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**CORPORATE COMMUNICATION VIA FACEBOOK:  
HOW THE USE OF DIALOGIC PRINCIPLES INFLUENCES PERCEPTIONS  
OF CORPORATE CREDIBILITY**

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Through a 2x2x2 mixed factorial experiment (N = 390), the presence or absence of links to corporate information, response options and recent updates were varied to determine how each individually and jointly affect perceptions of corporate credibility. An investigation of how the use of dialogic principles influences corporate credibility revealed that, in the on-line setting employed, goodwill was the only robust component of the credibility construct to emerge despite predictions that expertise and trustworthiness would factor as well. Ultimately, the study found that the presence of responses is positively related to goodwill and that social media should focus on open and active conversations and less on information distribution.

**Keywords:** social media; Facebook; corporate online communication; dialogic principles; dialogic theory.

Kent and Taylor (1998) believed that “the web has great potential as a dialogic communication medium” [13, p. 331]. It allows public relations practitioners to communicate with thousands of individuals on a regular basis. Kent and Taylor (1998) stated that to facilitate the development of dialogic communication online, professionals should incorporate dialogic principles into organizational websites. As Kent and Taylor (2002) remarked, web is one of the mediated channels that “comes closest to the interpersonal ideal” [14, p. 31].

A series of studies have examined how organizations have used online communication tools, specifically social media, to facilitate dialogic two-way communication with publics. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) argued that social media “represent a revolutionary trend that should be of interest to companies operating in online space” [11, p. 60]. Researchers suggested that “if you do not participate in Facebook, YouTube, and Second Life, you are not part of cyberspace anymore” [11, p. 66].

Social media as a communication tool is more efficient and of relatively low cost compared with other more traditional communication tools. More and more companies are experimenting with their use of social web sites. Roughly 260,000 businesses in the US utilize different kinds of social web sites to advertise and market their businesses. Studies have documented that companies employ social networking sites to foster brand creation [17], to conduct marketing research [15], to communicate with its own employees [5], to build brands [16], to reach local communities, to start conversations on topics of interest to an organization and its publics [18], to get qualified recruits [27], to make hiring decisions [3] and to disseminate information during disasters [26].

Some of the companies use social media tools for media relations. PR practitioners began to realize that social media could be a great way to publicize the organization’s efforts but more importantly to develop relationships with consumers and bloggers —

influencers [29]. Social media may have positive effects on media relations. Immediate updates, instant sharing of information has made it easier for PR practitioners to reach the media [7]. Reporters also mentioned that corporate social media could be very useful tool for them. They pointed out that corporate blogs could be used to do research on topic ideas, Twitter — to get company's news, and Facebook — to reach sources within an organization [2].

Overall, PR practitioners emphasized the importance of social media for corporations. Communication via social media represents a company as a truly open organization. Pranicoff [27] argued that social media could allow an organization to not only represent a brand but also to “give it a voice of its own.” To be successful in social media, companies should strive to build meaningful relationships and engage consumers in two-way dialogue. Only those companies that engage in conversations with their publics and not just “shout louder” would be successful in building relationships in a new consumer environment. Companies have to be “open” in social media [4] and “participate strategically and transparently” [6].

There are two areas of academic research on social media in public relations: first are the studies that explore how organizations and public relations practitioners use social media, and second are the studies that investigate the public's perceptions and effects of organization social media use. For the current work the studies that explored the public's perceptions and effects of organization social media use are of a particular interest.

Sweetser and Lariscy (2008) analyzed how candidates used Facebook during the 2006 midterm election. It is one of the first studies in dialogic theory that examined the audience reaction toward dialogic type of communication [23]. The question was whether the Facebook users consider dialogic principles as facilitating two-way communication between the candidates and their supporters. The researchers conducted content analysis of the individual comments on the candidates' Facebook walls. The conversations that take place on the Facebook wall demonstrate the “willingness for dialogue” [23, p. 192]. The findings revealed that only few candidates actually engaged in dialogue with the users by replying to their comments. The scholars argued that it is one of the cases when candidates employ “dialogic interactive technology as a façade” [23, p. 193], which goes against the social norms of the network.

Overall, Sweetser and Lariscy (2008) documented that social networking sites such as Facebook provides numerous opportunities to the supporters to develop dialogic, two-way communication and establish personal friendship with candidates [23]. Although, as the study showed, the candidates did not employ those opportunities to their full potential. For future research, Sweetser and Lariscy (2008) suggested that scholars should employ experimental methods to compare “predetermined responsive and nonresponsive social media sites” [23, p. 196] to deepen the understanding of the effects of dialogic communication.

To extend the investigation of online dialogic communication, Bortree and Seltzer (2009) conducted a study that analyzed the use of dialogic principles on Facebook profiles of environmental advocacy organizations [1]. The researchers suggested that dialogic principles of Web 2.0 have to be re-conceptualized to reflect additional social networking sites features, tools and strategies. In this first study that examined actual outcomes of the dialogic strategies use, Bortree and Seltzer (2009) employed dialogic

outcomes (user posts, network activity, user responses to others, organization responses to user posts, network extensiveness, and network growth) to evaluate the level of dialogic engagement between organizations and Facebook users [1]. The study documented that use of dialogic strategies facilitates dialogue as well as leads to other positive outcomes including the growth of organization's social network [1]. Overall, their findings suggested that most of the advocacy groups in the study merely used their social networking profiles to create an interactive space without fully using all of the dialogic strategies offered by social networking sites. Bortree and Seltzer (2009) suggested that future research should look not only at the presence of dialogic strategies on the sites but to explore the outcomes or effects of the dialogic strategies [1].

Rybalko and Seltzer (2010) extended the investigation of the dialogic potential of online communication by analyzing how *Fortune* 500 companies use Twitter to facilitate dialogic communication with publics. The study confirmed the general trend within online communication literature that "Twitter is also being underutilized by organizations to facilitate dialogic communication" [21, p. 340]. The authors argued that Twitter, as another social media tool, should not be used to disseminate advertisements but rather engage and stimulate dialogue with the public. To successfully achieve this goal, organizations have to put "the responsibility for the implementation of these tools squarely in the hands of PR practitioners who have appreciation for the two-way symmetrical model of public relations practice" [21, p. 340].

One of the objectives of the current study was to continue the line of research that explores the effects and users' perceptions of corporate use of social media, specifically the effects of dialogic principles' use on a company's Facebook profile page on corporate credibility. The following hypothesis were tested in this study:

H1: The use of the technical design principle "usefulness of information" on companies' Facebook page is positively related to trustworthiness (source credibility factor).

H2: The use of the "generation of return visits" dialogic principle on companies' Facebook page is positively related to trustworthiness (source credibility factor).

H3: The use of a dialogic loop principle on a company's Facebook page is positively related to publics' perceptions of goodwill (source credibility factor).

#### Methodology

The experiment used a 2 ("a technical design principle" links present or absent) x 2 ("dialogic loop": responses present or absent) x 2 ("generation of return visits": recent or old updates) mixed-factor design. A within-subject factor with two levels (company) was included. Each Facebook profile contained four users' comments on the company's Facebook wall. Two of the users' comments were specific questions asked by customers; the third comment was a negative comment about the company's product or service and the last (fourth) comment was a positive one.

#### *Operational definitions of independent variables*

The current study explored the use of dialogic principles developed by Kent and Taylor [13, p. 326]: one technical design principle and two dialogic principles.

Technical design principle was operationalized as presence or absence of a link to "News and information," a link to "about the company," and a link to a corporate website. The presence of those links reflects a dialogic principle — usefulness of information identified as the principle of technical and design cluster [13].

“Dialogic loop” was varied as presence or absence of an organization’s response to all users’ comments. The source of the response was “company.”

“Generation of return visits” dialogic principles was varied as recent or old updated about company’s everyday operations. In the condition with recent updates, there were four organization updates posted on the Wall within the range of several hours. In the condition with old updates, there was only one update posted about two months before the week the study was run.

#### *Research participants*

Three hundred ninety students were recruited from mass communications and political science classes at a large southwestern university. The average age of participants was 21 years old. Approximately 57% of participants were female, and 43% were male. They reported to use Facebook on a daily basis. This group of population known as “generation Z” was chosen for the study because they grow up with a highly sophisticated media and computer environment. They are Internet savvy and they are “digital natives” who have no recollection of a world without smart devices and broadband internet” (Meet the millennials: Who are Generation Y?; 28 August 2017 ; <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-41036361>), which makes them the most appropriate subject for the study. They are also entering the labor market and their opinion will continue to play an ever increasing role in the companies’ decisions in terms of how new media are used to communicate with the publics.

#### *Procedure and stimulus material*

Using a stimulus presentation/data collection software package, participants viewed two Facebook profile pages and completed the measures. Two different companies were fabricated for the study: Sky East Regional Air, an airline company, and NorthMark Bank. Facebook profile pages were constructed and formatted to appear as screenshots of typical Facebook pages. Each Facebook profile had a company’s name and a tab “Wall” open with four users’ comments on it.

#### *Measures*

The study adopted Huang’s [9, 307-326] multiple-item scale for measuring public relations strategy (called the PRSA — Public Relations Strategy Assessment). The perception of corporate online communication was operationalized as the score on a one to seven Likert scale. Newell and Goldsmith’ [19, p. 235-247] scale was employed to measure corporate credibility (trustworthiness and expertise). Items for goodwill dimension were adopted from Teven’s [25, p. 159-169] study.

#### *Results*

##### *Data reduction*

Principal axis factoring analysis with promax rotation of ten items produced one factor with four items loading on it ( $a = .95$ ), which allowed for the construction of a composite measure, labeled *Two-way Communication*. The analysis of thirteen items produced one factor with seven items loading on it ( $a = .96$ ), which allowed for the construction of a composite measure, labeled *Goodwill*.

##### *Hypothesis testing*

##### *Perception of trustworthiness (corporate credibility factor)*

As a result of data reduction, no factor measuring the trustworthiness dimension of corporate credibility emerged. The decision was made to run individual ANOVAs on all three items. For the item “I trust company,” there was no significant main effect for

links  $F(1, 390) = 1.69, p = .202$ , and no significant main effect for updates  $F(1, 390) = 2.67, p = .104$ . For the item “company makes truthful claims” there was no significant main effect for links  $F(1, 390) = 3.40, p = .06$ , and no significant main effect for updates  $F(1, 390) = 1.16, p = .29$ , and not significant main effect for updates  $F(1, 390) = 2.66, p = .11$ . Therefore, H1 and H2 were not supported.

*Perception of goodwill (corporate credibility factor)*

H3 stated that the use of the dialogic loop principle on a company’s FB page is positively related to perception of goodwill. The main effect of responses yielded  $F(1, 390) = 151.12, p < .001$ . Therefore, H3 was supported.

Discussion

One of the objectives of the study was to investigate how the use of dialogic principles influenced the perception of corporate credibility. The dimensions of trustworthiness and expertise did not emerge as a part of the corporate credibility construct, which could be explained by the fact that participants did not have enough information on the Facebook page to decide whether the company is trustworthy or expert in the field and it could be treated as one of the limitations.

The study found that “goodwill” is indeed a part of the corporate credibility construct, and it is positively related to responsiveness. Participants who saw Facebook pages without responses not only perceived an organization as not having enough commitment to communication [13, p. 326] but also that an organization simply did not care. If that is the case, will the fact that a company is trustworthy and expert even matter? From theoretical standpoint, this finding supported the previous suggestions made by McCroskey in 1992, who conceptualized a third antecedent factor of credibility, “perceived caring,” which represented both the goodwill and intention-toward-receiver conceptualizations. Also McCroskey and Teven (1999) emphasized that “perceived caring” is an important antecedent factor of source credibility because it opens up communication channels more widely. As current study demonstrated, in the social media environment, links and updates on the Facebook page do not provide enough information for the users to judge a company’s trustworthiness and/or expertise. In contrast, to form an opinion about a company’s goodwill, users just need to read discussion on a company’s Facebook Wall. These findings suggest that companies that integrate social media into their daily work routines should be aware of the potential adverse effects of not responding to users’ comments.

Conclusion

Discussing the effectiveness of social media use in public relations, Taylor and Kent (2010) argued that the crucial question is not “if” but “how” to use social media in public relations” [24, p. 207]. The results of the present study revealed that the companies using social media to foster dialogue need to participate in actual discussion with their publics. At the end of the day, it is up to the company either to engage in conversations and benefit from supportive word-of-mouth intentions, or not to engage and show it does not care about its stakeholders.

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КОРПОРАТИВНАЯ КОММУНИКАЦИЯ НА FACEBOOK  
КАК СРЕДСТВО ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИЯ ДИАЛОГИЧЕСКИХ ПРИНЦИПОВ  
ДЛЯ ПРОДВИЖЕНИЯ КОРПОРАТИВНОЙ КРЕДИТНОСТИ

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В исследовании был проведён смешанный факториальный эксперимент 2x2x2 (N = 390) со следующими независимыми переменными: наличие или отсутствие ссылок на корпоративную информацию, варианты ответа и последние обновления. Цель проведенного эксперимента — определить, как каждая из независимых переменных индивидуально и совместно влияет на восприятие корпоративной достоверности. Исследование того, как использование диалогических принципов влияет на корпоративную достоверность, показало, что в ситуации онлайн общения доброжелательность была единственным "рабочим" релевантным компонентом концепта "доверия". В целом, исследование показало, что наличие ответов положительно связано с концептом "добрая воля" и что социальные сети должны сосредоточиться на поддержке открытого и активного общения и меньше на формальном распространении информации.  
*Ключевые слова:* социальные медиа; Фейсбук; корпоративное онлайн общение; диалогические принципы; диалогическая теория.