the strong engagement achieved via face-to-face communication. She shared, "social media will never, however, replace face to face, because that relationship may start on social media, but it's truly built by somebody looking, you know, each other in the eye, or truly connecting in some other way." Similarly, Ellen, the marketing and communications manager of a state health

network, explained the importance of face-to-face engagement with, “More than engagement on mobile, we do community outreach that serves the low-income population. We have a mobile health van that’s stationed at a church and they are never wanting for patients to come there. So, I guess it’s a little more organic for that population.” Likewise, Lauren, an executive at a state low-income services organization, described an example of how face-to-face dialogue and listening were key to truly understanding and meeting the needs of their publics, despite associated challenges:

So, we went and talked to parents who were experiencing hunger and asked, ‘What would you need? What would work for you? Where would it be? What would a welcoming environment look like? But we tend to skip over that process as a sector. It’s hard and it’s expensive and it’s time-consuming. And you are often going to hear things are inconvenient and hard and time-consuming that you might not want to do. And it’s a challenge to be able to listen to that and then respond.

### ***Engaging with Humility and Empathy***

Participants, especially those working on behalf of homeless low-income publics, cautioned that dialogue often occurs with those whose income or housing status are in constant uncertainty or with those who feel shame regarding their status. Gus, the development director for a homeless organization, described the challenges of fostering dialogue with individuals who fear disclosing their identity, income, or housing status or who lack an address, email access, or telephone: “These people are in the wind... They park their cars somewhere else and then where do they go? And cell phones are typically, you know, they’re throwaway phones. So it isn’t like you go and find them. They show up with their stuff in a plastic bag and if you have the room and they fit the profile, you take them.” Mirroring Gus’ comment, Dan, the regional charity director, explained, “It’s not uncommon to have a phone number for a client and then to follow back up with it and realize that that number is disconnected. The mailing address doesn’t come back. We kind of have to rely on them coming back to us and saying, ‘Hey, you know, I’m back. I’m here.’ It’s hard...”

Many participants implored for communications professionals to utilize humility, empathy, and respect as they engage in dialogue with low-income and homeless publics in such circumstances. Adam, a communications specialist for a utilities provider, described empathy as central to his interactions: “We try to show empathy whenever possible. We try to be as friendly and upfront with people as possible. We try to communicate that we get it, we know what they’re going through.” Likewise, Dan mirrored such sentiment by explaining that dialogic encounters must respect the dignity and unique struggles of each individual:

It is treating the men and women and children that come to us as human beings. You know, they might look a little different than we do, but the reality is that they’re human beings that are struggling. We treat them with decency and respect... People are coming into our door broken and they’re hurting. And they really don’t want to be seen as just another number from the deli kiosk. They need somebody to listen to their story and they need to be heard and they need to be

validated.

Ultimately, Gus implored of professional communicators - who often represent a different socio-economic status from the low-income publics they engage:

It's a world that people don't understand. I mean you don't understand the meaning of wants and needs until you've really seen this and when you're middle-class and understand that, then it really opens your eyes. That convertible that you thought you *needed* suddenly becomes irrelevant.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore how organizations foster dialogic engagement with low-income individuals via digital, social, and mobile technologies (DSMTs). Public relations professionals can no longer afford to ignore this large, complex public, but must remain sensitive to access-based implications of remaining digital divides. Analysis of interview data from the 39 participants suggests that potential for digital, social, and mobile engagement with low-income publics exists via online and on-the-ground partnerships and mobile-first approaches combined with face-to-face dialogic engagement, continued sensitivity for digital divides, and humble, empathetic understanding and dialogue.

### ***Theoretical Implications***

This study offers implications regarding dialogic theory, digital, social and mobile technologies (DSMTs), and engagement with low-income publics. Findings indicate that some theoretical components of dialogic theory (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Kent & Taylor, 2002) are being considered by organizations when engaging low-income publics via digital, social, and mobile media. These include the principles of mutuality (viewing low-income individuals as equals), empathy (engaging in supportive communication), risk (understanding the complex identity- and access-related issues pertaining to dialogue with low-income publics), commitment (demonstrating willingness to communicate with low-income publics via all necessary means possible), usefulness of information, and dialogic loop. Mirroring previous research (e.g. Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Collins & Zoch, 2001; Lee & VanDyke, 2015; Men, Tsai, Chen & Ji, 2018; Taylor & Kent, 2014; Xifra & Grau, 2010), findings suggest, however, that organizations are utilizing digital, social, or mobile technologies as a one-way tool to engage low-income publics. Whereas participant responses indicated ethical intent, their responses largely indicated that digital, social and mobile technologies were used mainly as a means to identify and contact low-income individuals or distribute information to them. Phrases most used by participants describing mobile and social engagement were “finding information” and “accessing information” and “deliver.” Although communication is occurring between low-income individuals and organizations, findings suggest that meaningful or authentic dialogue in a theoretical sense (Kent & Taylor, 1998; 2002) often occurs face-to-face and/or after initial contacts are made via social or mobile media.

Partnerships and networks were frequently described as an important concept associated with dialogue. Partnerships with like-minded organizations, local service providers, trusted intermediaries, or family networks were especially integral to conveying trust, maximizing information reach, and bridging digital divides among low-income publics. Although the words

“partnerships” and “networks” were explicitly used by participants to describe this phenomenon, participants may have been indirectly referencing dialogic theory elements of mutuality and commitment, via recognition of relationships and prioritization of dialogue and understanding, respectively (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Ultimately, participant emphasis on partnerships and networks speaks to the relational foundation of dialogue – viewing dialogue as the outcome of interpersonal relationships founded on mutual respect, commitment, and trust (Kent & Theunissen, 2016; Taylor & Kent, 2014).

Findings of this study also suggest that concepts of dialogic loop, mutuality, and empathy (Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002) are especially important for engaging low-income individuals in the spirit of equality and freedom from ridicule or contempt. As some low-income individuals may have limited access to mobile and social technologies or feel hesitant disclosing their low-income status, communicators must increasingly “walk in their shoes” (Kent & Taylor, 2002) and facilitate dialogue by creating spaces for dialogue that emphasize empathy and supportiveness. Findings suggest that in some cases, an anonymous dialogue will occur (Kent & Taylor, 2002) with those individuals who are “in the wind” (as Gus described) or uncomfortable disclosing their identities. These circumstances tap into elements of risk (Kent & Taylor, 2002) that occur with dialogue. Public relations professionals must take risks to be humble, empathetic, and willing to engage in dialogue with individuals who fear disclosing facets of their identity or who wish to remain anonymous at first, to establish trusting relationships.

### ***Practical Implications***

As Ellen, the health network communicator explained, professionals need to ensure that dialogue remains “organic,” recalling instances in which individuals have approached her with questions or discreet requests (“I need help with \_\_\_\_”) written on their hands or scraps of paper. Public relations professionals should engage low-income publics where and how *they* are. In many cases, the best potential for authentic dialogue still exists interpersonally, as communicators purposefully engage in relationship building via face-to-face efforts. Interpersonal tactics, such as live interactive events, engagement booths, or screening vans at parks or libraries, a) offer more reciprocal listening and dialogue opportunities, b) emphasize the experience of engaging in dialogue, and c) could ease perceived power differentials between organizational representatives and publics. Nonetheless, fostering dialogue with low-income publics must balance digital divides and evolving demographics and engagement preferences. On one hand, some members of the low-income community may lack access to digital, social, or mobile technologies. On the other hand, members of the low-income community – especially youth – may *only* engage via mobile texting or messaging. Thus, it is imperative that communicators purposefully utilize a diverse spectrum of traditional face-to-face strategies in addition to social, mobile, and digital tactics to best facilitate continuous, accessible, and respectful dialogue with all publics.

Ultimately, interpersonal and listening-based approaches to dialogue emphasizing the values of mutuality and empathy may best guide dialogic engagement with low-income publics. Findings illustrate the importance of cultivating ethical (Paquette, Sommerfeldt, & Kent, 2015) and social presence-based (Men, Tsai, Chen, Ji, 2018) dialogue based on humility, trust, and mutual respect of individuals as ends in themselves. Practitioners must prioritize respectful and reciprocal engagement with the individual first – not the technology used to do so. If developed with usability, access, an empathy in mind, digital, social, and mobile technologies can continue

to provide a space for low-income (and all) individuals to forge trusting relationships, voice their needs, and feel a sense of empowerment through reciprocal communication. Respectful dialogue may best take place in digital, social, and mobile environments when communicators implement active or “pertinent listening” via answering and asking questions, offering detail and elaborating on topics being discussed, or empathetically responding to publics’ thoughts and feelings in a conversational manner (Maben & Gearhart, 2018, pp. 106-108). Digital and social media-based dialogue must also better acknowledge all facets of lived experiences and show *explicit* inclusion and support of low-income publics across all content and engagement tactics.

Lastly, findings indicate that digital, mobile, and social technologies supported primarily asynchronous or threaded dialogue with low-income individuals – via mobile texting or social media platforms. Practitioners should be mindful that asynchronous and threaded dialogue does not facilitate the timely or personalized exchange of ideas (Kent, 2013) and could especially hinder low-income individuals who are seeking immediate counsel from organizations such as social services or governmental agencies.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Although this study provides insights into social and mobile engagement with low-income individuals, limitations exist. This exploratory, qualitative study is not generalizable to the public relations industry at large. Differing interview lengths or formats may have affected interview dynamics. Future research should further examine the partnership and networking implications for dialogue on social media, particularly about an establishment of trust and demonstration of commitment to the low-income community at large. Strengthened partnerships with governmental and social services agencies, sociologists, and data scientists can further support public relations professionals as they engage in respectful dialogue for the good of the community - *all* of the community.

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