

Social Care and Professional Standards: Developing an Ethical Decision-Making Model

Carolyn Mae Kim, Ph.D., APR
Biola University

Karen Freberg, Ph.D.
University of Louisville

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Abstract

The growth of organizations engaging stakeholders through a holistic communication process via social media, known as social care, is a growing trend. While public relations professionals are increasingly leading or joining teams dedicated to social care, there is limited scholarship in public relations that specifically addresses how this communication process contributes to the role of public relations or the ways in which public relations ethics should guide the communication. This study provides insight into how publics and organizations are defining social care, what ethical principles are considered important to its practice, and concludes with recommending an ethical model to help guide future social care initiatives. This study has implications both for the theoretical foundations of public relations use of social media, as well as the application of social media among professionals.

Keywords: Social media, social care, public relations, public relations ethics

Social Care: Ethical Standards and Professional Expectations

Social media drastically impacts the world of public relations, influencing the perceptions key stakeholders have of organizations (Kim & Brown, 2015). Given this prominence, looking at social media as a strategic element of Organizational-Public Relations (OPR) is important. OPR is a sphere that has not only a rich history within public relations, but also has been particularly impacted with social technology (Kelly, 2001; Patel and McKeever, 2014). In addition, social media has changed the communication dynamics between the organization and its publics. For decades, before the rise of social media, organizations had almost complete control over their message and how it was presented to their key audiences. With social media, however, the power structure and dynamic of communication has changed dramatically.

Social media, therefore, represents changes in the way relationships are managed as well as a key shift in how communication is regulated and established between organizations and stakeholders. The myriad of options provided to publics via social media has resulted in increasingly engaged and interactive communication between publics and organizations. Recently, it was found that 67% of companies believe that social customer care is the most pressing, short-term priority for their contact centers (Lackey, n.d.). In addition, the Harvard Business Review analyzed effective use of social customer care among organizations and found it is possible to “resolve over 95% of issues through social media, while maintaining customer satisfaction levels above 90%” (Masri, Esber, Sarrazin, & Singer, 2015, “gathering the right information” para 2).

Despite the growing expectation by stakeholders for social care efforts and the industry trends indicating the impact of social care, there is limited academic research that explores this concept. Some current scholarship focuses on *customer care* (DeMers, 2014; Hyken, 2017) that occurs in social media, examining the platform and interactions through marketing theory rather than OPR. Additionally, public relations scholars have explored social media interactions between organizations and the public (Lackey, n.d.; Kim and Brown, 2015), but have yet to develop theories, ethical guides and applications for social care as a critical component to relationship management. This study seeks to fill that gap by identifying relevant perspectives, approaches, and values that influence social care in the context of public relations’ role of relationship building and communication management.

Literature Review

Social Care: Definitions and Purpose

Defining social care. While the concept of social care is increasingly mentioned in industry studies, reports and articles, the term social care is not clarified, often taking a variety of definitions. For example, some will reference the idea of *social customer support*, linking the concept and practice to that of regular customer service behaviors but in a new environment -- social media (DeMers, 2014). However, this fails to fully capture the breadth of what brands are doing with stakeholders or the full implications of effective social care for key publics (Hyken, 2017; Wardini, 2017). A more robust approach to understanding *social care* positions this approach to communication via social networks as more than simply an interaction with customers, but rather an experience where key stakeholders, reaching far more than only customers, develop strong perceptions of a brand’s credibility, reputation and, ultimately,

cultivate loyalty, all of which are constructs of deep value in public relations (Wardini, 2017). To establish the context for this study as an area of importance for public relations, it is helpful to first identify how social care is connected to the industry.

Social media as a public relations function. Perhaps one of the foundational connections between social care and public relations is the growing body of research that examines the way public relations professional's use social media and the implications for stakeholders (DiStaso, McCorkindale, & Wright, 2011; Men & Tsai, 2014; Saxton & Waters, 2014; Faustino & Connolly-Ahern, 2015; Kim & Brown, 2015; Wright & Hanson, 2017; Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018). In fact, public relations scholars increasingly have considered the way social media may influence multiple elements of the discipline – including implications for practitioners, organizations and particular sectors of practice. For example, scholars have examined the role of social media and PR in contexts such as the work-life balance for public relations professionals (Gilkerson, Anderson & Swenson, 2018), the use of Facebook in higher education for public relations efforts (Thelen, 2018), and public relations professionals use of social media in various global contexts, such as professionals in Zimbabwe (Ngondo, 2019). Public relations scholars have also focused on the impact of social media internally on employees (Justin, 2018), the use of social media in emergency situations Liu, Lai, & Xu, 2018), social media's impact on media relations and agenda setting (Waters, Tindall, & Morton, 2010), and how to communicate corporate social responsibility (CSR) messages via social media (Wang & Huang, 2018). These studies and many others indicate that there is an acknowledgement that public relations professionals have adopted social media as a key practice in engaging stakeholders.

Social care as research in public relations. While there is a robust focus on social media in public relations research, social care, as an approach to engaging stakeholders in social media, is an area that needs further exploration. One area that social care, as a particular strategy in social media, enhances existing theory is the contribution it makes to the role of research and listening in the public relations process. Place (2019) points out that “the emphasis of public relations research and practice on environmental scanning, issues management, and relationship development implies a need for listening,” (p. 2). Social care focuses on providing key insights into trends and issues that may arise, using social media as the channel. For social care to be effectively leveraged, organizations must first be willing to listen and make sense of the information they are receiving from stakeholders. This process requires attention and dedication to issues management, authentic dialogue, and environmental scanning to determine how to best interact with stakeholders. Thus, social care would fall under the kind research that Grunig (1992) argued as being central to excellent public relations.

Social care and public impact. Finally, social care is a particular concern for public relations scholars and practitioners as it has the potential to dramatically impact stakeholder relationships on a large-scale (Kinsky et al., 2015; Wood, 2018). There have been numerous examples where organizations have found key conversations going viral due to the dialogue in social media – and these conversations engage stakeholders in ways that influence brand perceptions of credibility, loyalty and trust (Veil, Reno, Freihaut, & Oldham, 2015; Sandlin & Gracylany, 2018). Examples include how Chipotle framed the conversation with contaminated food (Brummette & Fussell Sisco, 2018) and Ben and Jerry's approach to #BlackLivesMatter (Ciszek & Nneka, 2018). These and other studies point to an important element in social media: the fact that any interaction can cause a significant influence. Lee and Seltzer (2018) pointed out that when an organization interacts with a stakeholder online, the impact does not stop with that

one individual. Rather, through ‘vicarious interaction’ those who observe the engagement are also influenced. In other words, organizations using social care strategies have the potential to reach very large number of stakeholder groups while interacting with individuals due to the public nature and viral potential of social media.

Thus, social care is of concern to public relations professionals for three key reasons: 1) it is one medium that studies have positioned as important to public relations; 2) it facilitates listening, which is a foundational construct to effective public relations; and 3) its public presence and potential for virality have a significant impact on stakeholder relationships. Recognizing these ties to public relations, it is important to clarify the construct of *social care* as it is a new practice and an area that has, to the author’s knowledge, had no previous research conducted around the topic.

Creating a definition. Some of the confusion over the construct of social care may relate to the fact that many organizations are still grappling with who “owns” social media. Is it marketing? Is it advertising? Is it public relations? Given the dynamic nature of social media and the stratification of audience needs through this communication channel, Keith Quesenberry (2016) suggests:

to be more effective at building relationships with consumers online, companies need a cross-functional social media team, one where marketing works together with other departments. Distributing social responsibilities to relevant people across the organization can be efficient, be effective, and help make one-on-one customer engagement scalable. (para. 3)

Recommendations to build a truly customizable social care team include 1) making sure team members are trained not just on social media but also on customer relationship management (CRM) tools, 2) designating responsibilities for each team member so that stakeholders can have seamless support no matter what the issue is, 3) having an established reporting process so all information is tracked and recorded, and, lastly, 4) providing a way to evaluate the ROI of these customer care efforts in order to show the overall value and ultimate impact of the work (Quesenberry, 2016). Ultimately, *social care* seems to be a communication method that is established with the presumption that key publics desire and expect to have the ability to personally interact with brands, receiving customized responses and care from a variety of touch-points within the organization (Gingiss, 2016).

RQ1: How do social media professionals define social care?

Purpose of social care. As described above, there is a general presumption that social care is more than a one-time interaction with a customer. Rather, it is a dynamic process that not only serves as a way to address issues or problems for those making purchases, it can also resolve or mitigate crises as well as cultivate loyalty through an elevated stakeholder engagement on behalf of organizations (Wardini, 2017). This purpose, then, seems to encompass several key constructs such as credibility, reputation, and loyalty which are of importance to public relations practice and scholarship.

Credibility. Credibility within social media is an increasingly explored construct (Kim & Brown, 2015; Pressgrove & Kim, 2018). Credibility is defined as “a set of perceptions that individuals hold toward a particular source, medium or message” (Pressgrove & Kim, 2018, “Credibility,” para 1). The concept is fluid, as it is consistently based in perceptions, rather than

being a fixed state. Thus, scholars tend to examine a variety of dimensions to understand credibility. Newell and Goldsmith (2001) suggest that, for corporations, credibility is composed of expertise and trustworthiness. Not only does social care seem to present the ability for organizations to position their expertise by being available to answer questions and provide information, but it also bolsters the perception of their trustworthiness as they showcase individual attention to problems and situations.

Reputation. Reputation is a significant element to social care communication. Reputation can be defined as “the evaluation of organizations’ ability to meet stakeholder expectations based on its performance” (van Zoonen & Van Der Meer, 2015, p. 372; Coombs, 2007). When individuals engage with organizations in social media, it is a public conversation. Thus, social care not only influences an individual's perceptions of the organization’s ability to meet certain expectations, but also influences other people who are watching the interaction take place on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Thus, the reputation impact of social care has the potential to reach both primary and secondary audiences.

Loyalty. Loyalty is a long-standing construct both within marketing and advertising literature, and recently in public relations work as well (Pressgrove & McKeever, 2016). While the definitions of loyalty vary, the overall concept is that it is a repeated behavior or desire to maintain a relationship between an organization and the public. Overall, there are three main factors in the construct: cognitive loyalty (the belief that a brand or organization is preferable over another); affective loyalty (the feeling of satisfaction based on a product, service or experience) and behavioral loyalty (the repeated support of or interaction with an organization) (Pressgrove & McKeever, 2016). Loyalty cultivation through social care interactions is a significant consideration for public relations.

In summary, constructs like credibility, reputation and loyalty seem to be embedded within the current conversations surrounding social care. In light of this, in addition to understanding the definition of social care and the disciplines it incorporates, it is further important to explore the perceived purpose of social care. This moves beyond a mere ontological question (ex. *What is social care*) and into a teleological exploration (ex. *What is the end goal of social care*). In light of this, our second research question is as follows:
RQ2: What are the perceptions of the role and purpose of social care within an organization for public relations?

Values and Ethics in Social Care

Increasingly, public relations scholars have examined key ethical values or principles that guide communication with stakeholders. Setting the foundation for this conversation, it is helpful to consider ethics as “both an art and science” (Rae, 2009, p. 15). In other words, it is important to not only discuss principles in ethics (the science) but also how we apply those in a decision-making model (the art).

As an industry, public relations has identified key ethical values and principles. For example, the Public Relations Society of America has values for its members to follow such as honesty, loyalty and fairness (PRSA Code of Ethics, n.d.). Other values that have been suggested include commitments to mutual-benefit between publics and organizations (Grunig, 1992). While some scholars or organizations have articulations of values or principles that differ in terms, there is an agreement upon the role and purpose of public relations professionals throughout. Thus, the values that should guide ethical processes can be identified. For example,

out of these values, Baker and Martison (2001) proposed the TARES system for advocating key values in persuasive communication: truthfulness, authenticity, respect, equity, and social responsibility. These five principles help communicators determine if what they are communicating, how they are communicating, and the likely ramifications of the communication create an ethical framework for persuasion. This is a system that can be employed when public communicators are engaging in persuasive messages, in order to make sure no ethical standards are violated. Similarly, Bowen (2004) proposed a model that can be used when engaging in issues management. Through a series of questions and answers, communicators are guided to the ethical decision based on the values of mutual benefit, truthfulness, and equity. While there is increasing attention given to public relations ethics (Neill and Drumwright, 2012), marketing ethics (Murphy, 2017) and social media ethics (Lipshultz, 2014), there is limited research to foster an understanding in how these disciplines and practices collide into one arena: social care. To address this gap, a handful of public relations scholars have provided insight into some of the guiding principles. These principles are rooted in the heart of public relations – relationships:

At its very core, social media is not about technology, it's about people. Connections, emotions, expression become the souls and personalities of online communities. The ties that bind them together are relationships. Without value, mutual benefits, the quality of the relationship erodes. (DiStaso & Bortree, 2014, Pg. XV)

When focusing on relationships in social care, it may be useful to use the lens of “Ethics of Care,” which is an approach to ethical reasoning that public relations scholars have championed for effective and ethical communication. One of the vanguard scholars to explicate the construct of Ethics of Care, Carol Gilligan, explained that:

The ethic of care guides us in acting carefully in the human world and highlights the costs of carelessness. It is grounded less in moral precepts than in psychological wisdom, underscoring the costs of not paying attention, not listening, being absent rather than present, not responding with integrity and respect. (Gilligan, 2014, p. 103)

In other words, Ethics of Care is a framework that can help humanize the digital landscape in a way that fosters organizational presence.

Stoker and Walton (2009) explain that “The ethic of care moves beyond thinking about the relationship in terms of organizational or personal rights and places an emphasis on relationships and an organization’s responsibility to relationships created under its care,” (p. 11). Plainly put, McCorkindale (2014) describes it as “doing what is right using the principles of care and concern,” (p. 67). Recognizing that social care, as a practice seems to be rooted in the process of maintaining and building relationships, it seems likely that the ethics of care may inform the perceptions of how ethical decisions are made by organizations using social care. To explore this, the following research question was developed.

RQ3: What are the perceived ethical principles and values that should guide social care activities?

Methodology

To address these research questions, a multi-phase approach was used.

Phase One: A Case Study

Design. First, a case-study was conducted focusing on General Motors (GM), a leading organization in social care. A case-study approach for the first phase was necessary as there is limited research on the construct of social care, particularly within the context of public relations literature. Thus, this first phase allowed the researchers to work to attempt to develop “epistemic theory, that is, theory that is explanatory and predictive” (Flyvberg, 2011, p. 302). While case study research has received its share of criticism related to rigor and reliability (Beverland & Lindgreen, 2010), case studies provide context-rich and needed insight into new areas of studies, particularly in humanities and social sciences. Scholars have identified using multiple data points, or triangulation, as a method to bolster the credibility of case studies while reaping the value of this type of research (Stake, 1995).

Participants. For the multiple data points, the researchers conducted a structured-question survey with 10 employees of GM who work within the Social Care efforts of the organization. To identify participants, a request for participation was sent to all GM employees working in Social Care roles. The request was provided through the leaders of the Social Care team. Those who decided to participate came from roles such as senior strategists, social media performance lead, and social care strategy and operations leads.

Instrument. The survey protocol included 9 qualitative questions focused on understanding perspectives related to social care (ex. How do you define social care; what is the primary purpose of social care; what key principles should be included with a code of conduct related to social care, etc.). Second, data was collected from a selection of GM’s 325 social media properties to verify and cross-reference data from the interviews. These accounts were identified for inclusion in analysis by one of the researchers who had conducted previous social media analysis of GM’s accounts in order to identify platforms that would be representative of the overall brand communication, included high engagement from stakeholders, and were well-recognized divisions. Third, data was collected from popular press and articles that focused on GM’s social care efforts. These articles were selected by identified popular press that focused both on the brand of GM as well as articles that identified strategies, approaches and uses of the social care initiatives from GM.

Phase Two: Expert Interviews

Design. The second phase of research included a structured-question survey interview conducted with 15 social media professionals from other organizations.

Participants. Participants came from a purposeful sampling. Only professionals who were working in full-time public relations/social media roles were asked to participate. Participants also represented a variety of organizational structures and categorizations, to ensure the findings could be applied to a broader audience (as opposed to only examining perceptions of professionals in larger organizations with dedicated teams, or only examining perceptions related to professionals working in a corporate setting, etc.). Participants also represented a range of experience from being a young professional (>2 years) to the top level leader in social media for organizations. This was done in order to ensure participants had the experience and background required to provide insight into the research questions related to brands and social care.

Instrument. The survey protocol included 12 qualitative questions focused on understanding perspectives and values related to social care. The initial questions mirrored those asked from Phase One, with the GM employees. These allowed for a comparison between the groups related to constructs such as the definition, purpose and values of social care. Additional survey items explored perceptions related to the advantages and disadvantages for organizations that employ social care teams. This step allowed the researchers to move the theory development forward from a case study into a wider frame-work. Using case studies with other methods is “especially appropriate in new topic areas. The resultant theory is often novel, testable, and empirically valid” (Eisenhardt, 1989, p.532).

Phase Three: A National Survey

Design. Finally, the third phase was a national survey conducted of the general public to compare the findings and expectations from the first two phases.

Participants. To recruit participants, the researchers used a panel from Cint, a partner with Survey Monkey, which is a well-known survey platform. The panel included participants that would be representative of census data from the United States. This was done to ensure the survey participation represented the same distribution as the population, in order to have a stronger validity in applying the findings nationally. This study had 703 participants who completed the survey.

The participants represented a variety of ages. The largest age group was 25-34 years old (n=216; 30.7%) and the second largest represented age was 35-44 years old (n=177; 25.2%). The least represented was 75 years and older, with only .4% (n=3) participants. There were 69.6% female participants (n=489) and 30.4% male participants (n=214). There were participants from every state in the United States in this study.

Instrument. The first part of the instrument included an open-ended question that asked participants to identify what expectations the public has for organizations that are engaging in social care. This allowed for a comparison between the general public with the first two phases (case study and interviews). Second, based on the findings identified from both phase one and two, a series of values was listed and participants were asked to use a five-point, Likert-scale to identify the significance of those values for organizations using social care. This was a further point of comparison between organizations and professional’s perceptions of social care versus the general public.

The value of these three phases is that it allowed the researchers to capitalize on the strengths of each method while mitigating the weaknesses that would be present if only using one method (Yin, 2011, p. xix).

Analysis

Phase One: GM Case Study

Background on General Motors Leadership in Social Care. As social care has become increasingly important, certain organizations have been recognized for their leadership in this arena. General Motors is one such brand. In 2013, for example, they developed a Social Media Center of Expertise (CoE) with over 600 employees in five regions with the “goal of enhancing the company’s market-based decision making” (Bolder-Davis, 2016, para. 5). Beyond simply centralizing the focus of customer care, GM stresses the need for organizations to fully equip their social care centers:

In North America alone, GM staffs 26 full-time social media customer care advisers — not including marketing and communications personnel — covering more than 150 owned social channels from GM, Chevrolet, Buick, GMC, and Cadillac and approximately 85 earned sites such as automotive enthusiast forums. These advisers are assisting customers seven days a week, averaging 16 operational hours per day, adding up to an average of more than 6,000 monthly interactions on both an in-market pre-sale and customer care basis. (Bolder-Davis, 2016, para. 10).

General Motors Social Media Analysis. GM currently has approximately 325 social channels globally, divided between GM as an organization and individual brands. As part of the interview process for the case study, a social care team member shared that Facebook and Twitter are the highest engaged channels for social care initiatives. The General Motors Twitter page had 643 thousand followers. One way that the Twitter page facilitates connections and interactions for the public is through lists, where GM provides a list of additional Twitter accounts such as “Buick customer care,” “Chevy customer care” and “GMC customer care.” In reviewing a week of replies and posts from the main Twitter account, a little over half (12 out of 21 tweets) related to social care interactions. The majority of the tweets addressed people specifically and indicated that further information and details could be obtained with the direct message (DM) feature of Twitter. Each tweet that related to a social care issue was signed with the initials of the specific representative reaching out.

The main GM Facebook page had 775,581 likes and 742,340 people who followed it at the time of data collection. As with Twitter, Facebook linked to other GM brands through the “Pages Liked By This Page.” The social care interaction tended to surface within the comment sections of these posts. For example, on a post related to providing unmatched customer service, one reply voiced concerns about the safety of a vehicle purchased and the lack of response or help from GM related to these issues. The social care team responded by posting:

We deeply regret to learn about this experience in your vehicle, Gabrielle. Your safety is of the utmost importance to us, and your situation is not something that we take lightly. Based on the nature of your concerns, we’d like to get one of our specialty teams involved. They are trained to handle these types of concerns and will be in the best position to try and resolve the issue. So that we may look up your previous interactions in our systems, we will just need you to provide some additional information about your situation. At your earliest convenience, please send us a private message with your contact information and VIN. To learn more about GM's privacy policy, please visit <http://s.gm.com/vjlxw> Dani C. GM Customer Care (General Motors Facebook Page, March 8, 2017).

While some of the social care interactions included identifying information for team members, other posts simply provided a response, but removed customer care service member information.

General Motors interviews. Interviews with the social care team related to perceptions about the essence, purpose, role, guidelines, and value of social care. Two researchers independently read and coded the responses and then applied the constant comparison approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This was an appropriate way to analyze the interviews, as the area of

social care has limited research on perspectives related to the definition, purpose, and ethics involved.

Defining social care. When asked to define social care, participants mainly focused on service to customers and surpassing expectations. A theme that emerged from this question is that social care, by definition, is stakeholder focused and designed rather than product or service oriented. One GM Social Care employee highlighted the broad spectrum of social care reaching multiple channels defining it as “Social care is helping customers get help in the social channel of their choice allowing them to communicate in a way that is easy and efficient for them.” Another emphasized the problem-solving or robust emphasis on communication engagement afforded by social care, and described it as “Acting as an advocate for the customer to provide the highest level service possible for the given situation.”

Purpose of social care. The themes that came out of GM related to the purpose of social care seemed to have a focus on accessibility, problem solving, and maintaining relationships. For example, one employee described the purpose as “Develop an ongoing thread of conversation with the customer. Fulfill the notion that social is not a push platform, but rather a multi-party conversation.” Another employee emphasized the level of stakeholder loyalty, building towards developing lifelong “fans” by explaining the purpose as, “to start, nurture or fix a relationship with a consumer to build our brands, sell vehicles, to have them be life-long fans of our products and services and advocate on our behalf.”

Stakeholder engagement. To help clarify the perceptions related to the definition and purpose, employees were asked “Why does GM care about engaging in social care with key publics?” Employees emphasized credibility, accessibility and future-proofing stakeholder communication as key reasons they want to engage. One employee explained, “This is a growing space for customer feedback and concerns. If we want to continue to grow with our customers and stay ahead of the curve, we need to engage on social platforms. This is where the future of customer engagement is heading.” Another highlighted how social care allows for stakeholder engagement even when someone does not directly reach out to the brand: “We can make ourselves available to an ever growing market in the social space, as well as assist individuals who may not reach out to us directly.” Finally, the impact to the trustworthiness and expertise was emphasized when an employee explained, “it’s an important outlet to engage in. If we are not assisting our customers in every communication available to the customer, we will lose that credibility with the customer.”

Diving further into this area, employees were asked ‘How does social care help GM build or maintain relationships with key stakeholders.’ One interesting emphasis came when an employee spoke to the public nature of digital communication: “They can see publicly everything that we are doing to try to help customers, build our brands, etc. We encourage transparency and only move customers to private conversations when we need personal information in order to move their issue/question forward.” Many others emphasized the need to be accessible and readily able to communicate with stakeholders, particularly when issues arise. One employee explained:

Customers approach GM for help or assistance via social care because a) they want to communicate in this manner or b) they feel we have disappointed them in other channels and this gives them a public podium to tell their story and allows

us a second opportunity to help them. This allows us to be where customers want us to be and ensures we are listening to them.

Social care and public relations. To help examine how social care is positioned as public relations effort, employees were asked, “How does social care fit into the larger social media or public relations strategy of GM?” Highlighting the changing nature of communications and digital technology, one employee explained:

Social care/social media go hand in hand with PR. PR has to have a social media presence in order to succeed with their messages. With that, comes conversations both positive and negative. Companies, like GM, need to have that kind of presence to assist those who reach out. GM needs smart people to engage and assist and represent the GM brand to continue thriving in their social media or media presence.

The focus on integration between departments was also emphasized by employees who mentioned “Social care is one foundational element of social at GM, working in tandem with Communications and Marketing to ensure the customer sees seamless integration no matter what way they approach us,” and another who explained “It’s the foundation. You can’t keep building the house, if you don’t have happy customers who believe in you or your brand.”

Ethics and values in social care. Moving from how social care functions or what purpose it serves, participants were asked “what is the role of ethics in social care?” The role of doing what is right and making a moral choice was highlighted by one employee who explained, “No different than ethics in anything...should be our guiding principle. do the right thing, everyday, everywhere and all will be fine.” Another employee explained how the ethics mirror that of the organization, in this case GM: “The role of ethics in social care should mimic the role of ethics across the company in terms of dealing with customers, partners, employees, etc... Social care is just another communication channel and should be treated as such.”

To extrapolate what ethics may look like in this setting, employees were asked “What key principles should be included in a code of conduct for social care?” Honesty and customer dignity were highlighted by employees who said things such as “Always be truthful and accurate,” and “Honesty, transparency and respecting the customer's privacy.” One employee also mentioned the commitment to both the customer and the organization, displaying the kind of position public relations often holds between stakeholders and brands:

Willingness to help a customer and go above and beyond when possible.
Neutrality, you have to advocate for the customer, the dealer and the company.
Evolution and Refinement as the environment and expectations shift. Drive to help customers and empathize with their [point of view].

In addition to rapidly responding to stakeholders, integrity and respect were also mentioned by employees.

Phase Two: Social Media Professionals

Defining social care. To understand the perceptions related to the construct of social care, professionals were asked the same question that the case study participants were asked: “How do you define social care?” One participant described social care as: “Organizations providing the best experience for their customers exceeding expectations and operating ethically

in their interactions at all times.” Other participants articulated that social care moves communication past a transaction and into a two-way communication process to build mutually beneficial relationships: “I define social care as the deliberate process of caring for consumers in a way that goes beyond simple transactions.”

Purpose of social care. As with the case study, social media professionals were also asked “what is the primary purpose of social care?” When explaining the purpose of social care, the primary theme that emerged from participants was the relational context and value of social care compared to a sales or revenue focus. One participant explained it by saying:

The primary purpose is to give your customers the attention and support that they need. Social care DOES NOT prioritize pitching or upselling. It prioritizes answering customer requests or questions promptly, and also being able to predict/get ahead of those requests (via research, content, proactive outreach, etc.)

Another participant identified the long-term, behavioral outcomes as a purpose for social care:

From a business perspective, the purpose of social care is to create strong, long-lasting relationships between brand and consumer. Working for a large company, we want to break down the idea that since we're so big we don't care about the individual. By showing personal attention to one consumer, we create a bond between consumer and brand.

In summary, social care’s purpose is a relational function of the organization. As one participant put it: “Social care helps organizations get closer to their customers and to build stronger relationships.”

Value of social care for organizations. Beyond simply defining and articulating the purpose, participants were asked about the value of social care for organizations. Participants were asked about the advantages and disadvantages of social care for a brand, to explain how social care can help build or maintain relationships with stakeholders, and why organizations should care about engaging in social care with their stakeholders. Questions in this part of the interview revealed two themes: 1) social care increases credibility among organizations and key stakeholders and 2) the relational outcome from this increased credibility is a strong reputation, deeper loyalty and lasting relationships.

In terms of building credibility, participants mentioned the changing landscape of today’s stakeholder, including expectations for digital interaction and the creation of perceptions within social media:

Today, the court of public opinion is predominantly digital. Building a baseline foundation of honesty and transparency means the digital community will seek out and trust a statement from your brand should an unpredictable narrative (scandal, accusation, etc.) begin to gain traction.

The development of expected interaction between stakeholders and organizations also lends itself to social care. One GM social care member explained this desire for interaction by saying:

Consumers want to be able to talk to companies in social media and expect answers to questions and resolution to problem. They know the power of complaining in public--and a lack of a response from a brand is often worse than a dissatisfying answer. Social care can help an organization manage brand

reputation and shape their public image, building positive sentiment and brand loyalty.

Ultimately, a value of social care is that it engages audiences in an authentic and transparent way. Today's landscape requires that organizations differentiate themselves based on customer relationships, not simply a product or service.

Social care humanizes your brand, and also just leads to higher customer satisfaction. Social care can also sell itself--customers are now starting to value brands that are authentic, helpful, and caring. It's not enough to have a good product. If your team is not willing to address customer questions or concerns, customers will either get frustrated or choose not to patronize a team/brand like yours.

Ethics and Decision Making in Social Care. In exploring perspectives of ethics and decision making in social care, several themes emerged.

When participants were asked to identify ethical obligations that were important when engaging in communication with key stakeholders via social media, two themes emerged. The first related to human dignity and the second to transparency. Many participants linked these two obligations as ways to understand the application of social care ethics. For example, one participant said:

We can't compromise our business stakeholders if a customer asks something that is beyond our privacy wall. However, it's really important that the consumer feels as though they are having a human experience versus an impersonal one.

The idea of privacy, expectations and transparency in communication was repeated by many others. Another participant explained that those ethical obligations are important to build trust:

I believe they must be open and timely in their communication with stakeholders, which I believe would be consumers or customers in this context. Setting incorrect or wrong expectation can lead to erosion of brand trust in the eyes of the online public.

In addressing what the role of ethics in social media communication should be, participants continued to stress transparency, respect and privacy.

Phase 3: General Public Expectations and Values of Social Care

Expectation of Social Care. Participants responded to an open-ended question asking what results or communication the public should expect from organizations engaged in social care. Categories that emerged from the analysis of the responses included:

- 1) Truthfulness and honest.
- 2) Transparency (including disclosure of how data is collected and used).
- 3) Fairness and equality.
- 4) Regular communication and releasing of data.
- 5) The protection of privacy for the public.

6) Supporting the values of the public.

Participants articulated these values by saying things such as: “We have the right to privacy; to transparency in the way data gathered from personal use is purposed, and to disclosure if data is being gathered through general use.” Another participant expressed the importance of knowing “That the brand is taking the time to hear what the customers have to say and maybe engage with them with personalized responses and not just stock responses.” Another participant highlighted the value alignment opportunity with social care: “The public should expect that organizations who engage in social care to choose causes that their customer base is passionate about, follow through on actions, and report results publicly.”

Values of social care. While the list of expectations from the public generally mirrored those identified in the first two phases, participants were also asked to rank the values that social care brings to an organization. These values were derived from the ones professionals working in digital and social care identified as being important. They included: 1) Transparency in communication; 2) Respect/Empathy for the individual; 3) Immediacy between organization and the individual; 4) Privacy of individual’s personal information; 5) Rapid response to individual interaction; 6) Customer-Centric purposes rather than ROI focused social care activity. Participants ranked the values from 1-6, with one being the lowest. The highest value among the public is a customer-centric social care focus (m=4.62). The second highest value was a rapid response to interaction (m=4.00). The third highest value was immediacy between the organization and the individual (3.40). The fourth was privacy (m=3.25). The fifth was transparency (2.92) and the sixth was respect/empathy (2.90).

Discussion

RQ1: How do social media professionals define social care?

A current gap in literature involves a concise definition for social care. To address this research question, it was important to understand both perspectives of professionals working with social care and new media, as well as the general public. This study’s findings indicate that social care can be defined as: *Stakeholder engagement on social media channels the bolsters an organization’s credibility and reputation in order to develop loyalty and commitment from the public.* Participants in this study, both professionals using social care strategies as well as the general public, seemed to indicate that social care is understood as a key *relational* function designed to not only address stakeholder questions and concerns, but to also humanize interaction between organizations and stakeholders. This humanization has the opportunity to better position organizations as credible and reputable in today’s digital landscape. Thus, rather than being considered as an issues or problem solving function that merely takes place on social media, *social care* is a humanizing engagement in an ever-digitalized world.

RQ2: What are the perceptions of the role and purpose of social care within an organization for public relations?

As this study is the first, to the author’s knowledge, to examine social care in the context of public relations, it was important to explore perceptions from both professionals and the general public.

Participants indicated that social care may be tied to an organization’s perceived credibility in the eyes of stakeholders. Newell and Goldsmith (2001) previously identified that an organization’s credibility is a combination of the perception of the trustworthiness and the

expertise of an organization. These findings align with Newell and Goldsmith, as a repeated themes from participants focused on the ways social care allowed organizations to not only address concerns about products and services (*expertise*) but also to humanize interactions with individuals, showing that they care about fulfilling their promises to each person (*trustworthiness*). This seems to support the idea that social care activities have opportunity to bolster perceptions of credibility.

Reputation was also another dimension that appears to be influenced as a result of social care initiatives. As previously defined, reputation is “the evaluation of organizations’ ability to meet stakeholder expectations based on its performance,” (van Zoonen and Van Der Meer, 2015, p. 372). Both the analysis of GM’s social media interactions and the analysis of media coverage related to GM’s social care emphasized a focus on reputation. Additionally, professionals mentioned that by openly and transparently interacting with publics, the organization would be viewed as a leader in the sector. Thus, participants seemed to indicate that there is potential to increase reputation by the use of social care strategies.

Finally, loyalty emerged as something participants seemed to link to social care activities. Ultimately, professionals indicated that the teleological goal of social care was to develop a long-term, mutually-beneficial relationship between the stakeholders and an organization. This focus on long-term relationships leads to a desire to cultivate and nurture a loyalty dimension within stakeholders, which participants indicated as one thing social care affords to organizations.

RQ3: What are the perceived ethical values that should guide social care activities?

The third and final research question in this study focused on ethical decision making. Ethics are often confused with morality. Particularly for this study, it is helpful to clarify the difference in order to frame the development of ethical values and decision making applications from this study. Earlier the difference was described as ethics being an art and a science – to further crystalize the construct, the following is useful:

Most people use the terms *morality* and *ethics* interchangeably. Technically, morality refers to the actual content of right and wrong, and ethics refers to the process of determining right and wrong. In other words, morality deals with moral *knowledge* and ethics with moral *reasoning*. Thus, ethics is both an art and a science (Rae, 2009, p. 15).

For this study, the researchers explored the ethics of how organizations should use social care in order to support the values participants identified.

Participants described the need for long-standing public relations ethics such as transparency, authenticity, and honesty to be part of social care. Additionally, the general public in this study indicated that the highest value for social care is the humanization of the relationship – that it should be about more than ROI and really be about the public. Participants seemed to link the communication and behavior associated with *social care* to the overall communication and behaviors of the organization. This seems to imply that social care can only be as ethical as the organization’s overall ethical framework.

Two themes emerged, however, related to ethics, that are particularly salient to the practice of social care: privacy and human dignity.

Privacy is a strong theme that participants emphasized throughout this study. Professionals stressed the need for social care to protect the privacy of the organization, but also

the privacy of the stakeholders. The public participants identified the right to privacy of their data, transparency in data collection, and confidentiality. As social care continues to emerge and is intertwined with technology, it seems an ethical area to focus on will be the measures and protection for privacy. This is related to particular technology tools, the collection of user data on platforms when interacting with social care, and the dissemination about stakeholders and their needs.

Human dignity, or the value of humanization, was also a strong theme. Social media professionals mentioned that a core ethical value should be knowing that stakeholders can talk directly with the organization. Interestingly enough, this may raise issues with the use of chatbots and other bots that may often be the front-lines of stakeholder interaction. Professional participants seemed to be suggesting that social care, based on its purpose and the desired outcomes, should remain focused on providing humanization of communication rather than automatization. This was repeated with the general public who continually emphasized humanization and communication.

Social Care Code of Conduct and Decision Making

After identifying participants' perceptions related to a definition, purposes, and ethical values for social care, the researchers categorized the themes into core values. These were derived by examining both qualitative and quantitative feedback to identify what participants indicated as useful ways for organizations to ensure social care initiatives supported human dignity and privacy. To identify these guiding values, the researchers analyzed data from each of the three phases, and categorized. Coding and analyzing the qualitative data from professionals and the public, key values were defined, as well as clarification for how organizations using social care could manifest that value to the public. The following themes emerged as ethical values for social care:

Transparency: Brands who engage in social care should do so with the intention of serving the client, rather than ultimately for motives about profit or personal gain. In other words, the intention of social care should be authentically focused on the stakeholder's needs.

Respectfulness and empathy: Brands should recognize the innate value of each individual by communicating in a manner that humanizes individuals through social media and cultivates an inviting environment online.

Immediacy: Social care should bridge the gap between key stakeholders and a brand by bolstering the perceptions of proximity, closeness and relationship.

Privacy: Social care representatives should safeguard the information of people interacting via social media, ensuring that their personal information is only used for the purposes of the individual need or that complete disclosure is provided if the person's information will be stored or used in other ways as a result of interacting via social media.

Responsiveness: Responsiveness is the timeframe in which a brand responds to a stakeholder's interaction via social media. Given the emphasis on care and dignity, social care teams should value a rapid response (no longer than 24 hours) to be effective.

Public-centric: The social care process should be designed with the stakeholder or individual in mind, rather than develop from an organizational structure. In other words, social care teams should be able to handle all the inquiries and network throughout the organization with other colleagues to resolve issues without sending the individual from one person to another person in order to address questions.

To apply these values, the following code of conduct was developed, which was created based on the existing information related to the practice of social care, as well as the qualitative data from participants of this study:

- 1) Humanize interaction in social care by using the names of people, identifying the social care representative, and ensuring that information is customized and individualized.
- 2) Use a respectful and courteous tone with customers at all times.
- 3) Ask for their contact details via private messages only.
- 4) Acknowledge a customer or user's concern within 30 minutes since the time of it getting published online.
- 5) Follow-up or update the customer while their concern gets investigated or looked into by the brand's operations team.
- 6) Close the loop on a customer's concern, regardless of it having been resolved satisfactorily or unsatisfactorily. This sets an impression for future customers, who see the brand paying attention to all their customers' queries on social media.
- 7) Prioritize influential people for social care since their social standing can make or break a brand's reputation online.

Similar to the previously discussed decision-making models for ethical communication in other settings (issues management, persuasive communication, etc.), Table 1 provides a guide that is recommended as a decision-making model for social care using the acronym SOCIAL. This decision-making model extends the theory of ethics of care into the context of social care initiatives. First, there is an explanation of principles that support the activities of social care. These principles are based in *actions* that can help professionals determine if particular initiatives or strategies align with ethical outcomes. Second, the table outlines the ethical value that is captured through the applied principles. The ethical values were identified from the participants in this study. Thus, beyond knowing, for example, that a good principle for social care is to be *specific* in communication, professionals are able to use the guide to recognize that specific communication results in ethical outcomes because it illustrates respect and empathy for the individual. Finally, there are examples of the principle in practice.

[INSERT TABLE 1]

Conclusion

Social care is a delicate yet strategic area within the social media profession, and it is closely aligned with the growing list of expectations and duties public relations professionals incorporate into daily activities. Having a successful social care program seems to require both the organization and the professionals working in the social media team invest in the efforts. Like all areas of public relations, social care rests on the foundation of ethical and professional guidelines, rooted in a commitment to human dignity and honesty. While social care is one part of social media, there are still unique ethical principles that are specific to those who work in this line of work. More research and discussion is needed to determine if these practices evolve like the platforms themselves do over time.

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Table 1

Social Media Use Principle	Ethical Value Connection	Example
Specific	When communicating using social care, information should be specific and related to the individual rather than a mass-communication. This practice connects to the value of <i>respectfulness and empathy</i> as it is geared to address a particular individual and the unique needs of their communication.	<i>Specific</i> pertains to the importance of answering a question, comment, or inquiry in a way that is directly related and personalized for the individual who initiated the particular action towards the organization on social media. For example, when a person would like to see what time the NCAA March Madness basketball tournament would start on the West Coast, it would be appropriate for the community manager to respond tailoring their response with this information.
Open	Messages and information provided on social media should be transparent, and honest. Be as open as possible with what the client needs to know. This practice connects to the value of <i>transparency</i> for communication between the individual and the organization, as well as a clarity for the larger public that is observing the interaction as well. This also ties to <i>privacy</i> as it connects to the disclosure of information collection, use and protection via social care initiatives.	<i>Open</i> focuses on addressing the information in a clear and honest forum, especially in a time of crisis. This transparency communication is a key value for audiences on social media. The cases in which the community manager for the accounts for the Las Vegas Police Department during the shooting in 2017 was honest and up front on what they could not share during the crisis situation, but it did allow them to keep the social media accounts open with real-time information for the audiences.
Collaborative	When necessary, be the connecting piece for clients across multiple departments within the organization. Find the information they need and directly provide it, rather than pointing them elsewhere. This practice ties to the ethical value of <i>public-centric</i> , as it focuses on providing the best experience to stakeholders by breaking down barriers to a cohesive, one-stop-engagement on social media platforms.	<i>Collaborative</i> focuses on coming together across the different departments to make sure everything is aligned and connected within the organization before it is sent out. This is the case where General Motors falls under in this principle. The CoE provides an outlet for all of the departments to get, receive, and communicate with each other on the various inquiries of information that would be relevant and appropriate for their respective channels.

<p>Immediate</p>	<p>Social care is contingent on a time. Be sure that to rapidly respond to key stakeholders, working to have a dedicated social care team member available whenever interaction may take place. This practice ties to the value of <i>responsiveness</i>, as stakeholders anticipate rapid replies to social media interaction. It also connects to the value of <i>immediacy</i> as the pace of response seems to influence perceptions of relationship and proximity in the mind of stakeholders.</p>	<p><i>Immediate</i> focuses on real-time engagement, and timing is of course the biggest factor in this case. This means to have a quick response time to address the situation or inquiry and not let too much time pass. An example of this is when airline industry social care teams are able to help stakeholders resolve issues via Twitter while they are in line at the airport.</p>
<p>Authentic</p>	<p>Social care communication is rooted in authentic interaction, not contrived communication. It is designed to foster relationship, not driven by sales or product placement. This practice is connected to the values of <i>transparency</i>, <i>respectfulness</i> and <i>authenticity</i>, and <i>public-centric</i>. The method of communication is focused on stakeholders and the care provided to them, rather than simply on a means to an end.</p>	<p><i>Authenticity</i> is focusing on bringing back the “social” part of social media. Real exchanges that are not automated or impersonal could help bring forth a strong sense of community, and audiences want to know they are doing business with “real” brands and organizations.</p>
<p>Loyalty</p>	<p>After interacting with a social care team member, stakeholders should increase in loyalty. If the interaction does not produce this outcome, social care is not complete. Ultimately, this represents an outcome rather than an action – but it measures the overall success of social care initiatives by determining if they produced the teleological purpose of social care through the decisions used to guide social care initiatives.</p>	<p><i>Loyalty</i> is the result and product of the authentic exchanges and experiences. Meaning, if an individual has a great experience with customer service, they may be more likely to return as a customer. This is one of the ways Southwest Airlines has established itself with a great reputation and brand loyalty amongst their customers and audiences.</p>