

Strategic Use of Facebook for Public Engagement in Higher Education Institutions

Patrick D. Thelen
Ph.D. Student in Public Relations
University of Florida
patrickthelen@ufl.edu

Rita Linjuan Men, Ph.D., APR
Associate Professor, Department of Public Relations
University of Florida
rlmen@ufl.edu

Abstract

This study examined how the Office of the President at the University of Florida has strategically utilized the social networking site of Facebook. Guided by the dialogic communication theory, a content analysis of the 146 posts published by the Office of the President and the 977 comments that these posts received between December 2014 and June 2017 explored the dialogic principles utilized, the message strategies implemented, and public social media engagement. The study's results suggest that message appeals play a key role in increasing the public's levels of engagement. More specifically, emotional messages and humor play a powerful role in developing relationships and generating engagement. At the same time, the findings indicate that the page is not fully employing the expected dialogic capacity of Facebook. From a strategic point of view, this study provides significant implications for communication practices of leaders in higher education institutions.

Keywords: social media, engagement, higher education institutions, dialogic communication

Executive Summary

In an increasingly digital era, many organizations, including higher education institutions and their leaders, have adopted and utilized social media as part of their communication efforts. After becoming the University of Florida's 12th president in January 2015, W. Kent Fuchs began communicating with students and other publics via diverse social media outlets such as Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook—through the Office of the President's Facebook account (@OfficeofthePresidentUF). Guided by the dialogic communication theory, the current study explored how the Office of the President's Facebook account had been strategically utilizing this social networking site (SNS). More specifically, this study examined 1) the dialogic principles utilized, 2) the implemented message strategies (i.e., appeals, vividness, and interactivity), and 3) public social media engagement.

The results of a content analysis of the 146 posts published by the Office of the President and the 977 comments that these posts received between December 2014 and June 2017 suggest that message appeals play a key role in increasing the publics' levels of engagement. More specifically, emotional messages and humor play a powerful role in developing relationships and generating engagement. Almost half of the messages (47.3%) used an emotional appeal. The President was not afraid to use humor and took advantage of several opportunities, such as April Fools' Day, to show publics his playful side. At the same time, the findings indicated that the page is not fully employing the expected dialogic capacity of Facebook; on average, the Office of the President's Facebook page utilized 12.4% of its capacity for dialogic communication in each post.

Findings from this study help extend current knowledge on social media and public engagement through quantitative data from a public university in the United States. This study helps fill the gap regarding the strategic use of social media among higher education leaders. The dialogic communication theory provides researchers a tool to study how organizations such as higher education institutions are using social networks to build and maintain online relationships with publics. Therefore, this study provides a significant contribution to our understanding of this theory as well as the relationship a university president has with his publics via Facebook and how he is using this tool for dialogic purposes.

From a strategic point of view, this study provides significant implications for communication practices among leaders in higher education institutions. Engaging publics through Facebook and other social media platforms gives these leaders an opportunity to participate in meaningful interactions and expand their reach. Additionally, public relations practitioners and communications staff working with leaders need to assist them in crafting and delivering messages in a way that is attractive to their publics. This study's results suggest that message appeals can play a key role in increasing the public's levels of engagement. More specifically, emotional messages and humor may play a powerful role in developing relationships and generating engagement.

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I've made several silly videos, such as me trying to dance the Whip and Nae Nae or pretending to be Darth Vader, Mr. Two Bits or the head football coach. Being purposeful in my humor has added joy to my life. However, the greatest impact has been on others. My attempts to be intentional with my smiles and humor, despite my own problems, have added joy to the lives of other people (Fuchs, 2016).

These words, written by University of Florida President W. Kent Fuchs in one of his monthly columns, highlight a key message strategy that the University's leader has been trying to implement: purposeful humor or "purposeful fun" as he described it in another column (Fuchs, 2017a). This statement also reflects why he has been labeled as the University of Florida's first president "to fully embrace social media to connect with students and share his experiences with them" (Schweers, 2015). In an increasingly digital era, in which social media has provided businesses the opportunity to engage in two-way communication and build long-lasting relationships with their stakeholders in a personable manner (Saxton & Waters, 2014), many

organizations, including higher education institutions and their leaders, have adopted and utilized social media as part of their communication efforts.

Similar to President Fuchs, Dr. Gordon Gee, the current leader of West Virginia University, often posts fun videos (which he calls “Gee Mail”) on Facebook that clearly portray his interest in engaging with his publics through humor. In one of his videos, President Gee stated: “Humor is desperately needed in this day and age when everyone on social media is angry and political discourse is far from civil” (Gee, 2018). In that video, Gee also said that using humor on social media has often helped him “build affection and trust” between him and the people he serves (Gee, 2018). Santa Ono, who previously led the University of Cincinnati and is currently the President and Vice Chancellor of the University of British Columbia, is another example of a university president that has been lauded for his use of social media (Riddell, 2014). Ono takes social media seriously, and has stated that having a digital strategy, “allows me to connect with digital natives and the younger generation much more effectively than if I stuck to face-to-face meetings, town hall meetings, and communications through traditional media” (Kane, 2018).

Social media’s popularity has enabled organizations to engage with publics in meaningful and personal ways (Zhong, Hardin, & Sun, 2011) that have the potential to positively impact their evaluation among publics (Kelleher, 2009). Higher education institutions and the leaders of these colleges and universities utilize social media outlets such as Facebook to communicate with a wide range of publics that include community members, staff, faculty, current and prospective students, parents, alumni, government, media, and those that can help with fundraising (Smedescu, 2014; Zaiontz, 2015). Social media has been particularly important for universities in their communication with students (Clark, Fine, & Scheuer, 2017). In November 2016, it was estimated that 86% of 18 to 29 year-olds used at least one social media site, up from 7% in March 2005 (Pew, 2017). Studies have also shown that social media plays a role in increasing a student’s sense of connection with their school (Wilson & Gore, 2013). Additionally, studies suggest that in 2012, 44 percent of prospective students had used social media sites to learn about the colleges they were considering to attend (Hesel, 2013).

After becoming UF’s 12th president in January 2015, Dr. Fuchs began communicating with students and other publics via diverse social media outlets such as Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook—through the Office of the President’s Facebook account (@OfficeofthePresidentUF) and has achieved notable success. BestColleges.com, a college planning website that develops hundreds of independent rankings, has ranked the University of Florida in eighth place in their 2018 list of higher education institutions with the best social media presence (BestColleges.com, 2018). In its description, BestColleges.com highlighted Dr. Fuchs’ humorous videos. Similarly, Josie Ahlquist, a digital leadership speaker has included Dr. Fuchs as one of the 25 college presidents to follow on Twitter (Ahlquist, 2017). The current study utilizes a case study approach and aims to explore how the UF Office of the President’s Facebook account has been strategically utilized to engage publics. More specifically, this study intends to examine 1) the dialogic principles utilized, 2) the implemented message strategies, and 3) public social media engagement. Despite the immense opportunity provided by social networks in terms of relationship building, strengthening brand equity (Yan, 2011), and establishing brand communities (Zhang & Luo, 2016), research has shown that organizations do not fully utilize the available dialogic strategies (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). Kent and Taylor’s (1998) theory of dialogic communication, which addresses online social relationships, is based

on the premise that dialogue is an outcome resulting from dialogic communication strategies (Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003). Although efforts have been made in researching the social media tools that are being used by colleges and universities (Barnes & Lescault, 2013) and how these tools play a role in recruiting new students and raising brand awareness (Smedescu, 2014), more research is needed on how these institutions are using social media (McAllister, 2012b), what message strategies are being utilized, and how the publics are engaging with these organizations. Guided by the overarching theoretical framework of dialogic principles, we conducted a content analysis of the 146 posts published by the Office of the President and the 977 comments that these posts received between December 2014 and June 2017.

This study helps provide important implications for public relations scholars, practitioners, and higher education leaders. Theoretically, it extends the growing body of knowledge on social media engagement, leaders' public relations function, and dialogic principles as applied in the context of a public institution. Although the public relations implications of organizational leaders have been studied in previous research (Men, Chen, & Ji, 2018; Park & Berger, 2004), leadership communication continues to be an under-studied and emerging area in public relations. Communication knowledge and expertise has been identified as one of the three most important qualities of excellent leadership in public relations (Meng, Berger, Gower, & Heyman, 2012). Additionally, previous research has shown that leadership plays an important role in contributing to excellence in public relations (Men & Stacks, 2014). Therefore, having a better understanding of how university leaders communicate through social media and how these public relations activities impact the public's attitudes and behavior is of relevance to the field. Practically, this study helps provide important insights to university presidents and their communication staff, to better understand the social media landscape in the United States.

Literature Review

Social media has been defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Given that the social media population comprised 2.46 billion people in 2017 and is expected to grow to 3.02 billion by 2021 (Statista, 2017), understanding how to engage with audiences has become essential for communicators and public relations practitioners. Brands and organizations are constantly focusing on strategies for engaging their customers and publics and on the strategic implications of such engagement (Javornik & Mandelli, 2012). Social media engagement, which has been frequently utilized as a metric to measure the success of an initiative (Peruta & Shields, 2017), is context-specific (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013), and there are various perspectives regarding its conceptualization. Some scholars divide engagement into three dimensions: cognitive, affective, and behavioral (Calder, Malthouse, & Schaedel, 2009). Other scholars do not focus on the cognitive and affective dimensions, and define engagement as a behavioral process (Javornik & Mandelli, 2012; Jiang, Luo, & Kulemeka, 2016). Similarly, Paine (2011) describes engagement as any time a visitor takes an action beyond viewing or reading, such as liking, sharing, or commenting. Regardless of the differences, all definitions assume an active role of publics and imply behaviors (Jiang et al., 2016).

Universities and Social Media Engagement

Over the past years, social media has grasped the attention of higher education institutions, and previous studies have shown that most universities and colleges in North America are actively utilizing social networking platforms (Asderaki & Maragos, 2012; Barnes & Lescault, 2011; Barnes & Lescault, 2013). The number of universities utilizing social media outlets as a way to build and maintain relationships with prospective and current students, alumni, faculty and staff, parents, and community members, has been increasing (Smedescu, 2014). Colleges and universities have recognized the importance of social media, and particularly Facebook, in student recruitment (Barnes & Lescault, 2013). A survey that interviewed community college presidents and other leaders found that the greatest value attributed by these leaders to social media was in marketing and delivering information about the college to students (Davis, Deli-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, & Gonzalez Canche, n.d.). The interviewees also perceived that social media was valuable for purposes such as student engagement, student involvement in campus life, building campus community, enhancing student social life/social interaction, and development/alumni connections (Davis, et al., n.d.).

Almost four out of five (79%) online Americans use Facebook, more than twice the percentage that uses Twitter (24%), LinkedIn (29%), Pinterest (31%), and Instagram (32%) (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016). A study conducted between 2010 and 2011 found that 98% of colleges and universities in the United States reported having a Facebook page (Barnes & Lescault, 2011). Given this reality, it is not surprising that most universities throughout the world use Facebook to address a wide range of publics (Brech, Messer, Vander Schee, Rauschnabel, & Ivens, 2017).

Leadership Communication and Social Media

The opportunity to cultivate meaningful relationships with their publics through social media has steered an increasing number of CEOs and other organizational leaders, such as higher education presidents, into using social media as a way to deepen their levels of connection with these audiences (Brandfog, 2013; Men & Tsai, 2016). Social media not only provides organizational leaders an ideal platform to listen to the publics and engage in direct conversation with them, but also allows the top leaders to personify themselves, establish a social presence, and project a genuine, authentic, and personable image (Men & Bowen, 2017). Although previous literature has suggested that remuneration, information, social integration, personal identity, and empowerment are key motivators for public engagement with organizations on their SNSs (Boyd, 2008; Tsai & Men, 2013), empirical research on the public's reasons for following organizational leaders is lacking. However, the results of a study conducted by Men and Tsai (2016) showed that publics followed or liked CEOs on SNSs mainly because of thought leadership and task attraction. Higher education leaders utilize social media to communicate with prospective and current students, alumni, faculty and staff, government, media, and those that can help with fundraising (Zaiontz, 2015). While social media is often perceived as a tool that can lead to unnecessary risks, a study conducted by Barnes and Lescault (2013) found that over half of college presidents post on Facebook (58%) or utilize Twitter (55%), and 35% host their own blog. Industry reports have suggested that social media is an important gateway for organizational leaders to deepen their connection with employees (Brandfog, 2013). A study conducted by Weber Shandwick (2012) that surveyed 630 professionals—managers on up to the C-suite, excluding CEOs—about the social participation of CEOs found that 75% consider it a

good way for a CEO to communicate with employees and 73% believe that it gives employees a chance to communicate with the CEO. Just like CEOs, higher education leaders are also interested in using social media as a tool that will help them develop and maintain relationships with internal and external publics, promote their brand, and strengthen their institution's reputation.

The Principles of Dialogic Communication

The dialogic communication theory was proposed by Kent and Taylor (1998) as a way to develop and maintain effective relationships between organizations and their publics. These authors referred to dialogic communication as "any negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions" (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Kent and Taylor (1998) proposed that by using strategically designed websites, organizations have the opportunity to build dialogic relationships with publics. Their theory is composed of the following five principles that offer guidelines on how to successfully integrate dialogic public relations and the Internet: dialogic loop, usefulness of information, generation of return visits, ease of the interface, and conservation of visits. The dialogic loop refers to the provision of opportunities for users to ask questions and more importantly, obtain the answers they need from the organization (Kent & Taylor, 1998). The second principle, usefulness of information, refers to the provision of information in various formats that is appropriate to the needs of the users (Haro-De-Rosario, Sáez-Martín, & Gálvez-Rodríguez, 2017). Generation of return visits refers to the extent in which useful and attractive features are utilized to encourage users to revisit the website regularly (Kent & Taylor, 1998). The fourth principle, ease of the interface, refers to the intuitiveness and navigability of the website (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). Finally, conservation of visitors refers to what is being done to encourage users to stay on the page (Kent & Taylor, 1998).

While originally conceived for websites (Kent et al., 2003; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001), dialogic communication principles have also been applied to blogs (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007) and social networks (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008). Regarding the types of organizations being researched, the theory of dialogic communication has been studied with nonprofit activist organizations (Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012), Fortune 500 companies (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010), congressional websites (Taylor & Kent, 2004), public administrations (Haro-De-Rosario, Sáez-Martín, & Gálvez-Rodríguez, 2017), and colleges and universities (McAllister, 2012a). While organizations are utilizing the technical and design cluster principles, there is consensus that the dialogic cluster is still not being fully utilized (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010).

A survey on college public relations professionals (McAllister, 2012a), found that the most important function for college and university websites was to provide information, while the most important function for new media tools was engaging and interacting with prospective students. While there have been efforts in researching what social media tools are being utilized by higher education institutions and what professionals consider to be the most important functions and uses of social media, more research is needed on how colleges and universities are utilizing these tools (McAllister, 2012b).

In order to extend the previous work on dialogic communication and in accordance with the literature review, the following research questions have been proposed:

RQ1: Which dialogic principles are present on the Office of the President's individual Facebook posts?

RQ2: What types of information are shared on the Office of the President's Facebook page?

Message Strategies of Social Media Engagement

In terms of message strategies, this study is focused on the following three: message appeals, vividness, and interactivity. Deciding what type of message appeals should be used to communicate with their publics is one of the important decisions a brand or organization has to make, and it is considered a primary strategic consideration by the advertising literature (Stafford, 2005). Message vividness has been selected in this study given its potential to enhance public engagement through efficacy of information presentation (Jiang & Benbasat, 2007). Finally, interactivity is another construct that has been a focus of interest among communication researchers for years (Koolstra & Bos, 2009), and previous studies have shown that it is associated with positive attitudes toward companies (Fortin & Dholakia, 2005).

Message appeals. The proposition that individuals make decisions based on rational and/or emotional reasons has originated a substantial amount of research (Albers-Miller & Stafford, 1999). Rational appeals seek to stimulate a logical thinking process among receivers (Leonidou & Leonidou, 2009). This type of appeal addresses the practical and functional needs of an individual (Bové & Arens, 1992), and presents facts in a straightforward and objective manner (Stafford & Day, 1995). Emotional appeals target individual's psychological, social, or symbolic needs, bringing an affection mechanism into play to aim to stir up feelings (Kotler & Armstrong, 2008). Emotional appeals are focused in creating a state of psychological arousal (Bové & Arens, 1992; Hawkins, Best, & Coney, 2003) by stimulating positive (e.g., joy, pride) or negative (e.g., anger, shame) feelings (Leonidou & Leonidou, 2009). Research shows that generally speaking, emotional appeals, especially those that include lively content, tend to be more easily remembered than rational ones (Costley & Brucks, 1992). In addition to focusing on rational and emotional messages, previous studies have also separately examined fear, humor, and vision appeals (Chen, Ji, & Men, 2017). While fear messages have been defined as appeals that portray potential negative consequences of taking a risk, humor messages elicit positive effect by using humor to attract the public's attention (Lee & Ferguson, 2002). Vision, which essentially refers to some desired future state (Holladay & Coombs, 1994), is often communicated via inspirational language and establishes standards of excellence (Conger, 1991; Holladay & Coombs, 1994).

Vividness. Vividness, which originated from the concept of "telepresence," refers to the extent in which a mediated environment can simulate a direct sensory experience (Steuer, 1992). Audio, photos, animation, and video are common tools that are utilized to increase the level of vividness in webpages or social media sites (Coyle & Thorson, 2001). Vivid messages decrease the level of mental effort required to process information (Keller & Block, 1997). Content that is vivid should appeal to multiple senses (Coyle & Thorson, 2001), and is more interesting,

memorable, attention getting, and emotionally arousing than nonvivid information (Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Research has found that in comparison to online posts lacking in vividness, highly vivid posts receive significantly more *Likes* (De Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012; Liu, Li, Ji, North, & Yang, 2017) and *Shares* (Liu, et al., 2017).

Interactivity. Interactivity, which has been a topic of interest in communication for many years (Koolstra & Bos, 2009), has been conceptualized in several ways (Liu et al., 2017). Steuer (1992) defines this term as “the extent to which users can participate in modifying the form and content of a mediated environment in real time” (p. 84). An experiment conducted by Coyle and Thorson (2001) operationalized interactivity as the number of clickable links found on the first page of a website. Stromer-Galley (2004) views interactivity as the mechanical structures of the medium, thus categorizing hyperlinks, volume control, downloadable videos and audio clips, and form fields as interactive features. Similarly, Liu et al. (2017), operationalized interactivity as the presence of hyperlinks on Facebook posts. Previous studies have shown that interactivity positively impacts attitudes toward websites (Liu & Shrum, 2009). At the same time, the presence of interactivity with hyperlinks is associated with the requirement of a higher number of cognitive elaborations (Tremayne & Dunwoody, 2001).

Based on the three previously discussed message strategies, the following research question is proposed:

RQ3: What message strategies (e.g., message appeals, vividness, and interactivity) are present in the Office of the President’s individual Facebook posts?

Public Social Media Engagement

Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit (2011) classified online engagement on social media into three categories: content consuming (e.g., viewing videos), content contributing (e.g., engaging in wall post conversations), and content creating (e.g., publishing and sharing videos or pictures on brand SNS pages). As opposed to websites, social media platforms like Facebook indicate how the publics are reacting to the organization and its messages through measures such as *Like*, *Share*, and *Comment* (Saxton & Waters, 2014). Based on the impact and the level of effort required by each of these actions (liking, sharing, and commenting), Cho, Schweickart, and Haase (2014), separated the engagement shown on Facebook by publics on three levels: low (*Like*), moderate (*Share*), and high (*Comment*). While these three levels of engagement are generally classified as being favorable toward an organization (Saxton & Waters, 2014), it is important to note that *Comments* do not necessarily imply positive feelings toward a message posted by a company or a higher level institution. To help close this gap, a study conducted by Ji, Li, North, and Liu (2017) on Fortune 500 companies in the context of Facebook, took comment “valence” into consideration.

It is also worth noting that as of February 2016, Facebook redesigned their *Like* button by allowing users to choose from six different emotions: *Like*, *Love*, *Haha*, *Wow*, *Sad*, and *Angry*. While users still see the *Like* button on every post, the button expands to reveal the other emotions if users tap and hold on it (or hover on desktop) (Oremus, 2016). This feature gives users more ways to share their reaction to a post, and also provides Facebook, organizations, and anyone else looking at the posts, more nuanced data on how people are reacting to them. The creation of this feature may impact the way in which scholars and practitioners measure

engagement. During 2017, Facebook stated that leaving a reaction on a post indicates a deeper level of engagement than leaving a *Like*, and would therefore weigh reactions a little more than they weigh a *Like* (Goodwin, 2017). Additionally, while the new reactions do not include a “dislike” option, they do include a crying and an angry emoji, which on occasions may indicate negative feelings toward a post or the organization. By measuring the different reactions included on the Office of the President’s Facebook page, this study intends to provide an initial approximation on the effect that different reactions may have on other areas of engagement, such as *Shares*, *Comments*, and the amount of views a video or Facebook Live session may have.

As associations between the topics posted by organizations on Facebook (e.g., social and political issues, sports, celebrations) or the tone of an organizational post and user engagement have rarely been examined (Wang, Kim, Xiao, & Jung, 2017), researching a link between the possible connection will be an initial approximation to help close this gap. Therefore, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ4: How do publics engage with the president on Facebook?

RQ5: How do topics/format of posts/message strategy/tone impact public engagement (*Like* (reactions), *Share*, *Comment*)?

Method

A content analysis method was employed to address the proposed research questions. Upon the arrival of President Fuchs to the University of Florida, the Office of the President created a Facebook page to share relevant information and engage with their publics. The current study conducts a census on the 146 posts published by the Office of the President and the 977 comments that these posts received between December 2014 and May 2017. Replies to other commenters were not tabulated in this analysis.

In order to code the content of the posts, two coders were selected. A written coding instrument was developed and a three-hour training was conducted to make sure the coders fully understood the codebook. During the pretest, each coder coded 20% of the sample. Inter-coder reliability for nominal variables was calculated using Scott’s pi (Scott, 1955) and inter-coder reliability using interval variables were calculated using Krippendorff’s alpha (Krippendorff, 1970). For nominal variables, Scott’s pi ranged from 86.7% to 100%. For the interval variable, the inter-coder reliability was 89.8%. After the inter-coder reliability test, one coder independently coded the remaining Facebook posts.

Coding Scheme

Type/Format of post. Coders examined how many of the following formats were included in each individual post: text, photo, graphics, video (recorded), Facebook Live, and emoticons. The inclusion of each format was coded as “1=yes” and “2=no.”

Dialogic principles. Following Rybalko and Seltzer’s (2010) methodology, this study sought to determine the use of dialogic principles in each individual Facebook post. For this purpose, a content index of the capacity for dialogic communication based on Kent and Taylor’s (1998) principles of dialogic communication was utilized. As the principle referring to the “ease

of the interface” is applied by default in all Facebook pages, it was eliminated from the analysis (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). Also, in line with previous studies (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Haro-De-Rosario et al., 2017; Kent et al., 2003), the principle “usefulness of information” was renamed “information of interest to stakeholders.” Given these modifications, the content index is composed of the following sub-indices: “conservation of visitors,” “generation of return visits,” “dialogic loop,” and “information of interest to stakeholders.” The items making up each sub-index were extracted and adapted following a previous study (Haro-De-Rosario et al., 2017) that analyzed Kent and Taylor’s (1998) principles of dialogic communication. The inclusion of each item was coded as “1=yes” and “2=no.” As in previous studies (Haro-De-Rosario et al., 2017), the content index of the capacity for dialogic communication was determined by the division between the sum of the percentages of all items, and the total number of items observed (25). The same procedure was applied to calculate the percentage of each dimension, using its sub-group number of items.

Message strategies. A post’s message appeal was selected by adopting the primary appeal among functional, emotional, fear, humor and vision appeals (Chen et al., 2017). Message vividness (Coyle & Thorson, 2001) was coded as “1=low vividness” when posts only included texts, “2=moderate vividness” when posts included audio, photos or graphics, and “3=high vividness” when posts included videos. To reflect the mechanical approach toward interactivity (Steuer, 1992), this variable was measured by counting the number of clickable hyperlinks and hashtags. Each post with no extra links/hashtags was coded as “1=low interactivity.” Posts with one link/hashtag were coded as “2=moderate interactivity” and posts with at least two additional links/hashtags were coded as “3=high interactivity.”

Topic of post. This item was coded by examining a major topic represented in the post. Researchers first read through the whole sample of posts and developed taxonomies of seven topics among which coders could choose one dominant topic for each individual post. These topics include (1) the University’s Stature (Reputation and Ranking); (2) Social and Political Issues Impacting UF; (3) Activities, Ceremonies, Distinctions, and Facilities at UF; (4) Sports specific; (5) Celebrations; (6) Safety; and (7) Other (If other, specify).

Publics targeted. The Office of the President addresses different publics with their posts. The following seven categories were selected based on Linvill, McGee, & Hicks (2012): (1) Prospective student; (2) Student; (3) Faculty; (4) Alumni; (5) Parents; (6) General; and (7) Other.

Tone of the post. A 7-point semantic differential scale (“1=negative”; “7=positive”) was used to measure the tone of the post.

Other variables related to the post. Length of the post was assessed through counting the number of words in each caption. Both post date and post time were recorded. If a post was shared, coders coded “1=yes.” If it was an original post, coders coded “2=no.”

Level of public engagement behavior. The number of *Likes* was measured by counting the number of *Likes* as indicated in each Facebook post. After Facebook redesigned their *Like* button by allowing users to choose from six different emotions (*Like, Love, Haha, Wow, Sad,*

and Angry) all six of these emotions were measured. The number of shares, video views and Facebook Live views were also counted as indicated in each Facebook post. Positive, negative, and neutral comments were also counted (Ji et al., 2017) and were later separated by their quality (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008). A quick note of a few words written in a few seconds with typically little thought, like “Go Gators! Proud to be a Gator!” or “Go University of Florida! Thank You!” were coded as “1=shallow.” Comments that are a bit longer, and possibly bring up an issue in a quick way, such as “Thank you for being such a great Gator! I am proud of your protection of our students,” were coded as “2=neutral.” Long, well thought-out, complex statements, that often discuss an issue or argument, were coded as “3=complex/well developed.”

The purpose of the users’ comments were also identified and coded as “1=information seeking,” “2=information reply,” “3=unsolicited information,” “4=emotional support only,” “5=advocacy and mobilization,” “6=conflict/criticism/complaints,” “7=comments unrelated to the University,” “8=involving someone else in the conversation,” and “9=other.” As the development of conversations between commenters on social media is a common practice (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008), every post was reviewed to determine if it generated conversations between users. If individuals replied to others’ comments, coders coded “1=yes.” If the post generated no comments, or if all comments were directed toward the University, coders coded “2=no.”

Results

The Office of the President’s Facebook page posted 146 times and received 977 comments between December 2014 (date in which the page was created) and June 2017. At the time this study was conducted, the page had a little over 4,800 followers. Posting frequency has decreased on a year-to-year basis. While there were 77 posts in 2015, the number dropped to 49 in 2016 and to 19 during the first six months of 2017. While most posts were created by the Office of the President (55.5%), a very large percentage of them were shared content (44.5%) from other sources. Having said this, it is important to note that there was a significant decline in the percentage of shared posts during 2017 ($\chi^2(2) = 7.561, p < .05$). While 48.1% of posts in 2015 and 51% of posts in 2016 were shared, only 15.8% were shared in 2017.

Of the total amount of posts, results indicated that a majority (70.5%) was directed toward a general audience. Additionally, 26% were directed to students, 7.5% were directed toward faculty and staff, 2.7% were directed toward alumni, 1.4% toward parents, and 0.7% toward prospective students. Regarding the types of posts, 74.7% included text, 56.2% included photos, 13.7% had graphics, 24% had videos, 5% had Facebook Live sessions, and 7.5% included emoticons. The tone of the posts was positive, with a mean of 6.42 ($SD=1.33$).

RQ1: Dialogic Principles Present in the Office of the President’s Facebook Posts

On average, the Office of the President’s Facebook page utilizes 12.4% of its capacity for dialogic communication in each post (Table 1). Conservation of visitors, applied by 25.1% of the posts was the most widely used among the analyzed dialogic principles, followed by information of interest to stakeholders. Dialogic loop (7.4%) and generation of return visits (6.3%) were the least often utilized dialogic principles.

Table 1
The Features of Dialogic Principles

FACEBOOK CONTENT	MEAN	SD
Content index of the capacity for dialogic communication	12.4%	0.13
Conservation of visitors	25.1%	0.15
1. Link to the University's official website	11.0%	0.31
2. Link to other social networks in which the University or the President is present (Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, blogs, Instagram)	17.8%	0.38
3. Links to other University of Florida Facebook pages	46.6%	0.50
Generation of return visits	6.3%	0.07
4. Links to websites where additional information can be obtained	17.8%	0.38
5. Calendar of events or link to a website providing such a calendar	2.1%	0.14
6. Links to news related to the University or the President issued by external media	4.8%	0.21
7. Links to discussion forums and FAQs on the University website	0.0%	0.00
8. Downloadable information	0.0%	0.00
9. Option to request information by mail/e-mail	0.7%	0.08
10. The use of other social networks to introduce information (Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, blogs, Instagram)	16.4%	0.37
11. Links to external Facebook pages	8.9%	0.29
Dialogic loop	7.4%	0.11
12. Reply by the University to a user's comment on a post	4.1%	0.20
13. <i>Like</i> or other reaction by the University to a user's comment on a post	2.7%	0.16
14. Opportunity to vote on University issues	2.1%	0.14
15. The provision of surveys for users to express opinions on University issues	0.0%	0.00
16. The use of hashtags	31.5%	0.47
17. Request to ask a question or leave a comment (request can be done via text/video/Facebook Live)	4.1%	0.20
Information of interest to stakeholders	17.3%	0.13
18. Press releases (issued by the University itself)	0.0%	0.00
19. Speeches by the President or members of the University (text, audio or video)	21.2%	0.41
20. Statement of the University's philosophy/mission/goals	24.0%	0.43
21. Details of how to participate in activities or services organized by the University	8.2%	0.28
22. Logo or emblem of the University	38.4%	0.49

FACEBOOK CONTENT	MEAN	SD
23. Summaries of activities of the University or Office of the President	13.7%	0.35
24. Contact of the Office of the President or the page administrator (i.e. e-mail, telephone number, address)	1.4%	0.12
25. Written statement or column by the President or members of the University	31.5%	0.47

The extent to which each dialogic principle’s features are being used in every post are also shown in Table 1. Links to other University of Florida Facebook pages (such as the Facebook page of the University, or those utilized by different schools at the University) was the most common feature, appearing in 46.6% of the posts. The use of logos or emblems of the University (38.4%), hashtags (31.5%), written statements or columns by the President or members of the University (31.5%), and statements of the University’s philosophy/mission/goals (24%) were the following four most utilized features. Among the utilized features (four of them were never present), the least used ones include: option to request information by mail/e-mail (0.7%), contact of the Office of the President or the page administrator (i.e. e-mail, telephone number, address) (1.4%), calendar of events or link to a website providing such a calendar (2.1%), opportunity to vote on University issues (2.1%), and *Like* or reaction (*Love, Haha, Wow, Sad, or Angry*) by the University to a user’s comment on a post (2.7%).

To gain a more detailed perspective on how often the Office of the President’s Facebook page was employing the dialogic principles, the percentage of posts in which at least one of the features in each of the four dialogic principles was utilized, was measured. Information of interest to stakeholders (77.4%) and conservation of visitors (65.8%) were utilized the most often. Generation of return visits (43.8%) and dialogic loop (39.0%) were the least frequently utilized principles.

While Kent and Taylor (1998) do not state that the use of each principle is a requirement in order for something to be dialogic, it is important to be aware of the number of principles that were being used in each post. Approximately 98.7% of posts used at least one feature of a dialogic principle, 78.8% used at least 2 dialogic principles, 42.5% used at least three dialogic principles, and 6.2% used all four. A little over 1% did not use any of the four dialogic principles.

RQ2: Type of Information Shared on the Office of the President’s Facebook Page

The most popular topic on the Office of the President’s Facebook page referred to “Activities, ceremonies, distinctions and facilities at the University of Florida” (53.4%). Posts referring to commencements ceremonies, university-related activities, or having the President visit and showcase different facilities and schools at the University were some of the most typical examples. With 15.8%, “UF Stature (Reputation and Ranking)” was the second most popular topic. Any posts that referred to the University’s current prominence, position or prestige, or addressed the institution’s goals regarding their short, medium, and long-term standings and objectives, were categorized under this topic. “Celebration” posts (8.9%), which referred to days such as Christmas, April Fools’ Day, Thanksgiving, Halloween, and Veteran’s

Day, were also relatively popular. “Sports specific” posts (6.8%), “Social and Political Issues Impacting UF” (5.5%), and “Safety” posts (4.1%) were the remaining topics.

RQ3: Message Strategies Present in the Office of the President’s Facebook Posts

The Office of the President’s Facebook page used a number of different message appeals. Emotional was the most frequently used appeal (47.3%), followed by functional (26.7%), vision (15.1%), and humor (11%). While humor is often categorized as an emotional appeal, the emphasis placed by President Fuchs on “purposeful fun” warranted creating a new category for humor. Regarding vividness, 2.7% only used text (low vividness), 67.8% used audio or photos/graphics (moderate vividness) and 29.5% used videos (high vividness). Interactivity was measured by the amount of links/hashtags included in each post. While 19.9% had low interactivity (no extra links/hashtags), 24% had moderate interactivity (one link/hashtag) and 56.2% had high interactivity (at least two links or hashtags).

RQ4: Publics Engagement with the Office of the President on Facebook

The mean of *Likes* for the total number of posts in the Office of the President’s Facebook page was 97.62 ($SD=175.86$). After Facebook redesigned their *Like* button in February 2016 by allowing users to choose from six different emotions (*Like, Love, Haha, Wow, Sad, and Angry*) the other reactions were also measured. The mean of each of these reactions (*Love: M=21.41, SD=43.08; Haha: M=5.10, SD=24.65; Wow: M=0.66, SD=1.50; Sad: M=4.47, SD=25.44; and Angry: M=0.61, SD=2.35*) was calculated by adding the total number of reactions and dividing the result by the total number of posts published after Facebook redesigned their *Like* button. 59 posts (40.4% of the total) were published after this date. The total number of *Likes* and reactions per post increased year by year. While the mean number of reactions in 2015 was 63.42 ($SD=106.05$), that number increased to 152.37 ($SD=285.57$) in 2016 and 200.37 in 2017 ($SD=281.82$).

The mean of *Shares* for the total number of posts was 73.99 ($SD=187.02$). Just like with the reactions, the number of *Shares* per post increased throughout the years. While the mean of *Shares* in 2015 was 25.14, this number reached 151.25 in 2017. The mean of video views among posts including videos was 90,182 ($SD=200,397.22$). The mean of comments per post also increased as the years progressed (2015: $M=2.72, SD=6.24$; 2016: $M=9.35, SD=22.99$; 2017: $M=16.26, SD=29.57$). An independent sample t-test comparing the number of comments during the first six months of 2015 and 2017 found a significant difference ($t=2.222, df=18.149, p<0.05$). The mean of positive comments per post was 4.22 ($SD=12.46$), the mean of negative comments was 1.36 ($SD=5.47$), and the mean of neutral comments per post was 1.11 ($SD=3.04$). Stated in percentages, 63.1% of comments were positive, 20.4% were negative, and 16.6% were neutral. On the quality of comments, 67% were shallow, 25.1% were neutral and 7.9% were complex/well-developed. Regarding the purpose of the comments, 53.7% were coded as “emotional support only.” “Involving someone else in the conversation” (16.1%), “conflict/criticism/complaints” (11.4%), “information seeking” (8%), and “unsolicited information” (7.1%) were the categories that followed in importance.

RQ5: Message impact on Public Engagement (Like (Reactions), Share, Comment)

A series of one-way ANOVAS and independent sample t-tests were performed to test for statistically significant differences in public engagement across themes, format of posts, message

strategies, and tone. “Safety” was grouped together with “Social and political issues impacting the University of Florida” for analysis. Significant differences between topics and total comments were found ($F_{(5, 33.285)} = 2.737, p < 0.05$). While “Safety, Social, and Political Issues” had a mean of 22 comments per post, all of the other topics had a mean lower than 9.

Regarding the format of posts, posts including videos show no statistically significant differences in terms of *Comments* or *Likes* and other reactions with posts that do not include videos. However, posts including videos or Facebook Live sessions show significantly more positive ($t = 2.049, df = 45.103, p < 0.05$) and neutral ($t = 2.294, df = 40.975, p < 0.05$) comments than posts that do not include videos or Facebook Live. Similarly videos or Facebook Live sessions received significantly more positive ($t = 2.034, df = 46.313, p < 0.05$) and neutral ($t = 2.417, df = 39.875, p < 0.05$) comments than those including photos or graphics.

In terms of messages, humor ($M = 162.25, SD = 191.94$) and emotional ($M = 139.64, SD = 281.02$) appeals had the highest number of reactions. Functional ($M = 53.56, SD = 70.36$) and vision ($M = 83.45, SD = 112.61$) appeals had the lowest number of reactions. Functional messages had significantly fewer reactions than emotional appeals ($t = -2.414, df = 82.112, p < 0.05$) and humor appeals ($t = -2.205, df = 16.679, p < 0.05$). At the same time, functional appeals had significantly fewer *Shares* than emotional appeals ($t = -2.152, df = 62.843, p < 0.05$) and video views than humor appeals ($t = -2.504, df = 9.092, p < 0.05$). While humor appeals had a mean of 149,174 ($SD = 172,868$) video reproductions, functional appeals had a mean of 11,925 ($SD = 7,852$).

While vividness showed no statistically significant results in terms of engagement, higher levels of interactivity had a negative effect on the measured engagement behaviors. Results showed significant differences between levels of interactivity and *Likes* or other reactions ($F_{(2, 58.595)} = 3.852, p < 0.05$) as well as between levels of interactivity and positive comments ($F_{(2, 55.168)} = 3.429, p < 0.05$).

With regards to the dialogic principles, it is important to add that posts including information of interest to stakeholders (e.g., Speeches by the President or members of the University; Summaries of activities of the University or Office of the President; Written statement or column by the President or members of the University) had significantly more *Comments* ($t = 2.704, df = 139.937, p < 0.05$) and *Shares* ($t = 3.066, df = 89.373, p < 0.05$) than those that did not include this principle. While posts including information of interest had a mean of 7.96 *Comments* ($SD = 20.25$) and 88.39 *Shares* ($SD = 206.80$), those that did not include this principle had a mean of 2.36 *Comments* ($SD = 4.62$) and 17.1 *Shares* ($SD = 23.06$). On the other hand, posts that included the conservation of visitors principle (e.g., Link to other social networks in which the University or the President is present) had fewer *Comments* than those that did not include this principle ($t = -2.669, df = 51.873, p < 0.05$).

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore how the Office of the President’s Facebook account has been strategically utilizing this SNS by examining the dialogic principles being used, the implemented message strategies, and how these strategies have impacted public engagement. Implications of the findings are discussed in the following sections.

Dialogic Communication

The results obtained show that, on average, the Office of the President's Facebook page utilized 12.4% of its capacity for dialogic communication in each post. As it is virtually impossible to use all of the features of each dialogic principle in each post, the current study also measured the percentage of posts in which at least one of them was being utilized. The results suggest that information of interest to stakeholders (77.4%) was the most utilized principle. As posts including information of interest to stakeholders generated higher levels of engagement than those that did not include this principle, it makes sense that the Office of the President's Facebook page frequently utilized this type of information. The second most utilized principle was conservation of visitors (65.8%). On the other hand, the least utilized principles were generation of return visits (43.8%) and the dialogic loop (39%). Regarding the dialogic loop, posts would very rarely include a reply by the President's Facebook page to a user's comment on a post (4.1%) or include a *Like* or other reaction by the University to a user's comment (2.7%). Taylor et al. (2001) suggest that even if the site follows the other dialogic principles, "it cannot be fully dialogic if it does not offer and follow through on two-way communication" (p. 271). Although no benchmark currently exists on the extent to which each dialogic principle should be used in every post, the data suggest that the page is not fully employing the expected dialogic capacity of Facebook, and that there are gaps between relationship building goals and dialogic engagement (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; McAllister, 2012b). The low percentage of two-way communication occurring between the Office of the President's Facebook page and publics support a previous study that stated that 85% of universities used this SNS as a one-way communication channel (McAllister, 2012b). They also support Taylor et al.'s (2001) results that suggested that generation of return visits and dialogic loop were being used less often in websites than conservation of visitors and information of interest to stakeholders.

Message Strategies and Public Engagement

In terms of the strategies utilized to reach publics, almost half of the messages (47.3%) used an emotional appeal. The President was not afraid to use humor and took advantage of several opportunities, such as April Fools' Day, to show publics his playful side. Comparatively speaking, the use of emotions and humor were more successful in terms of receiving *Likes* and other reactions than functional and vision appeals. At the same time, emotional messages also received more *Shares* than functional appeals, and humor received more video views than functional appeals. These results are in line with previous studies demonstrating that emotional appeals are a stronger alternative for generating eWOM behavior (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Liu et al., 2017). On April 3, 2017, the President revealed that he is very much aware of how his humorous messages are being received by stakeholders after posting the following message on his Twitter account: "Our fun seen by nearly 4M on social media" (Fuchs, 2017b). The success that humor appeals have had will probably encourage the president to continue using them in the future. While humor was very important in generating reactions and *Shares*, the topic of "Safety, Social, and Political Issues" generated the highest number of *Comments*. Posts referring to President Fuchs' views on hate speech and violence occurring on campus, social issues such as the 2016 Orlando Nightclub shooting, or political issues that have an impact on the University such as President Donald Trump's executive order on immigration, were some of the issues that generated high levels of *Comments*. These results are in line with a study conducted by Men and

Tsai (2016), which revealed that thought leadership is one of the main reasons for following or liking CEOs on SNSs.

The Office of the President's Facebook page was well aware of the importance of vividness as shown by the fact that 67.8% of their posts included photos or graphics and 29.5% included videos. Humor appeals were generally transmitted through videos. This was highlighted by the fact that humor messages were significantly more vivid than any other types of messages. Given these results, it is not surprising that posts including Videos or Facebook Live sessions had significantly more positive or neutral comments than those that did not. Previous research has shown that a conversational human voice in online communication generates more positive outcomes (Kelleher, 2009; Vernuccio, 2014). Unlike simply uploading a video, Facebook Live provides Dr. Fuchs an opportunity to interact with his audiences in real-time by answering their questions and responding to *Comments*. While there were only 7 Facebook Live sessions, it is not surprising that 2 out of the 4 posts with the highest amount of *Comments* were Facebook Live sessions. On the other hand, posts with low levels of interactivity had significantly more reactions, positive *Comments*, and total *Comments*. The presence of hyperlinks (interactivity) could be perceived as a sign of more information and a requirement of higher levels of cognitive efforts (Liu et al., 2017; Tremayne & Dunwoody, 2001). At the same time, directing people to different sites via hyperlinks may lead them to forget to come back and leave a reaction or *Comment*. These results help explain why posts that included the dialogic principle of conservation of visitors (whose items include links to the University's official website, links to other social networks in which the University or the President is present, and links to other University of Florida Facebook pages) had fewer *Comments* than those that did not include this principle.

Findings from this study help extend current knowledge on public relations, social media and public engagement through quantitative data from a public university in the United States. Although the role that organizational leaders play in public relations (Park & Berger, 2004) and strategic communication (Men, 2015) is recognized, this study helps fill the gap regarding the use of social media among higher education leaders and how it can contribute in generating engagement and building relationships with their internal and external publics. The dialogic communication theory provides researchers a tool to study how organizations such as higher education institutions are using social networks to build and maintain online relationships with publics. Therefore, this study provides a significant contribution to our understanding of this theory as well as the relationship a university president has with his publics via Facebook and how he is using this tool for dialogic purposes. The effectiveness of incorporating a human conversational voice in generating public engagement supports the importance of dialogic communication and interactivity (Chen et al., 2017; Kelleher, 2009). The current study also investigates the use of three message strategies (appeal, vividness, and interactivity) on Facebook pages and examines their effects on engagement.

Implications for Practitioners

From a strategic point of view, this study provides significant implications for communication practices among leaders in higher education institutions. Engaging publics through Facebook and other social media platforms gives these leaders an opportunity to participate in meaningful interactions and expand their reach. Additionally, public relations practitioners and communications staff working with leaders need to assist them in crafting and

delivering messages in a way that is attractive to their publics. This study's results suggest that message appeals can play a key role in increasing the public's levels of engagement. More specifically, emotional messages and humor may play a powerful role in developing relationships and generating engagement. Although the use of humor is encouraged, it is important to highlight that different humor styles (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003) have contrasting effects on others (e.g. Pundt & Herrmann, 2015; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Humor that is supportive and is used as a means to build relationships with others has been shown to enhance effective communication (Kuiper, Grimshaw, Leite, & Kirsh, 2004). On the other hand, demeaning styles such as aggressive humor (Martin et al., 2003) may have negative effects on others (Kim, Lee, & Wong, 2016). For example, during his tenure as president of Ohio State University, E. Gordon Gee had to apologize for remarks he made at a meeting of the university's Athletic Council in which he stated that "You just can't trust those damn Catholics" after being asked why he believed that Notre Dame had never been invited into the Big Ten (Greenwell, 2013). Gee also stated that "The fathers are holy on Sunday, and they're holy hell on the rest of the week" (Greenwell, 2013). Although he was trying to be funny, his comments were interpreted as offensive and did not contribute in building positive relationships.

Educational leaders also need to be aware that their publics are not only interested in becoming familiar with their views on subject matters related to the university, but also on social and political issues that have a national impact. Sharing their views on these topics through social media is an effective way to directly communicate with their publics, inform them about the university's stance and position, listen to the feedback provided by the community, and engage in dialogue.

Limitations and Future Studies

While this study incorporated quantitative methods (content analysis), it tends to be more descriptive in nature and only incorporates one organization. To obtain a more thorough understanding, future research may employ a qualitative approach. In-depth interviews with the president or his communication staff would help provide further insights. Similarly, in-depth interviews with students would serve as a means to explore their deeper perceptions of the president's social media engagement effectiveness. This study's content analysis only considered Facebook. While Facebook is a leading social media site, other platforms that are utilized by President Fuchs have also garnered heavy traffic and have large active user bases.

To better understand how University presidents are utilizing Facebook, future research should compare how leaders from a wide range of higher education institutions are utilizing this tool. Acquiring further data on how University presidents from culturally diverse countries are using social media and how different message appeals, such as humor would be perceived in these different environments, could be pursued in future research. Social media represents an evolving landscape in which higher education leaders can engage, build, and maintain relationships with their publics. University and college leaders will need to continuously adapt to these influential digital technologies.

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